publication in the **Federal Register**, with a possible 90-day extension.

The number of red king crab in the Bristol Bay area of the BS is declining. Data from the 1994 NMFS crab survey indicate that the number of female red king crab is below threshold. This triggered closure of the 1994 directed Bristol Bay red king crab pot fishery by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G). Due to the closure of the red king crab fishery in ADF&G shellfish management Area T, the area east of 163° W. long. was closed to C. bairdi Tanner crab fishing for the 1994-95 season. Current regulations close Federal Statistical Area 512 to trawling to protect the red king crab stock. In view of the declining red king crab stock and the need to further protect and conserve red king crab in the Bristol Bay area of the BS, NMFS is implementing, by emergency rule, the following measures:

1. A closure in a portion of Bycatch Zone 1 (defined at § 675.2) to directed fishing for groundfish by vessels using trawl gear other than pelagic trawl gear;

- 2. Catcher/processors or catcher vessels equal to or greater than 60 ft (18.3m) length overall (LOA) must carry a NMFS-certified observer during 100 percent of their fishing days when participating in the flatfish fishery, defined at § 677.10(a)(1)(ii)(E), in areas of Zone 1 outside of the closure area implemented under this emergency rule; and
- 3. Catcher/processors or catcher vessels, equal to or greater than 60 ft (18.3m) LOA, must carry a NMFS-certified observer during 100 percent of their fishing days in which the vessel uses pelagic trawl gear in the closure area implemented under this emergency rule.

For the duration of this emergency rule, NMFS is also requesting that observers onboard vessels that have INMARSAT Standard A satellite communications equipment and the appropriate software and that are fishing for flatfish in Zone 1, report electronically crab bycatch data and certain haul statistics on a daily basis. This would not entail any additional regulatory requirement for vessel operators. Details of these measures follow.

## **Red King Crab Savings Area (RKCSA)**

Based on NMFS survey data, the 1994 abundance index for legal-sized male Bristol Bay red king crab was 5.5 million crab compared to 7.3 million in 1993. The abundance index for mature female crab declined from 14.2 million crab in 1993 to 7.5 million crab in 1994. This number is below the threshold

value of 8.4 million crab established pursuant to the FMP for the Commercial King and Tanner Crab Fisheries in the BSAI. These declines were corroborated by the length-based assessment model that was newly developed by ADF&G. Because the abundance of female crab was below threshold, ADF&G closed the 1994 Bristol Bay red king crab fishery, as well as the directed pot fishery for Tanner crab in Zone 1 east of 163° W. long. The Bristol Bay red king crab stock continues to suffer from a long period of low recruitment and sublegal crab levels are among the lowest on record.

At the September 1994 Council meeting, the Crab Plan Team presented the Council with information detailing the status of the red king crab stocks in the Bristol Bay area of the BS. Because female red king crab were below the sustainable threshold, emergency action was considered to conserve this resource. At a subsequent teleconference on November 14, 1994, the Council reviewed an analysis prepared by ADF&G that examined alternative closure areas. At this teleconference, the Council recommended a closure area between 55°45′ and 57°00′ N. lat. and between 162° and 164° W. long. The intent of this trawl closure is to reduce the number of female red king crab taken as bycatch in the trawl fisheries. However, it would be at the expense of most of the optimal rock sole fishing grounds. After reviewing additional analysis prepared by ADF&G subsequent to the Council's teleconference and reexamining the administrative record on this issue, NMFS is implementing a closure area that would meet the intent of the Council to protect female red king crab, while minimizing the displacement of trawl fisheries and the foregone opportunity to harvest roe-bearing rock sole.

To conserve the red king crab resource in the Bristol Bay area of the BS, NMFS is implementing emergency measures to prohibit directed fishing for groundfish by vessels using trawl gear other than pelagic trawl gear in the RKCSA, which is bounded by a straight line connecting the following coordinates in the order listed below:

Latitude	Longitude
56°00′ N	164°00′ W. 164°00′ W. 164°00′ W.

The highest bycatch of red king crab has been from the rock sole/other flatfish fishery category, especially in 1993 and 1994 when the red king crab bycatch in Zone 1 was estimated at 134,000 and 193,000 crab, respectively. During this same period, the bottom trawl pollock fishery caught the next highest amount of Zone 1 red king crab (44,000 and 39,000, respectively) and the yellowfin sole and Pacific cod fisheries also took some king crab. Red king crab bycatch has been greatest in the rock sole fishery during the months of January and February when the rock sole roe fishery occurs. Significantly reduced bycatch rates of red king crab occur in other trawl fisheries throughout the year.

The current closure area for red king crab (Federal Statistical Area 512) in the BS was designed to protect approximately 90 percent of the mature female red king crab. This consideration was based on the distribution of female crab in the mid 1980's. Annual NMFS crab survey data show distribution and relative abundance of female red king crab vary from year to year. However, survey data since 1990 indicate that relatively large numbers of female crab have been taken at survey stations in Bristol Bay located at 56° N. long. and north. Although only a limited number of survey stations are located south of 56° N. long., survey data from this area indicate a relatively low abundance of crab and no female crab have been taken in this area during the 1990–1994 trawl surveys.

Recent 1993 and 1994 trawl survey data show female red king crab are present at survey stations located along 56° N. long. The relative abundance of female red king crab at these stations was significantly greater in 1993 compared to 1994. The distribution of crab indicated from summer trawl surveys may not represent the distribution of various stock components during winter months when intensive trawl operations for row-bearing rock sole occur in the Bristol Bay area. Although no recent winter trawl survey data exists, crab generally are believed to move shoreward during the molting and mating season. Although the breeding season for crab can be protracted and dependent on a number of variables, the peak breeding season is believed to occur during March-May.

Available observer data on the sex composition of Bristol Bay red king crab taken as bycatch in the trawl fisheries are limited. Sex composition data collected in 1993 for observed hauls south of 56° N. lat. are not available. However, 1993 data for observed hauls between 56° and 56°10′ N. lat. show about one third of the crab sampled for sex composition were females and almost 80 percent of the crab sampled