

February 27 – March 1, 2019) until the April 15, 2019 start date for the POP fishery. The EFP would also allow an exemption from the POP halibut PSC limit. Pollock halibut PSC would not be exempt from the limit since the pollock is accruing to the TAC (83 FR 8365).

The experiment would be conducted on trawl catcher vessels eligible to fish the Aleut Corporation's pollock allocation. Vessels would be equipped for pelagic pollock fishing, and 100 percent observer coverage would be required. Preference would be given to vessels equipped with a Simrad ES-60 or ES-70 echo-sounder with a 38kHz split beam transducer.

Prior to the fishing, each vessel's captain would record the tools they have available for discerning POP aggregations (e.g. echo-sounders, sonar, net sounders, etc.). While fishing, captains would be asked to report weather and tidal conditions for each haul. The captains would record their predicted proportion of POP prior to each haul and later the realized proportion of POP in each haul, and would record notes regarding why there may have been a mismatch in predicted versus realized POP. The testing of predictions would provide a means to test the captains' skill in identifying POP *in situ* with their available tools and evaluate the means for their success. Acoustic data from vessels equipped with ES-60 or ES-70 echo-sounders would be collected during fishing operations to help develop possible POP identification and avoidance measures.

During an EFP fishing trip, a permitted vessel and its operator would be exempt from the applicability of two regulations. First, an exemption would be necessary from MRA requirements at § 679.20(e)(ii). AFA CVs and non-AFA CVs less than 60 ft LOA fishing for AI pollock under the Aleut Corporation's permit would be exempted from the 5 percent MRA limit for POP in the pollock fishery. This exemption would apply from the date the 2019 final harvest specifications are effective until April 15 of each year this EFP is valid. Harvest specifications may be found at <https://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/>.

Second would be an exemption from § 679.21(b)(1)(ii)(B)(4) that applies to halibut PSC bycatch management and PSC limits for rockfish trawl fisheries in the BSAI. Vessels fishing under this EFP would be exempt from the halibut PSC limit applicable to directed fishing for POP in the BSAI.

Effects of the Action

The experiment conducted under the proposed EFP would be expected to help improve the avoidance POP bycatch in the AI pollock fishery with the added goal of improving safety at sea by reducing the amount of time necessary to stow catch by eliminating the need to sort POP from the catch on deck.

The proposed EFP would be of limited scope and duration and would not appreciably alter trawling by the pollock catcher vessel sector, including fishing location, timing, effort, or authorized gear types. Because the pollock would be taken out of the TAC, that is covered by the NEPA analysis for the annual specifications. POP harvest levels may be increased slightly since

