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Mr. Dan Hull, Chair
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 W. Fourth Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, AK 99501-2252

Dr. Jim Balsiger, Regional Administrator
NOAA Fisheries, Alaska Region
709 West Ninth Street
Juneau, AK 99802-1668

RE: D-7 Red King Crab Savings Area Exempted Fishing Permit

Dear Mr. Hull, Dr. Balsiger, and Council members:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the application for an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) to operate in the habitat protection areas of the Red King Crab Savings Area (RKCSA) and no trawl zone (Area 516).

We can understand the incentive for members of the head and gut fleet to apply for this EFP. While the prohibited species caps for crab species have not been constraining for the trawl fleet in recent years, access to habitats that have been closed to trawling could have the potential for increased operational efficiency and lucrative fishery catches. The EFP proposes to investigate whether commercial groundfish trawling in the closed areas would increase or decrease bycatch rates and the overall catch of crabs. However, the EFP should be denied because it is inconsistent with the management objectives of the Groundfish and Crab Fishery Management Plans (FMP)s, and because of potential detrimental impacts to the Bristol Bay Crab stock, halibut, Essential Fish Habitat (EFH), and walrus. Further, this EFP does not qualify for a categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) NEPA implementing guidance because of its potentially significant adverse impacts to the environment.

NMFS closed the Red King Crab Savings Area to bottom trawling almost 20 years ago after the Council recommended a year-round closure of the RKCSA to ensure conservation of the red king crab resource in the Bristol Bay area, citing the need for increased protection of adult red king crab and their habitat.¹ The EFP's potential detrimental impacts to the Bristol Bay red king crab stock and its EFH are inconsistent with FMP management objectives. It was not too long ago that the trajectory of the Bristol Bay red king crab stock was cause for alarm and a multitude of FMP amendments intended to rebuild crab populations were instituted. These included stricter harvest limits, crab bycatch controls,

¹ Federal Register / Vol. 61, No. 178 / Thursday, September 12, 1996 / Proposed Rules
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1996-09-12/pdf/96-23039.pdf>

