

Purpose

The purpose of the proposed amendment is to end and prevent overfishing on silver hake and red hake stocks, to provide basic protection for offshore hake, and to rebuild and maintain healthy spawning stocks in order to allow for a balanced, sustainable fishery that maximizes economic benefits without compromising the health of the resources.

Management Options

Moratorium on Permits—Limited Access

The Whiting Committee recommends that, in order to land whiting, a vessel without a current limited access multispecies permit must meet the following criteria: (1) That it held an open access, nonregulated multispecies permit as of the control date (September 9, 1996), and (2) that it had landed at least one pound of whiting prior to the control date. All vessels with a current limited access multispecies permit would retain access to the whiting fishery.

Southern Stock

Management of the southern stock is complicated by the diversity of the fisheries where whiting is caught; specifically, the squid/whiting fishery uses a 1.88-inch (4.78-cm) mesh, and the other mixed-trawl fisheries use meshes of 2–2.5 inches (5–6.35 cm). The Council is considering requiring a vessel retaining whiting to use a codend of 2.5 inches (6.35 cm) or larger and to prohibit the retention of whiting on vessels using smaller mesh from June 1 to September 1 of each year. Vessels retaining whiting from September 1 through May 31 would be required to switch to a 2.5-inch (6.35-cm) mesh upon reaching a specific threshold amount of whiting on board. The minimum mesh size for retaining whiting from September 1 to May 31 would be the minimum mesh size for *Loligo* squid as determined by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

The Whiting Committee is also considering several options for a whiting trip limit, including a sliding scale trip limit based on overall vessel length. A trip limit may be imposed year-round or seasonally.

Northern Stock

Scientific information indicates that the northern stock may be able to sustain a fishery utilizing both small and large whiting, provided the catch is limited or controlled. The Whiting Committee intends to consider results from experimental fisheries that have

evaluated grate/mesh size management strategies. The Whiting Committee recommends requiring a vessel retaining whiting to use a codend of 2.5 inches (6.35 cm) or larger if the vessel is not in an approved fishery requiring a separator grate. The Whiting Committee is also considering the same trip limit options for the northern stock as for the southern stock.

Other Measures Under Consideration

The Council is also considering and will take comments on other management options, including (1) a minimum fish size for whiting of 11 inches (27.94 cm) with a 20-percent tolerance for undersized fish, with or without a minimum mesh size; (2) minimum mesh sizes up to 3 inches (7.62 cm), with or without a minimum fish size; (3) a square-mesh panel in the net and other gear modifications; (4) a raised footrope trawl design; (5) spawning area closures; and (6) a provision to utilize additional management tools from the FMP to manage these stocks in the future.

Scoping Process

The Council discussed and took scoping comments at a previous meeting on March 12 and 13, 1997. A notice of intent to prepare an SEIS and notice of scoping process for silver hake and offshore hake stocks was published in the **Federal Register** on March 19, 1997 (62 FR 12983). Because both red hake and silver hake have recently been listed as overfished, the Whiting Committee felt that reopening the scoping process was necessary to receive further comments about managing silver hake, offshore hake, and red hake. Therefore, the Council will accept public comments about the scope of whiting, offshore hake, and red hake management at its next meeting on February 25, 1998, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Additional scoping meetings are scheduled as follows (a notice will be published in the **Federal Register** at a later date giving complete addresses for the meetings):

1. March 3, 1998, 7 p.m.—Holiday Inn, Toms River, NJ.
2. March 4, 1998, 7 p.m.—Holiday Inn at MacArthur Airport, Ronkonkoma, NY.
3. March 5, 1998, 4 p.m.—Holiday Inn at the Crossings, Warwick, RI.
4. March 9, 1998, 2 p.m.—Town Hall, Provincetown, MA.

Additional meetings of the Council, Whiting Committee, or Advisory Panel during the scoping period will provide opportunities for public comments on specific issues identified in the respective agendas.

All persons affected by, or otherwise interested in, whiting and red hake fisheries management are invited to participate in determining the scope and significance of issues to be analyzed by submitting written comments (see **ADDRESSES**). Scope consists of the range of actions, alternatives, and impacts to be considered. Alternatives include not developing a management plan, developing amendments to existing plans, or other reasonable courses of action. Impacts may be direct, indirect, individual, or cumulative. The scoping process will also identify and eliminate from detailed study issues that are not significant. Once a draft FMP amendment and an SEIS or Environmental Assessment are developed, the Council will hold public hearings to receive comments on them.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: February 4, 1998.

Bruce C. Morehead,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 648

[I.D. 020398A]

New England Fishery Management Council; Meeting

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Public meeting.

SUMMARY: The New England Fishery Management Council (Council) will hold a 2-day public meeting on February 25 and 26, 1998, to consider actions affecting New England fisheries in the exclusive economic zone.

DATES: The meeting will be held on Wednesday, February 25, 1998, at 10 a.m., and on Thursday, February 26, 1998, at 8:30 a.m.

ADDRESSES: The meeting will be held at the Sheraton Portsmouth Hotel, 250 Market Street, Portsmouth, New Hampshire 03801; telephone (603) 431-2300. Requests for special accommodations should be addressed to the New England Fishery Management Council, 5 Broadway, Saugus, Massachusetts 01906-1097; telephone: (781) 231-0422.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Paul J. Howard, Executive Director, New

England Fishery Management Council (781) 231-0422.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Wednesday, February 25, 1998

After introductions, the Monkfish Committee will review public hearing comments and approve the final monkfish management measures for Amendment 9 to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan (FMP). During the afternoon session, results of a synthesis of available scientific information about fishing gear impacts on habitat will be presented by Dr. Peter Auster, Science Director of the National Undersea Research Center at the University of Connecticut. This will be followed by an update on progress to develop essential fish habitat designations for Council-managed species and a review of the Dogfish Committee's recent meeting. The discussion will include consideration and approval of a dogfish fishery control date (which may be used in the future to establish rules to limit participation in this fishery). Next, the Whiting Committee will discuss the development of a whiting management program and its recommendations concerning several whiting exempted fisheries proposals. Prior to adjournment for the day, a scoping hearing to solicit comments on whiting management will conclude the Council meeting. The Council will ask the public to identify major issues to be considered in the development of management measures for silver hake (whiting), offshore hake, and red hake.

Thursday, February 26, 1998

The Groundfish Committee Report may approve initial action on a framework adjustment to the Northeast Multispecies FMP that would restrict the use of "streetsweeper" trawl gear. The Council may also consider including alternative measures to protect Gulf of Maine cod (contained in a proposal forwarded by the Gulf of Maine Fishermen's Alliance) in this action. The proposal would establish 2 vessel categories (inshore/offshore and offshore/trip limit exemption area), trip limits, area closures, and incentives to fish outside the Gulf of Maine. Finally, the Groundfish Committee will review progress on a plan amendment to address the Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA) requirements. In addition to a

briefing on the recent U.S./Canada industry meeting, the Herring Committee may ask the Council to approve management alternatives for public hearing purposes (including, but not limited to, controlled access, spawning area closures, vessel/dealer/operator permit requirements, area management, a target total allowable catch level, vessel size limits, a prohibition on fishing for the purpose of meal production, limits on fishing time, and restrictions on fishing for roe). The Thursday agenda will include reports from the Council Chairman, Executive Director, Administrator, Northeast Region, NMFS (Regional Administrator), Northeast Fisheries Science Center and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council liaisons, and representatives of the Coast Guard, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Interspecies Committee will update the Council on efforts to eliminate inconsistencies in vessel upgrading, replacement, and permit-splitting restrictions, including asking the Council to approve measures to eliminate upgrading restrictions on boats less than 30 ft (9.1 m). It will review comments on the Atlantic States Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program fishing vessel logbook form and discuss the development of a policy on harvesting innovations and new fisheries technology. The Overfishing Definition Review Panel will review the overfishing definitions for sea herring, silver hake, and possibly other species. The Sea Scallop Committee will discuss its progress on a plan amendment to address SFA requirements, the development of criteria for opening and closing management areas and on its discussions of days-at-sea leasing and an industry-funded vessel buyout program.

The Regional Administrator will consult with the Council regarding a proposal from Soren Henriksen of the Westport Scalping Corporation to conduct an experimental fishery to harvest seed scallops with a small mesh-lined scallop dredge in the Nantucket Lightship Closed Area (NLCA). There will be a discussion and opportunity for public comment. This proposal authorizes additional activities to facilitate the sea scallop aquaculture research project approved last winter under Amendment 5 to the Atlantic Sea

Scallop Fishery Management Plan. The applicant cites problems with harvesting seed scallops from distant areas and off-loading to the test site (20 hours steam). The 1997 NMFS sea scallop survey indicates the presence of mixed scallop beds containing seed within the northeast part of the NLCA (survey stations #238-241). The area is currently closed to scallop dredge vessels under the northeast multispecies regulations. The experiment would authorize one limited access scallop vessel to catch and retain a maximum of 1500 bushels (528.6 hl) of seed scallops with a small mesh-lined scallop dredge from the NLCA and off-load to the Scallop Experimental Fishing Area (five hours steam). The vessel would be given a 2-day exemption from the days-at-sea reporting requirements while collecting seed scallops in the NLCA. The experiment is intended to allow the harvesting of seed scallops to support the ongoing sea scallop aquaculture research project aimed at developing techniques and practices that could allow the scallop fishery to evolve from one based exclusively on wild-capture to an industry that also incorporates modern husbandry, enhancement, and open-ocean cage culture. The Council meeting will adjourn after the conclusion of any other outstanding Council business.

Although other issues not contained in this agenda may come before this Council for discussion, in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, those issues may not be the subject of formal Council action during this meeting. Council action will be restricted to those issues specifically listed in this notice.

Special Accommodations

This meeting is physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Paul J. Howard (see ADDRESSES) at least 5 days prior to the meeting date.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: February 4, 1998.

Gary Matlock,

*Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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