

Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC)

Areas of Skate Egg Concentration

Public Review Draft

Environmental Assessment (EA) / Regulatory Impact Review (RIR) / Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (IRFA)

For Amendment to the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Groundfish of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI), the BSAI King and Tanner Crab FMP, the Alaska Salmon FMP, and the Alaska Scallop FMP

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Table of Contents

1.0	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	6
1.1	Action Alternatives and Options	6
1.2	Summary of Environmental Impacts.....	9
1.3	Summary of Economic Impacts	10
2.0	INTRODUCTION.....	11
2.1	Overview of Existing HAPCs	12
2.2	HAPC Recommendations for Council Consideration	14
2.3	Current HAPC Process Timeline.....	15
2.4	Summary of Proposed HAPCs	16
2.4.1	Research Conclusions, Assumptions, and Remaining Unknowns	17
2.4.2	Supporting Research.....	17
2.4.3	Expected Sites for Three Skate Species	18
2.4.4	Skate Egg Site Nomenclature.....	21
2.5	Delineation of HAPCs.....	23
3.0	ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA).....	25
3.1	Relevant NEPA Documents	25
3.1.1	Alaska Groundfish Programmatic Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement EIS (PSEIS).....	25
3.1.2	Alaska Groundfish Harvest Specifications Environmental Impact Statement	26
3.1.3	BSAI Final 2011-2012 Harvest Specifications Environmental Assessment.....	26
3.1.4	Essential Fish Habitat Environmental Impact Statement	26
3.2	Purpose and Need for the Action.....	27
3.2.1	Statement of Purpose and Need.....	27
3.3	Alternatives and Options	28
3.3.1	Action Alternatives and Options Analyzed.....	28
3.4	Discussion of Alternatives and Options	30
3.4.1	Alternative 1	30
3.4.2	Alternative 2.....	31
3.4.3	Alternative 3 and Options b and c	31
3.4.4	Option d – Research List.....	33
3.4.5	Option e – BSAI Amendment 89	34
3.5	Alternatives & Options Considered but Rejected.....	34
3.6	Skate Biology	35
3.6.1	Alaska Skate.....	36
3.6.2	Bering Skate	36
3.6.3	Aleutian Skate	37
3.6.4	Life History and Stock Structure.....	37
3.6.5	Embryology and Development Duration.....	38
3.6.6	Role of Skates in the Ecosystem	39
3.7	Environmental Impacts.....	40
3.7.1	Habitat	42
3.7.2	Target Species	53
3.7.3	Non-Target Resources.....	58
3.7.4	Marine Mammals and Seabirds.....	60
3.7.5	Ecosystem.....	64
3.8	Cumulative Impacts.....	66
3.8.1	Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions (RFFA).....	67
3.8.2	Climate Change	68
3.9	Management and Enforcement Considerations.....	69

4.0	REGULATORY IMPACT REVIEW (RIR)	70
4.1	Introduction and Problem Statement	70
4.1.1	Statement of Purpose and Need.....	71
4.2	Alternatives and Options	71
4.2.1	Action Alternatives and Options	72
4.3	Background	75
4.3.1	Proposed HAPC Sites.....	75
4.3.2	BSAI Groundfish Fisheries	75
4.3.3	Skate Fishery Management and Stock Status.....	76
4.3.4	Incidental Catch and Discards	77
4.4	Effects on Harvesters, Processors, and Communities	78
4.4.1	Effects on Harvesters.....	78
4.4.2	Effects on Processors and Communities	86
4.5	Effects on Management, Monitoring, and Enforcement	86
4.5.1	Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS)	87
4.5.2	Vessel Speed and Distance Traveled.....	88
4.5.3	Geo-fence Application for HAPC Sites	94
4.5.4	Automatic Identification System (AIS).....	94
4.6	Net Benefits to the Nation	95
5.0	INITIAL REGULATORY FLEXIBILITY ANALYSIS (IRFA)	96
5.1	Introduction	96
5.2	IRFA Requirements.....	97
5.3	Definition of a Small Entity	97
5.3.1	Small Businesses	97
5.3.2	Small Organizations	99
5.3.3	Small Governmental Jurisdictions.....	99
5.4	Reasons for Consideration of Proposed Actions	99
5.5	Legal Basis for Proposed Actions	100
5.6	Small Entities Impacted by Actions	100
5.7	Recordkeeping and Reporting Requirements	102
5.8	Duplicate, Overlap, or Conflict with Federal Rules	102
5.9	Alternatives that Accomplish Objectives at Lower Cost to Small Entities	102
5.10	Consistency With Applicable Law.....	103
5.10.1	Environmental Analysis Conclusions.....	103
5.10.2	The Ten National Standards	106
5.10.3	Fisheries Impact Statement (FIS)	108
6.0	REFERENCES	109
7.0	PREPARERS, CONTRIBUTORS, AND PERSONS CONSULTED	116
8.0	APPENDICES	117
8.1	Appendix A – HAPC Process Methodology	117
8.2	Appendix B – Color Figures	120

List of Tables

Table 1. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 2.	7
Table 2. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 3.	8
Table 3. HAPCs within the NMFS Alaska Region.	13
Table 4. Comparison of existing HAPCs with proposed HAPCs, in terms of area.	14
Table 5. Egg estimates for each area of concentration and the annual cohort estimate comparing areas of concentration to trawl survey estimates (YOY=young-of-the-year).....	21
Table 6. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 2.	29
Table 7. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 3.	29
Table 8. Summary table of gear type prohibited under each option for Alternative 3.	31
Table 9. Summary table of HAPC sites, skate species, and fisheries	32
Table 10. Skate species found in Alaskan waters.	35
Table 11. Criteria used to determine significance of effects on habitat.....	51
Table 12. Trawl footprint analysis according to available VMS data, of the areas described by Alternative 2.	52
Table 13. Criteria used to estimate the significance of effects on FMP-managed target stocks.....	54
Table 14. Summary table of potential impacts of fishing gear on skate eggs.....	58
Table 15. Criteria used to estimate the significance of effects on forage and non-specified species.	59
Table 16. Criteria used to estimate the significance of impacts on prohibited species.....	59
Table 17. ESA listed and candidate species that range into the BSAI groundfish management area.	61
Table 18. Criteria for determining significance of impacts to marine mammals.	62
Table 19. Criteria used to determine significance of impacts on seabirds.....	64
Table 20. Significance thresholds for fishery induced effects on ecosystem attributes.	66
Table 21. Reasonable foreseeable future actions (RFFAs).....	67
Table 22. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 2.	73
Table 23. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 3.	74
Table 24. Summary Information on proposed Skate egg HAPC sites.....	75
Table 25. Aggregate 2011 through 2013 harvest recommendations for the BSAI skate complex.	76
Table 26. Status and catch specifications (t) of skates in recent years in the BSAI.	76
Table 27. Bottom trawl catch (mt) per year, under Alternative 3. Sites not listed experienced no catch in the years examined.	83
Table 28. Gross ex-vessel value of nonpelagic (i.e., bottom trawl) trawl catch per year, under Alternative 3. Sites not listed experienced no catch in the years examined.	84
Table 29. Pelagic trawl catch, in tons of groundfish (pollock) per year, in areas designated by Alternative 3.	85
Table 30. Relationship of time, speed and distance for VMS polling rates.....	89
Table 31. Increased VMS poll rates – distances and costs.	93
Table 32. Criteria to evaluate HAPC proposals for the Council’s consideration	117
Table 33. The Data Certainty Factor (DCF).....	118
Table 34. HAPC Evaluation Criteria.....	119
Table 35. Evaluation of HAPC proposal.....	120

List of Figures

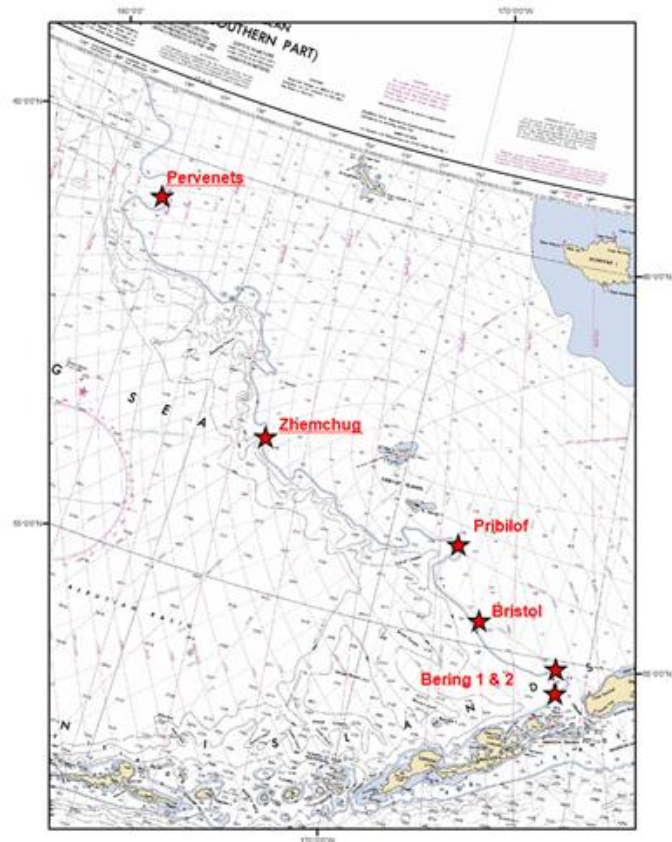
Figure 1.	Life cycle with respect to habitat use for skates along the slope (200 to 1200 m) and the shelf (0-200 m) in the eastern Bering Sea.....	22
Figure 2.	Modified nonpelagic (i.e., bottom) trawl gear (Figure 26 to Part 679).....	44
Figure 3.	Elevating device clearance measurement locations for modified nonpelagic (bottom) trawl gear.....	45
Figure 4.	A comparison of the relative bottom contact (shown in the shaded area) made by conventional trawl sweeps, and those using the modified sweeps specified in regulation for flatfish fisheries. Figure from Rose et al., 2010.....	48
Figure 5.	Illustration of the effects of different VMS polling rates relative to the Bering 2 site, with boundaries described under Alternative 2.....	90
Figure 6.	Illustration of the effects of different VMS polling rates relative to the Zhemchug site, with boundaries described under Alternative 2.....	91
Figure 7.	Illustration of the effects of different VMS polling rates relative to the Bering 1 site, with boundaries described under Alternative 2.....	92
Figure 8.	Relationship between the distances a vessel travels (nm) and increasing VMS polls per hour.	93
Figure 9.	Schematic of time slots and vessel communication under AIS.	95

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) are geographic sites within the distribution of essential fish habitat (EFH) for federally managed species. Specific to fishery actions, HAPCs are areas within EFH that are rare and are either ecologically important, sensitive to disturbance, or may be stressed.

In April 2010, the Council set a habitat priority type (skate nurseries) and issued a request for HAPC proposals in conjunction with the completion of its EFH five-year review process. In October 2010, the Council selected a HAPC proposal from the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) to forward on for further analysis. The Council reviewed several versions of the analysis and refined the alternative options. In June 2012, the Council identified a preliminary preferred alternative (Alternative 2, with Options a, d, e).

Three alternatives for the identification of skate egg concentration HAPCs and two options (b and c) for gear type prohibitions within those HAPCs are analyzed within this document and listed below. Consideration of areas of skate egg concentration is limited to the six candidate sites from the AFSC proposal. Additional sites, if or when discovered, are not considered part of this action. Further, the Council has the option to request that NMFS monitor HAPCs for the effects of fishing and that industry support those efforts (Option a). In addition, the Council has the options of recommending research and monitoring of skates be added to its research priority list (Option d) and adopting an FMP housekeeping amendment to standardize federal descriptions of Bering Sea habitat conservation measures (Option e).



1.1 Action Alternatives and Options

The problem statement for this action is as follows:

HAPC are geographic sites that fall within the distribution of Essential Fish Habitat for the Council's managed species. The Council has a formalized process, identified in its FMPs, for selecting HAPCs that begins with the Council identifying habitat priorities—here, areas of skate egg concentration. Candidate HAPCs must be responsive to the Council priority, must be rare (defined as uncommon habitat that occurs in discrete areas within only one or two Alaska regions), and must meet one of three other considerations: provide an important ecological function; be sensitive to human-induced degradation; or be stressed by development activities.

The candidate HAPC identify sites of egg concentration by skate species (Rajidae) in the eastern Bering Sea. Skates are elasmobranch fish that are long-lived, slow to mature, and produce few young. Skates deposit egg cases in soft substrates on the sea floor in small, distinct sites. A reproducing skate deposits only several egg cases during each reproductive season. Depending on the species, a single egg case can hold from one to four individual skate embryos, and

development can take up to three years. Thus, a single egg case site will hold several year classes and species, and eggs growing at different rates.

Distinct skate egg deposition sites have been highlighted by skate stock experts while assessing skate information from research survey and catch locations. The scientists noted repeated findings of distinct sites where egg cases recruit to sampling or fishing gear contacting the sea floor: egg case prongs (or horns) entangle in or cases recruits into the gear. These sites are discrete areas near the shelf/slope break that serve as important spawning and embryonic development areas for skate species. It is therefore important to consider: 1) designating these areas as HAPCs; 2) to consider restricting activities which impact the habitat at these sites; and 3) to monitor the continued utility of these sites for skate spawning and embryonic development, and further study for the relationship between the habitat features of these sites and site selection for skate egg deposition.

To address the issues described in its statement of purpose and need, the Council identified three alternatives and five options for analysis, shown below. In addition, a BSAI Groundfish FMP housekeeping option has been added to the analysis (Option e). Alternatives 2 and 3 would amend the BSAI Groundfish FMP, the BSAI Crab FMP, the Alaska Salmon FMP, and the Alaska Scallop FMP to identify HAPC areas in the Bering Sea. Alternative 3 would also implement regulatory changes for Bering Sea groundfish and scallop fisheries.

Alternative 1: Status quo; no action: No measures would be taken to identify, or to identify and conserve, areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs.

Alternative 2: Identify skate egg concentration areas as HAPC: (Preliminary preferred alternative)

The Council may select to identify (individually, severally, or all six) areas of skate egg concentration as HAPC. At each of the six areas of skate egg concentration, the spatial extent of research bottom trawls containing more than 1,000 egg cases per kilometer squared (km²) have been established. Boundary lines are then snapped outward to the nearest minute of latitude or longitude. The intent of Alternative 2 is to identify these areas as HAPCs.

Under Alternative 2, the six proposed areas of skate egg concentration will be identified as HAPC:

Table 1. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 2.

Site name ^a	Predominant skate species	Depth of max. egg density (m)	Maximum egg density (eggs/km ²)	Area of HAPC nm ²	Boundaries of HAPC (°N latitude or °W longitude)			
					North	South	West	East
1. Bering 1	Alaska	145	800,406	18.4	54°53'	54°49'	165°46'	165°38'
2. Bering 2	Aleutian	380	62,992	17.5	54°38'	54°33'	165°45'	165°34'
3. Bristol	Bering	156	6,188	13.7	55°21'	55°17'	167°40'	167°34'
4. Pribilof	Alaska	205	16,473	1.2	56°11'	56°10'	168°28'	168°26'
5. Zhemchug	Alaska	217	610,064	3.2	56°57'	56°54'	173°23'	173°21'
6. Pervenets	Alaska, Bering, Aleutian	316	334,163	27.7	59°28'	59°22'	177°43'	177°34'
Total area of the eastern Bering Sea proposed as HAPCs under Alternative 2 = 81.7 nm ²								

^a The Bering 2 site is south of the Bering 1 site. Sites 3 through 6 run south to north.

Option a: (Preliminary preferred option) NMFS would monitor HAPCs for changes in egg density and other potential effects of fishing and the Council would request that industry support in

collection of data in evaluation of monitoring and management efforts relative to those HAPCs.

Alternative 3: Identify and conserve skate egg concentration HAPC(s): The Council may select to identify (individually, severally, or all six) the areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs – and, the Council may select different conservation and management options for any area identified as a skate egg concentration HAPC. To achieve effective enforcement of these areas, Alternative 3 establishes a minimum size threshold for the core concentration areas to be protected of at least 5 nm to a side and are then, where appropriate, enlarged with a buffer of 1 nm beyond the boundary of Alternative 2. Boundaries are then snapped outward to the nearest minute of latitude and longitude.

Table 2. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 3.

Site name ^a	Predominant skate species	Depth of max. egg density (m)	Maximum egg density (eggs/km ²)	Area of HAPC (nm ²)	Boundaries of HAPC (°N latitude or °W longitude)			
					North	South	West	East
1. Bering 1	Alaska	145	800,406	41.8	54°54'	54°48'	165°48'	165°36'
2. Bering 2	Aleutian	380	62,992	40.9	54°39'	53°32'	165°47'	165°37'
3. Bristol	Bering	156	6,188	34.4	55°22'	55°16'	167°42'	167°32'
4. Pribilof	Alaska	205	16,473	28	56°13'	56°08'	168°32'	168°22'
5. Zhemchug	Alaska	217	610,064	27.4	56°58'	56°53'	173°27'	173°17'
6. Pervenets	Alaska, Bering, Aleutian	316	334,163	53.3	59°29'	59°21'	177°45'	177°36'
Total area in the eastern Bering Sea proposed as HAPCs under Alternative 3 = 225.8 nm ²								

^a The Bering 2 site is south of the Bering 1 site. Sites 3 through 6 run south to north.

This alternative includes two options relative to what gears would be prohibited from use in the areas of skate egg concentrations designated as HAPC.

Option b: Prohibit within skate egg concentration HAPC(s) the use of “mobile bottom contact”¹ fishing gear: nonpelagic (i.e., bottom) trawl, dredge, and dinglebar gear.

Option c: Prohibit within skate egg concentration HAPC(s) the use of “mobile bottom contact” and pelagic trawl fishing gear: nonpelagic and pelagic trawl, dredge, and dinglebar gear.²

Additional Options

The following options are applicable to ALL of the alternatives, and with any combination of conservation and management measures the Council selects:

Option d: (Preliminary preferred option) Suggest adding research and monitoring of areas of skate egg concentration to the Council's research priority list.

The Council may suggest incorporating the research and monitoring of skate species into the Council's annual research priority list, to evaluate skate populations, skate egg concentration areas, and their ecology and habitat.

¹ 50 C.F.R. 679.2.

² See 50 C.F.R. 679.2 for the particular and intricate components defining “pelagic trawl” fishing gear.

Option e: (Preliminary preferred option) *Adopt formatting standards as stated in the final rule implementing Amendment 89 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP.*

This option is a housekeeping amendment to the BSAI Groundfish FMP. The Council may approve the consolidation of figures and tables that describe areas in Amendment 89 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP, which establishes Bering Sea habitat conservation measures. Color Figures 70-73 in Appendix B describe the Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Area, the Northern Bering Sea Research Area and Saint Lawrence Island Habitat Conservation Area (HCA), and the Nunivak Island, Etolin Strait, and Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area, respectively.

1.2 Summary of Environmental Impacts

The analysis of direct, indirect, and cumulative effects for the proposed action indicate no significant impacts on the human environment from the three alternatives and any of the possible options for conservation and management. Environmental effects of this proposed action are considered insignificant under all alternatives. These sites are small and discrete areas that have had either little fishing effort in them in the past or some limited trawling for groundfish, including for pollock, in some areas, in some years. No substantial changes in effort re-distribution are anticipated. As such, any effects on habitat, target species, non-target resources, protected species, or the ecosystem would be considered insignificant. The effects on skates are unknown but are expected to provide some positive benefit.

Alternative 1, the status quo or no action alternative, involves no measures to identify or conserve areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs. Thus Alternative 1 is not likely to result in any significant effects regarding habitat, target species, non-target resources, protected species, or the ecosystem. The skate egg concentration areas would likely continue to persist under the current level of fishing effort and distribution. The Council may choose Option d under Alternative 1, which would suggest adding areas of skate egg concentration to the Council's annual research priority list. The Council could also choose Option e under Alternative 1, a housekeeping amendment to the Bering Sea Aleutian Island (BSAI) Fishery Management Plan (FMP)

Alternative 2 provides some degree of protection for vulnerable benthic skate egg habitat by identifying areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs. The identification of these sites as a HAPC highlights the importance of this essential fish habitat for conservation and consultation on activities such as: drilling, dredging, laying cables, and dumping, as well as fishing activities. The impacts of Alternative 2 would be similar in magnitude to Alternative 1 because under Alternative 2 fishing activities are not restricted. However under Option a, fishing activities in these areas could be more closely monitored through the Ecosystem Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) and the essential fish habitat (EFH) five-year review.

Alternative 3 provides for both the identification of skate egg concentration HAPCs and for the conservation of these areas through prohibitions on gear types within HAPCs. The impacts of Alternative 3 depend on the option for conservation and management (b and c) selected for each HAPC. The Council may select, in combination with any skate egg concentration designated as a HAPC, to limit fishing activities that make contact with the sea floor in these areas by prohibiting the use of certain fishing gears: bottom trawls, scallop dredges, dinglebar gear, and pelagic trawl gear. Options that prohibit trawling in these areas would potentially provide the most protection from potential direct impacts (e.g., bury or damage egg cases in some way) and indirect impacts (e.g., dislodgement, movement, siltation, bycatch mortality) on egg cases. The potential effects of the options on skate populations remains unknown but are likely beneficial to some degree.

1.3 Summary of Economic Impacts

Economic impacts are expected to be minor under Alternatives 2 and 3, as the proposed HAPC sites are small areas overall and have low levels of fishing effort, particularly the four more northern sites. The most costly option (Alternative 3, Option c) would close these six areas to all trawl gear, encompassing a total area of 225.8 nm².

The economic effects of prohibiting trawling in these sites under Alternative 3 were examined by the amount and value of catches within these sites, based on VMS track lines from observed tows. Data indicated that the catch (and ex-vessel value of the catch) varies considerably by site and across the years examined. Two of these sites (Bering 1 and Pervenets) had pollock catches valued at over \$1 million in at least one of the years examined. Bering 1 site had highest catches of Pacific cod and pollock in 2004, but catches in this area have been very low since. Bering 2 had the highest catches of pollock in 2004, 2006, and 2007, and highest catches of other groundfish (arrowtooth flounder) in 2008 and 2009, with almost no catches in other years. In the Bristol site, catches of pollock were made in 2003 and 2004, but almost no catch in other years, and no catch with bottom trawls. Small catches of arrowtooth and pollock have been made in a few years at the Pribilof site. Similarly, small catches of pollock have been made at the Zhemchug site during 2004-2006, otherwise it has not been trawled. The Pervenets site had catches of Pacific cod and flathead sole in 2004 and 2008, and pollock from 2007-2010. In 2011, the only site that had catches of pollock was Bering 1, and only Bering 2 and Pribilof sites had catches of other groundfish (arrowtooth flounder).

On average, analysis suggests that a closure to pelagic and bottom trawling of these sites (Alternative 3, option c) would result in a maximum foregone value of approximately \$1,599,000 per year. Of this total, pelagic trawling in the areas would generate a forgone value of \$1,102,000 per year, and bottom trawling of \$497,000, which is the total ex-vessel value divided by the nine years (2003 through 2011) of catch data examined. For comparison, BSAI trawl fisheries ex-vessel value was averaged at \$515,840,000 over 2006-2010 (from the 2011 Economic SAFE, for all trawl species). The average of \$1,102,000 per year of estimated forgone pelagic catch value equates to approximately 0.21% of an average (2006 through 2010) annual gross value of the BSAI trawl groundfish (\$515,840,000). It is likely, however, that the catch would be taken in other nearby areas, so costs to the fleet would be incurred through increased operational costs (increased fuel, lower CPUE, etc.), rather than forgone catch. Testimony from fishermen has indicated that in addition to these costs, a closure of the Bering 2 site may cause crowding of the pollock fleet in years when the fish are holding deeper, potentially resulting in substantial additional costs, gear conflicts, and other effects.

There would be no economic impacts on other fisheries. Although Alternative 3 options include prohibition on the use of dredge gear and dinglebar gear in the proposed HAPC areas, these gear types have not been used in these areas to date. Other fisheries using pot gear or longline gear would continue to be allowed to fish in these areas, and thus would be unaffected by the action.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) are geographic sites that fall within the distribution of essential fish habitat (EFH) for federally managed species. HAPCs are areas of special importance that may require additional protection from adverse fishing effects. EFH provisions provide a means for the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) to identify HAPCs (50 C.F.R. 600.815(a)(8)) within Fishery Management Plans (FMP). FMPs should identify specific types or areas of habitat within EFH as habitat areas of particular concern based on one or more of the following considerations:

- (i) The importance of the ecological function provided by the habitat;
- (ii) The extent to which the habitat is sensitive to human-induced environmental degradation;
- (iii) Whether, and to what extent, development activities are, or will be, stressing the habitat type;
- (iv) The rarity of the habitat type. Specific to fishery actions, HAPCs are areas within EFH that are rare and are either ecologically important, sensitive to disturbance, or that may be stressed.

The Council has a formalized process identified within its FMPs for selecting HAPCs. Under this process, the Council periodically considers whether to set a priority habitat type (or types). If so, the Council initiates a request for proposals (RFP) for HAPC candidate areas that meet the specific priority habitat type. Members of the public, non-governmental organizations, and Federal, State, and other agencies may submit HAPC proposals. Sites proposed under this process are then sent to the Council's plan teams for scientific review to determine ecological merit. Council and agency staff also review proposals for socioeconomic and management and enforcement impacts. This combined information is then presented to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), the Advisory Panel (AP), the Enforcement and Ecosystem Committees (if necessary), and to the Council, which may choose to select HAPC proposals for a full analysis and subsequent implementation. The Council may also modify proposed HAPC sites and management measures during its review, or request additional stakeholder input and technical review. This analysis evaluates six sites of skate egg concentration in the Bering Sea as proposed HAPC sites.

This Environmental Assessment / Regulatory Impact Review / Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (EA/RIR/IRFA) examines the environmental, economic, and socioeconomic aspects of proposed Federal regulatory actions primarily to the groundfish fisheries in the eastern Bering Sea. The groundfish fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off the coast of Alaska are managed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). Pursuant to the MSA, the Council developed and adopted the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Groundfish of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI). This proposed action would designate areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs in the BSAI, specifically the eastern Bering Sea. Other FMPs that would be affected by this action are the BSAI Crab FMP and the Scallop FMP.

An Environmental Assessment (EA) is required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) to determine whether the proposed Federal action will result in a significant impact on the human environment. The purpose of an EA is to analyze the environmental impacts of a proposed Federal action. The human environment is defined by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) as the natural and physical environment, and the relationships of people with that environment (40 C.F.R. 1508.14). This means that economic or social effects are not intended, by themselves, to require preparation of an EA. When an EA is prepared and socioeconomic and natural or physical environmental impacts are interrelated, the EA must discuss, however, all of these impacts on the quality of the human environment. If, based on an analysis of the relevant considerations the Federal action is determined to be insignificant,

then the EA and accompanying finding of no significant impact (FONSI) would be the final environmental documents required by NEPA. An Environmental Impact statement (EIS) must be prepared for major Federal actions significantly affecting the human environment. In addition, NEPA requires a description of the purpose and need for the proposed action, as well as a description of alternatives which may address the problem. This document also includes a description of the affected human environment and information on the impacts of the alternatives on that environment.

Executive Order 12866 (EO) requires preparation of a Regulatory Impact Review (RIR) to assess the social and economic costs and benefits of available regulatory alternatives to determine whether a proposed regulatory action is economically significant as defined by the order. This analysis also addresses requirements of the Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA), which requires an analysis of potential adverse economic impacts accruing to small entities that would be directly regulated by the proposed action. This analysis also addresses the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA), which is applicable to this proposed action. References and literature cited are included, as well as a list of preparers, agencies, and individuals consulted during the evaluation.

2.1 Overview of Existing HAPCs

For the 2004 HAPC identification process, the Council designated two priorities: named seamounts in Alaska Federal waters a, and coral areas with rockfish associations. The Council received twenty-three proposals from six different organizations. After an initial screening by staff, the proposals were reviewed by the Council's plan teams, and assessed for management, enforcement, and socioeconomic issues. Ultimately, the Council identified a range of alternatives, staff completed an analysis, and in January 2005, the Council adopted several new HAPCs. Twenty sites in the GOA and Aleutian Islands, consisting of seamounts and high density coral areas, were identified as HAPCs in the FMPs: the GOA Groundfish FMP, the BSAI Groundfish FMP, the BSAI Crab FMP, the Alaska Salmon FMP, and the Alaska Scallop FMP. To protect these sites and eliminate environmental impacts due to fishing, the Council prohibited fishing in these areas by gear types that contact the sea floor. These sites and measures became effective in June 2006.

The Alaska Seamount Habitat Protection Area encompasses all sixteen seamounts in Federal waters off of Alaska named on NOAA charts: Bowers Brown, Chirikof, Marchand, Dall, Denson, Derickson, Dickins, Giacomini, Kodiak, Odyssey, Patton, Quinn, Sirius, Unimak, and Welker. Bottom-contact fishing is prohibited in all of the seamount HAPCs, which encompass a total area of 5,329 nm². In Southeast Alaska, three sites with large aggregations ("thickets") of long-lived *Primnoa* coral are also identified as HAPCs. These three sites, in the vicinity of Cape Ommaney and Fairweather grounds, total 67 nm². The GOA Coral Habitat Protection Areas designates five zones within these sites where submersible observations have been made, totaling 13.5 nm². All bottom contact gear—longlines, trawls, pots, dinglebar gear—are prohibited in these areas. Finally, in the Aleutian Islands region, the relatively unexplored Bowers Ridge was also identified as a HAPC. As a precautionary measure, the Council acted to prohibit mobile fishing gear that contacts the bottom within this 5,286 nm² area.

The Current HAPC areas and bottom trawl closure areas are shown in Appendix B – Color Figures 1 and 2, and in the tables below:

Table 3. HAPCs within the NMFS Alaska Region.

HAPC name	Individual HAPCs within	Total Area (approx.)	Fishery Management Application	Specific Regulation
Alaska Seamount Habitat Protection Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dickens Seamount • Denson Seamount • Brown Seamount • Welker Seamount • Dall Seamount • Quinn Seamount • Giacomini Seamount • Kodiak Seamount • Odessey Seamount • Patton Seamount • Chirikof & Marchand Seamounts • Sirius Seamount • Derickson Seamount • Unimak Seamount • Bowers Seamount 	5,300 nm ²	No federally permitted vessel may fish with <i>bottom contact</i> gear ³ .	<p>Federal Register</p> <p>50 CFR Part 679 Vol. 71, No. 124</p> <p>Wednesday, June 28,2006</p>
Bowers Ridge Habitat Conservation Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bowers Ridge • Ulm Plateau 	5,300 nm ²	No federally permitted vessel may fish with <i>mobile bottom contact</i> gear ⁴ .	Same as above
Gulf of Alaska Coral Habitat Protection Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cape Ommaney 1 • Fairweather FS1 • Fairweather FS2 • Fairweather FN1 • Fairweather FN2 	14 nm ²	No federally permitted vessel may fish with <i>bottom contact</i> gear in portions of the site.	Same as above

³ “Bottom contact” gear means nonpelagic (i.e., bottom) trawl, dredge, dinglebar, pot, or hook-and-line (i.e., longline) gear (50 C.F.R. 679.2).

⁴ “Mobile [bottom] contact” gear means nonpelagic trawl, dredge, or dinglebar gear (50 C.F.R. 679.2).

Table 4. Comparison of existing HAPCs with proposed HAPCs, in terms of area.¹⁵

HAPC - Current	Area nm²	Gear Restrictions	HAPC - Proposed	Alt 2 - Identify HAPC	Alt 3 - Identify & Conserve HAPC
			Skate Nursery	Area nm²	Area nm²
Bowers Ridge/Ulm Plateau	5,286	No mobile bottom contact gear			
Alaska Seamounts		No mobile bottom contact gear			
Dickins	147		Bering 1	18.4	41.8
Denson	287		Bering 2	17.5	40.9
Brown	167		Bristol	13.7	34.4
Welker	162		Pribilof	1.2	28
Dall	950		Zhemchug	3.2	27.4
Quinn	201		Pervenets	27.7	53.3
Giacomini	164		Total	81.7	225.8
Kodiak	158				
Odessey	210				
Patton	94				
Chirikof & Marchand	2,248				
Sirius	167				
Derickson	218				
Unimak	129				
Bowers	29				
Total	5,330				
GOA Coral HPA		No bottom contact gear			
Cape Ommaney	0.85				
Fairweather N1	0.77				
Fairweather N2	3.20				
Fairweather S1	7.88				
Fairweather S2	0.86				
Total	14				
HAPC Total (current)	10,630				
Other EFH HCAs or HPCs					
GOA Slope HPA	1,892	No nonpelagic trawl gear			
Aleutian Islands HCA	279,114	No nonpelagic trawl gear			
Aleutian Islands Corals HPA	112	No bottom contact gear			
Arctic	148,393	No commercial fishing			
St Matthew HCA	4,110	No nonpelagic trawl gear			
St Lawrence HCA	7,033	No nonpelagic trawl gear			
Nunivak/Kuskokwim HCA	9,718	No nonpelagic trawl gear			
Bering Sea HCA	47,121	No nonpelagic trawl gear			
NBSRA	65,559	No nonpelagic trawl gear			
EFH & HAPC Areas Total	573,682				

Terminology	
EFH	Essential Fish Habitat
HAPC	Habitat Area of Particular Concern
HCA	Habitat Conservation Area
HPA	Habitat Protection Area
HCZ	Habitat Conservation Zone

2.2 HAPC Recommendations for Council Consideration

From 2006 to 2007, the Council considered whether to initiate a HAPC proposal process during discussion related to Bering Sea Habitat Conservation. The Council reviewed the previous 2004 HAPC cycle and determined a review was needed to address plan team and public concerns. Some of these concerns included: how the Council assembles proposed HAPC nominations; the need to ensure uniformity in the information provided in the proposals; and the need for better definitions of the HAPC criteria, such as the requirement for rarity of candidate HAPCs. The Council formally revised the HAPC process to address many of these concerns and asked the SSC to provide further definitions of the HAPC

^{5 5} No bottom contact gear applies to only portions of the GOA Coral HPA sites.

criteria prior to the next Council RFP. Following discussion through an SSC, agency, and plan team workgroup, the Council adopted the SSC's recommended revisions to the HAPC criteria. See Appendix A for the Council's revised HAPC determination criteria.

The Council also considered whether to set a HAPC priority for Bering Sea "skate nurseries" (i.e., "areas of skate egg concentration" or "skate egg deposition sites") and for undersea canyons in the Bering Sea. The AFSC was contacted in October 2006 and asked to produce a white paper summarizing current scientific information on the canyons and "skate nurseries" in the eastern Bering Sea. The Council received the paper at its December 2006 meeting. Following public input and plan team and SSC review, the Council determined that it would be premature to initiate a call for proposals because there were no identified conservation concerns at that time.

At its April 2010 meeting, the Council set a habitat priority type—"skate nurseries"⁶—and issued an RFP in conjunction with the completion of the EFH five-year review process. The RFP, which included the Council's recently adopted revised evaluation criteria, was announced in the Federal Register (see 75 FR 21600) and in the Council newsletter. The proposal period opened April 26, 2010 and continued until August 31, 2010 (the period was extended from August 16). Applicants were asked to specify the geographic delineation of the proposed HAPCs, the purposes and objectives, any proposed management measures for the site(s), and any effects that would be expected from such measures. Council staff initially screened the proposals that were received to determine consistency with the Council's habitat priority type, compliance with the Council's HAPC criteria, and for general adequacy and completeness.

At their fall 2010 meeting, the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed the HAPC proposals for rarity and for ecological merit. The Plan Teams' recommendations are incorporated by reference in this analysis and within a matrix based on the Council's revised and adopted HAPC evaluation criteria. See Appendix A for details on the HAPC evaluation methodology. At the October 2010 meeting, staff presented the preliminary report of screening results to the AP and the Council. The Council selected the HAPC proposal from the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) to forward on for further analysis. At the February 2011 Council meeting, staff presented a discussion paper on the AFSC's HAPC proposal package to the SSC, the AP, the Ecosystem and the Enforcement Committees, and to the Council. The Council selected three alternatives and five options for conservation and management to forward on for full analysis.

2.3 Current HAPC Process Timeline

At its February 2012 meeting, the Council moved to expand the analysis and current suite of alternatives and options. The analysis was also reviewed by the Ecosystem and Enforcement Committees. Under the Council's motion, Alternative 2 was revised to include a discussion on potential industry and agency monitoring, reporting, and accountability mechanisms, and a statement of intent to discourage adverse fishing activities within the HAPC sites. Alternative 3 was revised to include HAPC area boundaries consistent with the Enforcement Committee's minimum size and buffer recommendations. Option e was reworded to suggest adding research and monitoring of areas of skate egg concentration to the Council's annual research priority list. The expanded analysis also included a lengthier history of fishing activities in the proposed sites, discussion on the ability to minimize the areas closed to fishing while complying with enforcement requirements, an economic analysis of impacts on the proposed closure sites, including buffers, and the amount of actual bycatch of egg casings by gear type in each HAPC site, where known.

⁶ "Skate nursery" sites are termed "skate egg concentration" areas for purposes of this analysis as per the Council's motion from February 2011.

At its March/April 2012 meeting, the Council eliminated options that would have restricted fishing with fixed gear—pot and hook-and-line (i.e., longline)—that had been determined to have minimal-to-no impacts on the seafloor within the HAPCs; thus a prohibition on those gear types would have offered only marginal conservation benefits. A new option (Option a) was added to Alternative 2 to require NMFS to monitor areas of skate egg concentration for changes in egg density and other potential effects of fishing and for industry to support collection of data in evaluation of monitoring and management efforts. The Council also moved to expand the analysis to evaluate the use of the most updated VMS technology, increased polling rates, and geo-fencing to monitor fishing activity. In addition, per the Council's requests, gear descriptions were updated to reflect the most recent changes in technology, and survey trawls have been differentiated from commercial trawls. A description of the methodology used in determining target catch rates in skate sites has also been added, as well as descriptions of existing fishery closures in the Bering Sea for potential overlap with the HAPCs. This analysis also incorporates recommendations and comments to the extent practicable from the SSC and Enforcement Committee.

At the June 2012 meeting, the Council made another initial review of the analysis, and recommended revisions to the problem statement and options. The Council selected Alternative 2 and Options a, d, and e as its Preferred Preliminary Alternative (PPA), and released the document for public review. Final action on this issue has been scheduled for February 2013.

2.4 Summary of Proposed HAPCs

Skates are elasmobranch fishes that reproduce by depositing a small number of large eggs protected by proteinaceous egg cases directly on the sea floor in localized areas. Skate embryos develop inside these cases, a process that can take over three years. During this development period, egg cases provide crucial protection to the fragile embryo and yolk mass. In the eastern Bering Sea, skate species deposit their eggs in highly localized areas known as “nursery sites,” (see Section 2.5.3 on nursery nomenclature) or as areas of skate egg concentration. Skate populations are characterized by low fecundity and slow growth rates, suggesting a bottleneck during early life history stages. As such, areas supporting large numbers of egg cases are important and warrant special consideration. This is especially true because there is evidence of extended skate embryonic development (greater than three years) and vulnerability of egg cases to removal or disturbance by bottom-contact fishing activity.

Because skates are long-lived, slow to mature, and produce few offspring, it may be prudent to reduce or eliminate the potential for damage to these areas of skate egg concentration. The primary protection measures proposed by the AFSC authors for conservation and management are to prohibit the use of any fishing gear that makes contact with the sea floor within each area of skate egg concentration and to remotely monitor those areas. Providing some protection for the six areas proposed is intended to reduce the mortality of skate eggs due to fishing activity and to limit the disruption to adult skate reproduction.

Six areas of skate egg concentration in the eastern Bering Sea are proposed as HAPCs. Each site has been studied and mapped using research bottom trawls to determine the density of egg cases, the extent of the area of skate egg concentration, mortality sources to young skates, and distinguishing abiotic features of the site that may define EFH. The exception is the Pribilof site, which was mapped using an autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) equipped with a high-resolution camera. Additional AUV mapping work has been performed at several of the other sites listed, but those data were not used to delineate the original boundaries of the proposed sites. At each site, the spatial extent of bottom trawls containing more than 1,000 egg cases per km² was established.

2.4.1 Research Conclusions, Assumptions, and Remaining Unknowns

Intensive study of a particular biological aspect of a species often can lead to a number of conclusions and inferences, and nearly always leads to additional questions with a number of aspects left unknown or unknowable. With that frame of reference, the results of research and what is known, what can be inferred based on the study and the basic common biological and physical principals, and finally what currently remains unknown (whether a testable hypothesis or something beyond the grasp of current science) is listed below.

2.4.1.1 Known-Research Conclusions

- 1) Skates use relatively small distinct areas of the eastern Bering Sea upper continental slope and outer shelf to deposit their eggs in high concentrations.
- 2) Skate embryos develop into juvenile skates and emerge from the egg cases.
- 3) Embryo development time is between 3-4 years and a function of environmental temperature.
- 4) Egg cases are rarely (or in very low concentrations) found outside nursery sites widely scattered.
- 5) Skates nursery sites are generally species specific with low overlap in species.
- 6) Skate embryos are impacted by being brought to the surface by trawling and physical handling.
- 7) Skates are found in very high densities inside nursery sites in June and July.

2.4.1.2 Inferences-From Research and General Biological Principles

- 1) Skate nursery sites are important for skate reproduction.
- 2) Skates have low fecundity and rely on high survivorship of juveniles.
- 3) Exceptional habitat conditions that occur along the upper slope are optimum for skate reproduction success.
- 4) A single annual spawning event occurs at each site resulting in multiple cohorts developing at any time at each nursery site.
- 5) Skate nursery disturbances are detrimental to the successful embryo development and hatching process due to the fragile nature of embryos and any reduction in impact to developing embryos can enhance the survivorship of embryos and juvenile skates.
- 6) Skate nursery sites display evidence of site fidelity, and natal homing and persistence.

2.4.1.3 The Unknown-Future Research or the Unknowable

- 1) The impact that a trawl has by the physical pressure of the sweeps, foot rope, ground gear and doors on skate eggs lying on the substrate
- 2) The extent of impact on skate eggs from being removed from the skate nursery site bottom, being brought to the surface and returned to the water
- 3) The results of prohibition of physical contact with commercial fishing gear to skate eggs and the effect on recruitment and health of skate populations
- 4) The specific oceanographic and habitat conditions that make the areas of skate nursery sites

2.4.2 Supporting Research

Much of the information used to support these six HAPCs candidate areas comes directly from the AFSC and years-long research effort by Dr. Gerald R. Hoff, an AFSC fishery biologist, to identify, map, and study areas of skate egg concentration in the eastern Bering Sea. Dr. Hoff's work has been supported through NOAA EFH funds and grants from the North Pacific Research Board. In addition, the Council requested that the AFSC produce a white paper summarizing scientific information on "skate nursery areas," or areas of skate egg concentration in the eastern Bering Sea (as well as the Pribilof, Pervenets,

and Zhemchug Canyons in the eastern Bering Sea). The document produced was structured as an inventory of available data and applicable information as of fall 2006 and presented to the SSC, AP, and Council at the December 2006 meeting.

Because areas of skate egg concentration are rare and small in size, identifying these areas has been a major challenge for the AFSC. Data collected from NMFS groundfish surveys, directed research trawls, and fisheries observer data were all used to identify potential nursery sites (egg case concentration areas). Directed research trawl surveys examining areas of skate egg concentration using an adaptive sampling design were conducted to map the spatial extent of seven areas of skate egg concentration and provide information regarding embryo size and viability, as well as egg case predation (Hoff 2010). Areas of skate egg concentration are small in area and highly localized, with abrupt transitions from areas of high egg case density to areas with little or no egg cases. They occur over a narrow depth range (from 150m to 375m) on generally flat sandy to muddy bottom, with little bottom structure or attached biota. Sites are associated with major undersea canyons and are generally located in the upper portion of canyon heads. These areas of skate egg concentration are highly productive, with some sites possessing estimated egg densities of more than 100,000 eggs/km².

This work and earlier research (Hoff 2008) also identified the presence of multiple cohorts within areas of concentration and suggested that development time of Alaska skate embryos exceeded three years. This may be temperature dependent, a hypothesis supported by subsequent work where viable embryos were raised at different temperatures in the laboratory (Hoff *et al* 2010). This long development time substantially increases the exposure of the embryos to predation and disturbance.

Skates, exhibit a K reproductive strategy which is characterized by slow growth, late maturity, large sizes and extremely low fecundity when compared to species exhibit an R life history strategy such as pollock. Skates invest a large amount of energy into a small number of offspring and rely on the high survival rate of juveniles for maintaining the strength of populations. This life history strategy is dependent on high recruitment and low embryo mortality during development.

The AUV research study conducted in 2009 was also used to obtain estimates of egg production in the four then-known Alaska skate areas of egg concentration, which were then compared to estimates of egg and juvenile abundance from AFSC research trawl surveys and stock assessments (Hoff 2010b). This work indicated that the known areas of skate egg concentration probably are not sufficient to sustain the population of Alaska skates and thus there are likely areas of skate egg concentration not identified.

2.4.3 Expected Sites for Three Skate Species

It is helpful in the current HAPC cycle to produce a reasonable estimate of the expected number of sites in the eastern Bering Sea used by skates for depositing their eggs. Ecologically, this information can help scientists understand how skates partition and use their habitat and which environmental parameters may be the most critical for successful reproduction. Biologically, areas of skate egg concentration shed new light on skate reproduction and what role these areas may play in skate life history strategies. Economically the number, location, and area used for skate egg deposition is useful as a gauge for the impact it could have on fishing activity and enforcement challenges for gear restrictions.

To estimate the expected number of areas of skate egg concentration of the three skate species included in the proposed HAPC designation in the eastern Bering Sea, a synthesis of data from directed research and the AFSC bottom trawl groundfish surveys was used. The estimation of the expected number of nursery sites for each species is based on the notion that the number of juvenile skates seen in the AFSC bottom trawl groundfish surveys reflects the egg production from the identified areas of skate egg concentration. The simplest method for estimating an expected number of sites by species is a direct comparison of the

estimated number of viable eggs present at each nursery site (from the directed skate nursery surveys) to the abundance of young-of-the-year (YOY) skates estimated in the groundfish surveys. In other words, given the number of viable eggs at the known sites, how many more sites would be required to sustain the population size estimated in the groundfish surveys?

The model used (Equation 1, below) compared the estimated number of viable skate eggs from a single cohort in all known areas of skate egg concentration for each species to the estimated number of YOY skates of that species in the eastern Bering Sea shelf and slope AFSC groundfish bottom trawl surveys. When YOY abundance exceeded the total single cohort viable egg counts, an estimate of the number of average areas of skate egg concentration that could produce the YOY abundance was estimated.

Several important limitations to this approach must be noted. This simple model does not include corrections for such recognizable important parameters as trawl escapement of juvenile skates (i.e. selectivity) and post-hatching mortality. The inclusion of these parameters would tend to increase the expected demand of viable embryos in the egg concentration sites, thus increasing the expected number of such sites. Reliable estimates of these parameters do not exist and are a priority for future research. The analysis also does not include any estimates of uncertainty, which can be substantial. An age-structured model exists for Alaska skates in the eastern Bering Sea, and YOY estimates from that model might be expected to be more accurate than the raw survey estimates. However the Alaska skate model is simple and does not include detailed early life-history information. Therefore, estimates of abundance of YOY skates in the model were considered to be insufficiently reliable for use in this analysis. The lack of a similar model for the remaining two skate species was also a contributing factor in limiting the analysis to the simple approach outlined above.

The eastern Bering Sea skate population occurs at mid-slope depths with the bulk of its population occurring from about 100 to 500 m. It also has a moderate population estimate from NMFS trawl surveys. Since it appears as a mid-depth species, it is most likely that it is under-sampled on the eastern Bering Sea shelf from the AFSC trawl survey. A large percentage (22.7%) of the Bering skate biomass encountered during the eastern Bering Sea shelf NMFS trawl survey occurs between 150 m and 200 m. Since the AFSC shelf survey is of fixed station design its annual distribution of effort is about two percent of the deepest 50 m (approximately 10 stations annually) with only about 0.07% of the effort between 175 m and 200 m depth (less than one station annually) of a nearly 400 station survey. It is likely a large portion of the population is under-sampled where it is in highest density.

2.4.3.1 Model Predictions

Model results (shown in the table below) suggest approximately one half of the areas of skate egg concentration for the Alaska, Bering, and Aleutian skates combined are known with an expected total of 13 to 14 sites for these three species. Variability in the number of expected sites is a function of the egg case density and size of each nursery site and the abundance of juvenile recruitment.

The Alaska skate is the most abundant skate species in the eastern Bering Sea and predominantly a shelf species. The population dynamics are not completely understood for this species and it has demonstrated a remarkable ability to undergo a dramatic population increase during the 1980s. Because of the large population an estimated four additional sites is minimal for the recruitment observed.

The Aleutian skate is a moderately abundant species along the shelf edge and upper to mid slope; however, it does not deposit its eggs at extremely high densities and sites are relatively small in area resulting in a relatively high number of additional sites to account for the observed recruitment. Critical to the variance in this estimate is the juvenile escapement under the survey trawl footrope which can

significantly alter the estimate. This has not been studied for the net used for the eastern Bering Sea slope groundfish bottom trawl survey.

The Bering skate deposits its eggs at low densities in many sites other than its own. The extrapolations indicate the number of sites known can account for the juvenile production estimates from the shelf and slope bottom trawl groundfish surveys. However, it is expected that a significant portion of this species population is not surveyed well on the shelf because of the sparse sampling in its primary habitat from 150-200 m. It is likely there are many more recruits for the Bering skate and that several additional area of skate egg concentration are probable.

An important aspect of this estimation in the HAPC process is that it helps to demonstrate how the proposed action would benefit Bering Sea skate populations. The three species, Alaska, Aleutian and Bering skates comprise greater than 90% of the eastern Bering Sea skate biomass and all shelf and upper slope species occurring in heavily fished areas along the outer shelf and slope. Because of their large size, great biomass and low reproductive potential they are vulnerable to increased mortality from habitat disturbances. The estimates described above suggest that the proposed HAPC designation might provide protection for up to one half of the reproductive habitat for these three species.

Equation 1. To estimate the number of areas of skate egg concentration in the Eastern Bering Sea.

$$E = \left(\frac{r}{\sum \left(\frac{a d v}{c} \right)} \right) s$$

Where:

- E = number of expected sites by species
- r = recruitment estimate from AFSC bottom trawl survey
- a = approximate area of skate nursery site
- d = mean egg density in eggs/km²
- v = viability of eggs (research determined to be 80%)
- c = number of concurrent cohorts at each nursery site (research determined 3)
- s = number of known sites for that species

Table 5. Egg estimates for each area of concentration and the annual cohort estimate comparing areas of concentration to trawl survey estimates (YOY=young-of-the-year)

Nursery Site	Total Nursery Area (km2)	Egg Density (mean eggs km2)	Total Estimated Eggs	Single Year Viable Eggs	Number of Identified Nursery Sites	YOY Juveniles Survey Estimate	Number of Sites Estimated
Alaska Skate							
Pervenets Canyon	37	67,124	2,483,313	662,217	1		
Zhemchug Canyon	102	42,066	4,279,687	1,141,250	1		
*Pribilof Canyon	10	18,000	180,000	48,000	1		
Bristol Canyon	56	65	3,631	968			
Bering Canyon	38	43,496	1,671,775	445,807	1		
Totals	243	34,150	8,618,407	2,298,242	4	3,552,698	6-7
Bering Skate							
Pervenets Canyon	71	14,616	1,034,895	275,972	1		
Zhemchug Canyon	7	1,411	9,760	2,603			
Bristol Canyon	9	7,198	62,682	16,715	1		
Bering Canyon	13	835	10,585	2,823			
Totals	99	6,015	1,117,923	298,113	2	286,204	2-3
Aleutian Skate							
Pervenets Canyon	12	17,015	204,294	54,478	1		
Zhemchug Canyon	102	12	1,194	319			
Bristol Canyon	9	445	3,876	1,034			
Bering Canyon	30	14,616	334,201	89,120	1		
Totals	152	8,022	543,566	144,951	2	605,164	8-9
*Based on AUV study Note: total sites expected adjusted for double-counting.					Total sites expected		13-14

Source: AFSC.

2.4.4 Skate Egg Site Nomenclature

This analysis uses the term “skate egg concentrations” to describe these areas where skates deposit their egg cases in mass for the purpose of reproduction. This is analogous to the term “skate nursery”, which is the term for these areas used in the scientific literature as the term for areas (Hoff 2008, Love et al. 2008, Hoff 2010, Treude et al. 2011, Hunt et al 2011). The terminology was originated for viviparous sharks which gave live birth in distinct nearshore habitats where the young would spend their early life. The term nursery applied to this behavior has been well vetted and is the most appropriate for this reproductive mode. As with many scientific concepts and terminology, skate life history was detailed following sharks and many of the established terms were applied to skates that were previously established for sharks. Understanding skate nursery habitat and biology is in its infancy with just a few publications on the subject outside those of the Eastern Bering Sea. Although little work has been done in this field worldwide areas where skates deposit their egg cases for reproduction are known as skate nurseries.

Those identified as potential HAPC areas in the eastern Bering Sea are clearly distinct habitats with unique properties that are advantageous for successful reproduction in skates.

The concept of North Pacific skates using “nursery sites” for egg deposition is not a new one; the terminology of “nursery sites” has traditionally been applied to oviparous species. As with much terminology for skates and rays, the terms currently used were originally determined for sharks, which have been studied in much more detail. Many sharks utilize the classic example of nursery sites where a pregnant female migrates to a particular bay or nearshore area and gives birth to live young. The young sharks then remain in the “nursery” for some period until able to survive in open water. In this case, the area for young to remain for a period where they may need extra nutrients or protection is the well-expected idea of a nursery area. This terminology has been applied to areas where skates deposit their egg cases in mass; there are fundamental differences, however, in the reproductive strategy of oviparous skates and most viviparous sharks. Primarily skates (Rajidae) in the North eastern Pacific deposit eggs directly on the substrate and the embryo develops independent of maternal nutrients or care other than what was initially given. Many sharks and true rays (Mylobatidae) have some form of viviparity in which the egg cases and embryos are retained in the female body and provided nutrients by the mother until fully developed and produced into the environment as free swimming juveniles. Sharks and true rays do not go through the extended period in the egg case before hatching, as skates do.

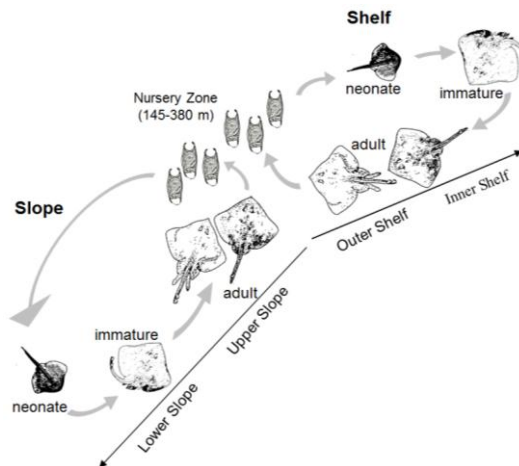


Figure 1. Life cycle with respect to habitat use for skates along the slope (200 to 1200 m) and the shelf (0-200 m) in the eastern Bering Sea.

Research since 2003 on skate reproduction has found that “nursery sites” may not be the optimal terminology for how skates utilize the habitat. Other terminology follows the concept of “skate nesting sites.” Functionally, they operate much like marine turtles in which their reproductive habitat and mode is widely accepted as “nesting sites.” To understand how skates utilize the habitat, one can simply apply all the mechanics and strategies that turtles use. At a designated time of year, both turtles and skates migrate to a predetermined habitat and specific location (possibly where they were hatched) and the females deposit eggs in mass. The females then depart the nesting site, provide no additional parental care, and most likely never again encounter the young throughout the parents’ life.

After egg deposition, internally the skate egg looks identical to birds and many reptiles. There is a large yolk mass surrounded by a cushion of clear to white albumin like substance (superficially equivalent to the white of a chicken egg). For North Pacific skates, there is no appreciable development before egg deposition and the skate develops entirely on the reserves of the yolk provided during the initial egg production similar to all birds and reptiles. Embryo development progresses with external integuments and internal organ development until finally full development results in a chick, or juvenile skate or

reptile, emerging from the egg casing. All these stages are remarkably similar in vertebrates and all standard terminology and stages are applicable.

After a prolonged development, juveniles emerge in mass and quickly exit the nesting site, avoiding being consumed by waiting predators. The young are fully mobile and able to feed upon hatching. In both cases (skates and turtles), the area of egg deposition is not where the newly hatched juveniles occur. In the eastern Bering Sea, the juveniles move either much deeper or much shallower (depending on the species) specifically avoiding the areas of skate egg concentration.

2.5 Delineation of HAPCs

Data for the AFSC HAPC proposal and this analysis was collected predominately from research bottom trawl studies at skate egg concentration sites where an adaptive sampling strategy was applied. The goal was to identify the areas of high skate egg case concentration and subsequently move in all four (or more) directions away from the center to detect the drop in egg case density, and therefore locate the extent of the egg concentration site. In the process, and due to mechanics of trawling, ability to clean the net, and the moderate scattering of empty egg cases out of the area of skate egg concentration, it was found that there is a slight ‘contamination’ from one research trawl to the next due to the entanglement of skate eggs in the trawl cod-end. A threshold of 1,000 eggs/km² equates to approximately ten eggs encountered in the research trawl and during the study was often found to be from a previous tow. Because of the uncertainty of this low level, it has been designated as background levels and not included as part of the egg concentration area. See Appendix B – Color Figures 9-24.

From the AFSC groundfish trawl survey conducted on an annual basis throughout the eastern Bering Sea, encountering skate eggs at this threshold level (1,000 eggs/km²) can be frequent and does not indicate an area of skate egg concentration in that immediate area. There are several possible explanations why there may be low level skate eggs widely scattered outside concentration sites, which include: 1) a certain amount of “wandering” by skates where they deposit eggs randomly away from concentration sites for unknown reasons; 2) the distance a skate may be from an area of skate egg concentration when the eggs are ready to deposit and concentration occurs whether inside a concentration site or not; 3) newly maturing skates may have a learning curve to find the appropriate habitat and they may not be successful immediately upon maturation; and 4) there may be scatter out of the concentration site due to currents, predator disturbances, or fishers disturbances. Throughout this analysis, an order of magnitude greater (10,000 eggs/km²) than background has been used to identify area of skate egg concentration from research and groundfish survey trawls or commercial trawls and this method has been very reliable on the determination of egg concentration sites when egg encounters at level of ~100 eggs in a single trawl (10,000 eggs/km²). From this identified area of concentration, the boundaries of the skate egg deposition site are determined by the extent of the threshold level of 1,000 eggs/km².

The capture of skate egg cases in trawls depends on the net configuration, such that capture rates in commercial trawls may be substantially different than in research survey nets. The adjacent text box shows the detailed specifications of the 83-112 Eastern Trawl that was used for skate nursery research and is the identical net used for the standard eastern Bering Sea shelf AFSC groundfish survey. During the survey this net is towed at 3 knots and 6’ x 9’ V doors weighing 1800 lbs and two point attachment tail chains are used. During the skate nursery research the identical net was used with the modifications of using 6’ x 9’ door weighting 2000 lbs with four point attachment tail chains, 2-2.5 knot towing speed and in some cases (Bering 1) 200 kg weights were attached to each trawl wing to ensure good bottom contact.

Specifications of the 83-112 Eastern Trawl used in AFSC surveys.

Netting:	Body and wing 4" stretched measure (including length of one knot) 60 T nylon, three strand twist, preshrunk and dyed green. Intermediate and codend - 3½" stretched measure 96 T nylon threestrand, twist, preshrunk and dyed green. Codend liner - 1¼" stretched measure 18 T nylon, three-strand twist, preshrunk and dyed green. Chaffing gear ~ 6", 6-mm polyethylene knotted web.
Headrope:	83' 9" of ½" (6×19) galvanized fiber core wire rope wrapped with d" polypropylene rope. Both eyes have ½" gusseted thimbles. The headrope doesn't include the length of either eye. Length is measured from the top of the micro sleeve to the top of micro at the other end. Top wings are hung over 36'.
Footrope:	111' 9" plus thimble eyes of e", (6×19) galvanized, fiber core wire rope, wrapped with ½" polypropylene rope. Loops of 5/16" galvanized, proof coil chain, (approx. 170') are tied to wrapped footrope by passing two fathoms of double 21 T nylon twine through every tenth link starting at the top of the micro forming the eye splice. Chain links are secured to footrope every 8" throughout length of wing forming 76 chain hangings over 50' each wing. Busom has 16 chain hangings equally spaced over 11' 9". There are four bars (2 meshes) per hanging in wings and 4 meshes per hanging in busom, hung with 96 T nylon round braid hanging twine. After the net is hung, split pieces of heavy rubber hose are served around footrope, passing the hose twice between each chain hanging for the length of the footrope.
Breastlines:	½" (6×19) galvanized wire rope wrapped with d" polypropylene rope. Top and bottom breastlines are 8', measured from the top of the micro press forming one eye through the bearing point of the other eye.
Riblines:	¾" Samson 2 and 1@ Duralon braided trawl rope. Riblines are hung at 97% of stretched measure of the gored seam. All measurements are made with 400 lbs of tension on rope. Gored seams are attached to riblines using white, untreated 60 T braided nylon hanging twine used to tie a benzel every 16".
Flotation:	Seventeen 8" aluminum side lug floats along each wing and seven 8" floats in center. Total of 41 floats along headrope spaced 24¼" apart. Buoyancy of 6.3 lbs each (258 lbs total).
Side seams:	Side seams are laced in top and bottom individually gathering 3 meshes (4 knots) using white, double 21 T perma-grip® (or like kind) nylon three-strand twine. Top and bottom panels are then laced together using green, double 21 T perma-grip® (or like kind) nylon three-strand twine.
Codend:	3½" stretched measure (including one knot) nylon, dyed green, 96 T nylon three-strand mesh. Codend is a "double wall" construction. Four panels of 96 T web cut 64 meshes long by 120 meshes deep. Two meshes on each side are laced together, leaving 60 "open meshes" per panel. Gored seams are laced together using 60 T round braid hanging twine and hung to riblines of ¾" Samson 2in1@ Duralon braided trawl rope. Riblines in codend are hung at 90% of stretched measurement of gored seams. Riblines are measured under 400 lbs of tension. Codend is closed at aft end using 24-2½" x 5/16" galvanized steel rings. A ¼" Duralon braided rope is passed through 5 selvage meshes and a ring is attached to the rope using a cow hitch every 12" leaving five open meshes between each ring. The bag is then closed using a e" - ¾" hauling clip. A liner of 1¼" three strand twine nylon, 360 meshes long by 200 meshes deep is hung on the inside of the bag 78 meshes up from terminal end.
Doors:	6' x 9' V doors weighing 1800 lbs. with two point tail chain attachment.

Under Alternative 2, the boundary lines are snapped to the nearest minute of latitude or longitude away from the center of the area of skate egg concentration. This snapping creates a buffer region to account for the possibility of additional eggs in un-sampled areas. Using whole minutes also allows for a simpler boundary line that will be easier to discern by fishing vessels, regulators, and policymakers.

For effective enforcement and monitoring, and in response to the recommendations of the Enforcement Committee, Alternative 3 establishes minimum size thresholds around the core concentration areas that are at least 5 nm to a side and, where appropriate, enlarged with a buffer of 1 nm beyond the original boundary. Boundaries are then snapped outward to the nearest minute of latitude and longitude. See Appendix B – Color Figures 3-8.

3.0 ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA)

The purpose of this section is to analyze the environmental impacts of the proposed Federal action to designate six areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs. An environmental assessment (EA) is intended to provide evidence of whether or not the environmental impacts of the action are expected to be significant (40 CFR 1508.9).

An EA must consider whether an action will have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment (40 CFR 1508.27; NAO 216-6, 6.01b). Significance is determined by considering the contexts (geographic, temporal, and societal) in which the action will occur, and the intensity of the effects of the action. The evaluation of intensity should include consideration of the magnitude of the impact, the degree of certainty in the evaluation, the cumulative impact when the action is related to other actions, the degree of controversy, and consistency with other laws. If an impact is not considered significant, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is issued. (See Section 6.0.)

The proposed action is limited the eastern Bering Sea and, depending on the alternative selected, the intent is to discourage or prohibit fishing activities that make contact with the sea floor. Effects of this action that are analyzed are therefore limited to the locations of the six sites proposed as a HAPC and to any component of the environment that may be impacted by fishing prohibitions under Options a and b.

3.1 Relevant NEPA Documents

The NEPA documents listed below have detailed information on the BSAI groundfish fisheries, and on the natural resources and the economic and social activities and communities affected by those fisheries. These documents contain valuable background for the actions under consideration in this EA/RIR/IRFA. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations encourage agencies preparing NEPA documents to incorporate by reference the general discussion from a broader EIS and concentrate solely on the issues specific to the environmental assessment subsequently prepared. According to the CEQ regulations, whenever a broader EIS has been prepared and a NEPA analysis is then prepared on an action included within the entire program or policy, the subsequent analysis shall concentrate on the issues specific to the subsequent action. The subsequent EA need only summarize the issues discussed and incorporate discussions in the broader EIS by reference (see 40 CFR 1502.20).

3.1.1 Alaska Groundfish Programmatic Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement EIS (PSEIS)

In June 2004, NMFS completed the PSEIS that disclosed the impacts from alternative groundfish fishery management programs on the human environment (NMFS 2004). The following provides information on the relationship between this EA/RIR/IRFA and the PSEIS. NMFS issued a Record of Decision on August 26, 2004, with the simultaneous approval of Amendment 74 and Amendment 81 to the FMP to implement the preferred alternative in the PSEIS, respectively. This decision implemented a policy for the groundfish fisheries management programs that is ecosystem-based and is more precautionary when faced with scientific uncertainty. During staff tasking at its February 2012 meeting, the Council discussed the schedule for review of the groundfish PSEIS and will receive a report back from NMFS staff at its April 2012 meeting. Until the current PSEI is reviewed, revised, and adopted, the 2004 PSEIS remains the relevant evaluation of alternative groundfish fishery management programs on the human environment.

The PSEIS brings the decision maker and the public up to date on the current state of the human environment, while describing the potential environmental, social, and economic consequences of alternative policy approaches and the corresponding management regimes for management of the groundfish fisheries off Alaska. In doing so, it serves as the overarching analytical framework that will be

used to define future management policy with a range of potential management actions. Future amendments and actions will logically derive from the chosen policy direction set for the PSEIS' preferred alternative.

As stated in the PSEIS, any specific FMP amendments or regulatory actions proposed in the future will be evaluated by subsequent EAs or EISs that incorporate by reference information from the PSEIS but stand as case-specific NEPA documents and offer more detailed analyses of the specific proposed actions. As a comprehensive foundation for management of the GOA and BSAI groundfish fisheries, the PSEIS functions as a baseline analysis for evaluating subsequent management actions and for incorporation by reference into subsequent EA/EISs that focus on specific Federal actions.

3.1.2 Alaska Groundfish Harvest Specifications Environmental Impact Statement

In January 2007, NMFS completed the EIS analyzing the impacts of various harvest strategies for the Alaska groundfish fisheries. Except for the no action alternative, the alternatives analyzed would implement the preferred management strategy contained in the PSEIS. This document contains an analysis of the effects of the alternative harvest strategies on target groundfish species, non-target species, prohibited species, marine mammals, seabirds, habitat, ecosystem relationships and social and economic concerns. The analysis is based on the latest information regarding the status of each of these environmental components and provides the most recent consideration of reasonably foreseeable future actions to consider in the cumulative effects analysis. The EIS provides the latest overall analysis of the impacts of the groundfish fisheries on the environment and will provide a substantial amount of reference material for the purposes of this EA/RIR/IRFA.

3.1.3 BSAI Final 2011-2012 Harvest Specifications Environmental Assessment

Final Harvest specifications for BSAI groundfish fisheries for 2011 and 2012 were analyzed in an environmental assessment to determine significance of the potential effects of alternative harvest strategies. This EA/IRFA provided recent, applicable methods of determining significance of effects on marine mammals and seabirds. These criteria are used in this Bering Sea Habitat Conservation analysis because they apply the latest understanding of the potential effects of groundfish fisheries on marine mammals and seabirds to determine the significance of an effect. This EA will analyze alternatives to further conserve fish habitat in the eastern Bering Sea. This proposed action derives from the policy established in the preferred alternatives in the PSEIS and in the EFH EIS.

3.1.4 Essential Fish Habitat Environmental Impact Statement

In 2010, NMFS and the Council conducted an EFH five-year review. The review examined information within the 2005 EFH EIS and determined: 1) new and more recent information exists to refine EFH for a small subset of managed species; 2) certain fishing effects may be impacting sensitive habitats of Bristol Bay red king crab; however additional analysis is needed; and 3) the non-fishing impacts analysis, including advisory EFH Conservation Recommendations, should be updated with the most current level of information. The Council has revised the EFH sections of its FMPs to address the results of the five-year review through the EFH Omnibus Amendment package adopted in April 2011.

In 2005, NMFS and the Council completed the EIS for Essential Fish Habitat Identification and Conservation in Alaska. The EFH EIS provided a thorough analysis of alternatives and environmental consequences for amending the Council's FMPs to include EFH information pursuant to Section 303(a)(7) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act and 50 CFR 600.815(a). Specifically, the EFH EIS examined three actions: 1) describing and identifying EFH for Council managed fisheries; 2) adopting an approach to identify HAPCs within EFH; and 3) minimizing to the extent practicable the adverse effects of fishing

on EFH. The Council's preferred alternatives from the EFH EIS are implemented through Amendments 78/65 and 73/65 to the GOA and BSAI groundfish FMPs, respectively, Amendments 16 and 12 to the FMP for BSAI King and Tanner Crab, Amendments 9 and 7 to the FMP for the Scallop Fishery off Alaska, and Amendments 7 and 8 to the FMP for Salmon Fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off the Coast of Alaska. A Record of Decision was issued on August 8, 2005. NMFS approved the amendments on May 3, 2006. Regulations implementing the EFH/HAPC protection measures were effective July 28, 2006 (71 FR 36694, June 28, 2006).

3.2 Purpose and Need for the Action

The purpose of this action designating areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs is to address the protection of habitat for eggs and developing embryos of skate species in the eastern Bering Sea. Skate eggs are deposited in small, highly localized areas. Eggs and embryos are protected by proteinaceous egg cases; however the egg cases, eggs, and embryos are susceptible to damage from some fishing gear. In addition, fishing and other human activities may be disruptive to reproductive adult skates depositing eggs in these localized areas. Because skates have relatively low productivity (i.e., low fecundity, long embryo development times, and delayed adult maturity), a need exists to protect areas of skate egg concentration and limit the potential loss of skates in its early life stages.

3.2.1 Statement of Purpose and Need

The Council adopted the following statement of purpose and need at its June 2012 meeting:

HAPC are geographic sites that fall within the distribution of Essential Fish Habitat for the Council's managed species. The Council has a formalized process, identified in its FMPs, for selecting HAPCs that begins with the Council identifying habitat priorities - here, areas of skate egg concentration. Candidate HAPCs must be responsive to the Council priority, must be rare (defined as uncommon habitat that occurs in discrete areas within only one or two Alaska regions), and must meet one of three other considerations: provide an important ecological function; be sensitive to human-induced degradation; or be stressed by development activities.

The candidate HAPC identify sites of egg concentration by skate species (Rajidae) in the eastern Bering Sea. Skates are elasmobranch fish that are long-lived, slow to mature, and produce few young. Skates deposit egg cases in soft substrates on the sea floor in small, distinct sites. A reproducing skate deposits only several egg cases during each reproductive season. Depending on the species, a single egg case can hold from one to four individual skate embryos, and development can take up to three years. Thus, a single egg case site will hold several year classes and species, and eggs growing at different rates.

Distinct skate egg deposition sites have been highlighted by skate stock experts while assessing skate information from research survey and catch locations. The scientists noted repeated findings of distinct sites where egg cases recruit to sampling or fishing gear contacting the sea floor: egg case prongs (or horns) entangle in or cases recruits into the gear. These sites are discrete areas near the shelf/slope break that serve as important spawning and embryonic development areas for skate species. It is therefore important to consider: 1) designating these areas as HAPCs; 2) to consider restricting activities which impact the habitat at these sites; and 3) to monitor the continued utility of these sites for skate spawning and embryonic development, and further study for the

relationship between the habitat features of these sites and site selection for skate egg deposition.

This EA/RIR/IRFA evaluates the impacts of three alternatives, which include a no action alternative, gear use restriction options, and other options for research and housekeeping. The alternatives and options are not mutually exclusive to the six proposed HAPCs, and any combination may be selected for each area proposed: the options may be chosen in any combination with the alternatives.

3.3 Alternatives and Options

Three alternatives for the identification of skate egg concentration HAPCs and two options (b and c) for gear type prohibitions within those HAPCs are analyzed within this document and listed below. Consideration of areas of skate egg concentration is limited to the six candidate sites from the AFSC proposal. Additional sites, if or when discovered, are not considered part of this action. Further, the Council has the option to request that NMFS monitor HAPCs for the effects of fishing and that industry support those efforts (Option a). In addition, the Council has the options of recommending research and monitoring of skates be added to its research priority list (Option d) and adopting an FMP housekeeping amendment to standardize federal descriptions of Bering Sea habitat conservation measures (Option e).

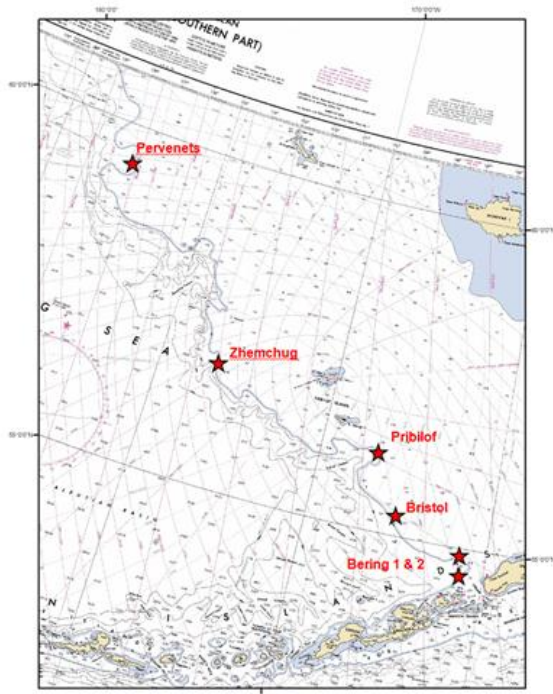
3.3.1 Action Alternatives and Options Analyzed

In order to address the issues described in its statement of purpose and need, the Council identified three alternatives and five options for analysis, shown below. In addition, a BSAI Groundfish FMP housekeeping option has been added to the analysis (Option e). Both Alternative 2 and 3 would amend the BSAI Groundfish FMP, the BSAI Crab FMP, the Alaska Salmon FMP, and the Alaska Scallop FMP to identify HAPC areas in the Bering Sea. Alternative 3 would also implement regulatory changes for Bering Sea groundfish and scallop fisheries.

In June 2012, the Council identified Alternative 2, Options a, d, and e as its preliminary preferred alternative. The Council motion noted that with the addition of option a, the intent of this alternative is to monitor the impacts of fishing activities in the proposed HAPC sites, primarily at the population level, and if practicable, develop additional information on fishery interactions with egg concentrations.

Alternative 1: Status quo; no action: No measures would be taken to identify, or to identify and conserve, areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs.

Alternative 2: Identify skate egg concentration HAPC(s): (Preliminary preferred alternative) The Council may select to identify – individually, severally, or all six of the areas of skate egg concentration as HAPC. At each of the six areas of skate egg concentration, the spatial extent of research bottom trawls containing more than 1,000 egg cases per kilometer squared (km²) have been established. Boundary lines are then snapped outward to the nearest minute of latitude or longitude. The intent of Alternative 2 is to identify these areas as HAPCs.



Under Alternative 2, the six proposed areas of skate egg concentration will be identified as HAPC:

Table 6. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 2.

Site name ^a	Predominant skate species	Depth of max. egg density (m)	Maximum egg density (eggs/km ²)	Area of HAPC nm ²	Boundaries of HAPC (°N latitude or °W longitude)			
					North	South	West	East
1. Bering 1	Alaska	145	800,406	18.4	54°53'	54°49'	165°46'	165°38'
2. Bering 2	Aleutian	380	62,992	17.5	54°38'	54°33'	165°45'	165°34'
3. Bristol	Bering	156	6,188	13.7	55°21'	55°17'	167°40'	167°34'
4. Pribilof	Alaska	205	16,473	1.2	56°11'	56°10'	168°28'	168°26'
5. Zhemchug	Alaska	217	610,064	3.2	56°57'	56°54'	173°23'	173°21'
6. Pervenets	Alaska, Bering, Aleutian	316	334,163	27.7	59°28'	59°22'	177°43'	177°34'
Total area of the eastern Bering Sea proposed as HAPCs under Alternative 2 = 81.7 nm ²								

^a Counterintuitively, the Bering 2 site is south of the Bering 1 site. Sites 3 through 6 run south to north.

Option a: (Preliminary preferred option) NMFS would monitor HAPCs for changes in egg density and other potential effects of fishing and the Council would request that industry support collection of data in evaluation of monitoring and management efforts relative to those HAPCs.

Alternative 3: Identify and conserve skate egg concentration HAPC(s): The Council may select to identify – individually, severally, or all six of the areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs – and, the Council may select different conservation and management options for any area identified as a skate egg concentration HAPC. To achieve effective enforcement of these areas, Alternative 3 establishes a minimum size threshold for the core concentration areas to be protected of at least 5 nm to a side and are then, where appropriate, enlarged with a buffer of 1 nm beyond the original boundary under Alternative 2. Boundaries are then snapped outward to the nearest minute of latitude and longitude.

Table 7. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 3.

Site name ^a	Predominant skate species	Depth of max. egg density (m)	Maximum egg density (eggs/km ²)	Area of HAPC (nm ²)	Boundaries of HAPC (°N latitude or °W longitude)			
					North	South	West	East
1. Bering 1	Alaska	145	800,406	41.8	54°54'	54°48'	165°48'	165°36'
2. Bering 2	Aleutian	380	62,992	40.9	54°39'	53°32'	165°47'	165°37'
3. Bristol	Bering	156	6,188	34.4	55°22'	55°16'	167°42'	167°32'
4. Pribilof	Alaska	205	16,473	28	56°13'	56°08'	168°32'	168°22'
5. Zhemchug	Alaska	217	610,064	27.4	56°58'	56°53'	173°27'	173°17'
6. Pervenets	Alaska, Bering, Aleutian	316	334,163	53.3	59°29'	59°21'	177°45'	177°36'
Total area in the eastern Bering Sea proposed as HAPCs under Alternative 3 = 225.8 nm ²								

^a Counterintuitively, the Bering 2 site is south of the Bering 1 site. Sites 3 through 6 run south to north.

This alternative includes two options relative to what gears would be prohibited from use in the areas of skate egg concentrations designated as HAPC.

Option b: *Prohibit within skate egg concentration HAPC(s) the use of “mobile bottom contact”⁷ fishing gear: nonpelagic (i.e., bottom) trawl, dredge, and dinglebar gear.*

Option c: *Prohibit within skate egg concentration HAPC(s) the use of “mobile bottom contact” and pelagic trawl fishing gear: nonpelagic and pelagic trawl, dredge and dinglebar gear.⁸*

Additional Options for ALL Alternatives

The following options are applicable to ALL of the alternatives, in any combination of skate egg concentration HAPCs, and with any combination of conservation and management measures the Council selects:

Option d: (Preliminary preferred option) *Suggest adding research and monitoring of areas of skate egg concentration to the Council's research priority list.*

The Council may suggest incorporating the research and monitoring of skate species into the Council's annual research priority list, to evaluate skate populations, skate egg concentration areas, and their ecology and habitat.

Option e: (Preliminary preferred option) *Adopt formatting standards as stated in the final rule implementing Amendment 89 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP.*

The Council may approve the consolidation of figures and tables that describe areas in Amendment 89 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP, which establishes Bering Sea habitat conservation measures. Color Figures 70-73 in Appendix B describe the Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Area, the Northern Bering Sea Research Area and Saint Lawrence Island Habitat Conservation Area (HCA), and the Nunivak Island, Etolin Strait, and Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area, respectively.

3.4 Discussion of Alternatives and Options

3.4.1 Alternative 1

Alternative 1, the status quo or no action alternative, involves no measures to identify areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs or to protect and conserve those areas of skate egg concentration from adverse fishing effects.

None of the skate egg concentration sites overlap with existing marine protected areas. Several sites do fall within established marine managed areas, but offer little in the way of fish habitat protection. For example, the proposed HAPC site at Pervenets canyon falls within the BSAI C. Opilio Crab Bycatch Limitation Zone, which closes to specified fisheries if a certain bycatch limit of crabs taken in this area is reached in specified fisheries. Similarly, the proposed sites at Bering 1 and Bering 2 fall within the Catcher Vessel Operational Area and the Steller Sea Lion Conservation Area. Pollock catcher processors are prohibited from fishing for pollock in the CVOA during the pollock B-season.

⁷ 50 C.F.R. 679.2.

⁸ See 50 C.F.R. 679.2 for the particular and intricate components defining “pelagic trawl” fishing gear.

3.4.2 Alternative 2

Alternative 2 would identify areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs without any associated conservation or management measures. The Council may select individually, severally, or all of the six areas identified as potential skate egg concentration HAPCs. The identification of these sites as a HAPC highlights the importance of this essential fish habitat for conservation and consultation on activities such as: drilling, dredging, laying cables, and dumping, as well as fishing activities. Under Alternative 2, the Council would not limit fishing activities or prohibit gear types that make contact with the sea floor. With the addition of Option a, the intent of this alternative is to monitor the impacts of fishing activities in the proposed HAPC sites, primarily at the population level, and if practicable, develop additional information on fishery interactions with egg concentrations.

At each site, the spatial extent of bottom trawls containing more than 1,000 egg cases/km² was initially established. Under Alternative 2, the boundary lines were then snapped to the nearest minute of latitude or longitude away from the center of the concentration area. This snapping created a buffer region to account for the possibility of additional eggs in un-sampled areas. Using whole minutes also allowed for a simpler boundary line that would be easier to discern by fishing vessels, regulators, and policymakers.

Under Alternative 2 Option a, skate sites would be designated as HAPC and NMFS would monitor these sites for changes in egg density and other potential effects of fisheries. Regular analysis of VMS data on fisheries trawl intensity at each site (as done for this analysis) could be done each year and reported in the annual Ecosystem SAFE report. This would allow the assessment author, and the Council to know when there are major changes in trawl fishing effort on HAPC areas and potential impacts to skate eggs. Additionally, trends in fisheries trawl effort, catch of skate eggs of each species, and effort by other gear types, could be reported regularly as part of the EFH 5-Year review. Should a change occur in skate recruitment, or overall biomass of a species, potentially related to fishing impacts on these HAPC sites, the Council could initiate an analysis to take further action to restrict fishing activities at those sites

3.4.3 Alternative 3 and Options b and c

Alternative 3 provides for both the identification of areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs and for the conservation of these areas through prohibitions of gear types that make contact with the sea floor. The Council may select, in combination with any area of skate egg concentration designated as a HAPC, to limit fishing activities that make contact with the sea floor in these areas by prohibiting the use of “mobile bottom contact,” pelagic, “bottom contact,” or all fishing gear. The table below summarizes the gear types that would or would not be allowed in areas of skate egg concentration, based on the option selected.

Table 8. Summary table of gear type prohibited under each option for Alternative 3.

Gear type prohibited	Option b	Option c
Nonpelagic (bottom) trawl	x	X
Dredge	x	X
Dinglebar	x	X
Pelagic trawl	--	X

Only Alternative 3 requires enforcement considerations. At the February 2012 meeting, the Enforcement Committee received an overview of the three alternatives presented in the analysis. The Committee noted that if the Council decided to identify the areas skate egg concentration as HAPCs with associated protection and conservation measures using VMS, there is a minimum size requirement that would allow for protection given the limitations of VMS polling (once or twice per hour), uncertainty in GPS

locations, and the spatial dislocation between the vessel and gear. The Committee discussed what the absolute minimum size could be that would still ensure conservation of the resource: an area of 5 nm per side would be an ideal minimum because of the limits of VMS to accurately track a vessel through the area. The Committee concluded that with the current VMS technology and protocols, areas smaller than 5 nm per side, though providing some level of protection, would unlikely be successfully enforced.

At its March/April meeting, the Council requested that the analysis be expanded to evaluate the use of the most updated VMS technology to monitor activity in and around skate egg concentration sites. VMS, increased polling rates, geo-fencing, and the use of the Automated Information System AIS are discussed in the RIR. Possible reductions in size of all six proposed HAPCs using increased VMSA poll rates are shown in Appendix B.

The table below provides a summary of the proposed HAPC sites, the skate species to be protected and its population trend, the egg casing density and depth at each site, and the fisheries in the site and amount of fish caught in site.

Table 9. Summary table of HAPC sites, skate species, and fisheries

Site Name	Skate Species	Depth of Max. Egg Density		Max. Egg Density (eggs/km ²)	Population Trend ^a	Fisheries	Tons of Catch ^b (mt)
		meters	fathoms				
1. Bering 1	Alaska	145	79	800,406	Stable	PTR Pollock mid-water NPT Atka NPT Pollock NPT Pacific cod NPT other flatfish NPT Flathead sole NPT Other Species NPT Rock sole NPT Arrowtooth	6,576 12 32 677 44 2 347 3 285
2. Bering 2	Aleutian	380	208	62,992	Stable	PTR Pollock, bottom PTR Pollock, mid-water NPT Atka NPT Pollock NPT Pacific cod NPT other flatfish NPT Flathead sole NPT Rock sole NPT Greenland Turbot NPT Arrowtooth NPT Yellowfin	427 7,558 110 35 489 716 298 83 182 5,671 12
3. Bristol	Bering	156	85	6,188	Stable	PTR Pollock, mid-water	5,828
4. Pribilof	Alaska	205	112	16,473	Stable	PTR Pollock, mid-water NPT Arrowtooth	658 25
5. Zhemchug	Alaska	217	118	610,064	Stable	PTR Pollock, mid-water	1,100
6. Pervenets	Alaska, Bering and Aleutian	316	173	334,163	Stable	PTR Pollock, mid-water NPT Pollock NPT Pacific cod NPT Rockfish NPT Flathead sole NPT Greenland Turbot NPT Arrowtooth NPT Yellowfin	14,750 9 205 43 337 48 827 3

^a Skate stock assessment experts offer population trends for all skate species tend to be stable on the shelf and slope.

^b Observed PTR and NPT catch data (2003 to 2011) filtered for confidentiality.

3.4.4 Option d – Research List

Under Option d, the Council may suggest that the plan teams and the SSC consider adding areas of skate egg case concentration as a research priority to the Council’s annual research priority list, in order to incorporate continuing research into skates, to evaluate skate populations, additional skate egg concentration areas, and their ecology and habitat. Dr. Gerald R. Hoff of the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) has compiled the description below of the three most important research priorities, as of February 2012.

In addition, the BSAI skate stock assessment authors have recommended continued study of areas of skate egg concentration to evaluate their importance to population production. Adult skates appear capable of significant mobility in response to general habitat changes, but any effects on the small scale area of skate egg concentration crucial to reproduction could have disproportionate population effects. Eggs are mostly limited to isolated areas of skate egg concentration, and juveniles use different habitats than adults. Changes in these habitats have not been monitored historically, so assessments of habitat quality and its trends are not currently available. After hatching, juveniles most likely remain in continental shelf and slope waters, but specific distribution is unknown; adults are found across wide areas of the shelf and slope.

3.4.4.1 List of Research Priorities

1) *Develop a clearer picture of the habitat conditions that produce productive skate egg deposition sites.*

In the eastern Bering Sea no less than eight nursery sites occur between 135 m and 400 m for the three most abundant skate species. The nursery sites are highly correlated with undersea marine canyons, egg cases are highly concentrated, and sites are persistent for many years. There is evidence of site fidelity by mature adults with protracted embryo development causing multiple cohorts to be present concurrently at any site. A clearer understanding of the specific oceanographic and biological processes that are common to skate nursery sites across species, bottom types and major ecosystems will provide a framework for developing a working hypothesis of the habitat conditions necessary for successful recruitment. An understanding of habitat parameters common to skate nurseries will provide estimates of the influence of climate change, habitat disturbance and ecosystem shifts on these vulnerable species.

2) *Monitoring of known skate sites to determine the effect of protective measures.*

A nursery site for the Alaska skate at the head of Bering Canyon has undergone activity from fishing for at least thirty years. Digital images of this site, when compared to 3 eastern Bering Sea sites for the Alaska skate, show this site to possess distinct properties with regard to bottom type and egg case distribution. The benthic habitat is soft “fluffy” sediment and egg cases are highly scattered over a broad area when compared to distinctly hard sand and gravel bottom types with areas of highly concentrated egg cases at the 3 northern sites. Developing a monitoring program that includes frequent studies of this site as to changes in benthic habitat, egg density and skate population will provide valuable information on the success of protective measures and information on the recovery time for this important habitat. Research for monitoring this habitat would include underwater camera systems and oceanographic equipment.

3) *Examine population structure as determined by site fidelity to skate egg deposition sites.*

Population structure in skates is an important aspect in understanding skate reproduction. In the eastern Bering Sea the Alaska skate has at least four skate nursery sites. There is evidence of site fidelity for egg deposition which potentially may help develop population structure within this large ecosystem. Understanding the specific role skate nursery sites play in successful recruitment and development of populations is key to the successful management of these sensitive species. Research leading to these

questions will involve genetic studies and a tagging program to monitor adult behavior at skate nursery sites.

3.4.5 Option e – BSAI Amendment 89

The Council may approve the consolidation of figures and tables that describe areas in Amendment 89 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP, which establishes Bering Sea habitat conservation measures. Color Figures 70-73 in Appendix B describe the Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Area, the Northern Bering Sea Research Area and Saint Lawrence Island Habitat Conservation Area (HCA), and the Nunivak Island, Etolin Strait, and Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area, respectively. The final rule (73 FR 43362, July 25, 2008) which implemented Amendment 89 created new coordinate tables and figures for the areas closed to nonpelagic (i.e., bottom) trawling and the research area. NMFS has determined that these figures need to be combined with the coordinates of four tables in 50 C.F.R. part 679.

The final rule that implemented Amendment 89 created new coordinate tables and figures for the areas closed to nonpelagic trawling and the research area (73 FR 43362, July 25, 2008). The Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Area; the Northern Bering Sea Research Area; and the Nunivak Island, Etolin Strait, and Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area are described in Tables 42, 43, and 44, and in Figures 16, 17, and 21 to 50 C.F.R. Part 679, respectively. St. Lawrence Island Habitat Conservation Area is described in Table 45 and Figure 17 to Part 679. The St. Matthew Island Habitat Conservation Area is described in Table 46 to Part 679. It is unnecessarily complicated for the public to refer to one page for the map of the area and refer to one or more other pages for the coordinates of the same area.

The standard format of the 50 CFR Part 679 regulations has one graphic with a figure number to contain both the (a) map and the (b) coordinates that describe the map. To meet that standard format, this rule would combine the appropriate coordinates and figures into one figure and would remove those tables affected in this process. Figure 16, a map, would be combined with the coordinates provided in Table 42 for the Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Area. Figure 17 would be combined with Tables 43 and 45 for the Northern Bering Sea Research Area and St. Lawrence Island Habitat Conservation Area. Figure 21 would be combined with Table 44 for the Nunivak Island, Etolin Strait, and Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area. Table 46 does not have a comparable figure and therefore would be re-designated as Table 42. Tables 43, 44, and 45 would be removed. Color Figures 70-73 in Appendix B show the Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Area, the Northern Bering Sea Research Area and Saint Lawrence Island Habitat Conservation Area (HCA), and the Nunivak Island, Etolin Strait, and Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area, respectively.

3.5 Alternatives & Options Considered but Rejected

Earlier drafts of this analysis included options under Alternative 3 that would have restricted fishing in HAPCs with fixed gear – pot and hook-and-line (i.e., longline) gear. These options were eliminated by the Council and dropped for further consideration after evaluation revealed that this would not be a reasonable alternative. These gear types were determined to have minimal-to-no impacts on the proposed HAPCs, and thus a prohibition would offer only marginal conservation benefits to the action. Regarding enforceability of allowing vessels to fish with these gears within HAPC sites, though prohibiting vessels using other gears, the combination of VMS and the ease of or ability to determine a vessel's gear operations during a USCG overflight should provide effective enforcement.

The effects of longline gear were determined to be very minimal because: 1) very low levels of longline effort occurs in HAPCs; 2) the effects of longlines on skate nursery habitats (sediments, emergent epifauna) is thought to be very low relative to other gears; and 3) the impacts of longlines on the egg cases themselves (through dispersal, unobserved mortality due to gear impacts, silting from gear, and bycatch mortality) has been determined to be very low. Data on longline effort had indicated low levels of

longline effort in five of the HAPCs, and medium levels at the Bering 1 site during the years 1998 through 2010. The low effort, combined with the 2005 EFH EIS findings that concluded longlines would have minimal impacts on benthic sediments—and would not cause silting that could potentially impact skate egg survival—resulting in a determination that longlines would not result in impacts to the proposed HAPC. Further, observer data shows that bycatch of skate eggs in longline gear was a relatively rare occurrence. When it did occur, the overall bycatch amounts were small—the highest recorded occurrence was less than 1,500 eggs. While dispersal of egg cases tangled in longlines and direct mortality due to hooking of skate eggs could occur, the potential for major impacts was considered to be low.

The effects of pot gear on skate egg HAPCs were similarly determined to be very low, having almost no impact. The reasons for this conclusion were: 1) very low levels of pot effort for groundfish or crabs occurs in these areas; 2) the effects of pots on skate nursery habitats was thought to be very low relative to other gears; and 3) the impacts of pots on the egg cases themselves (through dispersal, unobserved mortality due to gear impacts, silting from gear, and bycatch mortality) was determined to be very low. The initial analysis had indicated virtually no groundfish pot effort in these areas, and very low effort for one species of crab. The EFH EIS had concluded that pot gear would have virtually no impact to benthic habitats (except for epifauna) due to the small footprint of the gear. Relative to direct effects on skate eggs, the initial analysis determined that while unobserved mortality could occur to eggs if a pot landed on them, the potential impacts would be very small given the limited pot fishing effort in the proposed skate HAPC areas.

3.6 Skate Biology

Skates (from the family Rajidae) are cartilaginous fishes related to sharks. Skates are dorso-ventrally depressed animals with large pectoral “wings” attached to the sides of the head, and long, narrow whip-like tails. There are at least fifteen species of skates in three genera, *Raja*, *Bathyraja*, and *Amblyraja*, in Alaskan waters, and common from shallow inshore waters to very deep benthic habitats (Eschmeyer et al. 1983, Stevenson et al. 2006). The table below lists the fifteen skate species found in Alaskan waters:

Table 10. Skate species found in Alaskan waters.

Common Name	Species Nomenclature
¹²³⁴ Alaska skate	<i>Bathyraja parmifera</i>
¹²³⁴ Aleutian skate	<i>Bathyraja aleutica</i>
¹²⁴ Bering skate	<i>Bathyraja interrupta</i>
²³⁴ deepsea skate	<i>Bathyraja abyssicola</i>
²³⁴ Commander skate	<i>Bathyraja lindbergi</i>
²³⁴ whiteblotched skate	<i>Bathyraja maculata</i>
³ butterfly skate	<i>Bathyraja mariposa</i>
² whitebrow skate	<i>Bathyraja minispinosa</i>
³ leopard skate	<i>Bathyraja panthea</i>
²³ mud skate	<i>Bathyraja taranetzi</i>
²³⁴ rougtail skate	<i>Bathyraja trachura</i>
²³ Okhotsk skate	<i>Bathyraja violacea</i>
¹²³⁴ big skate	<i>Raja binoculata</i>
² roughshoulder skate	<i>Amblyraja badia</i>
¹²⁴ longnose skate	<i>Raja rhina</i>

1 = Bering Sea shelf, 2 = Bering Sea slope, 3 = Aleutian Islands, 4 = Gulf of Alaska.

The species within the skate assemblage occupy different habitats and regions within the BSAI FMP area: the eastern Bering Sea shelf (less than 200m depth), the eastern Bering Sea slope (greater than 200 m depth), and the Aleutian Islands region (all depths). Within the eastern Bering Sea, the skate species composition varies by depth, and species diversity is generally greatest on the upper continental slope at 250 to 500 m depth.

The single dominant species on the eastern Bering Sea shelf is the Alaska skate composing as much as 95% of shelf skate biomass. While skate biomass is much higher on the eastern Bering Sea shelf than on the slope, skate diversity is substantially greater on the slope where 13 of the 15 species have been found (Stevenson et al. 2006). The dominant species on the slope is the Aleutian skate (*B. aleutica*). A number of other species are found on the eastern Bering Sea slope in significant numbers, including the Alaska skate, Commander skate (*B. lindbergi*), whiteblotched skate (*B. maculata*), whitebrow skate (*B. minispinosa*), rougtail skate (*B. trachura*), and mud skate (*B. taranetzi*). Two rare species, the deepsea skate (*B. abyssicola*) and roughshoulder skate (*Amblyraja badia*), have only recently been reported from eastern Bering Sea slope bottom trawl surveys (Stevenson and Orr 2005). The Okhotsk skate (*B. violacea*), the big skate (*Raja binoculata*), and the longnose skate (*Raja rhina*) are also occasionally found on the eastern Bering Sea slope.

The skate complex in the Aleutian Islands (AI) is distinct from the eastern Bering Sea shelf and slope complexes, with two recently described endemic species, the butterfly skate, *Bathyrāja mariposa* and the leopard skate (*Bathyrāja panthera*) (Stevenson et al. 2004, Orr et al 2011) and several species notably absent from the AI fauna where common in the eastern Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. In the AI, the dominant species is the white blotched skate, *B. maculata* which is found primarily in the eastern and far western Aleutian Islands. Other abundant species include the Aleutian Alaska and mud skates in the AI. All known area of skate egg concentration in the eastern Bering Sea are associated with several major and minor undersea marine canyons located in the upper low slope areas occurring from 145 to 380 m (see Appendix B). Most likely particular oceanographic conditions are important factors for area selection; however, the specifics of these conditions remain unknown. The nominal six areas of skate egg concentration encompassed in this HAPC proposal include those of the three most abundant skate species in the eastern Bering Sea, which encompasses the dominant species on the shelf (from 20 to 200 m) that is most encountered by fishing activity in the eastern Bering Sea: the Alaska, Aleutian, and Bering skates.

3.6.1 Alaska Skate

The eastern Bering Sea shelf skate complex is dominated by a single species, the Alaska skate (*Bathyrāja parmifera*). The Alaska skate is distributed throughout the eastern Bering Sea shelf habitat area, most commonly at depths of 50 to 200 m (Stevenson 2004), and has accounted for between 91 percent and 97 percent of aggregate skate biomass estimates since species identification became reliable in 1999. The Alaska skate has the greatest estimated population of all the Alaska skate species and dominates the eastern Bering Sea shelf. Its population has increased dramatically since the 1970s and in recent years, has been encountered at nearly every station throughout the standard eastern Bering Sea trawl survey. It has limited distribution from off Japan throughout the eastern Bering Sea and into the GOA. It occurs in the Aleutians to as far as 180° W, where it is replaced by a very similar species (Leopard skate, *Bathyrāja panthera*) once thought to be a conspecific but recently described and documented as a congener. The Alaska skate trends towards having species specific egg case concentration sites with little “contamination” of other species eggs at its sites. Areas of skate egg concentration for the Alaska skate tend to be shallower than others, most likely because it is the shallowest of the skate species in the eastern Bering Sea. Another distinction of Alaska skate areas of egg concentration are their deposition of eggs in very high densities (greater than 500,000 eggs/km²), an order of magnitude greater than either the Bering or Aleutian skates. This is not surprising given that its population estimates are also an order of magnitude greater than any other eastern Bering Sea species.

3.6.2 Bering Skate

The Bering skate (*Bathyrāja interrupta*) is the next most common species in the eastern Bering Sea shelf, and is distributed on the outer continental shelf and upper slope. The Bering skate is an enigmatic species in many respects. It occurs from Japan throughout Alaska and at least as far south as the Mexican border

off California. However, it shows a large amount of morphological variation across its range and in fact appears different in each environment where it occurs. Within the eastern Bering Sea, there are a minimum of three morphological types varying with depth and latitude, a fourth type in the Gulf of Alaska and finally along the west coast of Washington, Oregon and California a fifth type appearing distinctly different than those in Alaska. Examination of egg case morphology corroborates the differences seen within the species across its range. Taxonomic resolution of this complex is underway and the results may determine what is currently recognized as a single species may in fact be three to five species. This complicates any life history, habitat, and ecological studies and interpretation of such for the species. However, for this analysis all Bering skates will be considered a single species with the understanding that a conservative approach may be necessary given the dubious status of the species complex.

3.6.3 Aleutian Skate

The Aleutian skate (*Bathyraja aleutica*) has the largest estimated population and biomass along the eastern Bering Sea slope (from 200 to 1200 m). It is one of the most broadly distributed species occurring throughout Alaska, the eastern Bering Sea, AI, and GOA, British Columbia, and south to California. It also has the greatest depth distribution from about 150 m to at least 1200 m. The two known areas of skate egg concentration in the eastern Bering Sea are of moderate to deep depths, however occur relatively shallow when compared to the depth distribution for the species. The Aleutian skate deposits its egg cases at a relatively low density not found over 100,000 eggs/km² and tends to have a fair amount of “contamination” by other species such as the Bering skate, mud skate, and whitebrow skate. The Aleutian skate however, does not appear to deposit its eggs in large numbers other than in its own areas of skate egg concentration and eggs are rarely found widely scattered outside those sites.

3.6.4 Life History and Stock Structure

Skate life cycles are similar to sharks, with relatively low fecundity, slow growth to large body sizes, and dependence of population stability on high survival rates of a few well developed offspring (Moyle and Cech 1996). Skates and sharks in general have been classified as “equilibrium” life history strategists (Winemiller and Rose 1992), with very low intrinsic rates of population increase implying that sustainable harvest is possible only at very low to moderate fishing mortality rates (King and McFarlane 2003). Within this general equilibrium life history strategy, there can still be considerable variability between skate species in terms of life history parameters (Walker and Hislop 1998). While smaller sized species have been observed to be somewhat more productive, large skate species with late maturation (11 or more years) are most vulnerable to heavy fishing pressure (Walker and Hislop 1998; Frisk et al. 2001; Frisk et al. 2002). Little is known about life history parameters of Alaska skate. Studies own elsewhere have determined age at maturity and maximum age for big skates and longnose skates to be about 12 to 26 years, with maturity occurring at approximately 8 years.

Several recent studies have explored the effects of fishing on a variety of skate species in order to determine which life history traits might indicate the most effective management measures for each species. Major life stages include the egg stage, the juvenile stage, and the adult stage (summarized here based on Frisk et al. 2002). All skate species are oviparous (egg-laying), investing considerably more energy per large, well-protected embryo than most commercially exploited teleost groundfish. The large, leathery egg cases contain embryos that develop for extended periods (in Alaska at least 3 years) in benthic habitats, exposed to some level of predation and physical damage, until the fully formed juveniles hatch. The juvenile stage lasts from hatching through maturity, several years to over a decade depending on the species.

The reproductive adult stage may last several more years to decades depending on the species. Age and size at maturity and adult size and longevity appear to be more important predictors of resilience to fishing pressure than fecundity or egg survival in the skate populations studied to date. Frisk et al. (2002) estimated that although annual fecundity per female may be on the order of less than fifty eggs per year (extremely low compared with teleost groundfish), there is relatively high survival of eggs due to the high parental investment, and therefore egg survival did not appear to be the most important life history stage contributing to population stability under fishing pressure. Juvenile survival appears to be most important to population stability for most North Sea species studied (Walker and Hislop 1998) and for the small and intermediate sized skates from New England (Frisk et al. 2002).

For the large and long-lived barndoor skate, adult survival was the most important contributor to population stability (Frisk et al. 2002). Comparisons of length frequencies for surveyed North Sea skates from the mid and late 1900s led Walker and Hislop (1998, p. 399) to the conclusion that after years of very heavy exploitation “all the breeding females, and a large majority of the juveniles, of *Dipturus batis*, *Leucoraja fullonica* and *R. clavata* have disappeared, whilst the other species have lost only the very largest individuals.” Although juvenile and adult survival may have different importance by skate species, all studies found that one metric, adult size, reflected overall sensitivity to fishing. After modeling several New England skate populations, Frisk et al. (2002) found “a significant negative, nonlinear association between species total allowable mortality, and species maximum size.” This may be an oversimplification of the potential response of skate populations to fishing; in reality it is the interaction of natural mortality, age at maturity, and the selectivity of fisheries which determines a given species’ sensitivity to fishing and therefore the total allowable mortality (i.e., ABC).

3.6.5 Embryology and Development Duration

Fecundity is a very difficult quantity to measure in skates, as individuals of some species may reproduce throughout the year and thus the number of mature or maturing eggs present in the ovary may represent only a fraction of the annual reproductive output. Matta (2006) estimated the average fecundity of the Alaska skate to range between 21 and 37 eggs per female per year, based on the assumed relationship between reproductive potential and M (Gunderson 1997). Additional work, such as laboratory rearing experiments, is needed to validate these estimates.

Skate eggs are deposited in thick leathery keratin cases on the floor of the continental shelf and slope of the eastern Bering Sea. Development time for oviparous elasmobranchs is dependent of environmental temperature. A retrospective analysis of 14 species worldwide from field and laboratory studies demonstrates that the relationship between environmental temperature during development and time describe an exponential curve and display the well-known Q_{10} effect of temperatures influence on metabolic rates of ectotherms (see Appendix B – Color Figure 61). The result is that in tropical to temperate waters, oviparous elasmobranchs emerge from the egg case in the range of one to six months after deposition. However, in sub-temperate to sub-arctic waters such as the North Pacific, the development time is dramatically extended taking years for embryo development. Field and recent laboratory studies conducted on the Alaska skate confirm that at environmental temperatures experienced in the eastern Bering Sea, time to emergence for juvenile skates between three and four years for upper slope skate species (see Appendix B – Color Figure 60).

Considering single spawning events at skate egg concentration sites, it is expected there will be multiple cohorts at any given moment in time since new eggs are deposited at a faster rate than embryo development. Appendix B – Color Figure 60 shows within an egg concentration site there are multiple embryo length modes at a particular instance, where in the case of the Aleutian skate-Pervenets Canyon having up to seven cohorts developing simultaneously. Because of temperatures influence on development time, skates have optimized egg concentration locations along the slope where sites selected

possess relatively warm annual temperatures for any given latitude (Appendix B – Color Figure 59). Due to currents and the strong influence the central eastern Bering Sea cold pool has on the outer shelf waters; for a given depth in the upper 400 m of the slope bottom temperatures are colder with increased latitude. The shelf condition influence dissipates at about 400 m and below this depth all latitudes show similar depth temperature relationships. This phenomenon explains why a single species' concentration sites are continually deeper at increased latitude in the eastern Bering Sea.

3.6.6 Role of Skates in the Ecosystem

This section focuses on the Alaska skate in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI), with all other species found in each area summarized within the group “Other Skates.” Aggregation is necessary due to current data constraints. Skates are predators in the BSAI FMP area. Some species are piscivorous while others specialize in benthic invertebrates; additionally, at least three species, deepsea skate, rougtail skate, and longnose skate, are benthophagic during the juvenile stage but become piscivorous as they grow larger (Ebert 2003, Robinson 2006). Each skate species would occupy a slightly different position in eastern Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands food webs based upon its feeding habits, but in general skates as a group are predators at a relatively high trophic level. In the eastern Bering Sea, the skate biomass is dominated by the Alaska skate, which eats primarily pollock (as do most other piscivorous animals in the BSAI). Aside from sperm whales, most of the “predators” of BSAI skates are fisheries. Cod and halibut are both predators and prey of skates.

In terms of annual tons removed, it is instructive to compare fishery catches with predator consumption of skates. While estimates of predator consumption of skates are perhaps more uncertain than catch estimates, the ecosystem models incorporate uncertainty in partitioning estimated consumption of skates between their major predators in each system. The predators with the highest overall consumption of Alaska skates in the eastern Bering Sea are sperm whales, which account for less than 2 percent of total skate mortality and consumed between 500 tons and 2,500 tons of skates annually in the early 1990s. Consumption of eastern Bering Sea Alaska skates by Pacific halibut and cod are too small to be reliably estimated. Similarly, sperm whales account for less than 2 percent of Other Skate mortality in the eastern Bering Sea, but are still the primary predator of Other Skates, consuming an estimated 50 to 400 tons annually. Pacific halibut consume very small amounts of Other Skates in the eastern Bering Sea, according to early 1990s information integrated in ecosystem models.

The predators with the highest consumption of Alaska skates in the AI are also sperm whales, which account for less than 2% of total skate mortality and consumed between 20 tons and 120 tons of skates annually in the early 1990s. Pinnipeds (Steller sea lions) and sharks also contributed to Alaska skate mortality in the AI, averaging less than 50 tons annually. Similarly, sperm whales account for less than 2% of Other Skate mortality in the AI, but are still the primary predator of Other Skates there, consuming an estimated 20 to 150 tons annually. Pinnipeds and sharks consume very small amounts of Other Skates in the AI, according to early 1990s information. Dr. Hoff's research on areas of skate egg concentration suggests that gastropod predation on skate egg cases may account for a significant portion of mortality during the embryonic stage, and Pacific cod and Pacific halibut consume substantial numbers of newly hatched juvenile skates within areas of skate egg concentration. These sources of mortality may be included in future stock assessments.

Diets of skates are derived from food habits collections taken in conjunction with eastern Bering Sea and AI trawl surveys. Skate food habits information is more complete for the eastern Bering Sea than for the AI, but we present the best available data for both systems here. Over 40% of eastern Bering Sea Alaska skate diet measured in the early 1990s was adult pollock, and another 15% of the diet was fishery offal, suggesting that Alaska skates are opportunistic piscivores. Eelpouts, rock soles, sandlance, arrowtooth flounder, salmon, and sculpins made up another 25-30% of Alaska skates' diet, and invertebrate prey

made up the remainder of their diet. This diet composition combined with estimated consumption rates and the high biomass of Alaska skates in the eastern Bering Sea results in an annual consumption estimate of 200,000 to 350,000 tons of pollock annually.

Eastern Bering Sea Other Skates also consume pollock (45% of combined diets), but their lower biomass results in consumption estimates ranging from 20,000 to 70,000 tons of pollock annually. Other Skates tend to consume more invertebrates than Alaska skates in the eastern Bering Sea, so estimates of benthic epifaunal consumption due to Other Skates range up to 50,000 tons annually, higher than those for Alaska skates despite the disparity in biomass between the groups.

Because Alaska skates and all Other Skates are distributed differently in the eastern Bering Sea, with Alaska skates dominating the shallow shelf areas and the more diverse species complex located on the outer shelf and slope, we might expect different ecosystem relationships for skates in these habitats based on differences in food habits among the species. Similarly, in the AI the unique skate complex has different diet compositions and consumption estimates from those estimated for eastern Bering Sea skates. The skate in the AI formerly known as the Alaska skate is opportunistically piscivorous like its eastern Bering Sea relative, feeding on the common commercial forage fish, Atka mackerel (65% of diet) and pollock (14% of diet), as well as fishery offal (7% of diet). Diets of Other Skates in the AI are more dominated by benthic invertebrates, especially shrimp (pandalid and non-pandalid total 42% of diet), but include more pelagic prey such as juvenile pollock, adult Atka mackerel, adult pollock and squids (totaling 45% of diet).

Estimated annual consumption of Atka mackerel by AI Alaska skates in the early 1990s ranged from 7,000 to 15,000 tons, while pollock consumption was below 5,000 tons. Shrimp consumption by AI Other Skates was estimated to range from 4,000 to 15,000 tons annually in the early 1990s, and consumption of pollock ranged from 2,000 to 10,000 tons. Atka mackerel consumption by AI Other Skates was estimated to be below 5,000 tons annually. The diet composition estimated for AI Other Skates is likely dominated by the biomass dominant species in that system, whiteblotched skate and Aleutian skate. The diet compositions of both Aleutian and whiteblotched skates in the AI appear to be fairly diverse, and are described in further detail in Yang (2007) along with the diets of big skate, Bering skate, Alaska skate, rougtail skate, and mud skate in the AI.

In the future, scientists hope to use diet compositions to make separate consumption estimates for whiteblotched and Aleutian skates along with Alaska skates in the AI. Examining the trophic relationships of eastern Bering Sea and AI skates provides a context for assessing fishery interactions beyond the direct effect of bycatch mortality. In both areas, the biomass-dominant species of skates feed on commercially important fish species, so it is important for fisheries management to maintain the health of pollock and Atka mackerel stocks in particular to maintain the forage base for skates (as well as for other predators and for human commercial interests).

3.7 Environmental Impacts

The proposed action is limited to six locations in the eastern Bering Sea and to fishing activities that make contact with the sea floor. Any effects of this action are therefore limited to these six locations and to any component of the environment that may be impacted by fishing activities that make contact with the sea floor in these locations. Under Alternative 1, the status quo or no action alternative, no environmental impacts would occur. Under Alternative 2, the Council would identify any of the proposed areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs, but would not adopt any gear type prohibitions or restrict any fishing activities. Therefore, the effects of Alternative 2 are expected to be the same as for the no action alternative.

Under Alternative 3, though, the Council would identify proposed areas of sake egg concentration as HAPCS and would adopt conservation and management measures prohibiting certain gear types within HAPCS. This section describes the criteria by which the impacts of the proposed action are analyzed for each of the following resource categories:

- Habitat
- Target Species (i.e., skates species)
- Non-target species
- Marine mammals and seabirds
- Ecosystem

Evaluation criteria have been developed for each of these categories recently within NMFS' HAPC EA (2006) and in the 2006/2007 Groundfish Harvest Specifications EA. The EFH EIS provide recent information on the effects of fishing on EFH. The analysis used in this EA draws upon the evaluations used in the EFH EIS and adopts the significance criteria used in the HAPC EA and the 2006-2007 Groundfish Harvest Specifications EA because of the similar type of action analyzed and the latest information provided by these analyses.

The four ratings used to assess each potential effect are:

- **Significantly negative:** Significant adverse effect in relation to the reference point. Information, data, and/or professional judgment indicate that the action will cause a significant adverse effect on the resource.
- **Insignificant impact:** Insignificant effect in relation to the reference point. Information, data, or professional judgment suggests that the action will not cause a significant adverse effect on the resource.
- **Significantly positive:** Significant beneficial effect in relation to the reference point. Information, data, and/or professional judgment indicate that the action will cause a significant benefit to the resource.
- **Unknown:** Unknown effect in relation to the reference point. Information is absent to determine a reference point for the resource, species, or issue and data is insufficient to adequately assess the effect of the action or the direction of the effect of the action. Professional judgment also is not able to determine the effect of the action on the resource.

The reference point condition, where used, represents the state of the environmental component in a stable condition or in a condition judged not to be threatened at the present time. For example, a reference point condition for a fish stock would be the state of that stock in a healthy condition, able to sustain itself, successfully reproducing, and not threatened with a population-level decline. Significance criteria are provided for each of the resource categories listed above, except for socioeconomic effects. Significance findings for social and economic impacts would not by themselves require the preparation of an EIS; see 40 CFR 1508.14. Economic and social impacts are described in Sections 3.8.6 and 4.5. In light of 40 CFR 1508.14, significance determinations are not made for these impacts.

This section will focus on the effects of Alternatives 2 and 3 and the options on fish habitat, target species (i.e., skates species), non-target species, marine mammals and seabirds, ecosystems, and cumulative effects on the human environment. Effects will be compared to the significance criteria for each component and compare the effects to Alternative 1 status quo effects.

3.7.1 Habitat

This section provides the effects of commercial fishing gear in the proposed HAPCs and their effects on fish habitat. It is a summary of the more detailed analysis of the studies most pertinent to the gear and habitats of the Alaska region. The descriptions and research summaries below are organized by gear type, which have different characteristics that determine their impact on the benthic environment and on the amount of habitat encountered. Effects also depend on properties of the substrate and organisms. Research conducted on the effects of commercial fishing gear on benthic habitats broadly recognizes several factors that influence the occurrence and degree of effect. Among these are: a) intensity of commercial fishing; b) frequency of fishing; c) class and specific characteristics of the commercial fishing gear; d) environmental/ habitat characteristics; and e) level of naturally occurring disturbance (Barnes and Thomas 2005). This section summarizes the fishing gears potentially, the literature on the habitat effects of commercial fishing gear relevant to the groundfish fisheries of Alaska, and potential impacts of the alternative on habitat, including essential fish habitat.

3.7.1.1 Bottom and Pelagic Trawl Gear

Bottom trawls are used in the Bering Sea by vessels targeting Pacific cod, rockfish, and flatfish species. The fleets using this gear are the Pacific cod trawlers and the Amendment 80 fleet. Pelagic trawls are used to catch pollock, which are targeted by the American Fisheries Act (AFA) catcher vessels and catcher processors. A description of the gear used by these fleets affected (excerpted from Witherell et al. 2012) is provided below.

AFA Catcher Vessels

All vessels in the AFA fleet target pollock with pelagic otter trawls. To achieve large net openings with a minimum of drag, the mesh sizes are very large, and twine size is relatively small. The trawl nets have meshes in the front end as large as 32 m to 64 m (105' to 210') and typically have a headrope to footrope vertical distance rise of 10 fathoms to 30 fathoms (60' to 180'). The size of the gear used is dependent on the size and horsepower of the vessel, such that the larger and more powerful vessels tow the larger trawls. Net mesh gets smaller towards the intermediate and codend, with the codend typically having 4" to 4.5" stretched mesh. Otter boards (or doors), which are used to spread the net and keep it open during towing, are made of steel and range in size from 5 m² to 14 m². In the pelagic fishery the doors do not come in contact with the ocean floor. Door spread in most fishing depths ranges from 100 m to 180 m (328' to 590'), and trawl warp/scope to depth ratio is typically 3 to 1. Contact with the seafloor is from weight clumps and the footrope. Long wire rope bridles attach the net to the doors. Unlike other groundfish trawl fisheries, there are no discs attached to the footropes on these trawls. Footropes typically extend 180 m to 450 m (590' to 1,475').

Trawl codends are usually made with polyethylene netting attached to four longitudinal riblines. The riblines are typically chain, wire, or synthetic rope. Floats are attached along the length of the codend to counteract the weight of the steel components. Container lines around the circumference are attached along the length of the codend to restrict the expansion of the netting, preventing damage and allowing the codend to be hauled up a stern ramp. Sacrificial chafing gear, typically polyethylene fiber, is attached to the codend to protect it from abrasion on the stern ramp.

Sets are made on schooled or scattered pollock, as indicated by electronics. When set, the codend, net, and sweeps are unwound from a net reel, then the doors are attached. Wire cable attached to each door is let out to a distance approximately three times the depth. Trawl winches are designed to automatically adjust tension and release when necessary. Tow duration in this fishery ranges from 20 minutes to 10 hours (depending upon catch rates), at a speed of 3.5 to 4.5 knots. Tows may be in a straight line, or they may be adjusted to curve around depth contours or to avoid location of hangs and fixed gear. Vessels may

turn around while towing and make several passes over the same general area. At haulback, the setting procedure is reversed, and the codend is dumped into the fish-hold below decks. Catcher vessels delivering to the inshore sector have traditionally fished the area north of Unimak Island during the A-season, venturing further north along the shelf break during the B-season.

AFA Catcher Processors

All vessels in this sector use pelagic trawls, with the catcher processors generally using larger gear than many catcher vessels. The trawl gear used has meshes in the front end as large as 32 m to 64 m (105' to 210') and typically has a headrope to footrope vertical distance rise of 10 fathoms to 30 fathoms (60' to 180'). Net mesh gets smaller towards the intermediate and codend, with the codend typically having 4" to 4.5" stretched mesh. Doors are made of steel and range in size from 5 m² to 14 m². Door spread in most fishing depths ranges from 100 m to 180 m (328' to 590'), and trawl warp/scope to depth ratio is typically 3 to 1. Long wire rope bridles attach the net to the doors, which remain off the bottom. Contact with the seafloor is from weight clumps and the footrope. Unlike other groundfish trawl fisheries, there are no discs attached to the footropes on these trawls. Footropes typically extend 180 m to 450 m.

Fishing operations are the same as for the catcher vessels, with the catch loaded into bins below deck. On catcher processors, the fish are then put through various processing lines (depending on product choices), frozen, boxed, and stored in the freezer compartment until the vessel is offloaded days or weeks later. Catcher processors generally fish the area north of Unimak Island during the A-season and from areas south of St. George Island northward during the B-season.

Pacific Cod Trawlers

Bottom trawls are used by AFA and non-AFA trawl fleets to target Pacific cod, with trawls typically having a headrope to footrope vertical distance rise of 1 fathom to 5 fathoms (6' to 30'). Net mesh gets smaller towards the intermediate and codend, with the codend typically having 5.5- to 8-inch stretched diamond mesh. Doors are made of steel and range in size from 4 m to 10 m. Door spread in most fishing depths is typically 100 m (328'), and the trawl warp/scope to depth ratio is typically 4 to 1. Trawl codends are usually made with polyethylene netting attached to four longitudinal riblines. The riblines are typically chain, wire, or synthetic rope. Floats are attached along the length of the codend to counteract the weight of the steel components. Container lines around the circumference are attached along the length of the codend to restrict the expansion of the netting, prevent damage and allow the codend to be hauled up a stern ramp. Sacrificial chafing gear, typically polyethylene fiber, is attached to the codend to protect it from abrasion from contact with the stern ramp and the seafloor. Sweeps are made of wire or combination rope, and may be threaded with rubber disks ranging from 4 to 8 inches in diameter. Footropes, constructed of chain or steel cable, typically extend 100' to 200' and are threaded with rubber discs and larger bobbins, which are 8" to 18" in diameter and are designed to roll along the bottom to limit contact with the bottom and protect the net. The larger diameter bobbins are spaced at intervals of 12" to 48".

Amendment 80 Fleet

The Amendment 80 fleet includes vessels that mainly target flatfish and Pacific cod, or Atka mackerel and Pacific ocean perch, and different bottom trawl configurations are used depending upon the target fishery. All vessels participating in the Bering Sea flatfish fisheries, as well as vessels fishing for groundfish with bottom trawls in the Modified Gear Trawl Zone, are required to use elevating devices on their trawl sweeps to reduce habitat impacts. Research had shown that this gear reduced impacts on benthic invertebrates and reduced crab injury rates to <5%. The fleet uses rollers to achieve the minimum clearance of 2.5" with the modified trawl gear. These devices are required to be a minimum of 30' to 95' apart, depending upon clearance provided by the elevating devices.

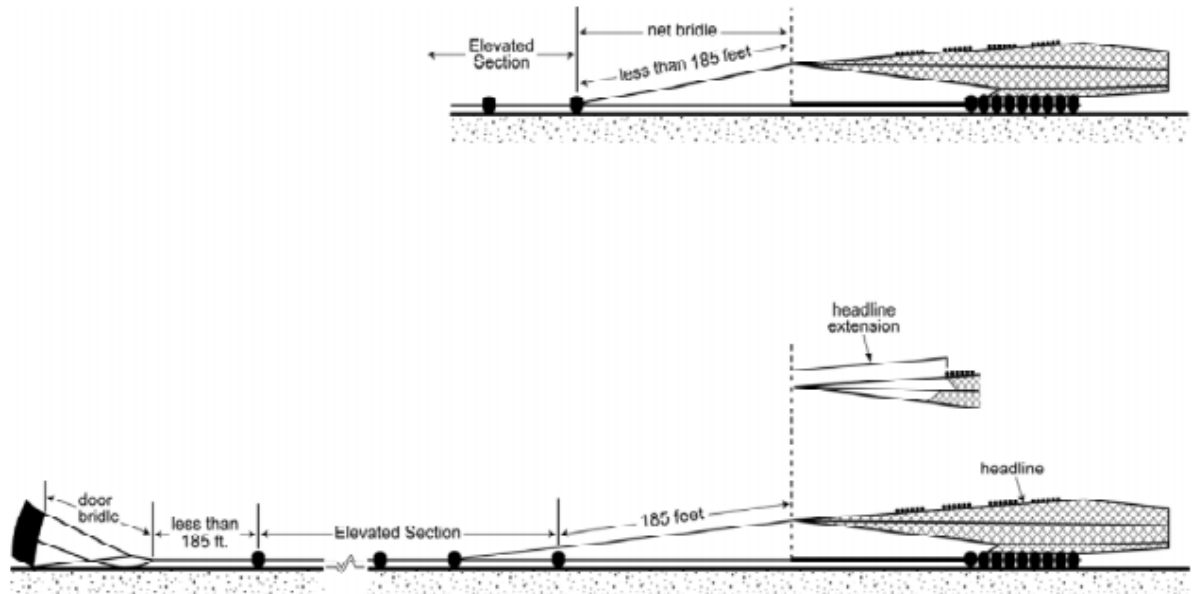


Figure 2. Modified nonpelagic (i.e., bottom) trawl gear (Figure 26 to Part 679).

The figure above shows the location of elevating devices in the elevated section of modified nonpelagic trawl gear, as specified under § 679.24(f). The top image shows the location of the end elevating devices in the elevated section for gear with net bridles less than 180 feet. The bottom image shows the locations of the beginning elevating devices near the doors and the end elevating devices near the net for gear with net bridles greater than 180 feet.

In 2011, a trawl sweep modification requirement was implemented for vessels participating in the Bering Sea flatfish fishery. Elevating devices (e.g., discs or bobbins) are required to be used on the trawl sweeps, to raise the sweeps off the seabed and limit adverse impacts of trawling on the seafloor. Research has demonstrated that this gear modification reduces unobserved mortality of red king crab, Tanner crab, and snow crab. The Council intends for a similar modification to be implemented in the Gulf of Alaska

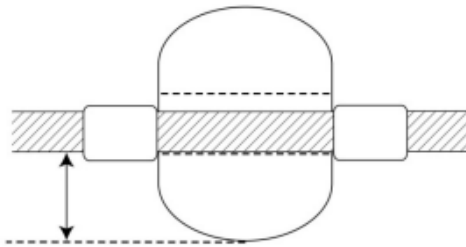


Figure 25a Line Clamps Flush to Elevating Device

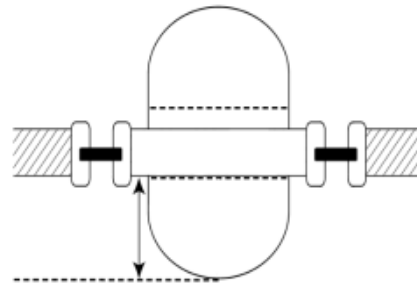


Figure 25b Elevating Device Supported by Material Different from Line Material

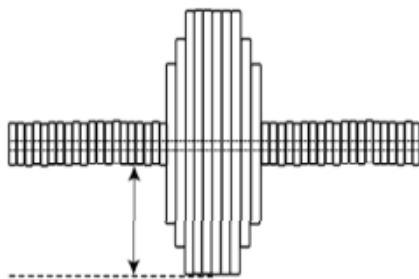


Figure 25c Cookie Gear

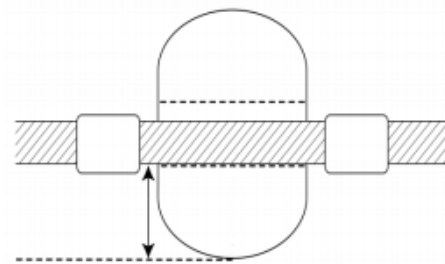


Figure 25d Line Clamps Not Flush to Elevating Device

Figure 3. Elevating device clearance measurement locations for modified nonpelagic (bottom) trawl gear.

The figure above shows measuring points for a variety of elevating devices located on the elevated section shown in Figure 26 to Part 679. The measuring location is indicated on each figure by the arrow. The measurement is made from where the line contacts the inside surface of the device.

The flatfish fishery uses a two-seam or four-seam trawl with a relatively low vertical opening (typically 1 fathom to 3 fathoms). Nets are made of polyethylene netting, with codends and intermediates using 5.5” to 8” mesh in square or diamond configuration. Trawl codends are usually made with polyethylene netting attached to four longitudinal riblines. The riblines are typically chain, wire, or synthetic rope. Floats are attached along the length of the codend to counteract the weight of the steel components. Container lines around the circumference are attached along the length of the codend to restrict the expansion of the netting, prevent damage and allow the codend to be hauled up a stern ramp. Sacrificial chafing gear, typically polyethylene fiber, is attached to the codend to protect it from abrasion on the stern ramp and contact with the seafloor. Steel trawl doors ranging in size from 5 m² to 11 m² spread the nets horizontally. Some vessels use off-bottom doors. The door spread varies with fishing depth and rigging style, but generally ranges from 40 m to 200 m (131’ to 656’). The rigging between the net and the doors includes bridles and sweeps (mudgear), ranging in length from 30 m to 400 m (98’ to 1,312’), which herd fish into the path of the trawl. Sweeps are made of steel cable or synthetic combination rope with bobbins to lift the sweep off the bottom. Footropes keep the front of the net off the bottom to protect it from damage. They are made of rubber disks or bobbins strung on chain or wire, with large diameter (12”-24”) disks or bobbins separated by 18”-48” long sections of smaller disks (4”-8” diameter). Bobbins are mostly rubber, but sometimes are hollow steel balls designed to roll along the seabed. A design objective for flatfish nets is to herd fish into the net with minimum bottom contact, reducing gear damage and drag and maintaining fish quality by keeping sand out of the catch.

The rockfish and Atka mackerel fisheries are prosecuted with bottom trawls rigged to fish over rougher substrates. The gear used is a four-seam otter trawl with a headrope to footrope vertical distance rise of about 1 fathom to 4 fathoms for mackerel and 4 to 6 fathoms for rockfish. Nets are made of polyethylene. Net mesh is 8-inch diamond in the wings and forward belly and 5.5" diamond in the intermediate and codend. Double meshes may be used in the codend, which is equipped with chafing gear. Doors are made of steel and range in size from 6.5 m² to 12 m². The door spread in most fishing depths and trawl warp/scope combinations is typically 45 m to 50 m (148' to 164'). Bridles are made of steel cable and are generally 90' long on each side. Atka mackerel nets use footropes equipped with tire gear, large disk tires (24" diameter airplane tires), 21" discs or bobbins, or a combination of these. Footropes typically extend 100' to 200', plus an additional 40-foot extension from net wing ends on both sides. Steel cable and chain used for the footrope runs through bobbins or discs spaced at intervals of 24" or tires grouped together at the bosom, which is the center 30' to 80'. Tow durations in this fishery are usually 1 hour to 4 hours, at a speed of 3- 4 knots. Tows are adjusted to curve around depth contours, and to avoid locations of known hangs and fixed gear. At haulback, the setting procedure is reversed, and the codend is unloaded into the fish-hold below deck. Because rockfish and mackerel are fished over rough bottom adjacent to areas with large potential for hangs in some areas, the net is usually fished with very short scope (the ratio of warp to towing depth) to minimize contact with the substrate and to allow the net to be lifted quickly if a hangup is sighted.

3.7.1.2 Dredge Gear

The Alaska weathervane scallop fishery is pursued using a standard "New Bedford style" scallop dredge. These dredges are heavy-framed devices with an attached holding bag, and they are towed along the surface of the seabed. The upper and forward part of the rectangular frame, or bail, is attached to the towing bar. The fixed opening in the frame is low in height relative to its width. Steel dredge "shoes" are welded onto both lower corners of the cutting bar, which is located at the bottom of the aft part of the frame. The dredge shoes bear most of the weight and act as "sled runners," permitting the dredge to move easily along the substrate. Regulation requires that the trailing ring bag, which retains the catch, consists of 4 inch (inside-diameter) steel rings connected with steel links to allow undersized scallops to escape. Rubber chafing gear may be used to protect the steel links and the integrity of the ring bag. The top of the bag consists of 6 inch stretched mesh polypropylene netting, known as the "twine back." The mesh netting helps hold the bag open while it is dragged along the ocean floor. A club stick attached at the end of the bag helps maintain the shape of the bag and provides for an attachment point to dump the dredge contents on the deck. A sweep chain footrope sweeps back in an arc and is attached to the bottom of the mesh bag. The bottom of the bag was formerly attached directly to the lower bar of the frame, but most fishers believe that the dredge tends bottom better with the chain footrope rigging. Bottom tending is also assisted by a pressure plate, which is a length of steel attached along the width of the dredge and angled so that the water pressure passing over it creates a downward force on the dredge.

When fishing properly, the dredge shoes, ring bag, and club stick maintain contact with the seabed. The side of the bail is designed so that the angle between the bail and the mouth of the dredge may be changed to suit bottom conditions. When the bottom is soft, the dredge is rigged so that the cutting bar (or scraper blade) will tend to ride up over the bottom and there will be less tendency for the dredge to become clogged with mud. The turbulence created by the cutting bar stirs the substrate and kicks up scallops into the ring bag. On harder bottoms, a different setting is used so that the dredge will dig in somewhat and catch more of the scallops in its path. In Alaska fisheries, however, the cutting bar is fixed and rides above the surface of the substrate. Tickler chains that run from side to side between the frame and the ring bag may also be used in harder areas or as an alternate fishing method when catch rates are low. If used on softer bottoms, the tickler chains will also stir up the substrate and kick scallops into the twine top. Rock chains that run from front to back are used in Atlantic scallop fisheries to keep larger rocks out of the ring bag, but are not used in Alaska.

Vessels used in the Alaska weathervane scallop fishery range in size from 58 to 124 feet length overall (LOA). The number of vessels is less than 4 in most years, and work as a cooperative, so vessels can be selective regarding the times and places that they fish. Those fishing inside the Cook Inlet Registration Area are limited to operating a single dredge not more than 6ft wide. Vessels fishing in the remainder of the state are limited to operating no more than two scallop dredges at one time, and each scallop dredge is limited to a maximum width of 15ft. Each dredge is attached to the boat by a single steel cable operated from a deck winch. On average, a 15ft New Bedford dredge weighs approximately 2,600 pounds, and a 6 foot dredge weighs about 900 pounds.

3.7.1.3 Groundfish Dinglebar Gear

In the GOA, troll vessels catch Chinook and coho salmon, and lingcod and rockfish, by moving lures or bait through the water column through feeding concentrations of fish. Dinglebar troll gear is used to target lingcod and rockfish. Dinglebar gear consists of a single line that is retrieved and set with a power or hand troll gurdy, with a terminally attached weight (a cannon ball at 12 pounds), from which one or more leaders with one or more lures or baited hooks are pulled through the water while a vessels is underway. This gear is not used in Bering Sea fisheries to date, but would be prohibited in the future under Alternative 3, option b and option c.

3.7.1.4 Impacts on Habitat

The following is a summary of the effects of bottom trawls, pelagic trawl, and dredge gear on benthic habitat. Following this summary is an evaluation of the effects of the alternatives on habitat.

Effects of Bottom Trawls

An important aspect of gear design, when considering bottom habitat effects, is the proportion of the trawl contact footprint that is made by each of the components. Trawl doors used in Alaska are typically less than 3 m along the edge that contacts the seafloor; because they are fished at an angle to their direction of movement, the doors will affect a path narrower than 3 m. The length of the sweeps will vary with target species, substrate, and individual/operator preference. A large vessel targeting flatfish on a smooth bottom may use 350 m of sweeps on each side, while a small rockfish trawler on rough bottom may only use 30 m. Adjusting for the angle of the sweeps, the sweep path may vary from 10 to 100 m on either side of the net. Thus, the area covered by the sweeps can vary significantly. The width of the trawl net itself will depend on how large a trawl the vessel can pull and whether a high opening or a wide, low trawl is selected. An approximate range would be from 12 to 30 m wide. Thus, most of the trawl's footprint results from the sweeps, followed by the footrope, with a relatively small area contacted by the doors.

Note however, the Amendment 80 fleet vessels have been recently required to use modified trawl sweeps. The sweeps are lifted off of the bottom, which reduces contact to only about 5% of the sweep path (Rose et al. 2010). This effect is illustrated by the shaded areas in the figure below. This reduction in contact would be expected to greatly reduce any direct effects of trawl fishing on habitat. As an additional benefit of these sweeps, is that it can increase herding of several flatfish species during the daytime (Rose et al. 2010; Ryer et al. 2010) thereby increasing catch rates and further reducing fishing impacts per metric ton of fish harvested. Because the Amendment 80 vessels participate in much of the bottom trawling that may occur in the proposed HAPC areas, it is likely that effects on skate egg habitat and EFH for other species may be greatly reduced.

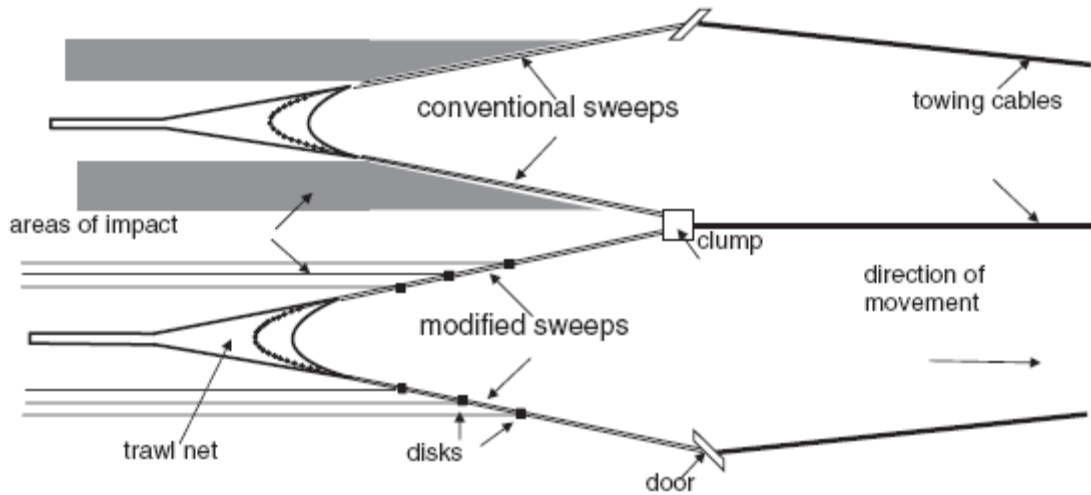


Figure 4. A comparison of the relative bottom contact (shown in the shaded area) made by conventional trawl sweeps, and those using the modified sweeps specified in regulation for flatfish fisheries. Figure from Rose et al., 2010.

Alaska experiences lower overall fishing intensity relative to many of the areas where fishing effects research has been done (i.e., NW Atlantic and North Sea) (NRC 2002). Overall, the areas experiencing trawling intensities above one trawl tow per year in small (5 by 5 km) areas are less than 2% for the EBS, 3% for the Aleutians, and 2% for the GOA; in comparison, it is 56% for northeastern United States fisheries.

While Alaska marine waters include a full range of substrates, the dominant bottom trawl fisheries target species that primarily occur over sand and gravel substrates, including yellowfin and rock soles (Smith and McConnaughey 1999, McConnaughey and Smith 2000) and cod. Studies on silt/clay environments are more relevant to the smaller fisheries for flathead, Dover and rex soles, and Alaska plaice. Studies of hard bottom, gravel, and boulder habitats are most applicable to the rockfish and Atka mackerel fisheries of the GOA and AI.

Based on the information available to date, the predominant direct effects caused by bottom trawling include smoothing of sediments, moving and turning of rocks and boulders, resuspension and mixing of sediments, removal of seagrasses, damage to corals, and damage or removal of epibenthic organisms (Auster et al. 1996, Heifetz 1997, Hutchings 1990, ICES 1973, Lindeboom and de Groot 1998, McConnaughey et al. 2000). Trawls affect the seafloor through contact of the doors and sweeps, footropes and footrope gear, and the net sweeping along the seafloor (Goudey and Loverich 1987). Trawl doors leave furrows in the sediments that vary in depth and width depending on the shoe size, door weight, and seabed composition. The footropes and net can disrupt benthic biota and dislodge rocks. Larger seafloor features or biota are more vulnerable to fishing contact, and, larger diameter, lighter footropes may reduce

Reports of several relevant studies done recently in Alaska waters are in process provide relevant and useful information on the effects of bottom trawling in this region. The effects are summarized in the bullets below.

- Bottom trawls commonly, but not always, cause detectable short-term changes in infauna, epifauna, megafauna and substrate in different habitat types.

- In comparable environments, studies using larger diameter footropes with noncontinuous contact along their length, such as those used in Alaska, indicated less damage to upright, attached epifauna than those with smaller diameters and continuous contact (Moran and Stephenson 2000, Van Dolah et al. 1987).
- At higher trawling intensities, bottom trawling with large-diameter footropes can produce persistent changes in megafauna communities (McConnaughey et al. 2000) on naturally disturbed sandy substrates.
- Even at relatively high intensities (12 tows per year), effects on infaunal communities may be ephemeral (Kenchington et al. 2001) on fine- to medium-grained sandy bottoms.
- Large bodied, attached, and emergent epifauna are particularly vulnerable to trawl damage, even by a single pass at unimpacted sites (Collie et al. 2000, Van Dolah et al. 1987, Freese et al. 1999, Moran and Stephenson 2000), and effects can remain for at least a year in Alaska waters (Freese 2002).
- Specific effects on EFH will depend on the fine-scale distribution and intensity of fishing effort relative to habitat distribution, levels of natural variability relative to fishing effects, and the nature of habitat dependencies of managed fish stocks. These are poorly known for Alaska EFH. Given discrete but overlapping spatial distributions of species reflecting different habitat preferences/requirements (e.g., McConnaughey and Smith 2000), differential responses to fishing gear effects are likely. In general, the ecological implications of reported changes due to bottom trawling are poorly known, particularly as they relate to sustainable fishery production and healthy ecosystem function.

Effects of Pelagic Trawls

Pelagic trawls are typically much larger than bottom trawls, but the leading parts of the net are constructed of large meshes (more than 1 m) for herding pelagic species into the trawl. The very large mesh openings greatly reduce hydrodynamic drag, so vessels can fish pelagic trawls that are much taller and wider than any bottom trawls they may use. These large meshes are required by law to allow for the escape of bycatch species that are not herded by these large meshes as easily as pollock, including halibut, sole, and crabs. Walleye pollock in the BSAI are caught exclusively by pelagic trawls, since non-pelagic trawling for pollock is prohibited. In the BSAI, vessels fishing for pollock are also limited by a performance standard prohibiting vessels from having more than 20 crab on board, which would be an indication of bottom trawling. The danger of trawl damage is likely to be effective in minimizing on-bottom trawling with pelagic trawl gear in areas of rough, hard, or complex substrates, but not necessarily in areas where significant obstructions are unlikely. Anecdotal evidence indicates that pelagic trawls are frequently fished on the bottom in areas with smooth floors. An indication of the distribution of such substrates in the EBS is that NMFS surveys the entire EBS shelf with a trawl whose footrope is as vulnerable as those of pelagic trawls; however, NMFS uses bobbin-protected footropes in the GOA and Aleutians because of the frequency of rough substrates.

Pelagic trawls fished off-bottom have no known effect on benthic EFH. While some pelagic habitats may be very important to fish species, the chemical and hydrological features that make them important are not subject to change by the passage of fishing gear because of the continuous/fluid nature of the environment.

Indirect and anecdotal evidence suggests that, in some seasons and areas, pollock are distributed so close to the seabed that they could not be caught effectively without putting some parts of pelagic trawls in contact with the seafloor. Confirmation that such near-bottom distributions can be widespread includes the following: (1) in 5 out of 9 years that both acoustic and bottom trawl surveys were conducted in the

EBS, the bottom trawl, which opens only 2 m high, detected more than 95% of the total biomass estimate for pollock more than 2 years old (2000 BSAI SAFE); and (2) the average acoustic measurements of pollock density from those surveys were five times higher half a meter above the bottom than at 2 to 4 m (Williamson, N., unpublished data, AFSC). As such, there is a strong incentive for fishing pelagic pollock trawls near/on the bottom.

The effects from pelagic gear being fished on the bottom have not been specifically studied, and there are some important differences from bottom trawls in ways that must be considered in assessing likely habitat impacts. Pelagic trawls used off Alaska are generally designed to fish downward, with the entire net fishing deeper in the water column than the doors. Pelagic doors are not designed to contact the seafloor. Pelagic trawls are pulled downward by weights attached to the lower wing ends, producing several hundred pounds of downward force. If the trawl is put in firm contact with the seafloor, most of this weight will be supported by the bottom, producing narrow scour tracks. Pelagic trawl footropes used in Alaska are most commonly made of steel chain, with some use of steel cable. Thus, their effects on habitat are more similar to tickler chains or small-diameter trawl footropes than to the large-diameter, bobbin-protected, footropes used in Alaska bottom trawls. Small footrope diameter will reduce the height that sediments are suspended into the water column, but make penetration of the sediment when bumps and ridges are encountered more likely. Animals anchored on or in the substrate would be vulnerable to damage or uprooting by this type of footrope. The very large mesh openings in the bottom panels of these trawls make it unlikely that animals not actively swimming upward in reaction to the net will be retained and hence removed from the seafloor, though they may be displaced a short distance or damaged in place.

In summary, pelagic trawls may be fished in contact with the seafloor, and there are times and places where there may be strong incentives to do so, for example, the EBS shelf during the summer. No data are available to estimate the frequency of this practice. Potential impacts would depend on the vulnerability of epibenthic animals in sand or mud substrates to contact with the small-diameter footropes. Prohibition of footrope protection makes the use and, hence, the impact of such gear on hard or rugged substrates unlikely.

Effects of Scallop Dredges

The magnitude and extent of seabed disturbances by scallop fishing vary according to the gear used and the habitats that are fished. For example, a worldwide trawl and dredge study for the submarine cable industry determined the depths to which various fishing gears penetrate the seabed. For normal fishing conditions, maximum cutting depths ranged from 40 mm for a New Bedford style dredge on sandy/rocky bottom to 300 mm for a mechanized (hydraulic) dredge on softer bottoms. Scallop dredges as a class penetrated less (40 to 150 mm) than beam trawls (60 to 300 mm) and bottom trawls and doors (50 to 300 mm).

The weathervane scallop fishery in Alaska occurs in limited, but well-defined areas of the GOA and the eastern Bering Sea. Based on an analysis of sediment properties associated with 28,000 individual dredge hauls for the period 1993 to 1997, Turk (2001) concluded that commercially fished beds occur most frequently on sand and sandy-silt in the GOA. Limited effort occurred in silty-clay substrates and in areas where bedrock and gravelly mud occurred, but was relatively high in sand, sandy to muddy gravel, gravelly sand, and clayey silt to silt substrates. These same data indicate commercial aggregations of scallops in the GOA occur over fairly narrow depth ranges from 25 to 195 m. The overall broad depth range was attributed to additional physical factors that were not investigated. The majority of fishing effort for all of Alaska occurs at 40 to 60 fathoms (73 to 110 m). Although there are some areas or portions of areas that contain rock (e.g., Alaska Peninsula Registration Area), the Alaska scallop fishery occurs primarily on soft-bottom areas because fishers avoid harder areas if possible, because of probable damage to their fishing gear.

Scallop dredges are designed to disturb the seabed in order to dislodge and capture scallops. The following summaries of scientific research detail physical effects on the sea floor and effects on living substrate such as benthic invertebrates. Generally, these studies discuss changes that occur as a result of scallop dredging, but do not interpret the ecological consequences of these changes.

Sediment plumes generated by scallop dredging may cause burial, clog respiratory surfaces, and reduce light levels; they may also release heavy metals, nutrients, or toxic algal cysts. The magnitude and spatial extent of the suspended sediment field around any dredging operation are a function of the type of dredge used, the physical/biotic characteristics of the material being dredged (e.g., density, grain size, organic content), and site-specific hydrological conditions (e.g., currents, water body size/configuration). The rate of change of plume characteristics depends critically on suspended sediment grain sizes, current strength, and the related water column turbulence (Black and Parry 1999). Although there are obvious differences in the nature of trawls and scallop dredges, it is nevertheless reasonable under the circumstances to consider the results of bottom trawl studies in softer sediments, including sand, as representative of the effects due to scallop dredging. In fact, dredge and trawl studies summarized in major reviews of the literature are frequently handled in this fashion.

Evaluation of Alternatives on Habitat

Criteria used in this EA to evaluate effects of the proposed action on habitat are provided in the table below. The reference point against which the criteria are applied is the current size and quality of marine benthic habitat and other essential fish habitat in the Bering Sea and are adopted from the HAPC EA (NMFS 2006b).

Table 11. Criteria used to determine significance of effects on habitat.

Effect	Criteria			
	Significantly Negative (-)	Insignificant (I)	Significantly Positive (+)	Unknown (U)
Habitat complexity: Mortality and damage to living habitat species	Substantial increase in mortality and damage; long-term irreversible impacts to living habitat species.	Likely not to substantially change mortality or damage to living habitat species.	Substantial decrease in mortality or damage to living habitat species.	Information, magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown.
Habitat complexity: (non-living substrates such as gravel sand and shell hash)	Substantial increase in the rate of removal or damage of non-living substrates.	Likely not to substantially change alteration or damage non-living substrates.	Substantial decrease in the rate of removal or damage of non-living substrates.	Information, magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown.
Benthic biodiversity	Substantial decrease in community structure from baseline.	Likely not to substantially change community structure.	Substantial increase in community structure from baseline.	Information, magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown.
Habitat suitability	Substantial decrease in habitat suitability over time.	Likely not to substantially change habitat suitability over time.	Substantial increase in habitat suitability over time.	Information, magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown.

The issues of primary concern with respect to the effects of fishing on the sea floor and benthic habitat are the potential for damage or removal of fragile biota within each area that are used by fish as spawning habitat and the potential reduction of habitat complexity, benthic biodiversity, and habitat suitability. Habitat complexity is a function of the structural components of the living and nonliving substrate and could be affected by a potential reduction in benthic diversity from long-lasting changes to the species mix. Many factors contribute to the intensity of these effects, including the type of gear used, the type of bottom, the frequency and intensity of natural disturbance cycles, and the history of fishing in an area.

In terms of habitat, the BSAI management area has complicated mixes of substrates, including a proportion of hard substrates (pebbles, cobbles, boulders, and rock), but data are not available to describe the spatial distribution of all of these substrates. Therefore, it is difficult to assess habitat complexity in terms of specific substrates. Some information on vulnerable or fragile habitats can be surmised through the NMFS groundfish surveys or from anecdotal information provided by fishers who utilize these areas.

To estimate the potential effects of commercial trawling over the skate egg concentration areas, the amount of recent commercial trawl effort in these areas was examined. At least 50% of each site (not including Pribilof & Zhemchug, which were not commercial fished) has been trawled over the 2003 through 2010 period, according to the CIA database. For this analysis, ArcGIS was used to buffer each VMS track line with 1/2 the net width figure from the EFH EIS. Those buffered lines were then joined and an area calculation performed. This area calculation represents the footprint of the fishery in these sites where a commercial trawl net (area between doors) has passed over at least once, but does not account for multiple passes.

Under Alternative 2, the Bering 2 site was the most heavily commercial fished by both pelagic and non-pelagic trawls, with 80.5 and 91.6 % swept respectively. Bering 1, Bristol, and Pervenets were all fished extensively as well.

Table 12. Trawl footprint analysis according to available VMS data, of the areas described by Alternative 2.

HAPC Area	Total area (nm ²)	NPT area Swept (nm ²)	Percent (%) of NPT area swept	PTR area swept (nm ²)	Percent (%) of PTR area swept
1. Bering 1	18.44	14.03	76.1	10.12	54.9
2. Bering 2	17.41	15.95	91.6	14.02	80.5
3. Bristol	13.81	0	0	7.95	57.6
4. Pervenets	27.66	17.96	64.9	19.46	70.4
5. Pribilof	1.09	0	0	0	0
6. Zhemchug	3.26	0	0	0	0

Source: NMFS HCD

Due to the very small size and limited commercial fishing effort in four of these six locations, adjacent areas will likely support the amount of commercial fishing displaced if activities and gear types that make contact with the sea floor were restricted. It is then possible to assume that some commercial fishing grounds would be fished with more frequency, with the potential for increased direct impact. However, it is likely that the increased commercial fishing effort in habitats currently fished would not be much greater than effort that already exists. For other management actions that displaced fishing effort from larger areas, an analysis has sometimes been undertaken to understand how and where the fleets would likely redistribute their effort. For this action, such a complex and time-consuming analysis was not undertaken given the very small amount of effort displaced.

Under Alternative 3, the fleet is likely to be displaced into adjacent areas with similar conditions for fishing, and not necessarily into areas that are more fragile or vulnerable (e.g., coral habitat). Because the maximum potential area closed to certain commercial fishing activities under Options b and c of Alternative 3 is 225.8 nm², without any reduction in sizes or buffers from increased polling rates or geofencing, the proposed action is not likely to result in any substantial changes to the current features of benthic habitat (other than skate egg EFH) including the habitat complexity, benthic diversity or habitat suitability.

The effects of Alternatives 1 and 2 on habitat are the same, with Alternative 2 being slightly more protective of known skate egg deposition and concentration habitat. Therefore, any potential effects of Alternatives 1 and 2 on habitat are likely insignificant. The closure of these six areas may seem insignificant in relation to the vast areas open to commercial fishing in the BSAI, and taking action to protect areas known or thought to contain sensitive marine habitats is a precautionary approach recognized in marine fisheries management and meets the management objectives of the FMPs (NMFS 2004). These areas of skate egg concentration are an example of vulnerable habitat that may be affected by fishing gear that makes contact with the sea floor. Under Alternative 3, a limit on commercial fishing activities that make contact with the sea floor would result in a positive effect on habitat because fishing has already occurred there, and habitat will likely be protected with limits on fishing gear that makes contact with the sea floor. The small amount of effort redistribution would not be expected to occur on more fragile habitats. Thus the effects on habitat are insignificant overall, but likely beneficial to skate egg habitat.

3.7.2 Target Species

Target species for the BSAI area are managed within the BSAI Groundfish FMP. The FMP describes the target fisheries as, “those species which are commercially important and for which a sufficient data base exists that allows each to be managed on its own biological merits.” Catch of each species must be recorded and reported. This category includes walleye pollock, Pacific cod, sablefish, yellowfin sole, Greenland turbot, arrowtooth flounder, rock sole, flathead sole, Alaska plaice, “other flatfish,” Pacific ocean perch, northern rockfish, shortraker rockfish, roughey rockfish, “other rockfish,” Atka mackerel, sharks, skates, sculpins, octopus, and squid. Other non-groundfish targeted FMP species in Federal waters are crab and scallops. Regarding State-managed crab and invertebrates fisheries, no effects on these target species are expected because no fisheries for these species are prosecuted within the six areas of skate egg concentration under the alternatives and options. The significance criteria used to evaluate the effects of this action on target species is below. These criteria are adopted from the significance criteria used in NMFS’ HAPC EA (2006).

Table 13. Criteria used to estimate the significance of effects on FMP-managed target stocks.

Effect	Criteria			
	Significantly Negative (-)	Insignificant (I)	Significantly Positive (+)	Unknown (U)
Stock Biomass: Potential for increasing and reducing stock size	Changes in fishing mortality are expected to jeopardize the ability of the stock to sustain itself at or above its MSST	Changes in fishing mortality are expected to maintain the stock's ability to sustain itself above MSST	Changes in fishing mortality are expected to enhance the stocks ability to sustain itself at or above its MSST	Magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown
Fishing mortality	Reasonably expected to jeopardize the capacity of the stock to yield sustainable biomass on a continuing basis.	Reasonably expected not to jeopardize the capacity of the stock to yield sustainable biomass on a continuing basis.	Action allows the stock to return to its unfished biomass.	Magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown
Spatial or temporal distribution	Reasonably expected to adversely affect the distribution of harvested stocks either spatially or temporally such that it jeopardizes the ability of the stock to sustain itself.	Unlikely to affect the distribution of harvested stocks either spatially or temporally such that it has an effect on the ability of the stock to sustain itself.	Reasonably expected to positively affect the harvested stocks through spatial or temporal increases in abundance such that it enhances the ability of the stock to sustain itself.	Magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown
Change in prey availability	Evidence that the action may lead to changed prey availability such that it jeopardizes the ability of the stock to sustain itself.	Evidence that the action will not lead to a change in prey availability such that it jeopardizes the ability of the stock to sustain itself.	Evidence that the action may result in a change in prey availability such that it enhances the ability of the stock to sustain itself.	Magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown

It was determined within NMFS' EFH EIS (2005) that considerable scientific uncertainty remains regarding the consequences of habitat changes for managed species. Nevertheless, the EIS analysis concluded that the effects on EFH from commercial fishing target species are minimal because no indication exists that continued commercial fishing at the current rate and intensity would alter the capacity of EFH to support healthy populations of managed species over the long term and no new information exists to the contrary. Therefore, Alternative 1, the no action or status quo alternative, is rated as insignificant for all target species in terms of stock biomass, fishing mortality, spatial and temporal distribution, and change in prey availability. If fish distribution remains the same as status quo, catch of target species is expected to remain the same under all alternatives and options; and no changes in stock biomass, fishing mortality, and prey species availability would be anticipated under any of the alternatives or option. Similarly, under Alternative 2, commercial fishing activity and distribution is expected to remain the same as status quo and the impact would be insignificant.

Under Alternative 3, prohibitions of certain commercial fishing activities—particularly commercial trawling—could result in a reduction in catch, though it would be expected that the fleet could make up foregone catch in other areas, immediately adjacent to the skate egg site or elsewhere. No substantial changes would be anticipated in stock biomass, fishing mortality, spatial and temporal distribution of catch, or changes in prey availability under Alternative 3. Hence, the effects of this Alternative on target species are expected to be insignificant. Nevertheless, because the action proposed under Alternative 3 would be anticipated to be beneficial to the habitat where skate nurseries occur, there is potential to have positive effects on the survival of skate eggs and skate populations. These issues are explored further in the sections below.

3.7.2.1 Effects on Population Sustainability and Abundance Trends

The Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) skate complex is managed in aggregate, with a single set of harvest specifications applied to the entire complex. In 2010, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council passed amendment 95 to the BSAI Fishery Management Plan, which removed skates from the Other Species complex and into the target category. Amendment 96 eliminated the Other Species complex and requires separate annual catch limits for its constituent species groups. Thus, BSAI skates are now managed as an independent complex with its own harvest specifications and annual catch limits (ACLs) are required for skates.

Harvest recommendations for Alaska skate (*Bathyraja parmifera*), the most abundant skate species in the BSAI, are made using the results of an age structured model and Tier 3. The remaining species (“other skates”) are managed under Tier 5 due to a lack of data. The Tier 3 and Tier 5 recommendations are combined to generate recommendations for the complex as a whole.

The Alaska skate makes up the vast majority of the skate complex biomass in the BSAI (greater than 90%). An age-structured model exists for Alaska skates, allowing Tier 3 harvest recommendations and the determination of its population status relative to $B_{35\%}$ (a proxy for B_{MSY}). In 2010 female spawning biomass for the Alaska skate was 55,755 t, relative to a $B_{35\%}$ of 36,846 t. Alaska skate spawning biomass is thus substantially greater than the estimated limit of sustainability.

Reliable species-specific biomass estimates for these species have existed only since 2000 due to earlier difficulties with species identification. Total skate biomass in the BSAI has apparently increased since the early 1980s (Ormseth and Matta 2011). However this information should be evaluated with caution. Biomass estimates from the EBS AFSC groundfish shelf survey, which has been conducted in a consistent fashion over the same time period, suggest that total skate biomass has remained at approximately the same level (with some fluctuation) since a dramatic increase in the mid-1980s. The apparent increase over the 1980-2010 time period occurs mainly in the eastern Bering Sea slope and Aleutian Islands surveys. During this same period, those AFSC groundfish surveys have been irregular and survey methodology has changed over time. In addition skate species are long-lived (ranging from 20 years to 50 or more years), and a ten-year time series of abundance is too short to evaluate trends in population size. As a result it is difficult to interpret any apparent trends in skate biomass. See Appendix B – Color Figures 70 through 74 for recent trends in skate biomass (Ormseth and Matta 2011).

In the case of Alaska skates, survey biomass estimates, though variable, have been basically trendless since species identification began in 1999. Model estimates of spawning biomass have also basically been trendless over the 1992-2011 period covered by the most recent biomass estimation model, while total biomass has tended to increase fairly steadily at an average rate of about 0.7 % per year over the same time period. Recruitment does not appear to vary much from year to year, with a CV for the time series of only 18 %. The most recent above-average year class was spawned in 2004. An examination of species-specific biomass estimates from 2000-2010 shows no apparent trend in abundances.

There are a number of factors that hinder effective skate management and that strengthen the case for protecting areas of skate egg concentration as a mean of enhancing skate conservation:

- 1) For all skate species in the BSAI except for Alaska skate, life history data are nonexistent. A mortality rate of 0.1 (an average of estimates from other species in other locations) is assumed for making harvest recommendations. Other data considered essential for population assessment, including maturity-at-age and fecundity, are completely unknown. These factors increase the uncertainty regarding NMFS estimates of OFL and ABC for the skate complex.

- 2) Skates are demonstrably vulnerable to overfishing due to slow growth, delayed maturation rates, and low fecundity. This sharpens the need for cautious management.
- 3) NMFS only recently began to monitor skate catches at the species level, primarily due to difficulties in observer identification of skates to species in the past. As a result, NMFS cannot yet evaluate standard metrics such as exploitation rates.

Under Alternative 1, the status quo or no action alternative, no environmental impacts would occur. Under Alternative 2, the Council would identify any of the proposed areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs, but would not adopt any gear type prohibitions or restrict any fishing activities. Therefore, the effects of Alternative 2 are expected to be the same as for the no action alternative.

Alternative 3 and Options b and c would prohibit some or all trawl and dredge gear from the HAPC skate sites. This proposed HAPC action provides a means of enhancing conservation for a group of species for which the conventional groundfish management approach, though useful, has several shortcomings. Adult skates appear capable of significant mobility in response to general habitat changes, but any effects on the small scale area of skate egg concentration crucial to reproduction could have disproportionate population effects. Eggs are mostly limited to isolated areas of skate egg concentration, and juveniles use different habitats than adults. Changes in these habitats have not been monitored historically, so assessments of habitat quality and its trends are not currently available. The stock assessment authors have recommended continued study of areas of skate egg concentration to evaluate their importance to population production. After hatching, juveniles most likely remain in continental shelf and slope waters, but specific distribution is unknown; adults are found across wide areas of the shelf and slope. The proposed action is designed to protect the reproductive output of skates, thereby increasing the likelihood that young skates will recruit to the adult population and enhancing the conservation of skate populations.

3.7.2.2 Impacts on Skate Eggs

There has been no directed study of the effect of fishing on skates or their eggs at skate nursery sites in the eastern Bering Sea, therefore little is known about how fishing may be interacting with reproduction. Fisheries observers do not (or never have) identified skate egg cases to species or the content state of the eggs (full versus empty). The understanding of skate egg case characters and the development of identification keys to the skate egg cases from Alaska has recently been developed and is used during RACE groundfish surveys but not yet expanded to the fisheries.

The question of a viable egg after trawling is a difficult assessment. In their natural environment skate eggs can occur in a host of states. Determining the contents of an egg case is a combination of understanding the development process and all the possible states, feeling the weight of the egg case and close observation of the external and internal state of the egg. Listed are some of the conditions an egg case may be in when brought up in a trawl:

- 1) New eggs that have recently been deposited. Eggs in this state are often golden yellow-brown and relatively soft with a layer of sticky substance and fibers. They have most likely been deposited on the bottom by the skate in the recent 1-2 weeks. Inside they contain a large yolk mass and a surrounding clear mass with a microscopic embryo still in the multiple cell stage.
- 2) During normal development eggs can be in any state from light brown to black which is a natural aging process as salt water acts on the keratin material of the egg case. The embryo is developing inside beginning as a small elongated embryo and ending as a miniature version of the adult skate. As the embryo develops it absorbs the large yolk mass, emerging from the egg case when completely absorbed.

- 3) Eggs that have hatched naturally are generally a dark black, have thin case material, have lost surface structure and most byssal threads for attachment. Often the margin is opened where the juvenile skate has emerged.
- 4) Eggs can occur in any color state with a sealed margin yet be empty due to snail predation. Early in development snails prey on the yolk mass by drilling a small hole in the case and feeding on the egg contents killing any developing embryo.
- 5) Eggs can occur in a “gel state” where an egg case is produced with egg albumin but lacks a yolk mass or embryo. This state has been found to occur upwards of 10% of egg cases for the Alaska skate. These eggs generally have a slightly smaller size and unusual shape and can occur in any color state. Gel eggs can only be detected by observations of the internal content.
- 6) Eggs can appear in a natural state yet (feeling like they have an embryo inside) yet the egg is actually filled with mud or sand when the internal contents are examined.
- 7) Eggs can appear in a natural state on the outside and contain a mass that indicates a developing embryo, however upon internal examination the contents is deteriorated and rotted or there is a partially deteriorated embryo.
- 8) In addition to all of the above states, eggs can occur in many various states of damage due to being brought to the surface by fishing gear. Fishing effects can be obvious such as flattened, torn apart or squished eggs to less obvious such as damaged yolks or embryos internally with no sign of external damage. The unknown effect of prolonged periods out of seawater and being brought to the surface and moved from the original deposition location are also to be considered.

The direct impact on skate egg cases from fishing gear has not yet been investigated. Components of commercial bottom trawl gear that would be in direct contact with an egg case are those in direct contact with the sea floor and include the doors, sweep, footrope, and net. Commercial bottom trawl doors are heavy (exceeding 1,000 lbs.) and are designed to contact the sea floor riding on the door’s edge or shoe. A door shoe width generally ranges from 4 to 12 feet wide. Therefore, impact from the shoe would likely cause injury. However, the width of door shoes is rather minimal. The sweeps have potential to directly injure an egg case and are more likely to dislodge or roll over cases. Note that current regulations require elevating devices on sweeps and the only contact is on the bobbins spaced approximately 60 feet apart. The foot rope impact is similar to the sweep, except it is heavier overall and meant to skim the sea floor and designed to catch fish. Thus, egg cases directly contacted by the footrope may be dislodged, rolled over or pushed down-upon.

The net itself can also recruit egg cases and cases are then considered bycatch. Skate egg cases can entangle on the outside of the net with edge *horns*⁹, if present. Thus, entangled cases could be dislodged or ‘ride-along’ the net, to then be re-distributed within or outside of the area of skate egg concentration. Cases caught in the net are subject to pressures created by fish concentrating in the cod end. It is unknown how much pressure would cause direct impact to the embryo. Further, egg cases caught by the net, brought aboard, and then subsequently rolled-up onto the net reel are crushed and results in mortality.

What is known is that egg cases themselves are robust capsules. Gear coming in contact with an egg case could dislodge, roll over, settle the case further in sediments, injure or increase risk of mortality. Given the gear, when towed, has lift supplied by the tow vessel and some buoyancy and that skate egg cases are most often in softer substrates, the potential to physically cause injury to the case exists, however the extent of these effects remains unknown. The table below predicts the impacts of the different gear

⁹ *Horns* are hook-like extensions located on the posterior and anterior corners of the egg case and thought to help anchor the case in sediment. Horn presence and size varies between species.

prohibitions under Alternative 3. Under Alternative 1, the status quo or no action alternative, there are no expected environmental impacts. Under Alternative 2, the Council would identify any of the proposed areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs, but would not adopt any gear type prohibitions or restrict any fishing activities. Therefore, the effects of Alternative 2 are expected to be the same as for the no action alternative.

The effects of fishing activity at skate nursery sites are currently unknown. However, intuitively it could be stated that any effort to lessen the mortality of recruits and reproductive adults is a positive influence on these species which rely on high survival of offspring and low mortality of reproductive adults for population stability. Since it is not known what the historical population levels were due to incomplete fisheries and fisheries independent surveys and pre-fishing observations, there is no baseline for comparison. However the creation of nursery sites with decreased disturbance can be used as a test study for populations, recruits, and the recovery of the habitat. Close observations of sites such as that of the Alaska skate in Bering Canyon may address the question directly. As the habitat receives less disturbances we would expect a recovery process which may be detected with close monitoring. With regard to suspended material (i.e. sand) in the skate nursery due to fishing operations, again this is a question that has not been researched. However, based on what is understood about the biology and the functioning of the skate egg case sedimentation can hinder the functioning of the egg case. During development the egg case opens to seawater and there is a flush of water through the egg across the embryo to bring in oxygen and remove metabolites. The water enters the egg case through four small slits (one on each horn). These slits can be as small as a millimeter wide by several millimeters long depending on the size of the egg case. Sand grains that are deposited on top of egg cases after opening can impact the embryos ability to move water through the case causing stress or death given the severity of the clogging. In general skate nursery sites may be in areas where there is sufficient current flow to facilitate the movement of sediments off the eggs and prevent the build-up. In areas where there is an excessive amount of sedimentation the currents may not be sufficient to prevent the build-up of sediment on the egg cases.

Table 14. Summary table of potential impacts of fishing gear on skate eggs.

Gear type	Exposure	Potential Impacts on skate eggs	Summary
Nonpelagic trawl (bottom trawl)	Low effort at Bering 1, Pervenets; medium effort at Bering 2	Unknown, but possible dispersal of egg cases, unobserved mortality due to gear impacts, silting from sweeps and footropes, bycatch mortality	Bottom trawls could potentially impact skate egg concentrations at exposed sites.
Pelagic trawl	Low effort at Bering 1, Bering 2, and Bristol; medium effort at Pervenets	Unknown, but possible dispersal of egg cases entangled in netting when net fished on bottom	Pelagic trawls could potentially impact skate egg concentrations at exposed sites.
Dredge	None	Unknown, but possible dispersal of egg cases, unobserved mortality due to gear impacts, silting due to dredging, bycatch mortality	Scallop dredges have no impact on these skate egg concentration sites.
Dinglebar	None	Unknown, but possible direct mortality if weight encounters an egg case	Dinglebar gear is not used in the BSAI and thus no impacts on these sites.

3.7.3 Non-Target Resources

Non-target resources include groundfish species taken as bycatch in the targeted groundfish fisheries, prohibited species, non-specified species and forage fish. Retention of prohibited species (PSC) is

forbidden in the BSAI fisheries. The prohibited species include: Pacific salmon, steelhead trout, Pacific halibut, Pacific herring, and Alaska king, Tanner, and snow crab. Pacific salmon include Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed salmon that may occur in the BSAI. Pacific salmon are primarily taken in the eastern Bering Sea pollock fishery, with a small proportion taken in bottom trawl fisheries.

The significance criteria used in the 2006-2007 Groundfish Harvest Specifications EA/RIRs for non-specified species and prohibited species is applicable to this analysis of the effects (NMFS 2006a). The specification analysis provided the rationale for determining the significance of effects on non-target species from the groundfish fisheries considering the lack of data regarding biomass and sustainability of most non-target species. The first criterium in the table was further refined for this analysis from NMFS 2006a to clearly provide a criterium for “insignificant impact” and to be consistent with other analyses of environmental components in this EA/RIR/IRFA. This analysis and the 2006/2007 EA/RIR analyze the effects of groundfish fisheries on non-target resources in the AI with this proposed action being much narrower in focus.

Table 15. Criteria used to estimate the significance of effects on forage and non-specified species.

Insignificant impact	The fishery would have insignificant impact on non-specified fish stocks if it did not change sustainable non-target species biomass.
Adverse impact	A substantial reduction in the sustainable biomass of non-target species stocks would be an adverse impact.
Beneficial impact	An increase in stocks above the levels they would reach in the absence of the fishery (perhaps due to the harvest of groundfish that compete for non-specified species prey) would be a beneficial impact.
Significantly adverse impact	Non-target species bycatches that were not consistent with sustainable non-specified species populations would be a significantly adverse impact. For the purpose of this analysis, the bycatch of non-target species will be assumed to be proportional to the sum of fishery TACs. A 50% increase in the harvest of target species from the baseline level is used as a proxy for an adverse significant threshold for non-target species
Significantly beneficial impact	No benchmark is available for a significantly beneficial impact, and this is not defined in this instance.
Unknown impact	Insufficient information available to predict target fish harvest change.

Table 16. Criteria used to estimate the significance of impacts on prohibited species.

	Halibut	Herring	Salmon and Steelhead	Crab
No impact	No incidental take of the prohibited species in question.			
Adverse impact	There are incidental takes of the prohibited species in question			
Beneficial impact	Natural at-sea mortality of the prohibited species in question would be reduced – perhaps by the harvest of a predator or by the harvest of a species that competes for prey.			
Significantly adverse impact	Fisheries are subject to operational constraints under PSC management measures. Groundfish fisheries without the PSC management measures would be a significantly adverse effect.			
Significantly beneficial impact	No benchmarks are available for significantly beneficial impact of the groundfish fishery on the prohibited species, and significantly beneficial impacts are not defined for these species.			
Unknown impact	Not applicable			

At present no active management and only limited monitoring of species in the other species and non-specified species occurs. Most of these animals are not currently considered commercially important and are not targeted or retained in groundfish fisheries. The information available for non-specified species is

much more limited than that available for target fish species. Directed fishing for forage fish species is prohibited and most of the bycatch of these occur in the pollock pelagic trawl fishery. Overall, The proportion of non-target species (non-specified, forage fish, and PSC) removed is thought to be small in relationship to the entire management area.

Under Alternative 1, the status quo or no action alternative, no unforeseen or additional environmental impacts would occur. Thus, the environmental impacts of Alternative 1 would be considered insignificant.

Under Alternative 2, the Council would identify any of the proposed areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs, but would not adopt any gear type prohibitions or restrict any fishing activities. Therefore, the effects of Alternative 2 on prohibited species and non-target species are expected to be the same as for the no action alternative, and thus be considered insignificant.

Alternative 3 would redistribute fishing effort slightly in a few small areas of the eastern Bering Sea. In terms of bycatch of non-target species, it not expected that any negative incremental changes will occur from Alternative 3 because the amount of effort in these sites is low. Under all alternatives, the total harvest or target species and associated PSC are expected to be the same because fishing would likely be nearby, and thus have similar PSC catch rates. Because the groundfish harvest is not expected to increase, the harvest of non-specific, PSC species and forage species are also not expected to increase and no change in the sustainability of non-target species biomass is expected. No change in potential takes of ESA-listed salmon is expected with this action, because no changes in overall harvest amounts are anticipated, and only minimal redistribution of fishing effort to avoid HAPC areas is anticipated. Therefore the effects of Alternative 3 would also be considered insignificant.

3.7.4 Marine Mammals and Seabirds

Impacts of the proposed Federal action on marine mammals and seabirds may be a concern because they may be listed as endangered or threatened under the ESA, they may be protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), they may be candidates or being considered as candidates for ESA listings, their populations may be declining in a manner of concern to State or federal agencies, they may experience large bycatch or other mortality related to fishing activities, or they may be particularly vulnerable to direct or indirect adverse effects from some fishing activities. These species have been given various levels of protection under the current FMPs of the Council, and are the subjects of continuing research and monitoring to further define the nature and extent of fishery impacts on these species. A current description of ESA consultations for each species is contained in section 3.4 of the harvest specifications EIS (NMFS 2007).

Table 17. ESA listed and candidate species that range into the BSAI groundfish management area.

Common Name	Scientific Name	ESA Status
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	Endangered
Bowhead Whale	<i>Balaena mysticetus</i>	Endangered
Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	Endangered
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Endangered
Right Whale ¹	<i>Balaena glacialis</i>	Endangered
Sei Whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>	Endangered
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	Endangered
Steller Sea Lion (Western Population)	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>	Endangered
Steller Sea Lion (Eastern Population)	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>	Threatened
Chinook Salmon (Lower Columbia R.)	<i>Oncorhynchus tshawytscha</i>	Threatened
Chinook Salmon (Upper Columbia R. Spring)	<i>Oncorhynchus tshawytscha</i>	Endangered
Chinook Salmon (Upper Willamette)	<i>Oncorhynchus tshawytscha</i>	Threatened
Chinook Salmon (Snake River spring/summer)	<i>Oncorhynchus tshawytscha</i>	Threatened
Chum Salmon (Hood Canal Summer run)	<i>Oncorhynchus keta</i>	Threatened
Coho Salmon (Lower Columbia R.)	<i>Oncorhynchus kisutch</i>	Threatened
Steelhead (Snake River Basin)	<i>Oncorhynchus mykiss</i>	Threatened
Steller's Eider ²	<i>Polysticta stelleri</i>	Threatened
Short-tailed Albatross ²	<i>Phoebastria albatrus</i>	Endangered
Spectacled Eider ²	<i>Somateria fishcheri</i>	Threatened
Kittlitz's Murrelet ²	<i>Brachyramphus brevirostris</i>	Candidate
Northern Sea	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>	Threatened

¹NMFS designated critical habitat for the northern right whale on July 6, 2006 (71 FR 38277).
²The Steller's eider, short-tailed albatross, spectacled eider, Kittlitz's murrelet, and Northern Sea are species under the jurisdiction of the USFWS. For the bird species, critical habitat has been established for the Steller's eider (66 FR 8850, February 2, 2001) and for the spectacled eider (66 FR 9146, February 6, 2001). The Kittlitz's murrelet has been proposed as a candidate species by the USFWS (69 FR 24875, May 4, 2004).

Many measures are already in place to protect marine mammals and seabirds from potential adverse effects from fishing activities. These measures include seasonal and geographic closed areas, requirements for seabird avoidance devices, observer requirements, and voluntary industry research activities to reduce vessel and gear encounters with protected species. These measures will remain in place in the future. And as new knowledge becomes available to minimize adverse impacts of fishing activities on protected species, the Council and NMFS likely will consider employing additional or modified measures to further reduce adverse effects on seabirds and marine mammals.

Assumed in this analysis is the global potential for fuel spills, other accidental contaminant releases, and accidental loss of fishing gear (nets, lines, buoys, pots or traps, hooks) from fishing activities throughout the North Pacific. Much of this lost gear or released contaminants disperse in the ocean, settle to the sea floor, or wash up on shore along the Alaskan or other coastlines. Some of the lost gear may entangle with marine mammals or birds, and this is further discussed below. Some contaminants may contact swimming fish, mammals, or birds and be absorbed by animal tissues. While these instances of contamination are most likely not lethal, some mortalities may occur to these species that are unseen and undocumented. Vessel strikes of mammals and sea birds also may occur and be either unknown to the vessel operator or unreported. Thus there likely are some unrecorded mortalities to marine mammals and seabirds from ship strikes, but Angliss and Lodge (2002) note that the mortality levels from such instances can only be

estimated. They have made some attempts to estimate a minimum mortality level to marine mammals from vessel strikes where possible. It is likely that strikes are few in number and have little effect on overall animal populations in the North Pacific. To summarize, these elements of fishing activities cannot be quantified to the extent necessary to be evaluated in any one fishery, region, or season, but are considered here generally and recognized as a byproduct of commercial fishing in the North Pacific. Because this action is limited in scope and intensity to a few small areas, substantial displacement of vessel activity is not anticipated. Thus the effects of all alternatives are expected to be insignificant.

3.7.4.1 Marine Mammals

Direct and indirect interactions between marine mammals and groundfish harvest activity may occur due to overlap of groundfish fishery activities and marine mammal habitat. Fishing activities may either directly take marine mammals through injury, death, or disturbance, or indirectly affect these animals by removing prey items important for growth and nutrition or cause sufficient disturbance that marine mammals avoid or abandon important habitat. Fishing also may result in loss or discard of fishing nets, line, etc. that may ultimately entangle marine mammals causing injury or death. Because of the gear type, fisheries, and discrete location of the action and limited harvest, marine mammals are not likely to be affected by the HAPC designation or protection actions of Alternatives 2 or 3. Thus, the effect would be insignificant under any of the alternatives. None of the alternatives would not change the implementation of the Steller sea lion protection measures, and therefore would not affect Steller sea lions or their designated critical habitat beyond those effects already analyzed in previous consultations (NMFS 2010). Harvest of prey species would be similar under all alternatives.

Table 18. Criteria for determining significance of impacts to marine mammals.

	Incidental take and entanglement in marine debris	Harvest of prey species	Disturbance
Adverse impact	Mammals are taken incidentally to fishing operations, or become entangled in marine debris	Fisheries reduce the availability of marine mammal prey.	Fishing operations disturb marine mammals
Beneficial impact	There is no beneficial impact.	There are no beneficial impacts.	There is no beneficial impact.
Insignificant impact	No substantial change in incidental take by fishing operations, or in entanglement in marine debris	No substantial change in competition for key marine mammal prey species by the fishery.	No substantial change in disturbance of mammals.
Significantly adverse impact	Incidental take is more than PBR or is considered major in relation to estimated population when PBR is undefined.	Competition for key prey species likely to constrain foraging success of marine mammal species causing population decline.	Disturbance of mammal or such that population is likely to decrease.
Significantly beneficial impact	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
Unknown impact	Insufficient information available on take rates	Insufficient information as to what constitutes a key area or important time of year	Insufficient information as to what constitutes disturbance.

3.7.4.2 Seabirds

Given the sparse information, it is not likely that groundfish fishery effects on most individual bird species are discernible. For reasons explained in previous Steller Sea Lion Protection Measures SEIS (NMFS 2001), the following species or species groups may be considered possible receptors of fishing activity impacts: northern fulmar, short-tailed albatross, spectacled and Steller's eiders, other albatrosses and shearwaters, piscivorous seabird species, and all other seabird species. Most of these effects are the incidental takes of these species by hook-and-line fisheries. Fishery-related processing waste and offal may also affect seabirds. ESA listed seabirds are under the jurisdiction of the USFWS. Past BiOps (2003) for the groundfish fisheries and the setting of annual harvest specifications. Both BiOps concluded that the groundfish fisheries and the annual setting of harvest specifications were unlikely to cause the jeopardy of extinction or adverse modification or destruction of critical habitat for ESA listed seabirds.

The seabird species most likely to be impacted by any indirect gear effects on the benthos would be diving sea ducks, such as eiders and scoters, and cormorants and guillemots (NMFS 2004). Additional impacts from nonpelagic (bottom trawling) could occur, if sand lance habitat is adversely impacted. This would affect a wider array of piscivorous seabirds that feed on sand lance, particularly during the breeding season, when this forage fish is also used for feeding chicks. Bottom trawl gear has the greatest potential to indirectly affect seabirds via their habitat. It is anticipated there would be an insignificant impact on seabirds based on the limited amount of fishing effort in the four northern areas of the eastern Bering Sea. Because the proposed action involves small discrete areas with small fishing effort, the impacts are not likely to lead to population level effects on the prey from benthic habitat, other prey availability or incidental takes. The proposed HAPC sites are in waters deeper than used by seabirds for benthic feeding. Further, any redistribution of effort due to these closures would be expected to be minimal and mostly occur in areas adjacent to the closure areas, and thus not change the incidental take or bycatch of seabirds. Therefore, Alternatives 2 and 3 have insignificant impacts on seabirds.

Table 19. Criteria used to determine significance of impacts on seabirds.

	Incidental take	Prey availability	Benthic habitat
Insignificant	No substantive change in bycatch of seabirds during the operation of fishing gear.	No substantive change in forage available to seabird populations.	No substantive change in gear impact on benthic habitat used by seabirds for foraging.
Adverse impact	Non-zero take of seabirds by fishing gear.	Reduction in forage fish populations, or the availability of forage fish, to seabird populations.	Gear contact with benthic habitat used by benthic feeding seabirds reduces amount or availability of prey.
Beneficial impact	No beneficial impact can be identified.	Availability of offal from fishing operations or plants may provide additional, readily accessible, sources of food.	No beneficial impact can be identified.
Significantly adverse impact	Trawl and hook-and-line take levels increase substantially from the baseline level, or level of take is likely to have population level impact on species.	Food availability decreased substantially from baseline such that seabird population level survival or reproduction success is likely to decrease.	Impact to benthic habitat decreases seabird prey base substantially from baseline such that seabird population level survival or reproductive success is likely to decrease. (ESA listed eider impacts may be evaluated at the population level).
Significantly beneficial impact	No threshold can be identified.	Food availability increased substantially from baseline such that seabird population level survival or reproduction success is likely to increase.	No threshold can be identified.
Unknown impacts	Insufficient information available on take rates or population levels.	Insufficient information available on abundance of key prey species or the scope of fishery impacts on prey.	Insufficient information available on the scope or mechanism of benthic habitat impacts on food web.

3.7.5 Ecosystem

Fisheries can potentially affect the marine ecosystem through removals of fish biomass or alteration of the habitat. Three primary means of measurement of ecosystem change are evaluated here: predator-prey relationships, energy flow and balance, and ecosystem diversity. The reference point for predator-prey relationships against which the criteria are compared are fishery induced changes outside the natural level of abundance or variability for a prey species relative to predator demands. The reference point for energy flow and balance will be based on bottom gear effort (qualitative measure of unobserved gear mortality particularly on bottom organisms) and a quantitative assessment of trends in retained catch levels over time in the area. The reference point for ecosystem diversity will be a qualitative assessment whether removals of one or more species (target, non-target) affects overall species or functional diversity of the area.

Fisheries can remove predators, prey, or competitors and thus alter predator-prey relationships relative to an un-fished system. Fishing has the potential to impact food webs, but each ecosystem must be examined to determine how important the potential impacts to the food webs are for that ecosystem. A review of fishing impacts to marine ecosystems and food webs of the North Pacific under the status quo and other alternative management regimes was provided in the programmatic groundfish SEIS (NMFS 2004).

Fishing may alter the amount and flow of energy in an ecosystem by removing energy and altering energetic pathways through the return of discards and fish processing offal back into the sea. From an

ecosystem point of view, total fishing removals are a small proportion of the total system energy budget and are small relative to internal sources of inter-annual variability in production.

Fishing can alter different measures of diversity. Species level diversity, or the number of species, can be altered if fishing removes a species from the system. Fishing can alter functional or trophic diversity if it selectively removes a trophic guild member and changes the way biomass is distributed within a trophic guild. Fishing can alter genetic level diversity by selectively removing faster growing fish or removing spawning aggregations that might have different genetic characteristics than other spawning aggregations. Large, old fishes may be more heterozygous (i.e., have more genetic differences or diversity) and some stock structures may have a genetic component, thus one would expect a decline in genetic diversity due to heavy exploitation. All alternatives would likely have the same insignificant effects on diversity because of the small changes in catch and effort between the alternatives and the same types of species and amounts expected to be harvested

Predator-Prey Relationships– No effect on predator prey relationships is expected for Alternative 2 or 3. No substantial changes would be anticipated in biomass or numbers in prey populations, nor would there be an increase in the catch of higher trophic levels, or the risk of exotic species introductions. No large changes would be expected in species composition in the ecosystem. The trophic level of the catch would not be much different from the status quo, and little change would be expected in the species composition of the groundfish community, or in the removal of top predators. All alternatives would likely have the same insignificant effects on predator-prey relationships because of the small spatial difference between the alternatives and the same types of species and amounts expected to be harvested.

Energy Flow and Balance – The amount and flow of energy in the ecosystem would be the same as the status quo with regard to the total level of catch biomass removals from groundfish fisheries. No substantial changes in groundfish catch or discarding would be expected under any of the alternatives. Therefore the effects on energy flow and balance under all alternatives are the same and insignificant.

Table 20. Significance thresholds for fishery induced effects on ecosystem attributes.

Effect	Criteria			
	Significantly Negative (-)	Insignificant (I)	Significantly Positive (+)	Unknown (U)
Predator-prey relationships	A decline outside of the natural level of abundance or variability for a prey species relative to predator demands.	No observed changes outside the natural level of abundance or variability for a prey species relative to predator demands	Increases of abundance or variability for a prey species relative to predator demands	Magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown
Energy flow and balance:	Long-term changes in system biomass, respiration, production or energy cycling, due to removals.	No observed changes in system biomass, respiration, production or energy cycling, due to removals.	Increases in system biomass, respiration, production or energy cycling, due to lack of removals.	Magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown
Ecosystem Diversity	Removals from area decreases either species diversity or the functional diversity outside the range of natural variability. Or loss in one or more genetic components of a stock that would cause the stock biomass to fall below minimum biologically acceptable limits	No observed changes outside the natural level for species diversity, functional diversity or genetic components of a stock.	Non-removal from the area increases the species diversity or functional diversity or improves the genetic components of a stock.	Magnitude and/or direction of effects are unknown

3.8 Cumulative Impacts

Analysis of the potential cumulative effects of a proposed action and its alternatives is a requirement of NEPA. An environmental assessment or environmental impact statement must consider cumulative effects when determining whether an action significantly affects environmental quality. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations for implementing NEPA defines cumulative effects as:

The impact on the environment, which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such other actions. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time (40 CFR 1508.7).

This section analyzed the cumulative effects of the action considered in this environmental assessment. A cumulative effects analysis includes the effects of past, present and reasonably foreseeable future action (RFFA). The past and present actions are described in several documents and are adopted by reference. These include the PSEIS (2004), the EFH EIS (2005) and the harvest specifications EIS and most recent BSAI groundfish harvest specifications (2011). This analysis provides a brief review of the RFFA that may affect environmental quality and result in cumulative effects. Future effects include harvest of federally managed fish species and current habitat protection from federal fishery management measures, harvests from state-managed fisheries and their associated protection measures, efforts to protect endangered species by other federal agencies, and other non-fishing activities.

3.8.1 Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions (RFFA)

The most recent analysis of RFFAs for the groundfish fisheries is in the harvest specifications EIS and most recent BSAI groundfish harvest specifications (2011). The RFFAs are described in the Harvest Specifications EIS section 3.3, are applicable for this analysis, and are adopted by reference. A summary table of these RFFA is provided below. The table summarizes the RFFAs identified applicable to this analysis that are likely to have an impact on a resource component within the action area and timeframe. Actions are understood to be human actions (e.g., a proposed rule to designate northern right whale critical habitat in the Pacific Ocean), as distinguished from natural events (e.g., an ecological regime shift). CEQ regulations require a consideration of actions, whether taken by a government or by private persons, which are reasonably foreseeable. This is interpreted as indicating actions that are more than merely possible or speculative. Actions have been considered reasonably foreseeable if some concrete step has been taken toward implementation, such as a Council recommendation or the publication of a proposed rule. Actions simply “under consideration” have not generally been included because they may change substantially or may not be adopted, and so cannot be reasonably described, predicted, or foreseen. Identification of actions likely to impact a resource component within this action’s area and time frame will allow the public and Council to make a reasoned choice among alternatives.

Table 21. Reasonable foreseeable future actions (RFFAs).

Ecosystem-sensitive management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing understanding of the interactions between ecosystem components, and on-going efforts to bring these understandings to bear in stock assessments, Increasing protection of ESA-listed and other non-target species components of the ecosystem, Increasing integration of ecosystems considerations into fisheries decision-making
Fishery rationalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuing rationalization of Federal fisheries off Alaska, Fewer, more profitable, fishing operations, Better harvest and bycatch control, Rationalization of groundfish in Alaskan waters, Expansion of community participation in rationalization programs
Traditional management tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authorization of groundfish fisheries in future years, Increasing enforcement responsibilities, Technical and program changes that will improve enforcement and management
Other Federal, State, and international agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Future exploration and development of offshore mineral resources Reductions in United States Coast Guard fisheries enforcement activities Continuing oversight of seabirds and some marine mammal species by the USFWS Expansion and construction of boat harbors Expansion of State groundfish fisheries Other State actions Ongoing EPA monitoring of seafood processor effluent discharges
Private actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commercial fishing Increasing levels of economic activity in Alaska’s waters and coastal zone Expansion of aquaculture

RFFA that may affect target and prohibited species are shown in the table above. Ecosystem management, rationalization and traditional management tools are likely to improve the protection and management of target and prohibited species and are not likely to result in significant effects when combined with the direct and indirect effects of Alternative 2, Alternative 3 gear prohibition options, or other options. Other government actions and private actions may increase pressure on the sustainability of target and prohibited fish stocks either through extraction or changes in the habitat. An increase in extraction of target species could be offset by federal management.

Ecosystem management, rationalization and traditional management tools are likely to improve the protection and management of target and prohibited species and are not likely to result in significant effects when combined with the direct and indirect effects of Alternatives 2 or 3. Other government actions and private actions may increase pressure on the sustainability of target and prohibited fish stocks either through extraction or changes in the habitat. An increase in extraction of target species could be offset by federal management.

RFFA for habitat and the ecosystem include ecosystem-sensitive management, rationalization, traditional management tools, actions by other federal, state and international agencies, and private actions. Ecosystem-sensitive management, rationalization, and traditional management tools are likely to increase protection to ecosystems and habitat by considering ecosystems and habitat more in management decisions and by improving the management of the fisheries through the observer program, catch accounting, seabird and marine mammal protection, gear restrictions, and VMS. Overall the cumulative effects on habitat and ecosystems are beneficial and not likely to result in significant impacts in combination with the impacts from Alternatives 2 or 3.

RFFA for marine mammals and seabirds include ecosystem-sensitive management, rationalization, traditional management tools, actions by other federal, state and international agencies, and private actions. Ecosystem-sensitive management, rationalization, and traditional management tools are likely to increase protection to marine mammals and seabirds by considering these species more in management decisions and by improving the management of the fisheries through the observer program, catch accounting, seabird avoidance measures, and vessel monitoring systems (VMS). Any action by other entities that may impact marine mammals and seabirds will likely be offset by additional protective measures for the federal fisheries to ensure ESA-listed mammals and seabirds are not likely to experience jeopardy or adverse modification of critical habitat. Direct mortality by subsistence harvest is likely to continue, but these harvests are tracked and considered in the assessment of marine mammals and seabirds. The cumulative effect of these impacts in combination with Alternatives 2 or 3 is likely to be primarily beneficial and is not likely to be significant because of the limited intensity of Alternatives 2 and 3.

3.8.2 Climate Change

Changes in the Bering Sea due to global climate change may be of a concern to the organisms that live within this environment. The release of carbon to the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels likely contributes to global warming. The impacts of global warming in the Bering Sea can include a rise in sea surface temperature, retreat of sea ice and acidification of marine waters.

The following information is from the January 9, 2007 Federal Register notice regarding the proposed listing of polar bears (72 FR 1064). This is a recent, general description of the potential changes in sea ice and the marine ecosystem due to Arctic warming.

All models predict continued Arctic warming and continued decreases in the Arctic sea ice cover in the 21st century (Johannessen 2004, p. 328) due to increasing global temperatures, although the level of increase varies between models. Comiso (2005, p. 43) found that for each 1° Centigrade (C) (1.6 °F) increase in surface temperature (global average) there is a corresponding decrease in perennial sea ice cover of about 1.48 million km² (.57 million mi²). Further, due to increased warming in the Arctic region, accepted models project almost no sea ice cover during summer in the Arctic Ocean by the end of the 21st century (Johannessen et al. 2004, p. 335). More recently, the [National Snow and Ice Data Center] cautioned that the Arctic will be ice-free by 2060 if current warming trends continue (Serreze [and Rigor] 2006, p. 2). The winter

maximum sea ice extent in 2005 and 2006 were both about 6 percent lower than average values, indicating significant decline in the winter sea ice cover. In both cases, the observed surface temperatures were also significantly warmer and the onset of freeze-up was later than normal. In both years, onset of melt also happened early (Comiso in press). A continued decline would mean an advance to the north of the 0 °C (32 °F) isotherm temperature gradient, and a warmer ocean in the peripheral seas of the Arctic Ocean. This in turn may result in a further decline in winter ice cover. Predicted Arctic atmospheric and oceanographic changes for time periods through the year 2080 include increased air temperatures, increased precipitation and run-off, and reduced sea ice extent and duration (ACIA 2005, tables on pp. 470 and 476).

A recent study of the Bering Sea, one of the most productive marine ecosystems on the planet, concluded “[a] change from arctic to subarctic conditions is underway in the northern Bering Sea” (Grebmeier et al. 2006, p. 1461). This is being caused by warmer air and water temperatures, and less sea ice. “These observations support a continued trend toward more subarctic ecosystem conditions in the northern Bering Sea, which may have profound impacts on Arctic marine mammal and diving seabird populations as well as commercial and subsistence fisheries” (Grebmeier et al. 2006, p. 1463).

With the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide, additional carbon dioxide may be absorbed by marine waters resulting in acidification (The Royal Society 2005). The acidification may have an impact on those organisms that depend on calcium carbonate for skeletal structure, such as copepods, pteropods, and clams. Human inputs of carbon into the atmosphere may acidify marine waters, which may impact benthic organisms that depend on calcium carbonate for skeletal structure. This potential effect in combination with the potential effects of nonpelagic trawling on benthic habitat may result in cumulative adverse impacts for organisms depending directly and indirectly on the benthic habitat. The effects of acidification and ocean warming may be widespread while nonpelagic trawling effects would be limited to locations where trawling occurs. It is not possible to predict the level of impact the combined effect may have because the level of acidification and the organisms’ responses are not clearly understood. No evidence exists that a significant cumulative impact is occurring at this time, but additional studies should be encouraged to provide a better understanding of future impacts.

Considering the direct and indirect impacts of the proposed action when added to the impacts of past and present actions previously analyzed in other documents that are incorporated by reference and the impacts of the reasonably foreseeable future actions listed above, the cumulative impacts of the proposed action are determined to be not significant.

3.9 Management and Enforcement Considerations

Enforcement considerations of the proposed alternatives and options, and a discussion of the effects the action on management and enforcement, depending on the alternative and option selected. Briefly, if the Council wishes to identify HAPC areas around skate egg concentration sites *and* wishes to enforce protections through gear prohibitions (i.e., Alternative 3), the Council must adopt areas of a minimum size to allow effective VMS tracking for enforcement. The Council must also consider establishing HAPC boundaries along latitude and longitude lines, wherever practical. Currently, the minimum thresholds are generally a buffer of at least 1 nm beyond the boundary of the area to be protected in order to account for current VMS capabilities, potential GPS error, and the dislocation between vessels and deployed gear. Should the council decide to implement trawl gear restrictions for these areas, the Enforcement Committee has recommended prohibition of all trawl activity in these areas. The minimum size threshold may be reduced with the implementation of increased VMS poll rates and geo-fencing. Additional discussion is included in the RIR.

4.0 REGULATORY IMPACT REVIEW (RIR)

A Regulatory Impact Review (RIR) is required under Presidential Executive Order (EO) 12866 (58 FR 51735; October 4, 1993). The requirements for all regulatory actions specified in EO 12866 are summarized in the following statement from the Order:

“In deciding whether and how to regulate, agencies should assess all costs and benefits of available regulatory alternatives, including the alternative of not regulating. Costs and benefits shall be understood to include both quantifiable measures (to the fullest extent that these can be usefully estimated) and qualitative measures of costs and benefits that are difficult to quantify, but nonetheless essential to consider. Further, in choosing among alternative regulatory approaches agencies should select those approaches that maximize net benefits (including potential economic, environmental, public health and safety, and other advantages; distributive impacts; and equity), unless a statute requires another regulatory approach.”

EO 12866 requires that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) review proposed regulatory programs that are considered to be “significant.” A “significant regulatory action” is one that is likely to:

- Have an annual effect on the economy of \$100 million or more or adversely affect in a material way the economy, a sector of the economy, productivity, competition, jobs, local or tribal governments or communities;
- Create a serious inconsistency or otherwise interfere with an action taken or planned by another agency;
- Materially alter the budgetary impact of entitlements, grants, user fees, or loan programs or the rights and obligations of recipients thereof; or
- Raise novel legal or policy issues arising out of legal mandates, the President’s priorities, or the principles set forth in this Executive Order.

4.1 Introduction and Problem Statement

Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) are geographic sites that fall within the distribution of essential fish habitat (EFH) for federally managed species. Specific to fishery actions, HAPCs are areas within EFH that are rare and are ecologically important, sensitive to disturbance, or may be stressed.

In April 2010, the Council set a habitat priority type—“skate nurseries”—and issued an RFP in conjunction with the completion of its EFH five-year review process. Council staff initially screened the proposals received to determine consistency with the Council’s habitat priority type, compliance with the Council’s HAPC criteria, and for general adequacy and completeness. At its fall 2010 meeting, the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed HAPC proposals for rarity and ecological merit, and in October 2010, the Council selected a HAPC proposal from the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) to forward on for further analysis. In February 2011, the Council received a discussion paper on the AFSC’s HAPC proposal and selected alternatives and options for conservation and management through gear type prohibitions to forward on for full analysis. In February and March, 2012, the Council made initial review of the analysis, and further refined the alternatives, options, and conservation and management.

Three alternatives for the identification of skate egg concentration HAPCs and two options (b and c) for gear type prohibitions within those HAPCs are analyzed within this document and listed below.

Consideration of areas of skate egg concentration is limited to the six candidate sites from the AFSC proposal. Additional sites, if or when discovered, are not considered part of this action.

4.1.1 Statement of Purpose and Need

The Council adopted the following Statement of Purpose and Need at its June 2012 meeting:

HAPC are geographic sites that fall within the distribution of Essential Fish Habitat for the Council's managed species. The Council has a formalized process, identified in its FMPs, for selecting HAPCs that begins with the Council identifying habitat priorities—here, areas of skate egg concentration. Candidate HAPCs must be responsive to the Council priority, must be rare (defined as uncommon habitat that occurs in discrete areas within only one or two Alaska regions), and must meet one of three other considerations: provide an important ecological function; be sensitive to human-induced degradation; or be stressed by development activities.

The candidate HAPC identify sites of egg concentration by skate species (Rajidae) in the eastern Bering Sea. Skates are elasmobranch fish that are long-lived, slow to mature, and produce few young. Skates deposit egg cases in soft substrates on the sea floor in small, distinct sites. A reproducing skate deposits only several egg cases during each reproductive season. Depending on the species, a single egg case can hold from one to four individual skate embryos, and development can take up to three years. Thus, a single egg case site will hold several year classes and species, and eggs growing at different rates.

Distinct skate egg deposition sites have been highlighted by skate stock experts while assessing skate information from research survey and catch locations. The scientists noted repeated findings of distinct sites where egg cases recruit to sampling or fishing gear contacting the sea floor: egg case prongs (or horns) entangle in or cases recruits into the gear. These sites are discrete areas near the shelf/slope break that serve as important spawning and embryonic development areas for skate species. It is therefore important to consider: 1) designating these areas as HAPCs; 2) to consider restricting activities which impact the habitat at these sites; and 3) to monitor the continued utility of these sites for skate spawning and embryonic development, and further study for the relationship between the habitat features of these sites and site selection for skate egg deposition.

4.2 Alternatives and Options

In order to address the problem described above in the Council's statement of purpose and need, the Council identified three alternatives and five options for analysis, shown below. Alternative 1, the status quo, or no action alternative, involves no measures to identify or conserve areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs. Alternative 2 would identify areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs. The Council may select individually, severally, or all of the six areas identified as potential skate egg concentration HAPCs. The intent of Alternative 2 is to monitor the impacts of fishing activities in the proposed HAPC sites, primarily at the population level, and if practicable, develop additional information on fishery interactions with egg concentrations. The Council has also added an option to Alternative 2 that would request NMFS monitor HAPCs for changes in egg density and any other potential effects of fishing, and would also request that industry support in the collection of data and in the evaluation of monitoring and management efforts.

Alternative 3 provides for both the identification of skate egg concentration HAPCs and for the conservation of these areas through prohibitions of gear types that make contact with the sea floor. The Council may select, in combination with any skate egg concentration designated as a HAPC, to limit fishing activities that make contact with the sea floor in these areas by prohibiting the use of “mobile bottom contact” gear and pelagic gear—Options b and c.

Further, under any Alternative, in any combination of skate egg concentration HAPCs and with any combination of conservation and management measures, the Council may identify the research and monitoring of areas of skate egg case concentration as a research priority and incorporate it into the Council’s annual research priority list for continuing research, to evaluate skates, skate egg concentration areas, and their ecology and habitat—Option d. A BSAI Groundfish FMP housekeeping option has been added to the analysis to standardize federal descriptions of Bering Sea habitat conservation measures (Option e).

4.2.1 Action Alternatives and Options

In order to address the issues described in its statement of purpose and need, the Council identified three alternatives and five options for analysis, shown below. In addition, a BSAI Groundfish FMP housekeeping option has been added to the analysis (Option e). Both Alternative 2 and 3 would amend the BSAI Groundfish FMP, the BSAI Crab FMP, the Alaska Salmon FMP, and the Alaska Scallop FMP to identify HAPC areas in the Bering Sea. Alternative 3 would also implement regulatory changes for Bering Sea groundfish and scallop fisheries.

Alternative 1: Status quo; no action.

No measures would be taken to identify, or to identify and conserve, areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs.

Alternative 2: Identify skate egg concentration HAPC(s).

The Council may select to identify – individually, severally, or all six of the areas of skate egg concentration as HAPC. At each of the six areas of skate egg concentration, the spatial extent of research bottom trawls containing more than 1,000 egg cases per kilometer squared (km²) have been established. Boundary lines are then snapped outward to the nearest minute of latitude or longitude. Under Alternative 2, the six proposed areas of skate egg concentration will be identified as HAPC:

Table 22. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 2.

Site name ^a	Predominant skate species	Depth of max. egg density (m)	Maximum egg density (eggs/km ²)	Area of HAPC nm ²	Boundaries of HAPC (°N latitude or °W longitude)			
					North	South	West	East
1. Bering 1	Alaska	145	800,406	18.4	54°53'	54°49'	165°46'	165°38'
2. Bering 2	Aleutian	380	62,992	17.5	54°38'	54°33'	165°45'	165°34'
3. Bristol	Bering	156	6,188	13.7	55°21'	55°17'	167°40'	167°34'
4. Pribilof	Alaska	205	16,473	1.2	56°11'	56°10'	168°28'	168°26'
5. Zhemchug	Alaska	217	610,064	3.2	56°57'	56°54'	173°23'	173°21'
6. Pervenets	Alaska, Bering, Aleutian	316	334,163	27.7	59°28'	59°22'	177°43'	177°34'
Total area of the eastern Bering Sea proposed as HAPCs under Alternative 2 = 81.7 nm ²								

^a Counterintuitively, the Bering 2 site is south of the Bering 1 site. Sites 3 through 6 run south to north.

Option a: NMFS would monitor HAPCs for changes in egg density and other potential effects of fishing and the Council would request that industry support collection of data in evaluation of monitoring and management efforts relative to those HAPCs.

Alternative 3: Identify and conserve skate egg concentration HAPC(s).

The Council may select to identify – individually, severally, or all six of – the areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs – AND – the Council may select different conservation and management options for any area identified as a skate egg concentration HAPC:

Option b: Prohibit within skate egg concentration HAPC(s) the use of “mobile bottom contact”¹⁰ fishing gear: nonpelagic (i.e., bottom) trawl, dredge, and dinglebar gear.

Option c: Prohibit within skate egg concentration HAPC(s) the use of “mobile bottom contact” and pelagic trawl fishing gear: nonpelagic and pelagic trawl, dredge, and inglebar gear.¹¹

To achieve effective enforcement of these areas, Alternative 3 establishes a minimum size threshold for the core concentration areas to be protected of at least 5 nm to a side and are then, where appropriate, enlarged with a buffer of 1 nm beyond the original boundary under Alternative 2. Boundaries are then snapped outward to the nearest minute of latitude and longitude.

¹⁰ 50 C.F.R. 679.2.

¹¹ See 50 C.F.R. 679.2 for the particular and intricate components defining “pelagic trawl” fishing gear.

Table 23. The six areas of skate egg concentration proposed for identification as a HAPC under Alternative 3.

Site name ^a	Predominant skate species	Depth of max. egg density (m)	Maximum egg density (eggs/km ²)	Area of HAPC (nm ²)	Boundaries of HAPC (°N latitude or °W longitude)			
					North	South	West	East
1. Bering 1	Alaska	145	800,406	41.8	54°54'	54°48'	165°48'	165°36'
2. Bering 2	Aleutian	380	62,992	40.9	54°39'	53°32'	165°47'	165°37'
3. Bristol	Bering	156	6,188	34.4	55°22'	55°16'	167°42'	167°32'
4. Pribilof	Alaska	205	16,473	28	56°13'	56°08'	168°32'	168°22'
5. Zhemchug	Alaska	217	610,064	27.4	56°58'	56°53'	173°27'	173°17'
6. Pervenets	Alaska, Bering, Aleutian	316	334,163	53.3	59°29'	59°21'	177°45'	177°36'
Total area in the eastern Bering Sea proposed as HAPCs under Alternative 3 = 225.8 nm ²								

^a Counterintuitively, the Bering 2 site is south of the Bering 1 site. Sites 3 through 6 run south to north.

Additional Options

The following options are applicable to ALL of the alternatives, in any combination of skate egg concentration HAPCs, and with any combination of conservation and management measures the Council selects:

Option d: *Suggest adding research and monitoring of areas of skate egg concentration to the Council's research priority list.*

The Council may suggest incorporating the research and monitoring of skate species into the Council's annual research priority list, to evaluate skate populations, skate egg concentration areas, and their ecology and habitat.

Option e: *Adopt formatting standards as stated in the final rule implementing Amendment 89 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP.*

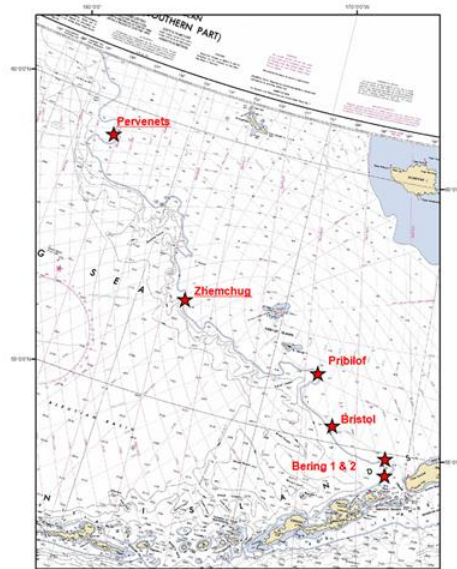
The Council may approve the consolidation of figures and tables that describe areas in Amendment 89 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP, which establishes Bering Sea habitat conservation measures. Color Figures 70-73 in Appendix B describe the Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Area, the Northern Bering Sea Research Area and Saint Lawrence Island Habitat Conservation Area (HCA), and the Nunivak Island, Etolin Strait, and Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area, respectively.

4.3 Background

4.3.1 Proposed HAPC Sites

Six areas of skate egg concentration in the eastern Bering Sea are proposed as HAPCs. Each site has been studied and mapped using research bottom trawls to determine the density of egg cases, the extent of the area of skate egg concentration, mortality sources to young skates, and distinguishing abiotic features of the site that may define EFH. The exception is the Pribilof site, which was mapped using an autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) equipped with a high-resolution camera. Additional AUV mapping work has been performed at several of the other sites listed, but those data were not used to delineate the original boundaries of the proposed sites.

The boundaries of each site differed under the alternatives. Alternative 2 would designate the sites as HAPC. The boundaries of the sites under this alternative were established by the spatial extent of bottom trawls containing less than 1,000 egg cases per km². Alternative 3 would not only designate HAPC areas, but would also prohibit trawling and dredging (depending on the option). The boundaries for the HAPC sites under Alternative 3 were expanded to allow effective enforcement of the regulations.



These sites are different from one another in many ways, although they all tend to occur in areas of the upper slope. Table 24 below provides a summary of the species utilizing this site for egg deposition, the depth of each site, and a comparison of the relative size of each site by alternative.

Table 24. Summary information on proposed skate egg HAPC sites.

Site Name	Skate Species	Ave. Depth (m)	Alternative 2 Area (nm ²)	Alternative 3 Area (nm ²)
Bering 1	Alaska skate	145	18.4	41.8
Bering 2	Aleutian skate	380	17.5	40.9
Bristol	Bering skate	156	13.7	34.4
Pribilof	Alaska skate	205	1.2	28.0
Zhemchug	Alaska skate	217	3.2	27.4
Pervenets	Alaska, Bering & Aleutian	316	27.7	53.3
			81.7	225.8

A more complete description of the HAPC sites is provided in the EA section of this analysis.

4.3.2 BSAI Groundfish Fisheries

The domestic groundfish fishery off Alaska is the largest fishery by volume in the U.S. The annual BSAI North Pacific Groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report (SAFE) contains economic summaries and detailed information about the BSAI commercial groundfish fisheries. The sum of the

total allowable catches (TACs) for all groundfish is 2,000,000 mt. In most years, the TACs are set well below the sum of the recommended ABCs. The status of BSAI groundfish stocks continues to appear favorable. Many stocks are well above Bmsy due to good recruitment and conservative harvest policies. A description of the fishing fleets and fisheries is provided in Witherell et al. 2012.

4.3.3 Skate Fishery Management and Stock Status

The BSAI skate complex is managed in aggregate, with a single set of harvest specifications applied to the entire complex. Two different assessment methodologies are used for skates, however. Beginning with the 2008 assessment, harvest recommendations for Alaska skate (*Bathyraja parmifera*), the most abundant skate species in the BSAI, are made using the results of an age structured model and Tier 3. The remaining species (“other skates”) are managed under Tier 5 due to a lack of data. The Tier 3 and Tier 5 recommendations are combined to generate recommendations for the complex as a whole.

The current target fishery for skates in the BSAI began in 2011. Most skates are caught incidentally in the hook-and-line/longlining fishery for Pacific cod, and in trawl fisheries for pollock and flatfish. Between 24% and 39% of the total observed skate catch was retained during 2003 through 2006, primarily consisting of Aleutian and Alaska skate.

Until 2011, skate species were managed as part of the “Other Species” management category within the BSAI FMP. In October 2009, the NPFMC approved Amendment 95 to the BSAI FMP, which separated skates from the BSAI Other Species complex into a target category. Beginning in 2011, skates have been managed as a single complex with skate-specific ABC and OFL. Previously, skates were taken only as bycatch in fisheries directed at target species in the BSAI, so future catches of skates are more dependent on the distribution and limitations placed on target fisheries than on any harvest level established for this category.

Table 25. Aggregate 2011 through 2013 harvest recommendations for the BSAI skate complex.

Quantity				
	2011	2012	2013	2014
OFL (t)	37,817	37,169	45,800	44,100
ABC (t)	31,523	32,600	38,800	37,300

There is an overall increase in skate biomass in the Aleutian Islands and eastern Bering Sea (biomass for each year corresponds to the projection given in the SAFE report issued in the preceding year). The OFL and ABC for 2013 and 2014 are those recommended by the Council.

Table 26. Status and catch specifications (t) of skates in recent years in the BSAI.

Year	Age 0+ Biomass	OFL	ABC	TAC	Catch
2010	608,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2011	612,000	37,800	31,500	16,500	21,034
2012	645,000	39,100	32,600	24,700	23,291
2013	629,000	45,800	38,800	n/a	n/a

The year 2011 was the first year that the skate complex was managed outside the context of the former “other species” complex. The Alaska skate portions of the 2013 ABC and OFL were specified under Tier 3, while the “other skates” portions were specified under Tier 5. For the skate complex as a whole, ABCs for 2012 and 2013 total 32,600 t and 38,800 t, respectively, and OFLs for 2012 and 2013 total 39,100 t and 45,800 t, respectively.

4.3.4 Incidental Catch and Discards

Most skates before 2011 have been caught incidentally in the longline fishery for Pacific cod and in the bottom trawl fisheries for pollock and flatfish. Retention rates ranged from 30% to 40% of the total observed skate catch during 2003 through 2009, primarily consisting of Aleutian and Alaska skate; it is likely that only the larger skates are retained. Incidental catch of skates in the BSAI was 5% of the 2008 survey biomass estimate for skates.

In the BSAI, there is no directed fishery for skates at present. A directed skate fishery developed in the Gulf of Alaska in 2003 (Gaichas et al. 2003). There has been interest in developing markets for skates in Alaska, and the resource was economically valuable to the GOA participants in 2003, although the price apparently dropped in 2004. Continued interest in skates as a potential future target fishery in the BSAI as well as in the GOA, should be expected.

In the Eastern Bering Sea pollock fishery, skate bycatch nearly doubled in 2008 compared to 2007, but declined to just over one thousand metric tonnes in 2010. In the Aleutian Islands Atka mackerel fishery, the bycatch of skates has averaged 158 mt in the last 3 years (2007 through 2009). Over this same time period, the Atka mackerel fishery has taken an average of 13% of the total Aleutian Islands skate bycatch. It is unknown if the absolute levels of skate bycatch in the Atka mackerel fishery are of concern. In addition, the Atka mackerel target fishery has been substantially curtailed as a result of recent Steller sea lion limitations, reducing the potential for adverse impacts on skates taken historically in this fishery.

At present the Catch Accounting System (CAS) reports species specific catch for big (*Raja binoculata*) and longnose (*Raja rhina*) skates. All remaining skate species are reported as “other”. Big and longnose skates make up only a small fraction of BSAI skate biomass, which is dominated by the Alaska skate. The fraction of Alaska skate catch in the total “other skates” is estimated by applying the average species composition encountered during trawl surveys. In the Alaska skate model, a catch rate of 100% mortality is assumed by the assessment team. In reality, skate mortality is dependent upon the time spent out of water, the type of gear, and handling practices after capture. From fishery observer data, approximately 30% of skates are retained; however, there currently is no information regarding the survival of skates that are discarded at sea.

Skates are caught in almost all fisheries and areas of the Bering Sea shelf, but most of the skate incidental catch is in the hook and line (a.k.a, longline) fishery for Pacific cod. Trawl fisheries for pollock, rock sole, flathead sole, and yellowfin sole also catch significant amounts. The catch of skates in pollock fisheries has increased in recent years, possibly because the fisheries are targeting pollock closer to the bottom. Due to incomplete observer coverage, it is difficult to determine how many skates are actually retained. However, between 24% and 39% of the total observed skate catch was retained during the years 2003 to 2006. More skates were retained in the EBS than the AI, and it appears that species that grow to a larger maximum size (>100 cm TL) are more likely to be retained than smaller-bodied species. For example, while the Aleutian skate, a large-bodied species, made up a relatively small portion of the observed skate catch in 2005 (approximately 2%), 31% of the Aleutian skates caught were retained. However, Bering skates (a small-bodied species less than 100 cm TL) were retained less frequently (10% in 2005). Larger percentages of Alaska skates and *Raja* species are also retained; all are relatively large-bodied skates.

Historically, skates were almost always recorded as “skate unidentified” with very few exceptions between 1990 and 2002. However, due to improvements in species identification by fishery observers, initiated by Dr. Duane Stevenson (AFSC) within the Observer program in 2003, it is possible to estimate the species composition of observed skate catches in the years 2004 through 2006. Recent observer data indicate that only about one half of skate catch is not identified to the species level. This is largely because most skates are caught in longline fisheries, and if the animal drops off the hook as un-retained

incidental catch, it cannot be identified as species by the observer (approximately 80 percent of longline-caught skates are unidentified, and longline catch accounts for the majority of observed skate catch). Changes made to the observer manual at the author's request have resulted in a large increase in skate length measurements beginning in 2008.

In 2005, observers were encouraged to identify skates to genus that were dropped off of longlines, which can be done without retaining the skate; hence in 2005 more than half of the unidentified skates were at least assigned to the genus *Bathyraja*. Of the identified skates, the majority (90 percent) were Alaska skates, as would be expected by their dominance in terms of overall skate biomass in the BSAI. The next most commonly identified species BSAI-wide was Aleutian skate, at 6.6% of identified catch, followed by Bering skates at 4.3 %, big skates at 3.6%, and whiteblotched at approximately 1.3% across the BSAI. It should be noted that the observed skate catch composition may not reflect the true catch composition, possibly due to selective retention of larger species or to a higher likelihood of identifying distinctive species. However, when viewed by area (EBS vs. AI), it is clear that the majority of identified Aleutian and whiteblotched skates are caught in AI fisheries, and that the species composition of the observed catch in the AI is very different from the EBS.

4.4 Effects on Harvesters, Processors, and Communities

Fisheries impact communities through the economic and socioeconomic activities generated by participants in the various harvesting sectors, processing sectors, and supporting industries.

4.4.1 Effects on Harvesters

Potential effects of the alternatives on harvesters were estimated from catch data. Trawl data were obtained from the VMS-enabled Catch-in-Areas database, by Steve Lewis of the AKRO. The query selected trawl effort (2003 through 2011) inside any of the six areas of skate egg concentration identified for HAPC consideration. These data represent observed hauls only (VMS track lines). The targeting algorithm used in the database differentiates between mid-water pollock as more than 90 percent pollock, and bottom pollock as predominately, but less than 90 percent pollock. Two sites, Zhemchug and Pribilof, showed no trawl effort. Using this methodology, all catch from any tow passing through a proposed HAC accrued towards the total, and thus overestimates actual catch of each tow taken from within site boundaries. Individual tows can extend many miles (e.g., a 4 hour tow at 4 knots covers 16 nautical miles) outside of a proposed skate egg site. The overestimate of the total catch from these tows is offset and reduced to some degree by the proportion of tows examined (less than 100% are observed).

4.4.1.1 Alternative 1

There would be no additional effects, beyond status quo, to any harvesters under Alternative 1.

4.4.1.2 Alternative 2

Bottom Trawlers

Nonpelagic (i.e., bottom) trawl effort in areas of skate egg concentration, as defined under Alternative 2, targeted arrowtooth flounder, Pacific cod and flathead sole. A total amount of 5,881 metric tons of groundfish were taken in observed hauls intersecting the Bering 1, Bering 2, Pribilof, and Pervenets HAPC sites during the years 2003 through 2011 in the areas as defined under Alternative 2. The value of potential foregone catch was estimated using annual catch by species and annual gross ex-vessel prices from the 2011 Economic SAFE Reports. If all catches were retained and processed, it is estimated that the gross ex-vessel value of this catch was a total of \$2,657,000 over the nine years. Thus, on average, the value of groundfish catch by vessels using bottom trawls was approximately \$356,000 per year (the total gross ex-vessel value divided by the nine years (2003-2011) of data). Because Alternative 2 does not restrict fishing activities in the sites, however, the economic impacts would be expected to be nil.

Pelagic Trawlers

Under Alternative 2, a total amount of 23,898 mt of groundfish (virtually all pollock, with de minimis amounts of other groundfish) were taken in observed hauls intersecting those four proposed HAPCs during the years 2003-2011. If all catches were retained and processed, it is estimated that the gross ex-vessel value of this catch was \$7,127,000. Thus, on average, the value of groundfish caught by vessels using pelagic trawls was \$792,000 per year (the total ex-vessel price divided by the nine years (2003-2011) of catch data collected). Because Alternative 2 does not restrict fishing activities in the sites, economic impacts would be expected to be nil.

Scallops and Vessels Using Other Gears

Designation of HAPC sites under Alternative 2 would not be expected to have any impacts on vessels fishing scallops with dredge gear, or vessels fishing any other non-trawl gear.

4.4.1.3 Alternative 3

Bottom Trawlers

Bottom trawls would be prohibited in HAPC sites under Alternative 3, Options b and c. The following is a summary of the effects of Alternative 3 on vessels using this gear type.

Nonpelagic trawl effort in areas of skate egg concentration, as defined under Alternative 3, between 2003 and 2011 was focused on Bering 1, Bering 2, and the Pervenets sites, with no effort in the Bristol, Pribilof, or Zhemchug sites, as shown in Table 27. Approximately one half of the total catch in areas of skate egg concentration was in Bering 2 and focused on arrowtooth flounder. Pacific cod and flathead sole were the other two species with substantial catches, although six other species were identified as targets in the three fished sites.

Note that the catches can vary considerably among sites and from year to year within sites. For example, in 2003 and 2004, Bering 1 site had catches of Pacific cod > 100 mt, whereas in other years, cod catch was nil. Bering 1 had catches > 1,000 mt of arrowtooth flounder in 2008 and 2009. Pervenets had catches of arrowtooth > 500 mt in 2008. Overall, Bering 2 had the most catch of groundfish taken with non-pelagic trawls (up to 1,696 mt in 2009, worth \$542,000 ex-vessel).

A total amount of 10,495 metric tons of groundfish were taken in hauls intersecting the Bering 1, Bering 2, Pribilof, and the Pervenets proposed HAPC sites, under Alternative 3, during the years 2003 through 2011. The value of potentially foregone catch was estimated using annual catch by species and annual gross ex-vessel prices from the 2011 Economic SAFE Report. For Greenland turbot, first gross wholesale value was used, rather than gross ex-vessel price, because turbot were only taken by catcher processors. If all 10,495 mt of groundfish catch had been retained and processed, it is estimated that the gross ex-vessel value of this catch would have been approximately \$4,477,000 (total over the nine year period), as shown by Table 28. Thus, on average, a closure to bottom trawling only of these sites (Option b) could have resulted in a maximum foregone value of about \$497,000 per year, which is the total gross ex-vessel value divided by the nine years (2003 through 2011) of catch data collected. This average of \$497,461 per year of estimated foregone bottom trawl value equates to approximately 0.09% of an average (2006 to 2010) annual gross value of the BSAI trawl groundfish (\$515,840,000).

Pelagic Trawlers

Pelagic trawls would be prohibited in HAPC sites under Alternative 3, Option c. The following is a summary of the effects of Alternative 3 Option c on vessels using pelagic trawl gear.

Pelagic trawl effort in areas of skate egg concentration from 2003 to 2011 was focused on the Bering 1 and 2, Bristol, and Pervenets sites, as shown in Table 29. In these sites, effort has shifted between areas, with some areas being relatively more important than other areas through the years. The target of the pelagic trawl fishery was pollock in all cases. Approximately one half of all pollock catch from areas of skate egg concentration took place in the Pervenets site between 2007 and 2010, showing a northward shift in the fishery. Bering 2 was fished most consistently, and Bristol showed higher catches in 2003 and 2004, but has not been active since 2007.

A total amount of 36,290 metric tons of pollock were taken in commercial pelagic trawl hauls intersecting four of the six proposed HAPC sites (defined by Alternative 3 boundaries) during the years 2003 through 2011. If all catches were retained and processed, it is estimated that the gross ex-vessel value of this catch over nine years and from all proposed HAPC sites would have been \$9,919,000. Thus, on average, a closure to pelagic trawling of these sites under Alternative 3, Option c, could have resulted in maximum foregone gross revenues of \$1,102,000 per year, which is the total gross ex-vessel value divided by the nine years (2003 to 2011) of catch data collected. The average of \$1,102,000 per year of estimated foregone pelagic catch equates to approximately 0.21% of an average (2006 to 2010) annual gross value of the BSAI trawl groundfish (\$515,840,000).

Catch varies greatly across sites and years. Highest catches were observed as follows. For Bering 1, catches of >4,000 mt were observed in 2004. In Bering 2, catches >4,000 mt were taken in 2007. In the Bristol site, catches >2,000 mt were taken in 2003 and 2004. At the Pervenets site, catches >3,000 mt were taken in 2007, 2008, and 2010. In all other years, and at other sites, catch of pollock was relatively low or non-existent.

In previous years (1990 to 2005), the Bering 2 site appears to have been important to the pollock fishery, as compared to more recent data (2003 to 2011). From the longer set of data (see **Color Figure 43**), it is estimated that the Bering 2 site experienced an average of 5,470 to 13,037 mt of catch per year, which is the total observed pelagic trawl catch, 87,517 mt to 208,599 mt, divided by sixteen years (1990 to 2005). It would be expected that the fleet could make up this foregone catch in other areas, adjacent or elsewhere. However, moving the fleet elsewhere to make up foregone catch may require vessels to fish outside of their preferred zone and could cause some increased operation costs (e.g., lower CPUEs, higher PSC rates, longer trip times, etc.).

There may be socioeconomic impacts of Alternative 3 beyond what is provided by the quantitative analysis discussed above. The following is a description of public testimony on the implementation of gear prohibitions in the proposed HAPC sites. Public testimony during the February 2012 Council meeting focused on the Bering 1 and Bering 2 sites. Specifically, the Bering 1 site was important to industry during the years 1986 to 1999, which is earlier than the data the analysis considered (2003 to 2011) and years without VMS effort data. The Bering 2 site continues to be of high importance to those vessels fishing for pollock, and the inshore fleet could incur significant impacts during the B season from any trawl restrictions. The Bering 2 site encompasses a narrow fishing lane used by the pollock CV fleet during the summer months, particularly in July and August. The Bering 2 site is also in an area where the bathymetry slopes rapidly from relatively shallow depths, at the southeast edge, to much deeper waters along the northwest edge. Thus, in years when pollock (or cod) are aggregated at the deeper end of the Bering 2 site, vessels line up and tow very closely to one another, in order to catch pollock (or cod) along a particular depth contour in the area known as “the horseshoe.” Consequently, a prohibition to trawl gear within the Bering 2 site would be in the middle of this fishing lane, in the worst case, and could act as a roadblock to traffic, pinching the flow of vessels into a narrower corridor. This obstacle could hinder pollock and cod fishing, increase trip time, cause gear conflicts, and in practice render the adjacent areas unfishable.

Testimony further suggested that the impacts on forgone harvest could be higher than what is predicted by the expanded catch data—i.e., from 1998 to 2010 versus from 2003 to 2011. In addition, the potential displacement of the fleet could be greater than originally anticipated, which could result in higher PSC rates (e.g., halibut, salmon). If the pollock trawl fleet is unable to fully prosecute the fishery during the summer months in the “horseshoe,” it may try to make up the difference later into the B season, which could raise PSC rates, particularly for chum salmon. Also, the Bering 2 is a relatively deep water trawl and chum salmon PSC is lower in deep water – if the fleet is pushed into shallower waters, chum PSC could increase.

Scallopers, and Vessels Using Other Gears

Dredge effort for scallops in the six proposed HAPC sites did not occur based on examination of locations where fisheries for scallops have occurred in the eastern Bering Sea. Commercial concentrations of weathervane scallops occur along the Alaska coast in elongated beds oriented in the same direction as prevailing currents, at depths from approximately 100 m to 120 m, which is shallower than any of the proposed sites. Dinglebar gear is not used in the eastern Bering Sea, and therefore no fishery would be limited by prohibitions on its use in the six proposed HAPC areas. Designation of HAPC sites (and prohibiting fishing with trawl and dredge gear) under Alternative 3, would not have any impacts on vessels fishing any other non-trawl gear.

Economic Impacts of Alternative 3, Option c

On average, analysis suggests that a closure to pelagic and bottom trawling of these sites (Alternative 3, option c) would result in a maximum foregone value of approximately \$1,599,000 per year. Of this total, pelagic trawling in the areas would generate a foregone value of \$1,102,000 per year, and bottom trawling of \$497,000, which is the total ex-vessel value divided by the nine years (2003 through 2011) of catch data examined. For comparison, BSAI trawl fisheries ex-vessel value was averaged at \$515,840,000 over 2006-2010 (from the 2011 Economic SAFE, for all trawl species). The average of \$1,102,000 per year of estimated foregone pelagic value equates to approximately 0.21% of an average (2006 through 2010) annual gross value of the BSAI trawl groundfish (\$515,840,000). Also, recall that the methodology used to generate these estimates of foregone catch and value, includes all catch from any tow passing through a proposed HAC accrued towards the total, and thus overestimates actual catches (and value) taken from observed hauls within site boundaries. Additionally, it is likely that the catch would be taken in other

nearby areas, so costs to the fleet would be incurred through increased operational costs (increased fuel, lower CPUE, etc.), rather than forgone catch. Anecdotal reports, however, have suggested that in addition to operational costs, the Bering 2 site may cause crowding of the pollock fleet in years when the fish are holding deeper, potentially resulting in additional costs, gear conflicts, and other effects.

There would be no economic impacts on other fisheries. Although Alternative 3 options include prohibition on the use of dredge gear and dinglebar gear in the proposed HAPC areas, these gear types have not been used in these areas to date. Other fisheries using pot gear or longline gear would continue to be allowed to fish in these areas, and thus would be unaffected by the action.

Table 27. Bottom trawl catch (mt) per year, under Alternative 3. Sites not listed experienced no catch in the years examined.

HAPC Area and Year	Species catch, in metric tons (mt)											
	Atka Mackerel	Pollock – Bottom	Pacific Cod	Other Flatfish	Rockfish	Flathead Sole	Other Species	Rock Sole	Turbot	Arrowtooth	Yellowfin	Total
1. Bering 1	12	32	677	44	0	2	347	3	0	285	0	1,402
2003	7	0	171	0	0	0	347	0	0	108	0	633
2004	0	0	476	44	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	522
2005	6	0	30	0	0	0	0	0	0	136	0	172
2006	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2008	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	38	0	41
2009	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13
2010	0	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	22
2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2. Bering 2	110	35	489	716		298		83	182	5,671	12	7,595
2003	15	0	332	95	0	5	0	0	121	188	0	756
2004	0	0	128	365	0	170	0	83	39	620	0	1,406
2005	95	0	4	243	0	123	0	0	22	580	12	1,078
2006	0	0	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	397	0	422
2007	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	171	0	178
2008	0	17	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	1,382	0	1,403
2009	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,687	0	1,696
2010	0	9	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	391	0	401
2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	255	0	255
4. Pribilof	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	0	25
2003	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2004	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2005	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2006	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	5
2007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2008	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2009	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	0	14
2010	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	6
6. Pervenets	0	9	205	0	43	337	0	0	48	827	3	1,473
2003	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	48	0	0	55
2004	0	0	187	0	0	209	0	0	0	0	3	399
2005	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	118	0	118
2006	0	0	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	0	37
2007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2008	0	0	0	0	0	112	0	0	0	573	0	684
2009	0	0	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	117	0	126
2010	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2011	0	9	0	0	43	0	0	0	0	0	0	53
Total (mt)	122	77	1,371	759	43	637	347	86	230	6,808	15	10,495

Source: NMFS HCD and NPFMC.

Table 28. Gross ex-vessel value of nonpelagic (i.e., bottom trawl) trawl catch per year, under Alternative 3. Sites not listed experienced no catch in the years examined.

HAPC Area and Year	Species catch, in metric tons (mt)											Total	Average value/year
	Atka Mackerel	Pollock - Bottom	Pacific Cod	Other Flatfish	Rockfish	Flathead Sole	Other Species	Rock Sole	Turbot	Arrowtooth	Yellowfin		
1. Bering 1	3,045	10,987	345,387	15,883	0	940	109,776	1,086	0	109,071	0	596,175	66,242
2003	1,545	0	100,933	0	0	0	109,776	0	0	34,257	0	246,510	
2004	0	0	229,216	15,883	0	0	0	1,086	0	0	0	246,186	
2005	1,500	0	15,237	0	0	0	0	0	0	59,206	0	75,944	
2006	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2008	0	0	0	0	0	940	0	0	0	14,730	0	15,671	
2009	0	5,206	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5,206	
2010	0	5,781	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	877	0	6,658	
2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2. Bering 2	28,332	14,367	278,193	273,456	0	116,696	0	30,055	401,045	2,070,286	5,137	3,217,566	357,507
2003	3,514	0	195,633	30,114	0	1,581	0	0	266,046	59,574	0	556,462	
2004	0	0	61,903	132,421	0	61,751	0	30,055	86,792	225,209	0	598,131	
2005	24,817	0	2,048	105,978	0	53,365	0	0	48,206	252,451	5,137	492,002	
2006	0	0	18,608	0	0	0	0	0	0	174,639	0	193,247	
2007	0	0	0	2,913	0	0	0	0	0	70,729	0	73,642	
2008	0	7,914	0	1,618	0	0	0	0	0	532,119	0	541,650	
2009	0	3,829	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	538,044	0	541,873	
2010	0	2,624	0	411	0	0	0	0	0	131,534	0	134,570	
2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	85,988	0	85,988	
4. Pribilof	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8,705	0	8,705	967
2003	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2004	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2005	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2006	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2,244	0	2,244	
2007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2008	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2009	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4,510	0	4,510	
2010	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2011	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,951	0	1,951	
6. Pervenets	0	2,744	103,550	0	0	124,069	0	0	105,437	317,735	1,174	654,708	72,745
2003	0	0	0	0	0	2,397	0	0	105,437	0	0	107,834	
2004	0	0	89,906	0	0	75,894	0	0	0	0	1,174	166,974	
2005	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	51,581	0	51,581	
2006	0	0	13,643	0	0	0	0	0	0	8,375	0	22,019	
2007	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2008	0	0	0	0	0	43,029	0	0	0	220,457	0	263,486	
2009	0	0	0	0	0	2,749	0	0	0	37,321	0	40,071	
2010	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2011	0	2,744	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2,744	
Grand Total	31,376	28,098	727,129	289,339	0	241,705	109,776	31,141	506,482	2,505,795	6,311	4,477,153	497,461

Table 29. Pelagic trawl catch, in tons of groundfish (pollock) per year, in areas designated by Alternative 3.

HAPC Area and Year	Pollock – Bottom (mt)	Pollock – Midwater (mt)	Grand Total (mt)	Max. Est. Gross Ex-vessel Value^a
1. Bering 1	0	6,575	6,575	1,678,264
2003	0	381	381	89,687
2004	0	4,328	4,328	1,009,290
2005	0	39	39	10,725
2006	0	46	46	12,954
2007	0	246	246	69,815
2008	0	0	0	0
2009	0	275	275	114,345
2010	0	0	0	0
2011	0	1,260	1,260	371,448
2. Bering 2	427	7,558	7,986	1,487,372
2003	23	211	234	55,084
2004	322	1,369	1,691	394,341
2005	0	0	0	0
2006	42	1,262	1,303	366,925
2007	41	4,616	4,657	624,360
2008	0	101	101	46,662
2009	0	0	0	0
2010	0	0	0	0
2011	0	0	0	0
3. Bristol	0	5,828	5,828	1,380,484
2003	0	3,543	3,543	834,022
2004	0	2,016	2,016	470,131
2005	0	0	0	0
2006	0	5	5	1,408
2007	0	264	264	74,923
2008	0	0	0	0
2009	0	0	0	0
2010	0	0	0	0
2011	0	0	0	0
4. Pribilof	0	658	658	184,115
2003	0	0	0	0
2004	0	0	0	0
2005	0	216	216	59,400
2006	0	329	329	92,646
2007	0	113	113	32,069
2008	0	0	0	0
2009	0	0	0	0
2010	0	0	0	0
2011	0	0	0	0
5. Zhemchug	0	1,100	1,100	269,088
2003	0	0	0	0
2004	0	856	856	199,619
2005	0	213	213	58,575
2006	0	19	19	5,350
2007	0	0	0	0
2008	0	12	12	55,44
2009	0	0	0	0
2010	0	0	0	0
2011	0	0	0	0
6. Pervenets	0	14,570	14,570	4,919,662
2003	0	0	0	0
2004	0	0	0	0
2005	0	0	0	0
2006	0	0	0	0
2007	0	6,178	6,178	1,753,316
2008	0	3,556	3,556	1,642,872
2009	0	806	806	335,135
2010	0	4,031	4,031	1,188,339
2011	0	0	0	0
Total	4270	36,290	36,290	9,918,985

Source: NMFS HCD.

4.4.2 Effects on Processors and Communities

The effects of the alternatives and options on processors and communities would be expected to be insignificant, due to the relatively low catches from these proposed HAPC areas, and the likelihood that the catch can readily be made up elsewhere.

4.5 Effects on Management, Monitoring, and Enforcement

At the February 2012 Council meeting, the Enforcement Committee received an overview of the three alternatives presented in the analysis. During discussion, the Committee noted that if the Council wished to identify these skate egg concentration areas and to protect them using VMS monitoring, then there would be a minimum size requirement that would allow for protection, given the limitations of VMS polling (twice per hour), uncertainty in GPS locations, and the possible spatial dislocation between the vessel and gear. The Committee was informed that there was concern at the SSC about increasing a buffer beyond the distribution of the egg concentration site. However, while the Committee recognized the desire to use biological data (egg concentrations) to identify the sites, there would be a practical enforcement need to create a larger buffer to limit vessel activity, in order to ensure conservation of the biological resource.

The Committee stated that an area 5 nm per side would be the ideal minimum, because of the limits of VMS to accurately track a vessel through the area. With areas smaller than 5 nm per side, although providing some level of protection to the site, the likelihood of successful enforcement goes down substantially. It was further noted that although it is technically feasible to increase VMS polling frequency, it is unknown at this time whether this cost would be less than or greater than the cost of complying and it is a deviation from what are currently the accepted standards (once or twice per hour). There could be additional complications in implementing changes in how VMS operates in Alaska, and the Committee would be hesitant to recommend tweaking VMS, before current concerns can be addressed. The Committee's final recommendation to the Council was to design areas to accommodate current VMS limitations, rather than attempting to change VMS to accommodate smaller areas. The Committee also discussed the desire to align sides of areas with latitude and longitude, to the greatest extent practicable. It is more practical for enforcement personnel and USCG pilots to quickly determine whether a vessel is inside or outside of a protected area with margins along latitude and longitude lines, than an irregularly shaped area.

Due to the size of the Alaska region and the number of enforcement assets available, one of the most effective means of surveillance is by aircraft. While an aircraft can identify the type of vessel (e.g., longliner, trawler, seiner, pot boat, etc.), there is no way for aircraft to readily identify whether a trawl vessel is using pelagic or nonpelagic trawl gear. Because of the regulatory definitions of gear types, the only time an aircraft would be able to determine whether a vessel was using pelagic or nonpelagic trawl gear would be if they witnessed a haulback and noted chafing gear on the foot rope or roller gear. By definition, this would make the vessel a nonpelagic trawler. All other definitions used to identify whether a vessel is conducting pelagic or nonpelagic trawl activities must be conducted by a boarding team on the vessel.

In addition to surveillance by aircraft, a vast majority of trawlers active in the groundfish fisheries in these areas carry observers 100% of the time. An observer physically present on the deck at haul-back represents a significant disincentive for use of illegal trawl gear. While fishery observers are not enforcement agents and should not be placed in that role, it nonetheless seems reasonable that an observer's mere presence during the setting and retrieving of the trawl gear, given the very obvious physical differences between bottom and pelagic configurations, could be a compelling and effective deterrent to potential violators. A more considered examination of the 'risk' of detection incurred by a

would-be violator of a trawl-type restriction might alter the relative advantage of alternatives that contemplate banning one, as opposed to both, trawl configurations in the proposed HAPC areas.

One additional possible mitigating factor, at least for aerial surveillance, would be to have vessels declare what they are targeting and what gear they are using through their vessel monitoring systems (VMS) units. This is a system that is used extensively in other regions of the country, and allows enforcement personnel to quickly identify locations of various fleets, by gear type and targeted species. Observers are another possible mitigating factor, because they could be in a position to identify pelagic versus nonpelagic (bottom) trawls. The Enforcement Committee has noted that the Bering Sea trawl fleet is one of the most highly observed fishing fleets in the world, and the observer position reports, reviewed by enforcement personnel, could provide another potential information source.

The Enforcement Committee has recommended that the Council maintain square- or rectangular-shaped closures. Areas closed to certain gear types for conservation are more practical to enforce if they are square- or rectangle-shaped. It is more clear that a fishing vessel is either west/east or north/south of a delineation, and therefore in or outside a closed area using VMS or aircraft overflight. This clarity also benefits fishing vessels in avoiding or inadvertently entering a closure. There have been no cases based solely on VMS data that have stood up in court, unless a cutter or aircraft was able to verify that fishing gear was in the water, (i.e., to ensure the vessel is actively engaged in fishing, and not merely transiting slowly through the area, or dealing with mechanical or weather issues that slow them down).

If the Council wishes to protect the proposed skate egg concentration HAPCs, and VMS is the mechanism utilized to monitor closures of these areas, then the ideal minimum size according to the USCG and NOAA is approximately 5nm to a side. This is the minimum size that would provide sufficient buffer space in order to use VMS, as it is currently deployed and at current polling rates, to determine an incursion into the area. The primary reason for this size would be to guarantee that at least one VMS poll is within the much finer area that the Council wishes to protect, and to ensure that vessels do not transit all the way through the area between polls, or merely cut through the corners. This minimum size will guarantee that the U.S. Coast Guard and the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) would be able to get at least one VMS poll within the closed area despite issues of cutting the corner, or other means, and would ensure the smaller area is protected.

The distribution maps at each site of skate egg concentration (Appendix B – Color Figures 11 through 26) display two possible alternatives to determine the extent of the area, based on Alternatives 2 and 3. The red boundary is based on the distribution of trawl sites where skate eggs were greater than 1,000 per km², using the trawl with the highest concentration as the center of the box. The box design accomplishes two goals, that of estimating the effective habitat area and providing a small buffer around the site that produces a manageable area and shape to facilitate enforcement. The black boundary line expands the areas to comply with the recommendations of the Enforcement Committee.

4.5.1 Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS)

At its February 2012 meeting, the Council followed the Enforcement Committee's recommendations to achieve effective enforcement of the HAPC areas and modified Alternative 3 to establish a minimum size threshold for the areas to at least 5 nm to a side for areas smaller than 3 nm per side. For HAPC areas with at least 3nm per side, a buffer of 1 nm was added to the boundaries established in Alternative 2 in order to provide enough distance to allow VMS, as currently established in regulation, to be used as a tool to determine activity in the protected area in a legal setting. The intent of this modification to Alternative 3 was to allow for effective VMS tracking for enforcement.

VMS in Alaska is a relatively simple system involving a tamperproof VMS unit, set to report a vessel identification and location at fixed 30-minute intervals to the NOAA Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement (OLE). Some of these units allow NOAA OLE to communicate with the unit and modify the reporting frequency. VMS is an essential requirement to show the vessel was at-sea, how long it was out, where it docked when it came into port, and the present vessel location. VMS is capable of understanding and recording small details of the ship's evolutions. It can document, for instance, specific course changes and engine speed changes by a vessel. Collectively this pattern is termed a signature. At present, there are not enough data to make a signature admissible in court as an indicator of fishing. Regardless, VMS technicians are trained to look at positioning data and other factors indicating potential fishing activity. An investigator can be dispatched to the landing site, intercepting the vessel as it comes into port or even when it anchors in a remote area. If the captain and crew are believed to have illegally harvested a limited access program (LAP) species, the agent or officer can intercept the vessel. If, during the course of an initial investigation, a violation surfaces, the agent or officer will bring the vessel to port, seize the catch, and cite the errant fisherman.

All of the trawl vessels that would be potentially affected by closures under Alternative 3 are required to have VMS. Fleets currently without VMS units (halibut IFQ, halibut CDQ, GOA sablefish IFQ, and jig), are not affected by this action, and thus monitoring the proposed HAPC sites with VMS holds some promise.

4.5.2 Vessel Speed and Distance Traveled

A simple speed calculation helps relate how far a vessel may travel at that speed given a certain measure of time. Distance traveled (in nautical miles) equals the speed (knots) of the vessel times the number of minutes traveled divided by 60.

Equation 2. The relationship between distance and vessel speed.

$$d = s*t/60$$

For different speeds, different distances are traveled (see table below). Generally, fishing vessels transit at speeds seven knots or faster, tow fishing nets at speeds averaging roughly four knots (some vessels tow faster, however six knots is rarely exceeded when towing), and haul fixed fishing gear at slow speeds usually not to exceed one to two knots.

Table 30. Relationship of time, speed and distance for VMS polling rates.

t = time (min)	3 knots d = distance (nm)	4 knots d = distance (nm)	6 knots d = distance (nm)	10 knots d = distance (nm)
0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
5	0.25	0.33	0.50	0.83
10	0.50	0.67	1.00	1.67
15	0.75	1.00	1.50	2.50
20	1.00	1.33	2.00	3.33
25	1.25	1.67	2.50	4.17
30	1.50	2.00	3.00	5.00
35	1.75	2.33	3.50	5.83
40	2.00	2.67	4.00	6.67
45	2.25	3.00	4.50	7.50
50	2.50	3.33	5.00	8.33
55	2.75	3.67	5.50	9.17
60	3.00	4.00	6.00	10.00

Source: NMFS HCD.

Current regulations require vessels to transmit data two times per hour via VMS (polling rate). In order to establish a vessel track line, two back-to-back positions are needed to create a vessel track line. By calculating time, speed, and distance, a vessel traveling at a speed of four knots would travel four nautical miles (nm) in one hour (60 minutes) or 2nm in one-half hour (30 minutes)¹². Thus, a vessel traveling at four knots transmits a VMS position twice every hour or once every 2nm. This creates a polling rate of two times per hour. The result is the polling rate sets a minimum distance to establish a two position track line.

Distance traveled calculations are plotted for each HAPC site (see figures below). A strong correlation exists between the size of the HAPC area and the polling rate needed to establish the two position track line within each site. This creates a level of confidence in order to be certain any conservation measures, such as gear restrictions, are monitored and enforceable. Specifically, Bering 2 and Pervenets HAPC sites are large areas and the current polling rate of two times per hour allows for a vessel track line to be established over the majority of the HAPC.

¹² For this analysis, the speed of 4 knots is used to represent the speed of a vessel towing trawl gear.

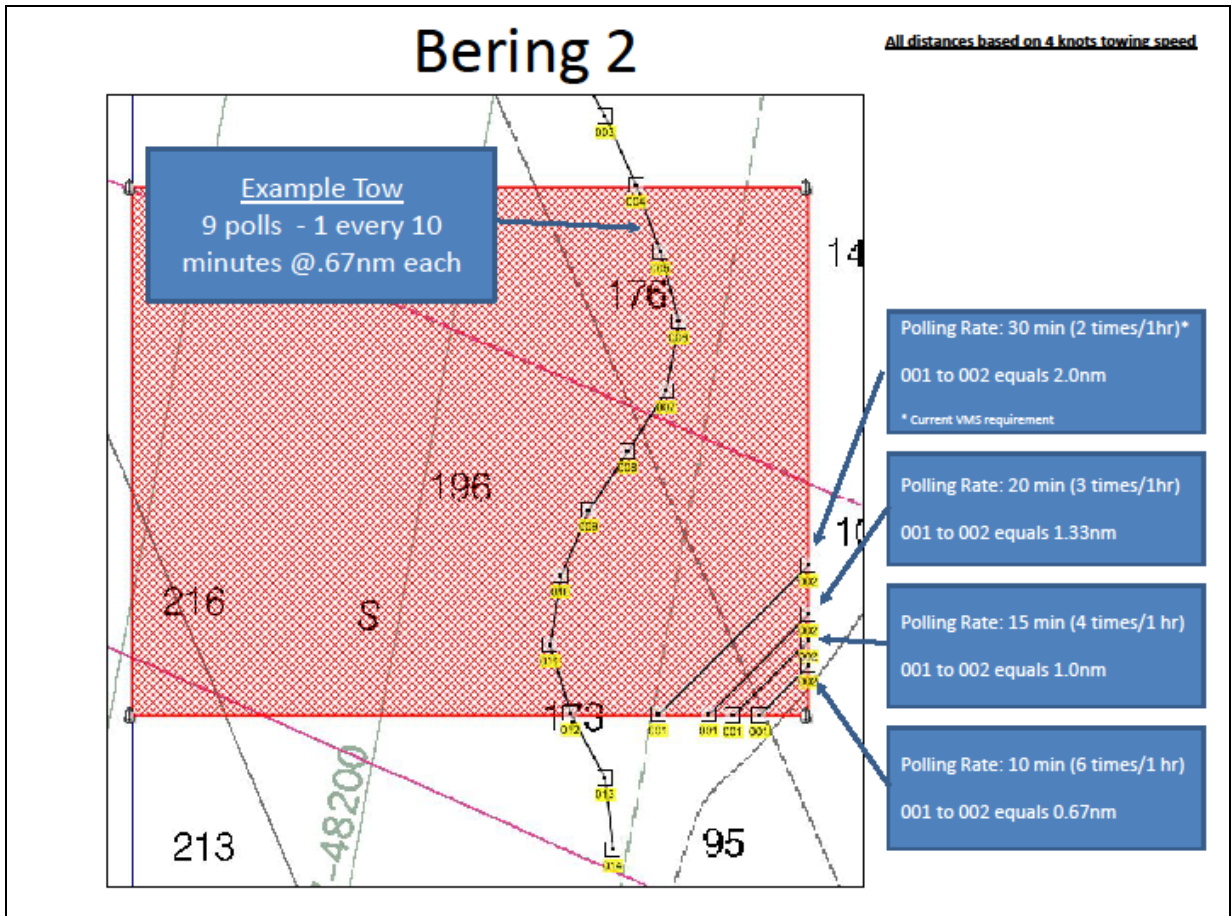


Figure 5. Illustration of the effects of different VMS polling rates relative to the Bering 2 site, with boundaries described under Alternative 2.

Using the same polling rate, the Pribilof and Zhemchug HAPCs are small and the two times per hour rate is not adequate to confidently establish a two position track line within the HAPC. In these smaller areas, a polling rate of once every ten minutes (6 times per hour) would provide similar confidence as compared to the larger areas.

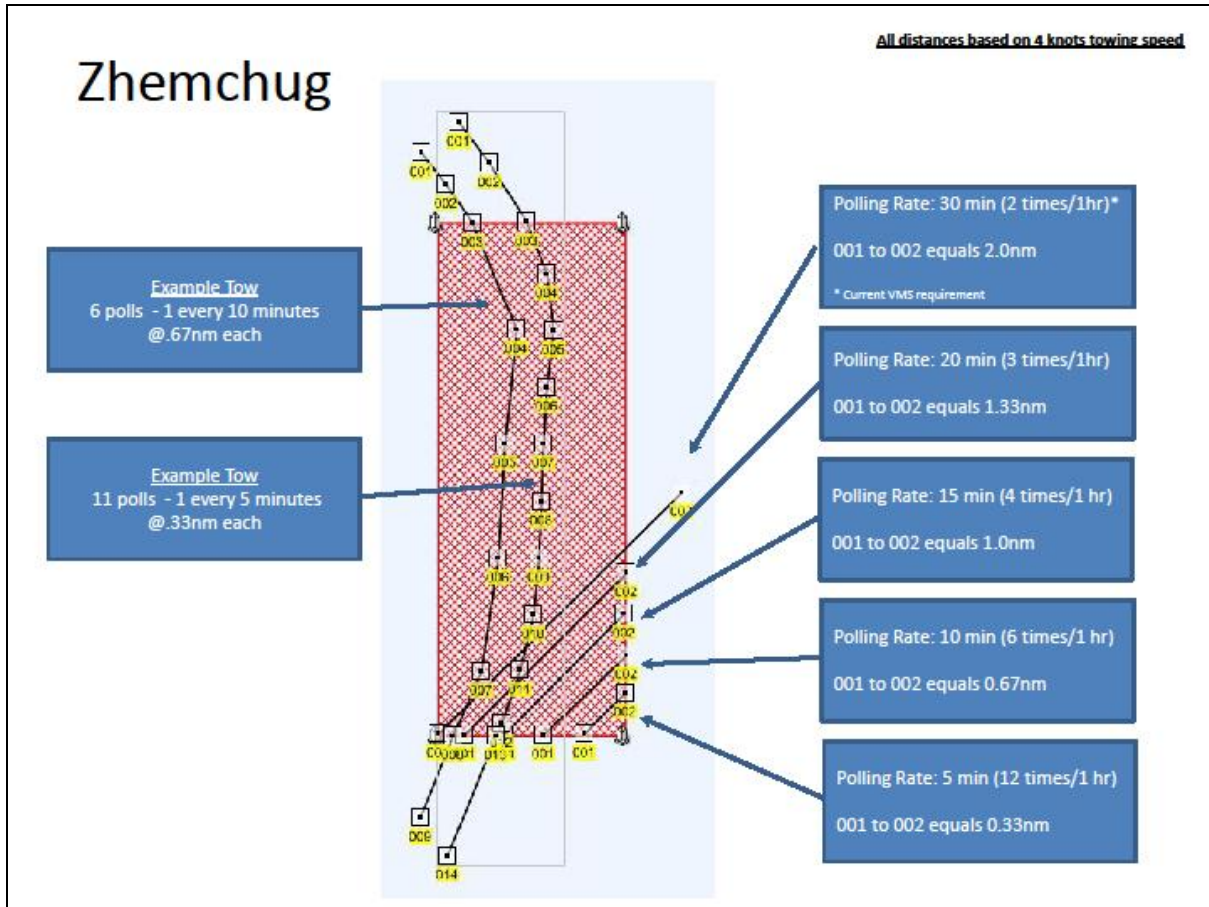


Figure 6. Illustration of the effects of different VMS polling rates relative to the Zhemchug site, with boundaries described under Alternative 2.

The Bering 1 and Bristol HAPCs are medium in size. The two times per hour polling rate would establish a two position track line, however the confidence is less. For these HAPCs, a polling rate of once every fifteen minutes (4 times per hour) would provide similar confidence as compared to the larger areas.

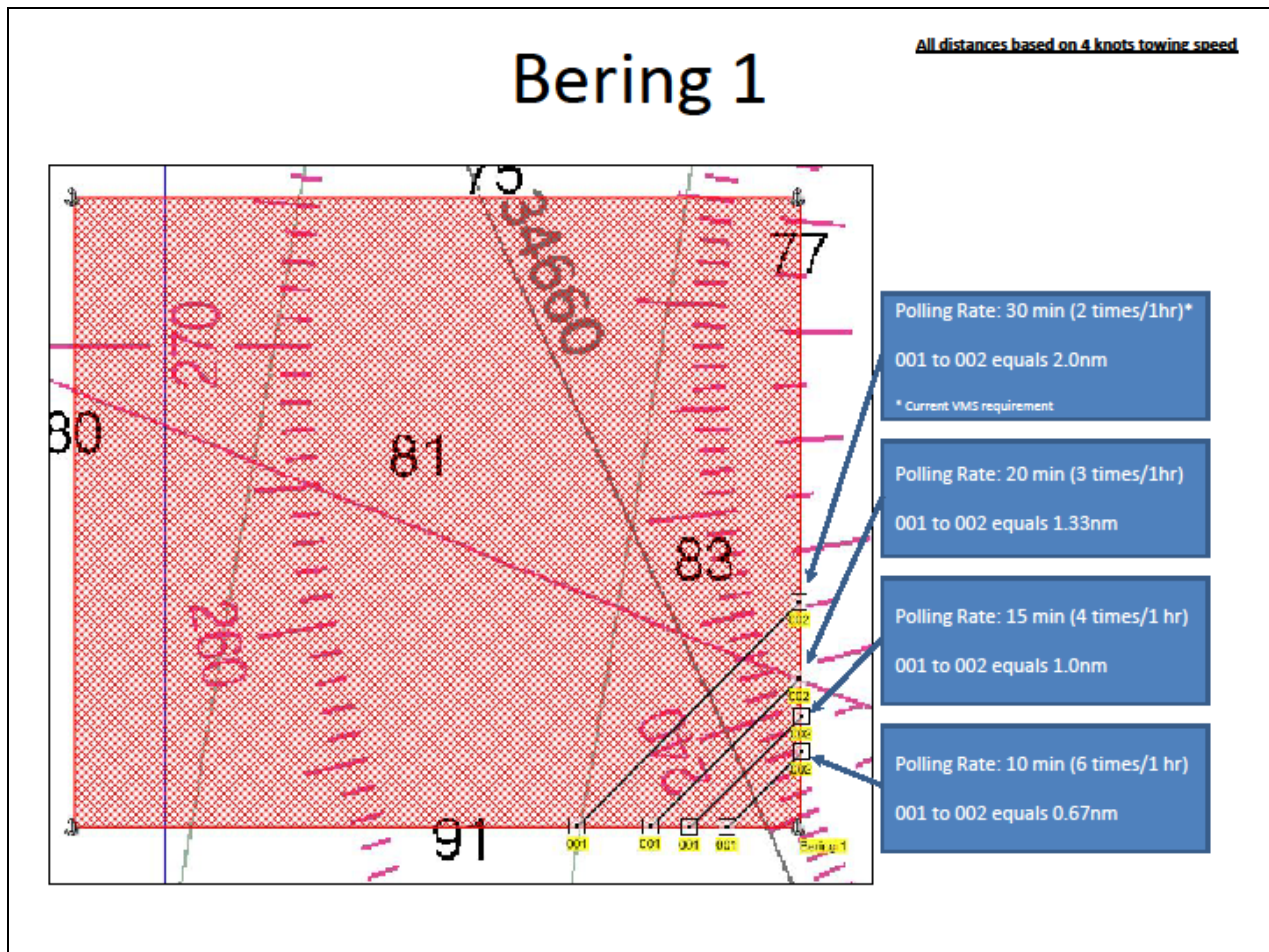


Figure 7. Illustration of the effects of different VMS polling rates relative to the Bering 1 site, with boundaries described under Alternative 2.

In summary, an increased polling rate would be needed to adequately monitor smaller and medium sites, should VMS be used for monitoring. In all cases, an increase in the polling rate creates greater confidence to establish vessels activities in the HAPCs.

Costs of increased polling rates can be calculated as follows, given:

- 1) Trawl Speeds of 4 knots
- 2) General horizontal accuracy of GPS systems is 100 Meters for land based mobile objects
- 3) Accuracy of GPS units at sea is decreased by the movement of the vessel in 3 dimensions (Pitch and Roll)
- 4) Costs are based upon the average change \$ cost between 1 and 2 polls/hr, and are extrapolated out at \$25.88 per additional poll per month.

Then, once you get to the point where the GPS error is equal to or greater than the change in distance travelled between polls, you begin to lose any additional benefit (see Table 31).

Table 31. Increased VMS poll rates – distances and costs.

Poll Rate/hr	Distance Travelled (NM)	Distance (yds)	Change in Distance (NM)	Change (yds)	AVG Monthly Cost to Industry	AVG Annual Cost	Minutes between polls
1	4.000	8000			\$42.00	\$504.00	60.00
2	2.000	4000	2.000	4000	\$67.88	\$814.56	30.00
3	1.333	2667	0.667	1333	\$93.76	\$1,125.12	20.00
4	1.000	2000	0.333	667	\$119.64	\$1,435.68	15.00
5	0.800	1600	0.200	400	\$145.52	\$1,746.24	12.00
6	0.667	1333	0.133	267	\$171.40	\$2,056.80	10.00
7	0.571	1143	0.095	190	\$197.28	\$2,367.36	8.57
8	0.500	1000	0.071	143	\$223.16	\$2,677.92	7.50
9	0.444	889	0.056	111	\$249.04	\$2,988.48	6.67
10	0.400	800	0.044	89	\$274.92	\$3,299.04	6.00
11	0.364	727	0.036	73	\$300.80	\$3,609.60	5.45
12	0.333	667	0.030	61	\$326.68	\$3,920.16	5.00
13	0.308	615	0.026	51	\$352.56	\$4,230.72	4.62
14	0.286	571	0.022	44	\$378.44	\$4,541.28	4.29
15	0.267	533	0.019	38	\$404.32	\$4,851.84	4.00

Source: USCG.

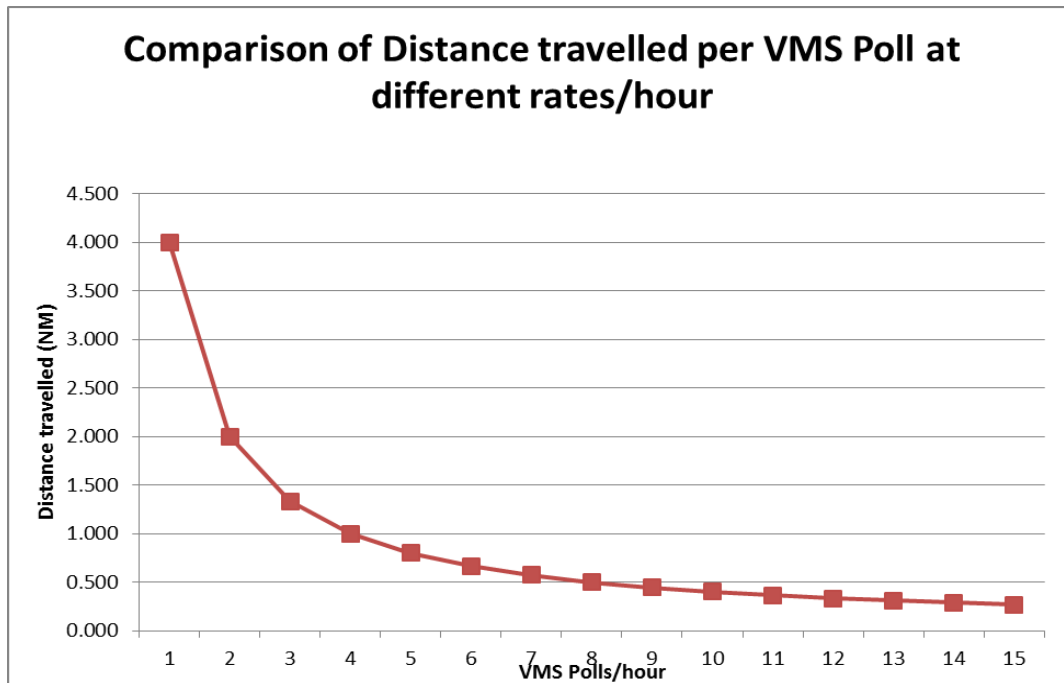


Figure 8. Relationship between the distances a vessel travels (nm) and increasing VMS polls per hour.

Source: USCG.

4.5.3 Geo-fence Application for HAPC Sites

A geo-fence is a virtual perimeter for a real-world geographic area. When used in conjunction with VMS, geo-fencing allows enforcement to create an area which, when entered by a vessel equipped with VMS, will trigger an increased polling rate. When the vessel exits this area, the polling rate will be reduced to the normal rate. Geo-fencing also allows for alerts (generally email or text message) to be sent to the agency or VMS user if deemed necessary. Increased polling as well as email alerts would result in higher VMS costs that may need be borne by industry using these areas.

Geo-fencing is a spatial management application not currently used in Alaska. However, its application has potential to regulate EFH and HAPC conservation areas. Currently, VMS is used to monitor fishing activities within EFH and HAPC conservation areas (71 FR 36694 June 28 2006). Vessels required to use VMS transmitters report vessel characteristics two times every hour. A geo-fence creates an electronic spatial extension of specific area (not a physically structured fence). The fence monitor (receiver) is triggered when the electronic transmitter crosses the 'fence' or boundary line. For use in fishery conservation management, the geo-fence would be triggered when vessel required to transmit via VMS crosses a spatially explicit management boundary. Importantly, more than one parameter can be linked to an individual VMS transmitter, including position, vessel characteristics, type, and speed. Not all vessel behaviors warrant a closer look within an area. A closer look is triggered when a vessel of a certain type enters a geo-fence and exhibits certain behavior, such as reduced speeds for fishing. In this instance, the vessel's speed is at slower than normal transit speed (approximately 4 knots). Vessel type and behavior would alert OLE VMS observers for further investigation, if warranted. Lastly, the geo-fence would be activated when a vessel carrying VMS first crosses the boundary line and then at specific intervals, depending on the size and the confidence to adequately monitor vessel activities in each area, until the vessel departs the geo-fenced area.

4.5.4 Automatic Identification System (AIS)

An alternative tool to VMS is the site-based Automated Information System (AIS). This alternative to VMS could provide some of the location information that is provided by VMS. AIS is a shipboard broadcast system that functions similar to a transponder, operating in the VHF maritime band, and has a capacity 4,500 or more reports per minute. AIS can update as often as every two seconds, utilizing Self-Organizing Time Division Multiple Access (SOTDMA) technology to meet this high broadcast rate. The Marine Exchange has installed AIS receivers at many locations throughout Southeast Alaska. State of Alaska grant funds are being used to extend the Alaska Maritime Safety Net, which is currently comprised of at least 75 sites from Prudhoe Bay, west to Adak, and south to Ketchikan

Each AIS system consists of one VHF transmitter, two VHF TDMA receivers, one VHF DSC receiver, and standard marine electronic communications links to shipboard display and sensor. Position and timing information is normally derived from an integral or external global navigation satellite system (e.g. GPS) receiver. Other information broadcast is electronically obtained from shipboard equipment through standard marine data connections. Heading information and course and speed over ground would normally be provided by all AIS-equipped ships. Other information, such as rate of turn, angle of heel, pitch and roll, and destination and ETA could also be provided.

The AIS transponder normally works in an autonomous and continuous mode, regardless of whether it is operating in the open seas or coastal or inland areas, to avoid overlap of transmissions. Although only one radio channel is necessary, each station transmits and receives over two radio channels to avoid interference problems, and to allow channels to be shifted without communications loss from other ships.

The system provides for automatic contention resolution between itself and other stations, and communications integrity is maintained even in overload situations.

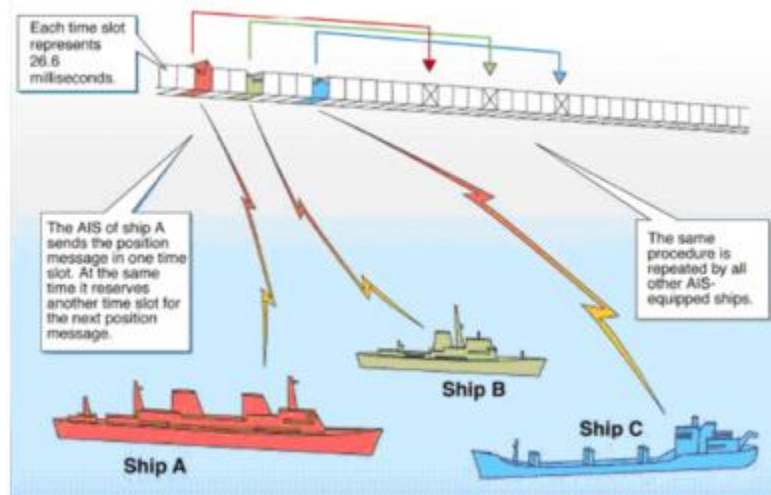


Figure 9. Schematic of time slots and vessel communication under AIS.

AIS coverage range is similar to other VHF applications, essentially depending on the height of the antenna. Its propagation is slightly better than that of radar, due to the longer wavelength, so it is possible to “see” around bends and behind islands if the land masses are not too high. A typical value to be expected at sea is nominally 20 nautical miles.

There are significant issues with this system as the information is not protected. Because anyone can get access to AIS information, many fishermen turn their AIS unit off while they are fishing to protect their fishing locations from their competitors. In addition, AIS is not a satellite based system, so it is contingent upon line of sight communications and receive locations. There are currently not enough AIS receivers around the state to provide accurate fishing locations. U.S. Coast Guard type approved AIS units range in price from \$500 for an AIS Class B transponder to \$4,000 for an AIS Class A transponder, not including installation. Costs vary greatly for installation due to the differences in vessel configuration and level of integration necessary for other shipboard systems.

4.6 Net Benefits to the Nation

Overall benefits to the Nation may be affected by the proposed actions, though our ability to quantify those effects is limited to a qualitative description. HAPCs are specific subsets of EFH that highlight specific habitat areas with extremely important ecological functions and/or areas that are especially vulnerable to human-induced degradation. These are areas where fisheries management identifies a need to conserve sensitive, rare habitats from anthropogenic activities such as fishing or development. All stakeholders would generally benefit from enhanced sustainability of skate populations. Skate egg deposition areas are ideal candidates for spatial management because they are fixed geographical locations, are highly localized, and will receive long term benefits from additional conservation. Designating these six proposed areas as HAPCs is also consistent with the Council’s emphasis on an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. Ecological and biological “benefits” may accrue from stability of habitat, avoidance of benthic disturbance, and skate biomass productivity. In summary, each of the action alternatives and options would be expected to increase the overall net benefits to the Nation, relative to the status quo.

5.0 INITIAL REGULATORY FLEXIBILITY ANALYSIS (IRFA)

5.1 Introduction

This Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (IRFA) addresses the statutory requirements of the Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA) of 1980, as amended by the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act (SBREFA) of 1996 (5 U.S.C. §§601-612). When an agency proposes regulations, the RFA requires the agency to prepare and make available for public comment an IRFA that describes the impact of the proposed rule on small businesses, small nonprofit entities, and small government entities. The IRFA is to aid the agency in considering all reasonable regulatory alternatives that would minimize the economic impact on the small entities to which the proposed rule applies. This IRFA evaluates the potential adverse economic impacts on small entities directly regulated by the proposed actions.

The RFA, first enacted in 1980, was designed to place the burden on the government to review all regulations to ensure that, while accomplishing their intended purposes, they do not unduly inhibit the ability of small entities to compete. The RFA recognizes that the size of a business, unit of government, or nonprofit organization frequently has a bearing on its ability to comply with a Federal regulation. Major goals of the RFA are: a) to increase agency awareness and understanding of the impact of their regulations on small business, b) to require that agencies communicate and explain their findings to the public, and c) to encourage agencies to use flexibility and to provide regulatory relief to small entities. The RFA emphasizes predicting impacts on small entities as a group distinct from other entities, and on the consideration of alternatives that may minimize adverse economic impacts, while still achieving the stated objective of the action.

On March 29, 1996, President Clinton signed the SBREFA. Among other things, the new law amended the RFA to allow judicial review of an agency's compliance with the RFA. The 1996 amendments also updated the requirements for a final regulatory flexibility analysis, including a description of the steps an agency must take to minimize the significant economic impact on small entities. Finally, the 1996 amendments expanded the authority of the Chief Counsel for Advocacy of the Small Business Administration (SBA) to file *amicus* briefs in court proceedings involving an agency's alleged violation of the RFA.

In determining the scope, or “universe”, of the entities to be considered in an IRFA, NMFS generally includes only those entities that can reasonably be expected to be directly regulated by the proposed action. If the effects of the rule fall primarily on a distinct segment, or portion thereof, of the industry (e.g., user group, gear type, geographic area), NMFS would consider that segment the universe for the purpose of this analysis. NMFS interprets the intent of the RFA to address negative economic impacts, not beneficial impacts, and thus such a focus exists in analyses that are designed to address RFA compliance.

Data on cost structure, affiliation, and operational procedures and strategies in the fishing sectors subject to the proposed regulatory action are insufficient, at present, to permit preparation of a “factual basis” upon which to certify that the preferred alternative does not have the potential to result in “significant adverse impacts on a substantial number of small entities” (as those terms are defined under the RFA). Because, based on all available information, it is not possible to “certify” this outcome, should the proposed action be adopted, a formal IRFA has been prepared and is included in this package for Secretarial review.

5.2 IRFA Requirements

Until the Council makes a final decision on a preliminary preferred alternative(s) (PPA), a definitive assessment of the proposed management alternatives, within the context of the RFA, cannot be conducted. In order to allow the agency to make a certification decision, or to satisfy the requirements of an RFAA of the PPA, this section addresses the requirements for an IRFA. The level of detail and sophistication of the analysis should reflect the significance of the impact on small entities. Under 5 U.S.C. 603(b) of the RFA, each IRFA is required to address:

- A description of the reasons why action by the agency is being considered;
- A succinct Statement of the objectives of, and the legal basis for, the proposed rule;
- A description of and, where feasible, an estimate of the number of small entities to which the proposed rule will apply (including a profile of the industry divided into industry segments, if appropriate);
- A description of the projected reporting, record keeping, and other compliance requirements of the proposed rule, including an estimate of the classes of small entities that will be subject to the requirement and the type of professional skills necessary for preparation of the report or record;
- An identification, to the extent practicable, of all relevant Federal rules that may duplicate, overlap, or conflict with the proposed rule;
- A description of any significant alternatives to the proposed rule that accomplish the Stated objectives of the proposed action, consistent with applicable statutes, and that would minimize any significant economic impact of the proposed rule on small entities. Consistent with the Stated objectives of applicable statutes, the analysis shall discuss significant alternatives, such as:
 1. The establishment of differing compliance or reporting requirements or timetables that take into account the resources available to small entities;
 2. The clarification, consolidation, or simplification of compliance and reporting requirements under the rule for such small entities;
 3. The use of performance rather than design standards;
 4. An exemption from coverage of the rule, or any part thereof, for such small entities.

In preparing an IRFA, an agency may provide either a quantifiable or numerical description of the effects of a proposed action (and alternatives to the proposed action), or more general descriptive statements, if quantification is not practicable or reliable.

5.3 Definition of a Small Entity

The RFA recognizes and defines three kinds of small entities: small businesses, small non-profit organizations, and small government jurisdictions.

5.3.1 Small Businesses

Section 601(3) of the RFA defines a “small business” as having the same meaning as “small business concern,” which is defined under Section 3 of the Small Business Act (SBA). “Small business” or “small business concern” includes any firm that is independently owned and operated and not dominant in its field of operation. The SBA has further defined a “small business concern” as one “organized for profit,

with a place of business located in the United States, and which operates primarily within the United States or which makes a significant contribution to the U.S. economy through payment of taxes or use of American products, materials or labor. A small business concern may be in the legal form of an individual proprietorship, partnership, limited liability company, corporation, joint venture, association, trust or cooperative, except that where the firm is a joint venture there can be no more than 49% participation by foreign business entities in the joint venture.”

The SBA has established size criteria for all major industry sectors in the United States, including fish harvesting and fish processing businesses. Effective January 5, 2006, a business involved in fish harvesting is a small business if it is independently owned and operated, not dominant in its field of operation (including its affiliates), and if it has combined annual gross receipts not in excess of \$4.0 million for all its affiliated operations worldwide.¹³ A seafood processor is a small business if it is independently owned and operated, not dominant in its field of operation, and employs 500 or fewer persons on a full-time, part-time, temporary, or other basis, at all its affiliated operations worldwide. A business involved in both the harvesting and processing of seafood products is a small business if it meets the \$4.0 million criterion for fish harvesting operations. Finally, a wholesale business servicing the fishing industry is a small business if it employs 100 or fewer persons on a full-time, part-time, temporary, or other basis, at all its affiliated operations worldwide.

The SBA has established “principles of affiliation” to determine whether a business concern is “independently owned and operated.” In general, business concerns are affiliates of each other when one concern controls or has the power to control the other, or a third party controls or has the power to control both. The SBA considers factors such as ownership, management, previous relationships with or ties to another concern, and contractual relationships, in determining whether affiliation exists. Individuals or firms that have identical or substantially identical business or economic interests, such as family members, persons with common investments, or firms that are economically dependent through contractual or other relationships, are treated as one party with such interests aggregated when measuring the size of the concern in question. The SBA counts the receipts or employees of the concern whose size is at issue and those of all its domestic and foreign affiliates, regardless of whether the affiliates are organized for profit, in determining the concern’s size. However, business concerns owned and controlled by Indian Tribes, Alaska Regional or Village Corporations organized pursuant to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (43 U.S.C. 1601), Native Hawaiian Organizations, or Community Development Corporations authorized by 42 U.S.C. 9805 are not considered affiliates of such entities, or with other concerns owned by these entities solely because of their common ownership.

Affiliation may be based on stock ownership when: a) a person is an affiliate of a concern if the person owns or controls, or has the power to control 50 % or more of its voting stock, or a block of stock which affords control because it is large compared to other outstanding blocks of stock, or b) if two or more persons each owns, controls or has the power to control less than 50% of the voting stock of a concern, with minority holdings that are equal or approximately equal in size, but the aggregate of these minority holdings is large as compared with any other stock holding, each such person is presumed to be an affiliate of the concern.

Affiliation may be based on common management or joint venture arrangements. Affiliation arises where one or more officers, directors, or general partners, controls the board of directors and/or the management

¹³ Effective January 6, 2006, the SBA updated the Gross Annual Receipts thresholds for determining “small entity” status under the RFA. This is a periodic action to account for the impact of economic inflation. The revised threshold for “commercial fishing” operations (which, at present, has been determined by NMFS HQ to include catcher-processors, as well as catcher vessels) changed from \$3.5 million to \$4.0 million in annual gross receipts, from all its economic activities and affiliated operations, worldwide.

of another concern. Parties to a joint venture also may be affiliates. A contractor and subcontractor are treated as joint venturers if the ostensible subcontractor will perform primary and vital requirements of a contract or if the prime contractor is unusually reliant upon the ostensible subcontractor. All requirements of the contract are considered in reviewing such relationship, including contract management, technical responsibilities, and the percentage of subcontracted work.

5.3.2 Small Organizations

The RFA defines “small organizations” as any not-for-profit enterprise that is independently owned and operated, and is not dominant in its field.

5.3.3 Small Governmental Jurisdictions

The RFA defines “small governmental jurisdictions” as governments of cities, counties, towns, townships, villages, school districts, or special districts with populations of fewer than 50,000.

5.4 Reasons for Consideration of Proposed Actions

In the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA), Congress recognized that one of the greatest long-term threats to the viability of commercial and recreational fisheries is the continuing loss of marine, estuarine, and other aquatic habitats. Congress adopted specific requirements for FMPs to identify Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and minimize to the extent practicable any adverse effects of fishing on EFH. In the regulations implementing the EFH provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, NMFS encourages Councils to identify types or areas of habitat within EFH as HAPCs (50 CFR 600.815(a)(8)). HAPCs provide a valuable mechanism to acknowledge areas where more is known about the ecological function and/or vulnerability of EFH, and to highlight priority areas within EFH for conservation and management. HAPCs and associated management measures considered by the Council would provide additional habitat protection and further minimize potential adverse effects of fishing on EFH. Such actions are consistent with the EFH Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), because they address potential impacts that are discussed in the EIS. In effect, through its evaluation of HAPCs, the Council is considering new measures that would be precautionary.

The Council adopted the following Statement of Purpose and Need at its June 2012 meeting:

HAPC are geographic sites that fall within the distribution of Essential Fish Habitat for the Council’s managed species. The Council has a formalized process, identified in its FMPs, for selecting HAPCs that begins with the Council identifying habitat priorities—here, areas of skate egg concentration. Candidate HAPCs must be responsive to the Council priority, must be rare (defined as uncommon habitat that occurs in discrete areas within only one or two Alaska regions), and must meet one of three other considerations: provide an important ecological function; be sensitive to human-induced degradation; or be stressed by development activities.

The candidate HAPC identify sites of egg concentration by skate species (Rajidae) in the eastern Bering Sea. Skates are elasmobranch fish that are long-lived, slow to mature, and produce few young. Skates deposit egg cases in soft substrates on the sea floor in small, distinct sites. A reproducing skate deposits only several egg cases during each reproductive season. Depending on the species, a single egg case can hold from one to four individual skate embryos, and development can take up to three years. Thus, a single egg case site will hold several year classes and species, and eggs growing at different rates.

Distinct skate egg deposition sites have been highlighted by skate stock experts while assessing skate information from research survey and catch locations. The scientists noted repeated findings of distinct sites where egg cases recruit to sampling or fishing gear contacting the sea floor: egg case prongs (or horns) entangle in or cases recruits into the gear. These sites are discrete areas near the shelf/slope break that serve as important spawning and embryonic development areas for skate species. It is therefore important to consider: 1) designating these areas as HAPCs; 2) to consider restricting activities which impact the habitat at these sites; and 3) to monitor the continued utility of these sites for skate spawning and embryonic development, and further study for the relationship between the habitat features of these sites and site selection for skate egg deposition.

5.5 Legal Basis for Proposed Actions

Actions taken to amend FMPs or implement other regulations governing these fisheries must meet the requirements of federal laws and regulations. In addition to the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the most important of these are the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), EO 12866, and the RFA.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA), the U.S. has exclusive fishery management authority over all marine fishery resources found within the EEZ, 3 to 200 nautical miles from the baseline used to measure the territorial sea. The management of these marine resources is vested in the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) and in the Regional Councils. In the Alaska Region, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council has the responsibility for preparing FMPs for the marine fisheries it finds that require conservation and management, and for submitting their recommendations to the Secretary. Upon approval by the Secretary, NMFS is charged with carrying out the federal mandates of the Department of Commerce with regard to marine and anadromous fish. The groundfish fisheries in the EEZ off Alaska are managed under the FMP for the Groundfish Fisheries of the GOA and the FMP for the Groundfish Fisheries of the BSAI. The crab fisheries in the EEZ off Alaska are managed under the FMP for the Crab Fisheries of the BSAI. The scallop fisheries in the EEZ off Alaska are managed under the FMP for the Scallop Fisheries of Alaska. The halibut fishery is managed by the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC), which was established by a Convention between the governments of Canada and the United States. The IPHC's mandate is research on and management of the stocks of Pacific halibut within the Convention waters of both nations.

5.6 Small Entities Impacted by Actions

The entities that could be directly regulated by the proposed action are those businesses that use trawl gear to harvest pollock and other groundfish, and dredge gear to harvest scallops in the waters off of Alaska. Entities that participate in the Bering Sea scallop fishery include up to 3 vessels < 124' LOA, and would not be considered small entities.

Entities that participate in the Bering Sea bottom trawl groundfish fisheries include Amendment 80 catcher processor vessels and approximately 15 catcher vessels that fish with bottom trawls that are neither Amendment 80 vessels nor AFA affiliated vessels (of which a few of the 15 could be considered small entities). The catcher processors that are members of the Amendment 80 sector that target flatfish, Atka mackerel, Pacific cod, and Pacific ocean perch in the EEZ of the BSAI, using trawl gear.

Earnings from all Alaska fisheries for 2009 were matched with the vessels that are members of the Amendment 80 sector and participate in the BSAI groundfish fisheries for that year. There are a total of

28 Amendment 80 qualified catcher processors in the sector. Based on the known affiliations and joint ownership of the Amendment 80 vessels, all vessels in the sector would be categorized as a large entity for the purpose of the RFA. Due to their participation in a harvest cooperative or through known ownership of multiple vessels, co-ownerships and “shares” ownership arrangement among vessels, and other economic and operational affiliations, it is the aggregate annual gross receipts of all affiliated operations worldwide, which are relevant under the SBA rules.

Entities that participate in the directed pollock trawl fishery in the Bering Sea include the American Fisheries Act (AFA) affiliated pollock fleet and the six western Alaska Community Development Quota Program (CDQ) groups that receive allocations of BS pollock. A summary of small and large entities participating in the pollock fishery are listed below.

Entity class	Units	Directly regulated by action	Small	Non-small
Catcher/processors	Vessels	Yes	0	16
Motherships	Vessels	Yes	0	3
Catcher vessels	Vessels	Yes	0	90
Inshore processors	Plants (including fixed floating platforms)	Yes	0	7
CDQ groups	Non-profit organizations	Yes	6	0

The RFA requires a consideration of affiliations among entities for the purpose of assessing if an entity is small. The AFA pollock cooperatives in the BS are an important type of affiliation. All of the non-CDQ entities directly regulated by the proposed action were members of AFA cooperatives in 2008 and, therefore, NMFS considers them “affiliated” large (non-small) entities for RFA purposes.

Due to their status as non-profit corporations, the six CDQ groups are identified as “small” entities. This proposed action directly regulates the six CDQ groups, and NMFS considers the CDQ groups to be small entities for RFA purposes. As described in regulations implementing the RFA (13 CFR 121.103) the CDQ groups’ affiliations with other large entities do not define them as large entities. Revenue derived from groundfish allocations and investments in BSAI fisheries enable these non-profit corporations to better comply with the burdens of this action, when compared to many of the large AFA affiliated entities. Nevertheless, the small entities that are directly regulated by this action include the six CDQ groups.

Description of the CDQ groups

The CDQ Program was designed to improve the social and economic conditions in western Alaska communities by facilitating their economic participation in the BSAI fisheries. In aggregate, CDQ groups share a 10 percent allocation of the BSAI pollock total allowable catch (TAC).¹⁴ These allocations, in turn, provide an opportunity for residents of these communities to participate in and benefit from the BSAI fisheries, through their association with one of the CDQ groups. The 65 communities, with approximately 27,000 total residents, benefit from participation in the CDQ Program, but are not directly

¹⁴The CDQ Program also receives allocations of other groundfish TAC that range from 10.7% for Amendment 80 species, to 7.5% for most other species; however, these allocated amounts are not affected by this action.

regulated by this action. The six non-profit corporations (CDQ groups), formed to manage and administer the CDQ allocations, investments, and economic development projects are:

- Aleutian Pribilof Island Community Development Association (APICDA)
- Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation (BBEDC)
- Central Bering Sea Fishermen’s Association (CBSFA)
- Coastal Villages Region Fund (CVRF)
- Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC)
- Yukon Delta Fisheries Development Association (YDFDA)

The pollock fishery harvests on the order of 1 million metric tons of pollock each year (some years substantially more, some somewhat less) and provides millions of dollars in revenue to western Alaska CDQ communities through various channels, including the direct catch and sale or leasing of quota to various harvesting partners. The vessels harvesting CDQ pollock are the same vessels conducting AFA non-CDQ pollock harvesting. In addition to pollock allocations, CDQ groups have made significant investments in the at-sea pollock fleet as well as in hook & line and pot fisheries for such species as halibut, sablefish, crab, and Pacific cod. In addition, several of the CDQ groups have made, and continue to make, investments in fisheries and community infrastructure to support traditional local salmon fisheries in their regions.

5.7 Recordkeeping and Reporting Requirements

The proposed rule does not directly mandate “reporting” or “record keeping” within the meaning of the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA). However, implementing rules could contain compliance requirements not subject to the PRA. For example, implementing regulations could prohibit the use of certain types of fishing gear in habitat areas designated as HAPCs.

Of those vessels that could be directly regulated, only a small fraction would incur compliance costs as a result of the implemented rule. In many cases, it is likely that any displaced catch would be made up by shifting effort to another area. Given the low level of revenue at risk under the proposed rule, the potential increase in vessel operating costs would also likely be small. On this basis, implementing regulations should not be expected to have the potential to adversely affect the cash flow or profitability of any small entities. Implementation of these alternatives would potentially mean that fishing vessels actively fishing in the areas under consideration for HAPC designation would be subject to NMFS recordkeeping and reporting requirements for as long as they hold an FFP.

5.8 Duplicate, Overlap, or Conflict with Federal Rules

No relevant Federal rules have been identified that would duplicate, overlap, or conflict with the proposed action.

5.9 Alternatives that Accomplish Objectives at Lower Cost to Small Entities

Though technically, this section cannot be completed until the Council has selected its PPA, an IRFA also requires a description of any significant alternatives to the proposed action(s) that accomplish the stated objectives, are consistent with applicable statutes, and that would minimize any significant economic impact of the proposed rule on small entities. All of the directly regulated entities under this action are considered small entities, as defined under the RFA. Within the universe of small entities that would be directly regulated by this action, impacts may accrue differently (i.e., some small entities may be negatively affected, while others may be positively affected).

5.10 Consistency With Applicable Law

This section examines the consistency of HAPC designation for areas of skate egg concentration with a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), the ten National Standards, and Fishery Impact Statement (FIS), requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA), and Executive Order (EO) 12866.

5.10.1 Environmental Analysis Conclusions

One of the purposes of an environmental assessment (EA) is to provide the evidence and analysis necessary to decide whether an agency must prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS). The Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is the decision maker's determination that the action will not result in significant impacts to the human environment, and therefore, further analysis in an EIS is not needed. The Council on Environmental Quality regulations at 40 CFR 1508.27 state that the significance of an action should be analyzed both in terms of "context" and "intensity." An action must be evaluated at different spatial scales and settings to determine the context of the action. Intensity is evaluated with respect to the nature of impacts and the resources or environmental components affected by the action. NOAA Administrative Order (NAO) 216-6 provides guidance on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) specifically to line agencies within NOAA. It specifies the definition of significance in the fishery management context by listing criteria that should be used to test the significance of fishery management actions (NAO 216-6 §§ 6.01 and 6.02). These factors form the basis of the analysis presented in this EA/RIR/IRFA. The results of that analysis are summarized here for those criteria.

Context: For this action, the setting is the eastern Bering Sea, primarily within the BSAI groundfish fisheries that participate in the specific areas of the EBS that are proposed for identification as a HAPC and gear limitations. Any effects of this action are limited to these areas, or areas immediately adjacent in the EBS where vessels may choose to catch their target fish if they are closed out of specific fishing areas. The effects of this action on society within this area are on individuals directly and indirectly participating in these fisheries and on those who use the ocean resources. Because this action concerns the use of a present and future resource, this action may have impacts on society as a whole or regionally.

Intensity: Considerations to determine intensity of the impacts are set forth in 40 CFR 1508.27(b) and in the NAO 216-6, Section 6. Each consideration is addressed below in order as it appears in the NMFS Instruction 30-124-1 dated July 22, 2005, *Guidelines for Preparation of a FONSI*.

1) *Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to jeopardize the sustainability of any target species that may be affected by the action?*

No. No significant adverse impacts on target species were identified for Alternatives 2 or 3. No changes in overall amount or timing of harvest of target species are expected with any of the alternatives or options in the proposed action, and the general location of harvest is also likely to be similar to the status quo, although there may be localized shifts. Therefore, no adverse impacts on the sustainability of any target species are expected.

2) *Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to jeopardize the sustainability of any non-target species?*

No. Potential effects of Alternatives 2 and 3 on non-target and prohibited species are expected to be insignificant and similar to status quo because no overall harvest changes to target species were expected. Some benefit to skate eggs caught as bycatch in the groundfish fisheries may accrue due to the area closures. Because no overall changes in target species harvests under the alternatives is expected, the alternatives and option are not likely to jeopardize the sustainability of any non-target/prohibited species.

3) *Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to cause substantial damage to the ocean and coastal habitats and/or essential fish habitat as defined under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and identified in the fishery management plans?*

No. No significant adverse impacts were identified for Alternatives 2 or 3 on ocean or coastal habitats or EFH. The alternatives provide additional protection to areas in the EBS where area closures and gear limitations are proposed. Alternative 2 is less protective of habitat than Alternative 3 because it only designates areas as HAPCs without gear limitations for conservation of habitat and skate egg concentrations.

4) *Can the proposed action be reasonably expected to have a substantial adverse impact on public health or safety?*

No. Public health and safety will not be affected in any way not evaluated under previous actions or disproportionately as a result of the proposed action. The proposed action for Alternatives 2 and 3 will not change overall fishing methods, timing of fishing, or quota assignments to gear groups, which are based on previously established seasons and allocation formulas in regulations.

5) *Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect endangered or threatened species, marine mammals, or critical habitat of these species?*

No. The proposed action would not change the Steller sea lion protection measures, ensuring the action is not likely to result in adverse effects not already considered under previous ESA consultations for Steller sea lions and their critical habitat. The area adjacent to these closures, into which fishing vessels may be displaced, is not identified as critical habitat for any ESA-listed species and population level effects are not expected. Because there is not expected to be any change in overall harvests, none of the alternatives are likely to adversely affect ESA-listed species or their designated critical habitat.

6) *Can the proposed action be expected to have a substantial impact on biodiversity and/or ecosystem function within the affected area (e.g., benthic productivity, predator-prey relationships, etc.)?*

No significant adverse impacts on biodiversity or ecosystem function were identified for Alternatives 1 through 3. Alternative 3 would provide protection to biodiversity and ecosystem function by creating area closures in the EBS, and likely benefit marine features that provide an ecosystem function. No significant effects re expected on biodiversity, the ecosystem, marine mammals, or seabirds

7) *Are significant social or economic impacts interrelated with natural or physical environmental effects?*

Socioeconomic impacts of this action could result from *de minimis* displacement of vessels that make contact with the sea floor while fishing in the proposed area closures, or additional costs associated with the options that would allow them to be exempted from the closures. The social or economic impacts of the alternatives are not expected to be significant as target fish are harvested in areas immediately adjacent to the proposed closure areas, and meeting the requirements for the exemptions are not excessively expensive to the fishing fleet.. No significant adverse impacts were identified for Alternatives 1 through 3 for social or economic impacts interrelated with natural or physical environmental effects.

8) *Are the effects on the quality of the human environment likely to be highly controversial?*

No. This action is limited to specific areas in the EBS that are historically of some and limited value to the groundfish fleet. Development of the proposed action has involved participants from the scientific and fishing communities, and the potential impacts on the human environment are well understood. No issues of controversy were identified in the process.

9) *Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in substantial impacts to unique areas, such as historic or cultural resources, park land, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas?*

No. This action would not affect any categories of areas on shore. This action takes place in the geographic area of the EBS. The land adjacent to this marine area may contain archeological sites of native villages, but this action would occur in adjacent marine waters so no impacts on these cultural sites are expected. The marine waters where the fisheries occur contain ecologically critical areas. Effects on the unique characteristics of these areas are not anticipated to occur with this action because of the amount of fish removed by vessels are within the total allowable catch (TAC) specified harvest levels and the alternatives provide protection to EFH and ecologically critical areas at the heads of undersea canyons.

10) *Are the effects on the human environment likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks?*

No. The potential effects of the action are well understood because of the fish species, harvest methods involved, and area of the activity. For marine mammals and seabirds, enough research has been conducted to know about the animals' abundance, distribution, and feeding behavior to determine that this action is not likely to result in population effects. The potential impacts of different gear types on habitat also are well understood, as described in the EFH EIS (NMFS 2005).

11) *Is the proposed action related to other actions with individually insignificant, but cumulatively significant impacts?*

No. Beyond the cumulative impact analyses in the 2011 and 2012 harvest specifications EA and the Groundfish Harvest Specifications EIS, no other additional past or present cumulative impact issues were identified. Reasonably foreseeable future impacts in this analysis include potential effects of climate change due to global warming. The combination of effects from the cumulative effects and this proposed action are not likely to result in significant effects for any of the environmental component analyzed and are therefore not significant.

12) *Is the proposed action likely to adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources?*

No. This action will have no effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. Because this action occurs in marine waters, this consideration is not applicable to this action.

13) *Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in the introduction or spread of a nonindigenous species?*

No. This action poses no effect on the introduction or spread of nonindigenous species into the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands beyond those previously identified because it does not change fishing, processing, or shipping practices that may lead to the introduction of nonindigenous species.

14) *Is the proposed action likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration?*

No. This action would provide additional protections for North Pacific skate species by designating areas of skate egg concentration as HAPCs, implementing conservation and management measures, and

research and monitoring these areas in the EBS. This action does not establish a precedent for future action because the Council has indicated that a HAPC priority exists exclusively for the duration of a Council HAPC proposal cycle. Thus, HAPC site proposals for a previously-designated HAPC priority may not be submitted on a continuing basis. In addition, HAPC designation has been used as a management tool for the protection of marine resources in the Alaska groundfish fisheries. Pursuant to NEPA, for all future actions, appropriate environmental analysis documents (EA or EIS) will be prepared to inform the decision makers of potential impacts to the human environment and to implement mitigation measures to avoid significant adverse impacts.

15) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local law, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment?

No. This action poses no known violation of Federal, State, or local laws, or requirements for the protection of the environment. The proposed action would be conducted in a manner consistent, to the maximum extent practicable, with the enforceable provisions of the Alaska Coastal Management Program within the meaning of Section 30(c)(1) of the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 and its implementing regulations.¹⁵

16) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in cumulative adverse effects that could have a substantial effect on the target species or non-target species?

No. The effects on target and non-target species from the alternatives are not significantly adverse as the overall harvest of these species will not be affected. No cumulative effects were identified that added to the direct and indirect effects on target and non-target species would result in significant effects.

5.10.2 The Ten National Standards

Below are the ten National Standards as contained in the MSA and a brief discussion of the consistency of the proposed alternatives with each of those National Standards, as applicable (MSA 301(a)).

National Standard 1: *Conservation and management measures shall prevent overfishing while achieving, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield from each fishery.*

None of the alternatives considered in this action would result in overfishing in the EBS or of groundfish in the BSAI. The alternatives would also not impact, on a continuing basis, the ability to achieve the optimum yield from EBS fisheries or the BSAI groundfish fishery.

National Standard 2: *Conservation and management measures shall be based upon the best scientific information available.*

The analysis for this action is based upon the best and most recent scientific information available. The National Standard Guidelines for FMPs require that a stock assessment and fishery evaluation (SAFE) report be prepared and reviewed annually for each fishery management plan (FMP). Applicable here and utilized in this analysis is the December 2011 SAFE for the *Groundfish Resources of the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Regions*. The SAFE report summarizes the best available scientific information concerning the past, present, and possible future condition of the stocks (here, skates), marine ecosystems, and fisheries that are managed under Federal regulation. It provides information to the Councils for determining annual harvest levels from each stock, documenting significant trends or changes in the

The Alaska Coastal Management Program expired July 1, 2011 (AS 44.66.030). The State Legislature adjourned its special legislative session May 14, 2011 without passing legislation required to extend the Coastal Program.

resource, marine ecosystems, and fishery over time, and assessing the relative success of existing state and Federal fishery management programs.

In addition, this analysis incorporates policies from the 2004 PSEIS for the groundfish fisheries management programs that are ecosystem-based and more precautionary when faced with scientific uncertainty. During staff tasking at its February 2012 meeting, the Council discussed the schedule for review of the groundfish PSEIS and will receive a report back from NMFS staff at its April 2012 meeting. Until the current PSEI is reviewed, revised, and adopted, the 2004 PSEIS remains the best scientific information available to evaluation of alternative groundfish fishery management programs on the human environment.

National Standard 3: *To the extent practicable, an individual stock of fish shall be managed as a unit throughout its range, and interrelated stocks of fish shall be managed as a unit or in close coordination.*

The proposed action is consistent with the management of individual stocks as a unit or interrelated stocks as a unit or in close coordination.

National Standard 4: *Conservation and management measures shall not discriminate between residents of different States. If it becomes necessary to allocate or assign fishing privileges among various U.S. fishermen, such allocation shall be (A) fair and equitable to all such fishermen, (B) reasonably calculated to promote conservation, and (C) carried out in such a manner that no particular individual, corporation, or other entity acquires an excessive share of such privileges.*

The proposed alternatives treat all fishing vessels the same. The proposed alternatives would be implemented without discrimination among participants and are intended to promote conservation of North Pacific skate species in the EBS

National Standard 5: *Conservation and management measures shall, where practicable, consider efficiency in the utilization of fishery resources, except that no such measure shall have economic allocation as its sole purpose.*

This action will potentially improve efficiency in utilization of the fishery resources in the EBS and the BSAI groundfish fishery by highlighting areas in which there is a very high likelihood that skate egg casings will be encountered.

National Standard 6: *Conservation and management measures shall take into account and allow for variations among, and contingencies in, fisheries, fishery resources, and catches.*

None of the proposed alternatives is expected to affect the availability of and variability in the groundfish resources in the BSAI in future years.

National Standard 7: *Conservation and management measures shall, where practicable, minimize costs and avoid unnecessary duplication.*

This action does not duplicate any other management action.

National Standard 8: *Conservation and management measures shall, consistent with the conservation requirements of this Act (including the prevention of overfishing and rebuilding of overfished stocks), take into account the importance of fishery resources to fishing communities in order to (A) provide for the sustained participation of such communities, and (B) to the extent practicable, minimize adverse economic impacts on such communities.*

This action is not expected to have adverse impacts on communities or affect community sustainability.

National Standard 9: *Conservation and management measures shall, to the extent practicable, (A) minimize bycatch, and (B) to the extent bycatch cannot be avoided, minimize the mortality of such bycatch.*

The proposed action is expected to reduce the impact of bycatch and bycatch mortality of skate egg casings primarily in the BSAI groundfish fishery.

National Standard 10: *Conservation and management measures shall, to the extent practicable, promote the safety of human life at sea.*

The proposed action is not expected to have a substantial impact on safety at sea.

5.10.3 Fisheries Impact Statement (FIS)

Section 303(a)(9) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that any management measures submitted by the Council take into account the potential impacts on the participants in the affected fisheries, as well as participants in adjacent fisheries. The impacts on participants in the BSAI groundfish, crab, and scallop fisheries have been discussed in previous sections of this document. The proposed alternatives are not anticipated to have effects on participants in other fisheries.

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8.0 APPENDICES

8.1 Appendix A – HAPC Process Methodology

Methodology for Proposal Evaluation

Evaluation Criteria

The Council has determined, through the HAPC identification process defined in the Council FMPs, that HAPCs in Alaska must be geographic sites that are rare AND must meet one of three other considerations: (1) provide an important ecological function; (2) be sensitive to human-induced degradation; or (3) be stressed by development activities. To provide guidance to proposers and reviewers about how proposals should be evaluated against these considerations, the Council adopted the following criteria:

1. In order to be considered rare, proposals should meet the criteria identified in a score of “2” or “3.”
2. For the other three factors, a score of “0” indicates that a proposal does not meet the particular consideration in question.

Table 32. Criteria to evaluate HAPC proposals for the Council’s consideration

Score	<u>HAPC Considerations</u>			
	Rarity	Ecological Importance	Sensitivity	Level of Disturbance (applicable to activities other than fishing)
	<i>The rarity of the habitat type.</i>	<i>The importance of the ecological function provided by the habitat</i>	<i>The extent to which the habitat is sensitive to human induced environmental degradation</i>	<i>Whether and to what extent development activities are or will be stressing the habitat type</i>
0	N/A	Habitat does not provide any ecological associations ¹⁶ for managed species.	Habitat resilient (not sensitive).	Habitat not subject to developmental stress.
1	N/A	Habitat provides little structure ¹⁷ or refugia. Foraging and spawning areas do not exist.	Habitat somewhat sensitive and quickly recovers; 1- 5 years. Effects considered temporary.	Habitat is or will be exposed to minimal disturbance from development.
2	Habitat uncommon, less frequent, and occurs to some extent in one or two of the Alaska regions: Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands, and Arctic.	Habitat exhibits structure and provides refugia or substrates for spawning and foraging.	Habitat sensitive and recovery is within ten years. Effects considered temporary; may be more than minimal, however.	Habitat is or will be stressed by activities. Short term effects evident.
3	Habitat uncommon and occurs in discrete areas within only one Alaska region.	Complex habitat condition and substrate serve as refugia, concentrate prey, and/or are known to be important for spawning.	Habitat is highly sensitive and slow to recover; exceeds 10s of years. Effects will persist and more than minimal.	Habitat is or will be severely stressed or disturbed by development. Cumulative impacts require consideration from long term effects.

¹⁶ Ecological associations are those associations where the habitat provides for reproductive traits (i.e. spawning and rearing aggregations) and foraging areas; areas necessary for survival of the species. Associations include habitat complexity (features, structures, etc.) and habitat associations (provide refugia, spawning substrates, concentrate prey, etc.). Ecological importance is not to be applied across all waters or substrates.

¹⁷ “Structure” refers to three-dimensional structure.

Data Certainty Factor

The Data Certainty Factor (DCF) determines the level of information known to describe and assess the HAPC site. The DCF is used to determine if information is adequate prior to taking further action. Thus, a HAPC proposal with a high criteria score and a low DCF is to be highlighted (flagged) as a potential candidate for HAPC and for further consideration as a research priority. In this HAPC cycle, the DCFs are scored according to their weight to further inform the criteria scores, i.e., a DCF of 3, 2, or 1.

Table 33. The Data Certainty Factor (DCF)

Weight	Data Certainty
3	Site-specific habitat information is available.
2	Habitat information can be inferred or proxy conditions allow for information to be reliable.
1	Habitat information does not exist; neither by inference nor proxy.
N/A	Research Priority Flag – as applicable.

HAPC Proposal Rank

The HAPC ranking formula provides a score (sum of criteria scores) to provide information on the proposal as it is considered by the Council in the HAPC process. A highly ranked HAPC proposal with a DCF of 3 has a high criteria score AND information exists to assess the site. High scoring proposals with a low data certainty factor may warrant consideration as a research priority:

HAPC Proposal Rank = Additive HAPC Criteria Score supplemented with Data Certainty Factor

Methodology for Selection

Plan Teams' Review

At their September 2010 meeting, the Joint Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed the HAPC proposals for ecological merit. The joint plan teams found merit to the proposals, recognizing that there will always be some level of scientific uncertainty in the design of proposed HAPCs and how they meet the criteria and stated goals and objectives. The plan teams highlighted: low population growth rate of skates; the long development time for skate embryos, during which they are vulnerable to fishing gear that contacts the sea floor; and the relatively high level of production provided by small geographic areas of the eastern Bering Sea. The joint plan teams also encouraged allocation of research funds to monitor the effectiveness of the protection measures for skate embryos.

Evaluation of Proposed Sites Using HAPC Criteria

Table 34. HAPC Evaluation Criteria

	HAPC Considerations			
	Rarity	Ecological Importance	Sensitivity	Level of Disturbance (applicable to activities other than fishing)
	<i>The rarity of the habitat type.</i>	<i>The importance of the ecological function provided by the habitat</i>	<i>The extent to which the habitat is sensitive to human induced environmental degradation</i>	<i>Whether and to what extent development activities are or will be stressing the habitat type</i>
Score	2	3	2	1
Description	Habitat uncommon, less frequent, and occurs to some extent in one or two of the Alaska regions: Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands, and Arctic.	Complex habitat condition and substrate serve as refugia, concentrate prey, and/or are known to be important for spawning.	Habitat sensitive and recovery is within ten years. Effects considered temporary; may be more than minimal, however.	Habitat is or will be exposed to minimal disturbance from development.
Proposed HAPCs' Responsiveness to HAPC Considerations				
Responsiveness	The current state of knowledge indicates that skate nursery sites are very rare. The HAPC areas proposed here constitute only 280 km ² total, compared to an estimated area of 495,218 km ² for the eastern Bering Sea.	Skate nursery sites are distinct benthic habitat sites used for skate egg case deposition and embryo development. Nursery sites concentrate multiple cohorts of early life stages that are highly vulnerable, as well as reproductive adult skates. As a result, they are extremely important for the sustainability of skate populations and have great ecological significance.	Skate egg cases and the embryos they contain are sensitive to being dislodged, damaged, destroyed, or captured by fishing gear contacting the sea floor. Fishing also increases the mortality risk to reproductive adults in nursery sites.	Development is unlikely to affect the six nursery sites identified.

Ranking of Proposed HAPCs

The HAPC ranking formula provides a score (sum of criteria scores) to provide information on the proposal as it is considered by the Council in the HAPC process. The HAPC Proposal Rank is the additive HAPC Criteria Score supplemented with the Data Certainty Factor (DCF). DCF determines the level of information known to describe and assess the HAPC sites. Here, detailed and site-specific habitat information is available—in 2009, an AUV was used to map parts of four nurseries using a high-resolution camera (Hoff *et al* 2010).

Table 35. Evaluation of HAPC proposal

HAPC Evaluation	Proposal Score
Rarity*	2
Ecological importance	3
Sensitivity	2
Stress / disturbance	1
<u>Criteria Score Total (+)</u>	<u>8</u>
Data Certainty Factor	3
HAPC Proposal Rank (=)	11
Research Priority Flag	N/A

* Proposals must meet the rarity consideration.

8.2 Appendix B – Color Figures

(Follows on next page)