

**ADDRESSES:** Copies of the EFP application and the environmental assessment (EA) are available by writing to Sue Salvesson, Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, Alaska Region, NMFS, P. O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802, Attn: Ellen Walsh. The application and EA are also available from the Alaska Region, NMFS website at <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov>.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:**

Jason Gasper, 907-586-7228 or [jason.gasper@noaa.gov](mailto:jason.gasper@noaa.gov).

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) manages the domestic groundfish fisheries in the GOA under the FMP. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) prepared the FMP under the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Regulations governing the groundfish fisheries of the GOA appear at 50 CFR parts 600 and 679. The FMP and the implementing regulations at §§ 679.6 and 600.745(b) authorize issuance of EFPs to allow fishing that would be otherwise prohibited. Procedures for issuing EFPs are contained in the implementing regulations.

NMFS received an EFP application from Alaska Marine Conservation Alliance Foundation in April 2006. The proposed EFP would allow for the testing of a modification to trawl gear commonly used in the Central GOA that may reduce Pacific halibut bycatch rates in the Central GOA trawl fishery. GOA trawl fishery Pacific halibut bycatch is controlled by a prohibited species catch (PSC) limit. Once reached, a PSC limit closes a fishery regardless of the available target species quota. These closures impose a cost on the industry in the form of unharvested groundfish quota. Therefore, a reduction in PSC bycatch rates may allow the industry to harvest a greater proportion of the total allowable catch (TAC) of groundfish.

The proposed EFP's primary objective is to reduce Pacific halibut bycatch rates without substantially reducing the target species catch (Pacific cod). The Alaska Marine Conservation Alliance developed the EFP in cooperation with NMFS scientists at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC). The project has the following three performance goals: (1) To reduce current Pacific halibut bycatch rates by 40 percent; (2) to not reduce the target species catch by more than 10 percent; and (3) to be functional for a typical GOA trawl vessel which has limited deck space and may have only aft reels. The degree to which the excluder meets these performance goals will be evaluated by the applicant and the AFSC.

The project will take two weeks to conduct between August 1, 2006, and August 30, 2006. The project may be extended by the Regional Administrator to occur during a two week period between August 1, 2007 and August 30, 2007. Continuation of the experiment in 2007 would allow refinement of the trawl gear modification and time to address statistical issues discovered during the 2006 experiment. August was chosen by the applicant because trawl vessels are not fishing for Pacific cod and are thus available to fish the EFP permit. Fishing would occur in the Central GOA, primarily in the Portlock Bank and Albatross Bank areas near Kodiak Island, Alaska. Fishing would be conducted by six trawl vessels each equipped with ordinary trawl gear. Participating vessels would be vessels that operate in the Central GOA Pacific cod trawl fishery.

The proposed EFP exempts the applicant from fishery closures and prohibited species catch (PSC) limits. These exemptions are necessary to allow the permit holder to efficiently conduct the project and minimize Central GOA trawl fishery impacts. The EFP would exempt the applicant from Central GOA directed fishing closures implemented under §§ 679.20, 679.21, 679.23 or 679.25. Retained amounts of groundfish other than Pacific cod would be limited to the relevant maximum retainable amount specified in Table 10 of 50 CFR part 679, using Pacific cod as the basis species from which maximum retainable amounts would be calculated. The proposed EFP would also exempt the applicant from observer requirements at §§ 679.50, 679.7(a)(3), and 679.7(g).

The total allowable groundfish harvest for the proposed EFP is 1,300 metric tons (mt), of which 950 mt is expected to be Pacific cod and 350 mt is expected to be other groundfish species. Sufficient TAC amounts for several groundfish species likely to be taken during the project may be fully utilized by the groundfish fishery. Therefore, groundfish harvested under the EFP would not be deducted from the TAC amounts specified in the annual harvest specifications (71 FR 10870, March 3, 2006).

The PSC limit for Pacific halibut may be reached during the project, requiring the closure of the Central GOA trawl fisheries in accordance with 50 CFR 600.745(b) and 50 CFR 679.25. Halibut PSC limits closed the Central GOA trawl fishery for flatfish before the TAC was taken in 2003, 2004, and 2005. Therefore, to limit the impact on other Central GOA groundfish fisheries, halibut mortality from the project is

limited to a maximum of 90 mt and would not be counted against the annual PSC limit. The proposed EFP would exempt a vessel from halibut PSC limits at 50 CFR 679.21(d)(3) and permit up to 90 mt of halibut mortality as determined through consultation with the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) and the AFSC.

In accordance with 50 CFR 600.745(b) and 50 CFR 679.6, NMFS has determined that the proposal warrants further consideration and has initiated consultation with the Council by forwarding the application to the Council. The Council will consider the EFP application during its June 5-13, 2006 meeting in Kodiak, Alaska. The applicant has been invited to appear in support of the application. Interested persons may comment on the application at the Council meeting during public testimony. Information regarding the June 2006 Council meeting is available at the Council's website at <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc/council.htm>.

Copies of the application and EA are available for review from NMFS (see **ADDRESSES**).

**Authority:** 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: May 24, 2006.

**James P. Burgess,**

*Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[I.D. 052306C]

#### Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; Public Meeting

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Notice of public meeting.

