provide an opportunity for public participation in this process.

DATES: Comments must be submitted by January 4, 1996.

ADDRESSES: Comments must be sent to Ronald J. Berg, Chief, Fisheries Management Division, Alaska Region, NMFS, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802–1668, Attn: Lori Gravel.

The preliminary 1996 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report, dated September 1995, is available from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, 605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306, Anchorage, AK 99510–2252, 907–271–2817.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Ellen R. Varosi, 907–586–7228.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Groundfish fisheries in the BSAI are governed by Federal Regulations (50 CFR 675) that implement the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Area (FMP). Other applicable regulations are found at 50 CFR 611.93 (Foreign Fishing) and 50 CFR part 676 (Limited Access Management of Federal Fisheries In and Off of Alaska) and 50 CFR part 677 (North Pacific Fisheries Research Plan). The FMP was prepared by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) and approved by NMFS under the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

The FMP and implementing regulations require NMFS, after consultation with the Council, to specify for each calendar year the total allowable catch (TAC) for each target species and the "other species" category, the sum of which must be within the optimum yield (OY) range of 1.4 million to 2.0 million metric tons (mt) (§ 675.20(a)(2)). Regulations under § 675.20(a)(7)(i) further require NMFS to publish annually and solicit public comment on proposed annual TAC amounts, apportionments of each TAC, prohibited species catch (PSC) allowances, seasonal allowances of the pollock TAC, and seasonal allowances of the pollock Community Development Quota (CDQ) reserve. The specifications set forth in Tables 1-7 of this action satisfy these requirements. For 1996, the proposed sum of TAC amounts is 2.0 million mt. Under § 675.20(a)(7)(ii), NMFS will publish the final annual specifications for 1996 after considering: (1) Comments received within the comment period (see DATES), and (2) consultations with the Council at its December 1995 meeting.

The specified TAC amounts for each species are based on the best available biological and socioeconomic

information. At its September and December meetings, the Council, its Advisory Panel, and its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), annually review biological information about the condition of groundfish stocks in the BSAI. This information is compiled by the Council's BSAI Groundfish Plan Team (Plan Team) and is presented in the SAFE Report. The Plan Team annually produces such a report as the first step in the process of specifying TAC amounts. The SAFE Report contains a review of the latest scientific analyses and estimates of each species' biomass, maximum sustainable yield (MSY), acceptable biological catch (ABC) and other biological parameters, as well as summaries of the ecosystem and the economic condition of groundfish fisheries off Alaska. A preliminary 1996 SAFE Report, dated September 1995, provides an update on status of stocks. These preliminary assessments will be updated based on biological survey work done during the summer of 1995. Assessments will be made available by the Plan Team in November 1995 and included in the final edition of the 1996 SAFE Report. Final ABC amounts for the 1996 fishing year will be based on the most recent stock assessments. The proposed ABC amounts adopted by the Council for the 1996 fishing year are based on the best available scientific information, including projected biomass trends, information on assumed distribution of stock biomass, and revised technical methods used to calculate stock biomass.

Regulations at § 675.20(a)(7)(i) require that one-fourth of each proposed initial TAC (ITAC) amount and apportionment thereof, one-fourth of each PSC allowance established under § 675.21(b), and the first seasonal allowances of pollock become effective 0001 hours, A.l.t., January 1, on an interim basis and remain in effect until superseded by the final harvest specifications, which will be published in the Federal Register.

NMFS is publishing, in the Rules and Regulations section of this Federal Register issue, interim TAC specifications and apportionments thereof for the 1996 fishing year that will become available 0001 hours, Alaska local time, January 1, 1996, and remain in effect until superseded by the final 1996 harvest specifications.

Procedure for Estimating ABC

The Council bases its calculation of ABC on the definition contained in 50 CFR part 602—Guidelines For Fishery Management Plans (602 Guidelines). The 602 Guidelines (§ 602.11(e)(1)) state that:

ABC is a preliminary description of the acceptable harvest (or range of harvests) for a given stock or stock complex. Its derivation focuses on the status and dynamics of the stock, environmental conditions, other ecological factors, and prevailing technological characteristics of the fishery.

The 602 Guidelines also provide the Council with the flexibility needed to define overfishing appropriate to the individual stock or species characteristics, as long as it is defined in a way that allows the Council and NMFS to evaluate the condition of the stock relative to the definition (§ 602.11(c)). Application of the overfishing definition requires some flexibility because the amount of data for different stocks varies. The calculations used to derive preliminary overfishing levels for a given stock or stock complex are described in the preliminary 1996 SAFE Report.

Calculation of ABC varies among species, depending on the quality of available data and prior knowledge of a species' stock status. The Plan Team has adopted three steps for estimating ABC amounts. First, the exploitable biomass of a stock is estimated. Second, the ABC for a stock is calculated by multiplying an exploitation rate times the estimated exploitable biomass. Various exploitation rates or fishing mortality rates (F) may be used in this calculation, depending on the data available and the degree of risk the Plan Team is willing to accept. For example, the exploitation rate that would produce MSY (F_{MSY}) may be used when the stock is known to be in good condition, high in abundance, and not in danger of drastic decline. When more conservative stock management is desirable, a $F_{0.1}$ harvest strategy is used to determine an exploitation rate. This strategy determines a level of F at which the marginal increase in yield-per-recruit due to an increase in F is 10 percent of the marginal yield-per-recruit in a newly exploited fishery. Recruitment refers to the growth of juvenile fish into the adult or exploitable population. Generally, $F_{0,1}$ is a more conservative exploitation rate than F_{MSY} . Another alternative is to use historical exploitation rates when historical fishery data indicate that a stock is not affected adversely by such rates. A switch in harvest strategy from F_{.35} to F=natural mortality rate (M) can be used when current maturity parameter estimates are unreliable. Finally, an empirical estimation of ABC based on historical catch levels may be used when information is insufficient to estimate the biomass of a stock. Details of overfishing, ABC, and other calculation procedures are discussed in