UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

September 16, 2004

Stephanie Madsen, Chair
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2252

Dear Ms. Madsen:

At the June meeting in Portland, the Council voted to modify the Aleutian Islands portion of Alternative 5B in the Essential Fish Habitat Environmental Impact Statement to have four options, as follows:

1. Original 5B open areas approach for bottom trawling, including coral/sponge bycatch caps and TAC reductions for Pacific cod, Atka mackerel and rockfish;

2. Oceana's proposed modifications to the open areas approach for bottom trawling based on its April 29, 2004 letter to the Council, including coral/sponge bycatch caps and TAC reductions for Atka mackerel and rockfish;

3. Oceana's proposed modifications to the open areas approach for bottom trawling based on its April 29, 2004 letter to the Council, minus the coral/sponge bycatch cap and TAC reductions for Atka mackerel and rockfish;

4. A modified 5B open areas approach for bottom trawling that would incorporate all areas where the cumulative bottom trawl groundfish catch is greater than or equal to 200mt based on observer data from 1991-2003. No coral/sponge bycatch caps or TAC reductions are associated with this option.

The Council requested that staff plot these Alternative 5B options on 1:300,000 scale nautical charts to facilitate public review.

NMFS intended to present a full analysis of all the Alternative 5B options at the October Council meeting. However, while performing the spatial analysis of the 200mt option, we discovered that Council input is necessary to finalize boundaries for this option before we complete the analysis. As you will see on the enclosed maps, the areas with at least 200mt of catch are irregular in shape, so the Council may wish to adjust these areas to facilitate management and enforcement. NMFS will then complete the analysis and present the results for all of the Alternative 5B options at the December meeting.

Enclosed please find two sets of maps covering management areas 541, 542, and 543 in the Aleutian Islands; one showing the modified 5B areas and the other showing the areas with at least 200mt of catch. Both are overlaid on the original 5B areas for comparative purposes. Also enclosed is a single map showing the areas with at least 200mt of catch for all of the Aleutian Islands area.

The maps for the modified 5B reflect the changes sought by Oceana. Oceana provided the map files to NMFS and we made no edits. The modifications result in an approximately 6.5% decrease in areas open to fishing compared to the original 5B, for a total of 31,854 km^2.

The maps for the 200mt option are based on 1991-2003 NORPAC data, non-pelagic trawl (NPT) only, for management areas 541, 542, and 543. The methods and results of this analysis are as follows. Observer data were summed to 6'x6' grids aligned to latitude/longitude. These blocks are each approximately 80 km^2. A total of 1,054 blocks contained some level of catch from 1991-2003, with 348 blocks containing greater than 200mt of groundfish catch. These 348 blocks result in an area of 26,555 km^2 and contain 94.7% of the NPT tows and 97.6% of the total catch. The total area of the 200mt option should not be compared to the total open area of the other 5B options until the Council finalizes the boundaries of the 200mt option. NMFS used NOAA charts 16460, 16480, and 16500 for management area 541 and part of 542, and chart 16012 for the remainder of 542 and 543. Workable electronic versions of charts 16420 and 16440 were not available.

NMFS staff will be available at the October meeting in Sitka to provide any additional information to assist the Council in finalizing the Alternative 5B options.

Sincerely,

For James W. Balsiger
Administrator, Alaska Region

Enclosures