

## **Final Environmental Impact Statement for Essential Fish Habitat Identification and Conservation in Alaska**

*Amendment 78 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery of the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Area*  
*Amendment 73 to the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska*  
*Amendment 16 to the Fishery Management Plan for Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands King and Tanner Crabs*  
*Amendment 9 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Scallop Fishery off Alaska*  
*Amendment 7 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Salmon Fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zone off the Coast of Alaska*

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**Abstract:** The 1996 amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) included new provisions concerning the identification and conservation of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). The North Pacific Fishery Management Council amended its five fishery management plans (FMPs) in 1998 to address the new EFH requirements, and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) approved those FMP amendments in January 1999. A legal challenge resulted in a September 2000 United States District Court decision that upheld NMFS' approval of the EFH FMP amendments under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, but ruled that the environmental assessment (EA) prepared for the amendments violated the National Environmental Policy Act. The court ordered NMFS to complete a new and thorough environmental analysis. Accordingly, this environmental impact statement evaluates alternatives and environmental consequences for three actions: (1) describing and identifying EFH for fisheries managed by the Council; (2) adopting an approach for the Council to identify Habitat Areas of Particular Concern within EFH; and (3) minimizing to the extent practicable the adverse effects of Council-managed fishing on EFH. Most of the controversy surrounding the level of protection needed for EFH concerns the effects of fishing activities on sea floor habitats. Substantial differences of opinion exist as to the extent and significance of habitat alteration caused by bottom trawling and other fishing activities. This EIS reexamines the effects of fishing on EFH, presents a wider range of alternatives, and provides a more thorough analysis of potential impacts than the EA approved in 1999. The analysis indicates that there are long-term effects of fishing on benthic habitat features off Alaska and acknowledges that considerable scientific uncertainty remains regarding the consequences of such habitat changes for the sustained productivity of managed species. Nevertheless, based on the best available scientific information, the EIS concludes that the effects on EFH are minimal because the analysis finds no indication that continued fishing activities at the current rate and intensity would alter the capacity of EFH to support healthy populations of managed species over the long term. The analysis concludes that no Council-managed fishing activities have more than minimal and temporary adverse effects on EFH, which is the regulatory standard requiring action to minimize adverse effects under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, but a variety of practicable management actions could be taken as a precautionary measure to provide additional habitat protection.