

Comments received by September 24, 2007, whether specifically directed to the amendment or the proposed rule, will be considered by NMFS in its decision to approve, disapprove, or partially approve the amendment. Comments received after that date will not be considered by NMFS in this decision. All comments received by NMFS on the amendment or the proposed rule during their respective comment periods will be addressed in the final rule.

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

Dated: July 23, 2007.

James P. Burgess,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.
[FR Doc. E7-14450 Filed 7-25-07; 8:45 am]

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 648

RIN 0648-AV70

Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act Provisions; Fisheries of the Northeastern United States; Northeast Region Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology Omnibus Amendment

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

ACTION: Notice of availability of proposed fishery management plan amendment; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces that the Mid-Atlantic and New England Fishery Management Councils (Councils) have submitted an Omnibus Amendment to the Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) of the Northeast Region to establish a Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM), incorporating a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and preliminary Regulatory Impact Review (RIR), for review by the Secretary of Commerce, and is requesting comments from the public.

The SBRM Amendment would establish an SBRM for all 13 Northeast Region FMPs, as required under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). The proposed measures include: Bycatch reporting and monitoring mechanisms; analytical techniques and allocation of at-sea

fisheries observers; an SBRM performance standard; a review and reporting process; framework adjustment and annual specifications provisions; a prioritization process; and provisions for industry-funded observers and observer set-aside programs.

DATES: Comments must be received on or before September 24, 2007.

ADDRESSES: You may submit comments by any of the following methods:

- E-mail:

SBRM.Amend.NOA@noaa.gov. Include in the subject line the following identifier: "Comments on the SBRM Omnibus Amendment."

- Federal e-rulemaking portal: *http://www.regulations.gov.*

- Mail: Patricia A. Kurkul, Regional Administrator, NMFS, Northeast Regional Office, One Blackburn Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930. Mark the outside of the envelope: "Comments on the SBRM Omnibus Amendment."

- Fax: (978) 281-9135

Copies of the SBRM Amendment, and of the draft Environmental Assessment and preliminary Regulatory Impact Review (EA/RIR), are available from Daniel T. Furlong, Executive Director, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, Room 2115, Federal Building, 300 South New Street, Dover, DE 19901-6790; and from Paul J. Howard, Executive Director, New England Fishery Management Council, 50 Water Street, Newburyport, MA 01950. The EA/RIR is also accessible via the Internet at *http://www.nero.noaa.gov.*

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Michael Pentony, Senior Fishery Policy Analyst, 978-281-9283.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that each Regional Fishery Management Council submit any FMP amendment it prepares to NMFS for review and approval, disapproval, or partial approval. The Magnuson-Stevens Act also requires that NMFS, upon receiving an FMP amendment, immediately publish notification in the **Federal Register** that the amendment is available for public review and comment. If approved by NMFS, this amendment would establish a comprehensive SBRM that applies to all Northeast Region FMPs developed by either the Mid-Atlantic or New England Councils. The amendment would also effect an administrative change to the regulations on framework adjustments.

Background

Section 303(a)(11) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that all FMPs "establish a standardized reporting

methodology to assess the amount and type of bycatch occurring in the fishery." In 2004, several conservation organizations challenged the approval of two major amendments to Northeast Region FMPs. In ruling on these suits, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia found that the FMPs did not clearly establish an SBRM as required under this section and remanded the amendments back to the agency to fully develop and establish the required SBRM. In particular, the Court found that the amendments (1) failed to fully evaluate reporting methodologies to assess bycatch, (2) did not mandate an SBRM, and (3) failed to respond to potentially important scientific evidence.

In response, the Councils, working closely with NMFS, undertook development of a remedy that would address all Northeast Region FMPs. In January 2006, development began on the Northeast Region Omnibus SBRM Amendment. This amendment covers 13 FMPs, 39 managed species, and 14 types of fishing gear. The purpose of the amendment is to: Explain the methods and processes by which bycatch is currently monitored and assessed for Northeast Region fisheries; determine whether these methods and processes need to be modified and/or supplemented; establish standards of precision for bycatch estimation for all Northeast Region fisheries; and, thereby, document the SBRM established for all fisheries managed through the FMPs of the Northeast Region. The amendment also responds to the "potentially important scientific evidence" cited by the Court in the two decisions referenced above.

The Northeast Region SBRM Amendment would establish an SBRM comprised of seven elements: (1) The methods by which data and information on discards are collected and obtained; (2) the methods by which the data obtained through the mechanisms identified in element 1 are analyzed and utilized to determine the appropriate allocation of at-sea observers; (3) a performance measure by which the effectiveness of the Northeast Region SBRM can be measured, tracked, and utilized to effectively allocate the appropriate number of observer sea days; (4) a process to provide the Councils with periodic reports on discards occurring in Northeast Region fisheries and on the effectiveness of the SBRM; (5) a measure to enable the Councils to make changes to the SBRM through framework adjustments and/or annual specification packages rather than full FMP amendments; (6) a process to provide the Councils, and the

public, with an opportunity to consider, and provide input into, the decisions regarding prioritization of at-sea observer coverage allocations; and (7) to implement consistent, cross-cutting observer service provider approval and certification procedures and to enable the Councils to implement either a requirement for industry-funded observers or an observer set-aside program through a framework adjustment rather than an FMP amendment.

Public comments are being solicited on the SBRM Amendment and its incorporated documents through the end of the comment period stated in this notice of availability. A proposed rule

that would implement the SBRM Amendment will be published in the **Federal Register** for public comment, following NMFS's evaluation of the proposed rule under the procedures of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Public comments on the proposed rule must be received by the end of the comment period provided in this notice of availability of the SBRM Amendment to be considered in the approval/disapproval decision on the amendment. All comments received by September 24, 2007, whether specifically directed to the SBRM Amendment or the proposed rule will be considered in the approval/

disapproval decision on the amendment. Comments received after that date will not be considered in the decision to approve or disapprove the SBRM Amendment. To be considered, comments must be received by close of business on the last day of the comment period; that does not mean postmarked or otherwise transmitted by that date.

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

Dated: July 20, 2007.

Emily Menashes,

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