

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Kyle Molton, Fishery Management Specialist, 978–281–9236, Kyle.Molton@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Two commercial fishermen and a groundfish sector submitted complete applications to renew exempted fishing permits (EFPs) on February 16, 2018, to conduct commercial fishing activities that the regulations would otherwise restrict. These EFPs would authorize five commercial fishing vessels to fish a combined total of 150 trips in the Western Gulf of Maine (WGOM) and Cashes Ledge Closure Areas, excluding the Cashes Ledge Habitat Management Area (HMA), with hook gear, and to temporarily retain undersized catch for measurement and data collection. Within the Cashes Ledge Closure Area, access would be permitted in the Fippennies Ledge HMA, but not in the Cashes Ledge or Ammen Rock HMAs. These HMAs were developed as part of the New England Fisheries Management Council's Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat Amendment 2, and approved by NMFS on January 3, 2018.

The EFPs would authorize the applicants to use hook gear to selectively target pollock and haddock while maintaining minimal bycatch. In addition, the applicants would also explore and develop premium markets to increase the value of the catch. This study would be conducted in the WGOM and Cashes Ledge Closure Areas. The applicants have requested access to these areas based on reports, and experimental fishing, which suggest that there are high concentrations of the target species located in these areas. The exemptions are necessary to conduct this study because vessels on commercial groundfish trips are prohibited from fishing for groundfish in these closed areas and from retaining undersized groundfish. EFP trips would occur year-round, excluding existing seasonal closures.

Participating vessels would take a combined total of 150 trips to closed areas. Trips would be roughly 24 hours or less in length. Vessels would use automated jigging machines, handline, and rod and reel gears only. Based on preliminary 2017 data, estimated catch on these trips is between 1,000 and 2,000 lb (453.5 to 907.2 kg) of pollock and haddock, combined, per trip. 2017 data indicate that catch of non-target species is small; cod represented less than 10 percent of catch overall, and other species were encountered only sporadically or in low numbers.

Because these vessels would be fishing in closed areas, and must minimize interactions with non-target

species like cod, the use of a vessel monitoring system and 100-percent monitoring would be required for all vessels. A research technician or at-sea monitor would accompany all trips that occur under these EFPs to measure and document fish caught and document fishing gear, bait, location, and fishing conditions to evaluate gear performance. The vessel captains would also document fishing practices used to avoid bycatch of non-target species. Undersized fish would be discarded as quickly as possible after sampling. All Northeast multispecies of legal size would be landed, and all catch would be attributed to the vessel's sector annual catch entitlement. The applicants will also document ex-vessel price for all sold catch for comparison with other harvest methods and markets. The participating vessels would not be exempt from any sector monitoring or reporting requirements.

If approved, the applicants may request minor modifications and extensions to the EFPs throughout the year. EFP modifications and extensions may be granted without further notice if they are deemed essential to facilitate completion of the proposed research and have minimal impacts that do not change the scope or impact of the initially approved EFP request.

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

Dated: April 9, 2018.

Jennifer M. Wallace,

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

[FR Doc. 2018–07597 Filed 4–11–18; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510–22–P

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

RIN 0648–XG152

Magnuson-Stevens Act Provisions; General Provisions for Domestic Fisheries; Application for Exempted Fishing Permits

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

ACTION: Notice; request for comments.

SUMMARY: The Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, Greater Atlantic Region, NMFS, has made a preliminary determination that an exempted fishing permit application submitted by the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance contains all of the required information and warrants

further consideration. This exempted fishing permit would require participants to use electronic monitoring systems on 100 percent of sector trips for catch accounting in the groundfish fishery. Additionally, vessels would be authorized to access portions of groundfish closed areas. Regulations under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act require publication of this notification to provide interested parties the opportunity to comment on applications for proposed exempted fishing permits.

DATES: Comments must be received on or before April 27, 2018.

ADDRESSES: You may submit written comments by either of the following methods:

- **Email:** nmfs.gar.efp@noaa.gov. Include in the subject line “100 PERCENT EM EFP.”

- **Mail:** Michael Pentony, Regional Administrator, NMFS, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930. Mark the outside of the envelope “100 PERCENT EM EFP.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Claire Fitz-Gerald, Fishery Management Specialist, 978–281–9255.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Groundfish sectors are required to implement and fund an at-sea monitoring (ASM) program. Sectors may use electronic monitoring (EM) to satisfy this monitoring requirement, provided that NMFS deems the technology sufficient for catch monitoring. NMFS has yet to approve EM as a suitable alternative to ASM. However, NMFS is working with industry and other stakeholders to test the operational feasibility of EM and resolve outstanding barriers to implementation. Project partners include the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, and fishermen from the Northeast Fishery Sectors V & XI, the GB Cod Fixed Gear Sector, the Sustainable Harvest Sector, and the Maine Coast Community Sector.

In fishing year 2017, NMFS issued an exempted fishing permit (EFP) to these project partners to develop an audit-model EM program for the groundfish fishery. The EFP required vessels to use EM systems on 100 percent of groundfish sector trips to verify regulated groundfish discards. EM was used in lieu of human observers to meet their sector ASM requirements. Thirteen vessels using a variety of gear types (e.g. hook, benthic longline, sink gillnet, bottom trawl) participated in the

project. A total of 81 trips were completed in fishing year 2017.

The project partners have submitted a renewal request for fishing year 2018. The proposed participant list includes 14 vessels, 13 of which participated in this EFP in fishing year 2017. Together, these vessels are expected to take an estimated 400 trips. The project partners expect up to 10 additional vessels may join the project in fishing year 2018.

Vessels participating in this EFP would be required to use EM on 100 percent of groundfish trips. Camera systems would be used in lieu of human at-sea monitors, and in addition to Northeast Fishery Observer Program (NEFOP) observers. Vessels would adhere to a vessel-specific monitoring plan detailing at-sea catch handling protocols. Vessels would submit haul-level electronic vessel trip reports (eVTR) with count and weight estimates for all groundfish discards.

The discard estimates provided in the eVTR would be used for catch accounting, and all catch of allocated groundfish would be deducted from the appropriate sector's allocation. The EM service provider would review the video footage and produce an EM summary report identifying, counting, and generating weight estimates for all groundfish discards. The provider would submit this report to NMFS. NMFS would compare the eVTR and EM summary file to ensure the submissions match within an established tolerance. If the trips do not match, the eVTR would not be used for catch accounting for that trip. For trips that carry a NEFOP observer, the NEFOP data would be used for catch accounting. The EM service provider would review 100 percent of the video footage at the outset of the fishing year, but may reduce the review percentage mid-year as part of audit-model testing, if approved by NMFS.

Because participating vessels would be fully monitored, project partners requested access to closed areas to incentivize participation and create additional fishing opportunities for healthy stocks. Vessels would be allowed to use hook gear and sink gillnets in Closed Area II from May 1 through February 15, hook gear in Western Gulf of Maine Closure Area, and jig gear in Cashes Ledge Closure Area.

If approved, the applicant may request minor modifications and extensions to the EFP throughout the year. EFP modifications and extensions may be granted without further notice if they are deemed essential to facilitate completion of the proposed research and have minimal impacts that do not

change the scope or impact of the initially approved EFP request. Any fishing activity conducted outside the scope of the exempted fishing activity would be prohibited.

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

Dated: April 9, 2018.

Jennifer M. Wallace,

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

[FR Doc. 2018-07596 Filed 4-11-18; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510-22-P

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

RIN 0648-XG150

Magnuson-Stevens Act Provisions; General Provisions for Domestic Fisheries; Application for Exempted Fishing Permits

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

ACTION: Notice; request for comments.

SUMMARY: The Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, Greater Atlantic Region, NMFS, has made a preliminary determination that an exempted fishing permit application submitted by the Gulf of Maine Research Institute contains all of the required information and warrants further consideration. The exempted fishing permit would allow the use of electronic monitoring to support testing a maximized retention model in the groundfish fishery.

Regulations under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act require publication of this notification to provide interested parties the opportunity to comment on applications for proposed Exempted Fishing Permits.

DATES: Comments must be received on or before April 27, 2018.

ADDRESSES: You may submit written comments by either of the following methods:

- *Email:* nmfs.gar.efp@noaa.gov. Include in the subject line "GMRI MREM EFP."

- *Mail:* Michael Pentony, Regional Administrator, NMFS, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930. Mark the outside of the envelope "GMRI MREM EFP."

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Claire Fitz-Gerald, Fishery Management Specialist, 978-281-9255.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Groundfish sectors are required to implement and fund an at-sea monitoring (ASM) program. A sector is allowed to use electronic monitoring (EM) to satisfy this monitoring requirement, provided that NMFS deems the technology sufficient for catch monitoring. NMFS has yet to approve EM as an alternative to ASM, but is working with industry and other stakeholders to develop EM for catch monitoring in the groundfish fishery. For the groundfish fishery, the program designs currently being considered are the "audit model" and the "maximized retention model." The audit model would use EM to verify discards reported by a captain on a vessel trip report. Under the maximized retention electronic monitoring (MREM) model, vessels would be required to retain most fish species (e.g., allocated groundfish stocks), and EM would be used to ensure compliance with discarding regulations.

GMRI submitted an exempted fishing permit (EFP) application to test a maximized retention electronic monitoring (MREM) model and an accompanying dockside monitoring (DSM) program to monitor high-volume bottom-trawl vessels in the groundfish fleet. Vessels would be outfitted with EM systems (cameras and gear sensors), and the cameras would be on for 100 percent of groundfish trips. The EFP would require participating vessels to retain and land all catch of allocated groundfish, including undersized fish that they would normally be required to discard. All other species would be handled per normal commercial fishing operations. An EM service provider would review 100 percent of the video footage to verify that the vessels did not discard allocated groundfish. NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center staff would conduct a secondary review of 100 percent of the video footage for all trips.

All catch would be assessed shoreside via an accompanying DSM program. The DSM program would have three primary objectives: (1) Biological sampling; (2) verification of dealer-reported landings, and; (3) fish hold inspections. Vessels would be authorized to sell catch, including undersized fish, to a limited number of dealers. The vessel and dealer would work with the Center to ensure that a Federal employee or contract staff is present to observe 100 percent of offloads for this project. The sampler would verify dealer landings and collect biosamples, including length-frequency data on a subset of fish in each market category. The Northeast Region Office of