

Critical habitat is defined as the specific areas within the geographical area occupied by the species, on which are found those physical and biological features essential to the conservation of the species and which may require special management considerations or protections (ESA section 3(5)(A)(i)). Critical habitat shall not include the entire geographical area occupied by the species unless failure to designate such areas would result in the extinction of the species.

Proposed critical habitat for the Central California Coast ESU encompasses accessible reaches of all rivers (including estuarine areas and tributaries) between Punta Gorda and the San Lorenzo River (inclusive) in California. Also included are two rivers entering San Francisco Bay: Mill Valley Creek and Corte Madera Creek. Proposed critical habitat for the Southern Oregon/Northern California Coast ESU encompasses accessible reaches of all rivers (including estuarine areas and tributaries) between the Mattole River in California and the Elk River in Oregon, inclusive.

The areas described in the proposed rule represent the current freshwater and estuarine range of the listed species. Marine habitats are also vital to the species and ocean conditions are believed to have a major influence on coho salmon survival. However, there does not appear to be a need for special management consideration or protection of this habitat. Therefore, NMFS is not proposing to designate critical habitat in marine areas at this time. For both ESUs, critical habitat includes all waterways, substrate, and adjacent riparian zones below longstanding, naturally impassable barriers (i.e., natural waterfalls in existence for at least several hundred years). NMFS has identified twelve dams in the range of these ESUs (see proposed rule) that currently block access to habitats historically occupied by coho salmon. However, NMFS has not designated these inaccessible areas as critical habitat because areas downstream are believed to be sufficient for the conservation of the ESUs. The economic and other impacts resulting from this critical habitat designation are expected to be minimal.

NMFS is soliciting information, comments and/or recommendations on any aspect of this proposal from all concerned parties (see ADDRESSES); comments must be received by June 10, 1998. In particular, NMFS is requesting any data, maps, or reports describing areas that currently or historically supported coho salmon populations and that may require special management

considerations. NMFS will consider all information received before reaching a final decision.

Date: April 24, 1998.

Rolland A. Schmitten,

*Assistant Administrator for Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.*

[FR Doc. 98-11427 Filed 4-29-98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510-22-F

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Parts 227 and 622

[I.D. 042298A]

Fisheries of the South Atlantic; Shrimp Fishery of the South Atlantic; Endangered and Threatened Wildlife

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

ACTION: Request for information; notice of public hearings.

SUMMARY: NMFS has received comments from numerous fishermen, fishery organizations, and the states of Georgia and South Carolina recommending consideration of a closure of Federal waters offshore of Georgia and South Carolina to shrimping at night. State waters are currently closed at night, and commenters believed that a nighttime closure of Federal waters would reduce the concentration and total amount of fishing effort, and consequently would reduce lethal sea turtle captures. NMFS is requesting comments regarding the fishery management and/or sea turtle conservation benefits of closing all or some portion of Federal and state waters, off some or all of the South Atlantic states (North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida) to shrimp trawling at night.

DATES: Written comments will be accepted through June 29, 1998. Hearings will be held in May (see SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION).

ADDRESSES: Written comments may be submitted to the Chief, Endangered Species Division, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD. 20910. Hearings will be held in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida (see SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Charles A. Oravetz, 813-570-5312, or Barbara Schroeder, 301-713-1401.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

NMFS amended the Sea Turtle Conservation Measures through rulemaking in 1996 to reduce sea turtle mortalities associated with shrimping by maximizing the effectiveness of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) in commercial use. During the comment period associated with that rulemaking effort, NMFS received comments recommending various alternative management measures to reduce shrimp fishing effort, including prohibitions of nighttime trawling. Although the final rule did not incorporate measures specifically intended to reduce shrimp fishing effort, NMFS stated in the responses to comments on the 1995 Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking:

Prohibiting nighttime shrimping is a means to reduce shrimp trawling effort and enhance sea turtle protection, but NMFS does not believe that it should be employed at this time [April 1996]. In the Gulf of Mexico, the major fisheries for pink and brown shrimp are conducted mainly at night in deeper waters, when the target species are active, and nighttime closures would be incompatible with these fisheries. Trawling for white shrimp, on the other hand, is mainly done during the day in nearshore waters. Therefore, where white shrimp are the primary target species, nighttime closures may be compatible with operation of the fishery. Texas, Georgia, and South Carolina already have nighttime closures for management of shrimp stocks in some nearshore waters. A specific proposal was received, which recommended that NMFS coordinate with the States of Georgia and South Carolina to implement nighttime closures in Federal waters, concurrent with nighttime closures in State waters. Enforcement of closed areas would be greatly enhanced by cooperating Federal action. Coordinated state-Federal closures may also be a boon to local, primarily daytime shrimpers, by reducing the pressure to fish round the clock. This proposal may provide additional protection for sea turtles, and NMFS will investigate further whether closures in Federal waters offshore of Georgia and South Carolina would be consistent with State management goals and the interests of local shrimpers.

