



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau Alaska 99802-1668

May 30, 2018

Dan Hull, Chairman
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 W. 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, AK 99501-2252

Dear Mr. Hull:

Enclosed is a draft analysis that National Marine Fisheries Service is developing to evaluate the benefits and costs of a proposed regulatory amendment to allow halibut to be sorted on deck of trawl catcher processors (CPs) when operating in non-pollock groundfish fisheries off Alaska. A draft Regulatory Impact Review was e-mailed to you in May. NMFS staff will present an overview of this draft analysis to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) at its June 2018 meeting under agenda B2.

The draft regulations are being developed in response to the need reduce the discard mortality of halibut aboard trawl CPs operating in non-pollock fisheries off Alaska. This reduction in discard mortality of halibut will increase the amount of time trawl CPs operating in non-pollock fisheries off Alaska can fish for groundfish before reaching the halibut prohibited species catch (PSC) limit. The objective of deck sorting is to improve viability of halibut that are discarded and reduce the amount of halibut PSC that accrues to the PSC limit, which may provide additional harvest opportunities in the commercial halibut fishery.

NMFS has engaged with vessel and industry representatives to test catch handling techniques and monitoring components through exempted fishing permits (EFPs). Through this process, NMFS staff have worked closely with EFP holders to develop the monitoring and enforcement components discussed in this analysis.

At the June 2018 meeting, NMFS will consult with the Council about the draft analysis to provide an opportunity for Council members and the public to identify questions or other areas of concern with the draft analysis. ***It is not necessary for the Council to take action on this draft analysis for this action to move forward, but the Council may provide feedback or request to review a later draft of the analysis or draft regulations at a future Council meeting.*** NMFS intends to promulgate regulations to establish a voluntary deck sorting program under section 305(d) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, which authorizes the Secretary of Commerce to develop regulations necessary to implement fishery management plans. We will

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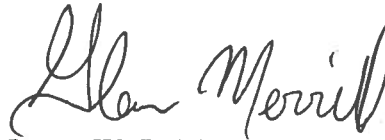


address, to the best of our ability, questions or concerns raised by the Council or the public in the draft proposed rule.

We expect to publish a proposed rule for this action by April 2019 and a final rule by late September 2019, which will provide time for vessel modification and inspection prior to fishing under the new requirements starting in January 2020.

Please contact Anne Marie Eich at AnneMarie.Eich@noaa.gov or 907-586-7172 if you have any additional questions about these draft regulations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James W. Balsiger". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "B".

James W. Balsiger, Ph.D.
Administrator, Alaska Region

For

Enclosure