Regulations at §§ 672.26 and 675.26 implement a vessel incentive program to reduce halibut and red king crab bycatch rates in the groundfish trawl fisheries. Under the incentive program, operators of trawl vessels may not exceed Pacific halibut bycatch rate standards specified for the BSAI and GOA midwater pollock and "other trawl" fisheries, and the BSAI yellowfin sole and 'bottom pollock' fisheries. Vessel operators also may not exceed red king crab bycatch rate standards specified for the BSAI yellowfin sole and "other trawl" fisheries in Bycatch Limitation Zone 1 (defined in § 675.2). The fisheries included under the incentive program are defined in regulations at §§ 672.26(b) and 675.26(b).

Regulations at §§ 672.26(c) and 675.26(c) require that halibut and red king crab bycatch rate standards for each fishery included under the incentive program be published in the Federal Register. The standards are in effect for specified seasons within the 6month periods of January 1 through June 30, and July 1 through December 31. Given that the GOA and BSAI groundfish fisheries are closed to trawling from January 1 to January 20 of each year (§§ 672.23(e) and 675.23(d), respectively), the Regional Director is promulgating bycatch rate standards for the first half of 1996 effective from January 20, 1996, through June 30, 1996.

At its September 1995 meeting, the Council reviewed halibut and red king crab bycatch rates experienced by vessels participating in the fisheries under the incentive program during 1992-1995. The Council also reviewed individual vessel performance during 1994 and 1995 relative to specified bycatch rate standards. Based on this and other information presented below, the Council recommended halibut and red king crab bycatch rate standards for the first half of 1996. These standards are unchanged from those specified for the first half of 1994 and 1995. The Council's recommended bycatch rate standards are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1.—BYCATCH RATE STAND-ARDS, BY FISHERY AND QUARTER (QT), FOR THE FIRST HALF OF 1996 FOR PURPOSES OF THE VESSEL IN-CENTIVE PROGRAM IN THE BSAI AND GOA

Fishery and quarter	1996 bycatch rate standard
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Halibut bycatch rate standards (kilogram (kg) of halibut/metric ton (mt) of groundfish catch

BSAI Midwater pollock:	
Qt 1	1.0
Qt 2	1.0
BSAI Bottom pollock:	
Qt 1	7.5
Qt 2	5.0
BSAI Yellowfin sole:	
Qt 1	5.0
Qt 2	5.0
BSAI Other trawl:	
Qt 1	30.0
Qt 2	30.0
GOA Midwater pollock:	
Qt 1	1.0
Qt 2	1.0
GOA Other trawl:	
Qt 1	40.0
Qt 2	40.0

Zone 1 red king crab bycatch rate standards (number of crab/mt of groundfish catch)

2.5
2.5
2.5
2.5

As required by §§ 672.26(c) and 675.26(c), the Council's recommended bycatch rate standards for January through June are based on the following information:

- (A) Previous years' average observed bycatch rates;
- (B) Immediately preceding season's average observed bycatch rates;
- (C) The bycatch allowances and associated fishery closures specified under §§ 672.20(f) and 675.21;
- (D) Anticipated groundfish harvests;(E) Anticipated seasonal distribution
- of fishing effort for groundfish; and (F) Other information and criteria deemed relevant by the Director of the Alaska Region, NMFS (Regional

Director).

The recommended 1996 standards are based largely on anticipated seasonal fishing effort for groundfish species and 1992–1995 halibut and red king crab bycatch rates observed in the trawl fisheries included under the incentive program. The Council anticipates that the 1996 prohibited species bycatch

allowances, groundfish harvests, and seasonal distribution of fishing effort will be similar to 1995. Under this assumption, additional information considered by the Council when recommending the 1996 bycatch rate standards is discussed in the Federal Register publication of the bycatch rate standards for the first half of 1995 (60 FR 2905, January 12, 1995).

Bycatch Rate Standards for Pacific Halibut

As in past years, the halibut bycatch rate standard recommended for the BSAI and GOA midwater pollock fisheries (1 kg halibut/mt of groundfish) is higher than the bycatch rates normally experienced by vessels participating in these fisheries. The recommended standard is intended to encourage vessel operators to maintain off-bottom trawl operations and limit further bycatch of halibut in the pollock fishery when halibut bycatch restrictions at §§ 672.20(f)(3)(i) and 675.21(c)(1)(iii) prohibit directed fishing for pollock by vessels using nonpelagic trawl gear.

The recommended halibut bycatch rate standards for the BSAI "bottom pollock" fishery continue to approximate the average annual rates observed on trawl vessels participating in this fishery during the past 5 years. During the first and second quarters of 1995, the average halibut bycatch rates in this fishery were 1.95 and 6.82 kg halibut/mt groundfish, respectively. As in past years, the directed fishing allowances specified for the 1996 pollock roe or "A" season likely will be reached before the end of the "A" season on April 15. Directed fishing for pollock is prohibited from the end of the pollock "A" season (April 15) until the beginning of the pollock "B" season (August 15), except by vessels fishing under the Community Development Quota (CDQ) program (50 CFR 675.27).

Data available on halibut bycatch rates in the yellowfin sole fishery during the first and second quarters of 1995 showed an average bycatch rate of about 3.67 and 4.00 kg halibut/mt of groundfish, respectively. As in past years, the Council has presumed that a bycatch rate standard of 5.0 kg halibut/mt of groundfish for the yellowfin sole fishery will continue to encourage vessel operators to take action to avoid excessively high bycatch rates of halibut.

A 30 kg halibut/mt of groundfish bycatch rate standard was recommended for the BSAI "other trawl" fishery. This standard is unchanged since 1992. The Council recommended a 40 kg halibut/mt of