

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 4 years. The recommended standard for the BSAI "bottom pollock" fishery during the first quarter of 1995 (7.5 kg halibut/mt of groundfish) is set at a level near the average halibut bycatch rate experienced by vessels participating in the "bottom pollock" fishery during the first quarters of 1992 and 1993 (7.58 and 7.59 kg halibut/mt of groundfish, respectively). During the first quarter of 1994, the halibut bycatch rate in this fishery was only 2.71 kg halibut/mt groundfish. However, the average halibut bycatch rate during the second quarter of 1994 was unusually high at almost 30 kg halibut/mt groundfish. This high rate was associated with very little fishing effort because the Bering Sea subarea and Aleutian Islands subarea offshore component pollock fisheries were closed on February 18 and March 1, respectively; and the inshore Bering Sea subarea and Aleutian Islands subarea pollock fisheries were closed on March 2, 1994, and March 18, 1994, respectively. As a result, the second quarter bycatch rate estimated for the 1994 pollock fishery is not considered to be reflective of the rates typically experienced in this fishery. As in past years, the directed fishing allowances specified for the 1995 pollock "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).

The Council recommended a 5.0 kg halibut/mt of groundfish bycatch rate standard for the second quarter of 1995 to accommodate any CDQ pollock fishery that may occur during this period. This standard approximates the average halibut bycatch rate experienced by vessels participating in the bottom pollock fishery during the second quarter of 1992 (4.34 kg halibut/mt of groundfish), but is higher than the second quarter rate experienced in 1993 (2.72 kg halibut/mt of groundfish).

A 30 kg halibut/mt of groundfish bycatch rate standard was recommended for the BSAI "other trawl" fishery. This standard has remained unchanged since 1992. The Council recommended a 40 kg halibut/mt of groundfish bycatch rate standard for the GOA "other trawl" fishery, which is the same as for 1994.

The bycatch rate standards recommended for the GOA and BSAI "other trawl" fisheries are based on the Council's intent to simplify the incentive program by specifying a single bycatch rate standard for the aggregate trawl fisheries that are not assigned fishery-specific bycatch rate standards under the incentive program, yet reduce overall halibut bycatch rates in the Alaska groundfish trawl fisheries.

Observer data collected from the 1994 GOA "other trawl" fishery show first and second quarter halibut bycatch rates of 20 and 43 kg halibut/mt of groundfish, respectively. First and second quarter rates from 1993 were 34 and 27 kg halibut/mt of groundfish, respectively. Observer data collected from the 1994 BSAI "other trawl" fishery show first and second quarter halibut bycatch rates of 9 and 20 kg halibut/mt of groundfish, respectively. Observer data from 1992 and 1993 showed similar rates. The average bycatch rates experienced by vessels participating in the GOA and BSAI "other trawl" fisheries are lower than the Council's recommended bycatch rate standards for these fisheries. However, the Council determined that its recommended halibut bycatch rate standards for the "other trawl" fisheries would continue to provide an incentive to vessel operators to avoid unusually high halibut bycatch rates while participating in these fisheries and contribute towards an overall reduction in halibut bycatch rates experienced in the Alaska trawl fisheries. Furthermore, these standards would provide some leniency to those vessel operators that choose to use large-mesh trawl gear in the BSAI rock sole fishery (a component fishery of the BSAI "other trawl" fishery) as a means to reduce groundfish discard amounts. The bycatch rates of halibut and crab could increase for vessels using this gear type, but observer data do not exist on which to base a revised bycatch rate standard for these operations. The Council recommended maintaining the current bycatch rate standard for the BSAI "other trawl" fishery until observer data become available that will provide a basis for bycatch rate standards for vessels using large-mesh trawl gear. At its September and December 1994 meetings, the Council requested that NMFS initiate rulemaking to require large-mesh trawl gear in the rock sole, Pacific cod, and pollock fisheries. As part of that process, the Council requested that NMFS amend regulations implementing the vessel incentive program so that separate bycatch rate standards for the rock sole fishery may be specified that

consider the potential for higher halibut and red king crab bycatch rates under mesh size restrictions.

#### **Bycatch Rates Standards for Red King Crab**

The Council's recommended red king crab bycatch rate standard for the yellowfin sole and "other trawl" fisheries in Zone 1 of the Bering Sea subarea is 2.5 crab/mt of groundfish during the first half of 1995. This standard has remained unchanged since 1992.

With the exception of rock sole, little fishing effort for flatfish has occurred in Zone 1 during recent years, because commercial concentrations of yellowfin sole and "other flatfish" normally occur north of this area, when these fisheries opened on May 1. Because regulations recently have been implemented that revise the opening date for these flatfish fisheries to January 20, limited observer data exist for the yellowfin sole fishery in Zone 1 for the 4-year period of 1991-94. These data indicate average red king crab bycatch rates during the first part of the year between 0.23 and 2.19 crab/mt of groundfish. During this same 4-year period, the first and second quarter bycatch rates of red king crab experienced by vessels participating in the "other trawl" fishery ranged from .02 to 2.39 crab/mt of groundfish. The total bycatch of red king crab by vessels participating in the 1994 trawl fisheries is estimated at 244,634 crab, or about 122 percent of the 200,000 red king crab bycatch limit established for the trawl fisheries in Zone 1. Most of red king crab bycatch (193,016 crab) occurred in the rock sole fishery. At the request of the Council, NMFS is pursuing an emergency trawl closure in Zone 1 to reduce the number of female red king crab taken as bycatch. This action was recommended by the Council in response to conservation concerns ensuing from results of the 1994 NMFS crab trawl survey that showed female crab to be below threshold numbers. The emergency rule would close lucrative fishing grounds used by the rock sole fishery and would change observer coverage requirements to provide NMFS with more thorough and timely data on crab bycatch in Zone 1, so that specified fishery bycatch allowances are not exceeded. Anticipating that fishery bycatch allowances will not be exceeded in 1995 and that the red king crab bycatch limit will restrict bycatch amounts to specified levels, the Council maintained the 2.5 red king crab/mt of groundfish bycatch rate standard. As mentioned above, the Council has requested that NMFS pursue rulemaking that would