**SUMMARY:** The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) will convene a public meeting of the Ad Hoc Grouper Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Advisory Panel (AHGIFQAP).

**DATES:** The AHGIFQAP meeting will convene at 8:30 a.m. on Thursday, June 15 and conclude no later than 3 p.m. on Friday, June 16, 2006.

**ADDRESSES:** The meeting will be held at the Embassy Suites Hotel, 555 North Westshore Boulevard, Tampa, FL 33609; telephone: (813).875-1555.

*Council address:* Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, 2203 North Lois Avenue, Suite 1100, Tampa, FL 33607.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Stu Kennedy, Fishery Biologist, telephone: (813) 348-1630.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council has begun deliberation of a Dedicated Access Privilege System (DAP) for the Commercial grouper fishery. The Council has appointed an AHGIFQAP composed of commercial grouper fishermen and others knowledgeable about DAP systems to assist in the development of such a program. The Panel will discuss the scope and the general configuration of an IFQ program for the Gulf of Mexico commercial grouper fishery.

Although other non-emergency issues not on the agenda may come before the AHGIFQAP for discussion, in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), those issues may not be the subject of formal action during these meetings. Actions of the AHGIFQAP will be restricted to those issues specifically identified in the agenda and any issues arising after publication of this notice that require emergency action under Section 305(c) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, provided the public has been notified of the Council's intent to take action to address the emergency. Copies of the agenda can be obtained by calling (813) 348-1630.

#### Special Accommodations

This meeting is physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Tina Trezza at the Council (see **ADDRESSES**) at least 5 working days prior to the meeting.

Dated: May 24, 2006.

**James P. Burgess,**

*Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[I.D. 052306B]

### New England Fishery Management Council; Public Meeting

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Notice of a public meeting.

**SUMMARY:** The New England Fishery Management Council (Council) will hold a two-day Council meeting on June 13-15, 2006, to consider actions affecting New England fisheries in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

**DATES:** The meeting will be held on Tuesday, June 13 beginning at 9 a.m., and Wednesday and Thursday, June 14 and 15, beginning at 8:30 a.m. each day.

**ADDRESSES:** The meeting will be held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, One Goat Island, Newport, RI 02940; telephone: (401) 851-1234.

*Council address:* New England Fishery Management Council, 50 Water Street, Mill 2, Newburyport, MA 01950; telephone: (978) 465-0492.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Paul J. Howard, Executive Director, New England Fishery Management Council; telephone: (978) 465-0492.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

##### Tuesday, June 13, 2006

Following introductions, the Council will receive reports from the Council Chairman and Executive Director, the NMFS Regional Administrator, Northeast Fisheries Science Center and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council liaisons, NOAA General Counsel and representatives of the U.S. Coast Guard, NMFS Enforcement and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. During this morning session, the Council will receive a briefing from the Standard Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM) Committee on progress to date on the development of an amendment to implement an SBRM process across all New England Fishery Management Council fishery management plans (FMPs). During the remainder of the day, the Council will review and approve a range of essential fish habitat (EFH) designation alternatives for inclusion in phase I of the Council's EFH Omnibus Amendment. This review also will include the prey species-related sections of the amendment.

##### Wednesday, June 14, 2006

During the morning session the Council's Research Steering Committee Chairman will report on the committee's recommendations concerning the use of information provided in several cooperative research final reports. The committee also will provide additional comments and recommendations on the process to review final reports. There will be a report on the results of the

Transboundary Resource Assessment Committee's findings on the status of Atlantic herring. The Council will then discuss, review and approve the comments of its Magnuson-Stevens Act Committee on two reauthorization bills under consideration by the U.S. House of Representatives. Prior to a noontime break, there will be a briefing by fishing industry representatives on progress to date to develop an industry-funded vessel buyout program for New England groundfish vessels.

The afternoon session will begin with the presentation of a NOAA Fisheries Environmental Hero Award by Northeast Regional Administrator Pat Kurkul to the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. This report will be followed by an opportunity for public comments on items not listed on the agenda. Council Executive Director Paul Howard will then provide background information on the use of sector allocation as a fishery management tool. The Groundfish Committee will initiate the development of Council comments on the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Sector's operations plan for the 2006 fishing year. At the end of the day, there will be a report by several Council members on their personal observations concerning New Zealand's Quota Management System.

##### Thursday, June 15, 2006

Beginning with the morning session, the Council will spend the majority of the day on sea scallop management issues. There will be an update on the activities of the Scallop Survey Advisory Committee, a report from the Scientific and Statistical Committee on updated scallop biological reference points and consideration and likely approval of alternatives to be considered and analyzed in the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement to accompany Amendment 11 to the Scallop Fishery Management Plan. Finally, the Council will discuss and intends to reaffirm its control date for the hagfish fishery.

Although other non-emergency issues not contained in this agenda may come before this Council for discussion, those issues may not be the subjects of formal action during this meeting. Council action will be restricted to those issues specifically listed in this notice and any issues arising after publication of this notice that require emergency action under section 305(c) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, provided that the public has been notified of the Council's intent to take final action to address the emergency.