



NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Action Memo

File Number:GF 14-047

Agenda Date12/8/2014

Agenda Number:C3

Dan Hull, Chairman
Chris Oliver, Executive Director

SUBJECT:

Revising Skate Maximum Retainable Amounts in the Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Fishery

ESTIMATED TIME:

4 hours

ACTION REQUIRED:

Review final EA/RIR/IRFA and choose Preferred Alternative.

BACKGROUND:

Public testimony to the Council, in December 2013, testimony suggested that the incidental catch of skates (primarily big skates, *Raja binoculata*, and longnose skates, *Raja rhina*) has exceeded the intrinsic rate of skate incidental catch in GOA groundfish fisheries in some years. Testimony indicated that this is because the MRA for skates in the GOA (20 percent) allows industry to top off on skates while fishing for groundfish. Since 2010, the estimated catch of big skates has exceeded the ABC in the Central GOA each year, and the estimated catch of longnose skates exceeded the ABC in the Western GOA in 2009, 2010, and 2013. The purpose of this action is to slow the harvest rate of skates by decreasing the incentive for vessels to top off on skates by reducing the MRA to levels that more accurately reflect the intrinsic rate of incidental skate catch in the GOA.

The amounts of skates available to the commercial fisheries in the GOA are limited by relatively small ABCs and TACs that are fully needed to support incidental catch needs in other fisheries. As a result, the directed fishery for skates is typically closed at the beginning of the fishing year and skate incidental catch is limited by an aggregate skate MRA of 20 percent. The MRA percentages serve as a management tool to slow the harvest rates of incidental catch species by limiting the amount that can be retained on board a vessel. The MRA also serves to reduce regulatory discards of species taken in other directed fisheries by preventing the species from being placed on "prohibited retention" status. However, once the TAC for a species is reached, retention of that species is prohibited and all catch of that species must be discarded.

In December 2013, the Council initiated an analysis to consider reducing the MRA for skates for all basis species. The options under consideration included:

- Alternative 1: No action, Status Quo. Maintain the MRA for skates for all basis species at 20 percent.
- Alternative 2: Reduce the MRA for skates for all basis species to 15 percent
- Alternative 3: Reduce the MRA for skates for all basis species to 10 percent
- Alternative 4: Reduce the MRA for skates for all basis species to 5 percent.

In October 2014, the Council selected Alternative 4 as its Preliminary Preferred Alternative. At this meeting the Council is scheduled to take final action.