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North Pacific Fishery Management Council  
1007 West Third Street Ste 400  
Anchorage AK 99501

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Dear Chairwoman Drobnica,

I am submitting these comments on behalf of the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association (ALFA) on D1 Pelagic trawl gear definition changes. ALFA is an association of independent fishermen who operate fixed gear boats in all Gulf of Alaska areas with some also participating in Bering Sea fisheries.

Though ALFA mostly supports the recommended changes proposed by NMFS in the document, we are alarmed at the lack of intent to limit seabed contact by pelagic trawl gear. The document clearly states "*In recent years, **the extent to which pelagic trawl gear contacts the seabed has been a growing concern among various fishery stakeholders.** In considering changes to the pelagic trawl gear definition that may be intended to address the impact of contact with the seafloor, the Council should first consider the intended management objective of the definition, if it is being met, and if it will continue to be met after each specific alteration of the pelagic trawl gear definition.*"

The definition of pelagic trawl gear as developed in 1991, and amended in 1993, was intended to help reduce bycatch of halibut and crab, discourage bottom contact while fishing and distinguish pelagic trawls from bottom trawls. With recent council documents outlining the extent of bottom contact in pelagic trawls with the range of 20%-100% of the time, it seems that bottom trawls are distinguished from pelagic trawls purely on the basis of mesh size, flotation, metallic parts, chaffing gear or presence of discs, bobbers or rollers. From our perspective, these components are irrelevant if a trawl has significant bottom contact. In other words, we believe seabed contact defines bottom trawling.

We urge the Council to reconsider the priority in this agenda item and address the issue of seabed contact in relation to the gear definition. The Alaska state waters definition of pelagic trawl clearly states: "*A pelagic trawl is a trawl where the net, or the trawl doors or other trawl-spreading device, **do not operate in contact with the seabed**, and which does not have attached to it any protective device, such as chafing gear, rollers, or bobbins, that would make it suitable for **fishing in contact with the seabed...***"

The federal regulation has no such language to dictate contact with the seabed. It is noted in the document that the 1991 final rule 56 FR 2700, removed bottom contact language from the definition of pelagic trawl. Rather it seems that the intent was to create a net with elements such as large mesh and spacing in the opening for escapement of crab and halibut, both seafloor dwelling species, rather than actually discouraging contact with the seafloor. Therefore this definition rather assumes bottom contact will occur in direct contradiction of the Council's stated intent.

The term “pelagic” is most commonly defined as relating to the open sea. There is widespread misunderstanding, as the document acknowledges, of the regulatory limitations in place for pelagic trawl gear. The NMFS consideration for the Council to change the term pelagic trawl to semi-pelagic trawl would create a more transparent definition of the gear and its intended use as bottom contact gear.

To summarize, ALFA supports the following recommendations by NMFS:

1. **Remove obsolete language referencing rope trawl.**  
As stated in the document, this section of the definition is obsolete. This is a clear housekeeping amendment.
2. **Revise the definition to allow the use of flotation for excluder devices and innovative technology for limiting seabed contact such as cameras, sounders, ect.** Encouraging fishers to utilize technology that reduces bycatch and seabed contact is of utmost importance in light of the environmental challenges we are experiencing in the Alaska EEZ.
3. **Support trawl gear innovation.** The paper notes multiple EFP’s that have involved pelagic trawl gear over recent years for gear innovation. Changes made to regulation to support gear innovation should be rooted in data and concepts derived from these EFP as well as intended changes to limit fishing impacts in sensitive and critical habitat.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Linda Behnken and Lauren Howard