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#### 50 CFR Part 673

[Docket No. 950223058-5058-01; I.D. 022395A1

# RIN 0648-AH93

## Scallop Fishery Off Alaska; Closure of **Federal Waters To Protect Scallop** Stocks

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

**ACTION:** Emergency interim rule; request for comments.

**SUMMARY:** NMFS is closing the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off Alaska to fishing for scallops in response to resource conservation concerns that result from unanticipated fishing for scallops in the EEZ by vessels outside the jurisdiction of Alaska State regulations governing the scallop fishery. This action is necessary to prevent localized overfishing of scallop stocks. This emergency closure is intended to control an unregulated scallop fishery in the EEZ until a Federal fishery management plan (FMP) can be implemented.

DATES: Effective February 23, 1995, through May 30, 1995. Comments must be submitted by March 10, 1995.

ADDRESSES: Comments may be sent to Ronald J. Berg, Chief, Fisheries Management Division, Alaska Region, National Marine Fisheries Service, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802, Attention: Lori Gravel. Copies of the Environmental Assessment prepared for the emergency rule may be obtained from the same address.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Susan Salveson, 907-586-7228.

## SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

#### Background

Fishing for scallops by U.S. vessels off Alaska is managed by the State of Alaska under regulations implemented by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) at 5 AAC 38.076. These regulations establish guideline harvest levels for different scallop registration areas, fishing seasons, open and closed fishing areas, observer coverage requirements, gear restrictions, and measures to control the processing efficiency of undersized scallops that include a ban on the use of mechanical shucking machines and a limitation on vessel crew size.

Section 306(a)(3) of the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act (16 U.S.C. 1801 et seq.) (Magnuson Act) provides that a state may not directly or indirectly regulate a fishing vessel in Federal waters unless the vessel is registered under the law of that state. As a result, regulations implemented by the State of Alaska to manage the scallop fishery only apply in the EEZ off Alaska to vessels registered under the laws of the State. Until now, all vessels fishing in the EEZ have been registered with the State and have been subject to ADF&G fishing regulations at 5 AAC 38.076.

The ADF&G recently became aware of a vessel fishing for scallops in the EEZ that is not registered under the laws of the State. The vessel is fishing for scallops in waters closed to Alaska registered vessels by the ADF&G. The State does not have authority to stop this activity because the vessel is not registered with the State and does not

fall under its jurisdiction.

Section 305(c) of the Magnuson Act authorizes NMFS to implement emergency regulations necessary to respond to fishery conservation and management problems that cannot be addressed within the time frame of the normal procedures provided by the Magnuson Act. These emergency regulations may remain in effect for not more than 90 days after publication in the **Federal Register**, with a possible 90day extension.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) convened an emergency teleconference meeting on February 17, 1995, to address the situation of unregistered vessels fishing for scallops in the EEZ outside the management jurisdiction of the State of Alaska. The Council requested NMFS to implement emergency rulemaking to close the EEZ to fishing for scallops to prevent further unregulated and uncontrolled fishing for scallops in Federal waters. Continued fishing for scallops by vessels not registered with the State poses significant conservation and management concerns that can be effectively addressed in a timely manner only through emergency closure of the EEZ. A brief discussion of the State's management program for scallops and the Council's concerns and justification for emergency rule action follow.

## Alaska State's Scallop Management Program

The primary pectinid harvested off Alaska is the weathervane scallop (Patinopecten caurinus). Since the early 1980's, between 4 and 20 vessels annually have participated in the Alaska scallop fishery. Gross earnings experienced by the fleet during this same period of time has ranged from almost \$.9 million in 1983 to over \$7 million in 1992.

The ADF&G initiated development of a management plan for the scallop fishery in response to overfishing concerns resulting from recent changes in the weathervane scallop fishery off Alaska. Weathervane scallops possess biological traits (e.g., longevity, low natural mortality rate, and variable recruitment) that render them vulnerable to overfishing. Record landings occurred in the late 1960's (about 1.8 million lbs (816.47 mt) shucked scallop meat), followed by a significant decline in catch through the 1970's and 1980's when landed catch ranged between 0.2 (90.72 mt) and 0.9 million lbs (408.23 mt). The ADF&G believes this decline was due, in part, to reduced abundance of scallop stocks. Landings since 1989 have increased to near record levels. Since 1989, the number of vessels fishing for scallops has not increased (about 10-15 vessels annually), although an increase in fishing power is evidenced by a substantial increase in average vessel length (from 84 ft (25.6 m) registered length in 1981 to 110 ft (33.5 m) in 1991) a predominance of full-time scallop vessels, and an increased number of deliveries. Until 1993, the State did not have a data collection program, although some indication exists that overfishing, or at least localized depletion, may have occurred. Data voluntarily submitted by participants in the scallop fishery during the early 1990's showed that an increase in meat counts per pound has occurred, indicating that smaller scallops now account for a greater proportion of the harvest. These data also suggest that catch-per-unit-of-effort in traditional fishing grounds has decreased.

Limited age data suggest that the scallop stock historically exploited off west Kodiak Island experienced an agestructure shift from predominately age 7 and older scallops in the late 1960's to an age structure predominated by scallops less than age 6 during the early 1970's. This shift indicated that harvest amounts had exceeded sustainable levels. Changes in fleet distribution from historical fishing grounds primarily in State waters to previously unfished grounds in the EEZ compounded management concerns.

In response to these concerns, the ADF&G implemented a management plan for the scallop fishery in 1993 that established a total of eight fishery registration areas corresponding to the