The regulatory situation is different in each South Atlantic state with respect to nighttime closures. In Georgia's territorial waters, trawling is prohibited from 8 p.m. eastern standard time to 5 a.m. eastern standard time. By convention, the same times of the closure also apply during Daylight Time. In South Carolina, state waters are closed to shrimp trawling between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m., from opening day (usually around May 15) to September 15, and between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m., from September 16 to closing day (usually around December 31). In Florida,

offshore waters are closed at night between one half-hour after official sunset to one half-hour before official sunrise, except in June, July, and August when the offshore waters do not close. North Carolina does not presently have any nighttime closure of its ocean waters, although the Director of the Division of Marine Fisheries has the authority to set the hours of day for the shrimping season by proclamation, appropriate to the management of the fishery.

Request for Comments

NMFS is inviting public comment and seeking information to help determine what, if any, nighttime closures should be implemented under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and/or Endangered Species Act as a fishery management tool, and/or to provide enhanced protection to sea turtles. In particular, NMFS wishes to receive quantitative data, or other information, on the extent of fishery effort reduction that would be achieved under various closure schemes. Information on the impacts, positive and negative, on affected fishermen as well as the conservation of marine turtles is also specifically requested. NMFS will conduct four public hearings in the South Atlantic states to solicit additional information.

The hearings are scheduled as follows:

1. May 11, 1998, at 7 p.m., Bolivia, NC
2. May 12, 1998, at 7 p.m., Charleston, SC
3. May 13, 1998, at 7 p.m., Brunswick, GA
4. May 14, 1998, at 7 p.m., Atlantic Beach, FL

The hearings will be held at the following locations:

1. North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, Brunswick County Government Center, Agriculture Building, (Meeting Room), 25 Referendum Drive, Bolivia, NC 28422;
2. South Carolina Marine Resources Research Institute, (Auditorium), 217 Fort Johnson Road, Charleston, SC 29412;
3. University of Georgia Marine Extension Service Office, (Conference room), 715 Bay Street, Brunswick, GA 31520; and
4. Mayport Elementary School, (Cafeteria), 2753 Shangri-La Drive, Atlantic Beach, FL 32233.

Special Accommodations

These hearings are physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids

should be directed to Charles A. Oravetz (see **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**).

Dated: April 24, 1998.

Rolland A. Schmitt,

*Assistant Administrator for Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.*

[FR Doc. 98-11426 Filed 4-28-98; 8:57 am]

BILLING CODE 3510-22-F

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 980331079-8079-01; I.D. 031198D]

RIN 0648-AK71

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska; Seasonal Apportionments of Pollock

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

ACTION: Proposed rule; proposed amendment to change seasonal apportionments of pollock; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS proposes to change the seasonal apportionment of the pollock total allowable catch amount (TAC) in the combined Western and Central (W/C) Regulatory Areas of the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) by moving 10 percent of the TAC from the third fishing season, which starts on September 1, to the second fishing season, which starts on June 1. This seasonal TAC shift is a precautionary measure intended to reduce the potential impacts on Steller sea lions of pollock fishing under an increased 1998 TAC by reducing the percentage of the pollock TAC that is available to the commercial fishery during the fall and winter months, a period that is critical to Steller sea lions. This action is intended to promote the conservation and management objectives of the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska (FMP).

DATES: Comments must be received by May 15, 1998.

ADDRESSES: Comments on the proposed rule must be sent to Sue Salvesson, Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, Alaska Region, NMFS, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802, Attn: Lori J. Gravel. Copies of the Environmental Assessment/Regulatory Impact Review (EA/RIR) prepared for

this action may be obtained from the same address.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Kent Lind, 907-586-7228 or kent.lind@noaa.gov

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The groundfish fisheries in the exclusive economic zone of the GOA are managed by NMFS under the FMP. The FMP was prepared by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). Regulations governing the groundfish fisheries of the GOA appear at 50 CFR part 600 and 50 CFR part 679.

Current groundfish regulations apportion the pollock TAC in the W/C Regulatory Areas among three statistical areas—610 (Shumagin), 620 (Chirikof), and 630 (Kodiak)—and divide the TAC apportioned to each statistical area into three seasonal allowances of 25 percent, 25 percent, and 50 percent of the TAC, which become available on January 1, June 1, and September 1, respectively. The proposed rule would shift 10 percent of the TAC from the third to the second season resulting in seasonal allowances of 25 percent, 35 percent, and 40 percent, respectively.

In December 1997, the Council approved a 1998 pollock TAC of 119,150 metric tons (mt) for the W/C Regulatory Areas of the GOA. This TAC represents a 60 percent increase from the 1997 pollock TAC of 74,400 mt. The GOA Plan Team and the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended the increased TAC based on survey and fishery data indicating increasing abundance and the presence of a large 1994 year class. Despite the projected increase in the pollock biomass available in the GOA, NMFS marine mammal biologists believe that precautionary action is warranted to shift increases in pollock fishing away from the fall and winter months, which are a critical feeding period for Steller sea lions particularly juveniles and adult females. Without action, 50 percent of the increased TAC would become available to commercial fishing during the September fishing season, substantially increasing the amount of fish that could be harvested in that season and extending the fishery further into that season, a time period considered particularly critical to Steller sea lions.

Current Status of Steller Sea Lions

NMFS has the authority to implement regulations necessary to protect Steller sea lions under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammal