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**NOAA FISHERIES APPROVES PROGRAM TO MAKE WEST  
COAST SABLEFISH HARVEST SAFER, MORE EFFICIENT**

West Coast commercial fishermen harvesting sablefish may find their job safer, more efficient and a bit more profitable, thanks to important changes to how the fishery is managed, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA fisheries) announced today.

NOAA fisheries, an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), said it has approved a proposal by the Pacific Fishery Management Council to let fishermen combine or "stack" as many as three permits assigned to any one vessel for harvesting sablefish, a staple of the West Coast groundfish fishery. The Pacific Fishery Management Council, an 11-member quasi-governmental body, manages 82 species of groundfish on the West Coast.

Last year, landings of sablefish, also known as black cod, topped 14 million pounds worth just over \$21 million in Washington, Oregon and California. In 1999, Newport, Ore., Astoria, Ore., and Northern Puget Sound were the principal sablefish ports.

While every vessel needs a permit to fish for sablefish, previously it could be assigned only one, creating a fishery with lots of vessels (an estimated 165 in 2000), each with its own permit and with only a tiny slice of the sablefish pie. While the overall quotas for sablefish will stay the same as they would have under the old system, under the permit-stacking program, vessel owners can buy or sell their permits. As some vessel's owners sell their permits to other vessel owners and get out of the fishery, the number of vessels participating in the fishery will decline, leading to a more economically efficient fishery.

In addition to the permit-stacking program, NOAA fisheries managers also approved lengthening the fishing season for sablefish. Instead of a typical nine-day, first-come-first-served, grueling season with a high safety risk to fishermen, the new season will be a less frantic two-and-one-half months in 2001. Even longer seasons are anticipated for 2002 and beyond.

This year's season runs from August 15 - October 31.

“These changes are a milestone in fishing management on the West Coast,” said Bill Robinson, head of the agency’s Northwest regional sustainable fisheries division in Seattle. “I’m proud that the council and the fisheries service were able to make this fishery safer and more efficient for Northwest commercial fishermen.”

NOAA fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitats. More about NOAA Fisheries is available at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

For more information about the permit-stacking program, check the Web at: <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov>