
Amendment 17

to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan

To Address NOAA-Sponsored, State-Operated Permit Banks

Including an Environmental Assessment and a Regulatory Impact Review

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Prepared by the

New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street
Newburyport, MA 01950

National Marine Fisheries Service
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930

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Executive Summary

If approved, this action will amend the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan (FMP) to explicitly define and facilitate the effective operation of permit banks operated by a New England state and funded, at least in part, through a Federal grant award from NOAA for this purpose (the “NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks”). This document is prepared according to the provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), under the jurisdiction afforded by the Magnuson-Stevens Act to the New England Fishery Management Council (Council).

The Council, associated states, and NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) have an interest in promoting the effective implementation of catch-share programs in New England, while minimizing any potential adverse socio-economic impacts to fishing communities and small-scale fishing businesses that can result from catch-share programs. To this end, in 2010 NOAA provided nearly \$6 million in funding to the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, in the form of Federal grant awards, for the express purpose of establishing several “permit banks” of Northeast multispecies fishing vessel permits.

NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are not recognized under the current provisions of the Northeast Multispecies FMP, and the only entities allocated, and authorized to transfer, a sector’s annual catch entitlement (ACE) to sectors are other sectors. In this situation, the only mechanism available for NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks to operate (i.e., provide fishing access to fishermen in the form of ACE transfers to the fishermen’s sector(s)) is for the permit bank to either join an existing sector as a member or to form a sector. Both of these mechanisms unnecessarily complicate the operation of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks by requiring redundant administrative requirements. For example, New Hampshire’s Fish and Game Department has been advised by the New Hampshire Attorney General that the Fish and Game Department may not join or form a groundfish sector for the purpose of operating its permit bank, due to legal concerns regarding joint and severable liability provisions of the sector regulations.

This action would define a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank as a partnership between NOAA and one or more states in which Federal grant funds are used by the state(s) to establish a bank of Federal fishing vessel permits and to obtain Federal fishing vessel permits so that the fishing access privileges associated with those permits may be allocated by the state(s) to qualifying commercial fishermen and sectors according to criteria to which NOAA and the state(s) have agreed. NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are subject to U.S. Department of Commerce regulations regarding program income, such that any revenue generated by the permit banks may only be used to defray the program costs of

operating the permit bank, or must be returned to the Federal Government to reduce the amount of the initial grant award.

NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would be allocated ACE and specifically authorized to provide ACE to approved groundfish sectors and/or days-at-sea (DAS) to vessels for the purpose of enhancing the fishing opportunities available to sector members, provided the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks comply with the terms and conditions of any applicable Federal grant agreement (i.e., a Federal grant award provided to a state for the purpose of establishing, enhancing, or operating a permit bank) and a memorandum of agreement (MOA) established with NMFS for the administration of a permit bank that must meet certain minimum criteria.

The primary purpose of this administrative action is to address an existing regulatory constraint that prevents the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks from operating as intended, by creating a new provision such that NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may provide ACE and DAS to approved groundfish sectors and their members without first becoming, or joining, a groundfish sector. The action defines NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks as separate entities from the groundfish sectors, and establishes certain minimum criteria for these newly defined entities in order to qualify for the streamlined administrative procedures described in this amendment. This action, in itself, does not establish, authorize, or promote the formation of any NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks. Absent this amendment, such permit banks are free to form—subject to support and funding from NOAA—and operate to transfer ACE and/or DAS to sectors, according to the terms and conditions placed upon them by any NOAA grant award and/or MOA signed with NMFS, so long as they fully comply with the administrative and procedural requirements for groundfish sectors currently established in the Northeast Multispecies FMP.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACE	Annual Catch Entitlement
ACL	Annual Catch Limit
AM	Accountability Measure
APA	Administrative Procedure Act
CE	Categorical Exclusion
CZMA	Coastal Zone Management Act
DAS	Days-at-sea
EA	Environmental Assessment
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EO	Executive Order
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FMP	Fishery Management Plan
IQA	Information Quality Act (also known as the Data Quality Act, or DQA)
MMPA	Marine Mammal Protection Act
MOA	Memorandum of Agreement
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NMFS	National Marine Fisheries Act
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
PRA	Paperwork Reduction Act
PSC	Potential Sector Contribution
RFA	Regulatory Flexibility Act
RIR	Regulatory Impact Review
TAC	Total Allowable Catch

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

Introduction

If approved, this action will amend the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan (FMP) to explicitly define and facilitate the effective operation of permit banks operated by a New England state and funded, at least in part, through a Federal grant award from NOAA for this purpose (the “NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks”). This document is prepared according to the provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), under the jurisdiction afforded by the Magnuson-Stevens Act to the New England Fishery Management Council (Council).

This amendment has been prepared under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and it also addresses the applicable requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA), the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA), the Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA), Executive Orders (EOs) 12866 and 13132, the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), and the Information Quality Act (IQA, also known as the Data Quality Act, or DQA). These laws and directives help ensure that, in developing a fishery management action, the Councils and NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) fully consider the expected impacts the action may have on the marine environment, living marine resources, and human communities.

Background

The Magnuson-Stevens Act establishes a regime for the management of fishery resources that occur in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone and establishes the Council as the body responsible for the development of fishery management plans for fisheries in the Atlantic Ocean seaward of the states of Connecticut through Maine.

The Council developed, and NMFS approved and implemented, Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP, which expanded a catch-share program known as “sectors” for the Northeast multispecies fishery. Catch-share management programs, when designed correctly, may help to prevent overfishing, eliminate the race to fish, reduce overcapacity and bycatch, and improve economic efficiency. However, catch-share programs may also result in the consolidation of fishing effort, reduce community involvement in local fishing, decrease access by small-scale fishermen to local fishery resources, create barriers to entry into the fishery by increasing the demand for capital to participate, and create competition among fishermen for access rights.

The sector management program allows groups of Northeast multispecies limited access permit holders (a minimum of three permit holders with no ownership interests in the other two permits) to be allocated, and manage the harvest of, a share of the annual catch limit (ACL) for certain stocks of groundfish in the form of a sector's annual catch entitlement (ACE). Northeast multispecies permit holders who do not join a sector would fish in the "common pool" under individual allocations of days-at-sea (DAS). Under Amendment 16, sectors may receive a transfer of additional ACE from other sectors to supplement their initial allocation, and members of the common pool may lease additional DAS from other common pool members to supplement their individual DAS allocations. Under Amendment 16, members of sectors may also lease additional DAS from other members of sectors (but not from or to common pool vessels) for the purpose of complying with the requirements of other FMPs.¹ Transfers between sectors and common pool vessels are prohibited.

The Council, associated states, and NMFS have an interest in promoting the effective implementation of catch-share programs in New England, while minimizing any potential adverse socio-economic impacts to fishing communities and small-scale fishing businesses that can result from catch-share programs.² To this end, in 2010 NOAA provided nearly \$6 million in funding to the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, in the form of Federal grant awards, for the express purpose of establishing several "permit banks" of Northeast multispecies fishing vessel limited access permits.

A permit bank, in its most basic form, is a collection of fishing permits held by an organization or individual for the purpose of providing to others the fishing privileges associated with those permits. NOAA and the states consider permit banks to have the potential to mitigate some of the possible adverse impacts associated with catch-share programs and to help preserve fishing opportunities for small-scale fishermen operating in small fishing ports that may otherwise be disproportionately negatively affected by the consolidation of fishing effort that often follows implementation of catch-share programs. Permit banks may help ease the transition to catch-share programs by:

- Providing options to fishermen with little access to capital;
- Helping fishermen to improve cooperation and operating efficiencies;
- Maintaining small-boat enterprises through the combination of a variety of permit attributes (e.g., DAS, potential sector contribution (PSC)) to meet the needs of fishermen and fishing communities for access to fishery resources; and
- Helping fishing communities preserve stable access to local fishery resources for local fishermen.

¹ Currently, both the Monkfish FMP and the Skate FMP require permit holders in those fisheries to use DAS allocated under the Northeast Multispecies FMP in order to fish for monkfish and skates, respectively.

² See Goal #4 (section 3.4) in Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP, "Minimize, to the extent practicable, adverse impacts on fishing communities and shoreside infrastructure."

The Federal grant awards to the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island are intended to facilitate partnerships between the states and NMFS that seek to:

- Preserve continued access to fishery resources for local, small-scale fishermen from small fishing communities throughout the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island;
- Supplement existing access privileges held by fishermen in small communities; and
- Mitigate the effects of fishing effort consolidation on small-scale fishermen and fishing communities in these four states.

Statement of the Problem

NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are not recognized under the current provisions of the Northeast Multispecies FMP, and the only entities allocated, and authorized to transfer, ACE to sectors are other sectors. In this situation, the only mechanism available for NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks to operate (i.e., provide fishing access to fishermen in the form of ACE transfers to the fishermen's sector(s)) is for the permit bank to either join an existing sector as a member or to form a sector. Both of these mechanisms unnecessarily complicate the operation of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks by requiring redundant administrative requirements. To form a sector, the state fishery management agencies must solicit for at least two other permit holders (without active vessels) with whom to form the sector, submit a complete sector roster of permits by December 1³ in advance of each fishing year, and comply with redundant documentation and reporting requirements, among other things.

For some states, the option to join or form a sector may not be a practicable approach to operate the permit bank. For example, New Hampshire's Fish and Game Department has been advised by the New Hampshire Attorney General that the Fish and Game Department may not join or form a groundfish sector for the purpose of operating its permit bank, due to legal concerns regarding joint and severable liability provisions of the sector regulations.

A more efficient approach that would address the concerns and needs of the states would be to include provisions in the Northeast Multispecies FMP that explicitly recognize NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks as entities that are separate and distinct from sectors but nonetheless authorized to transfer ACE and DAS to sectors for the purpose of achieving the goals and objectives of the permit banks.

³ The final rule to implement Framework Adjustment 45 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP revised this date from September 1 to December 1 in advance of each fishing year (76 FR 23042, April 25, 2011).

Purpose and Need

This amendment is needed to modify the Northeast Multispecies FMP to formally define, and facilitate the effective operation of, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks in order to lessen the administrative burden imposed by current regulations. The purpose of this amendment is to:

1. Define a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank and distinguish this type of entity from that of a groundfish sector; and
2. Clarify and streamline the administrative procedures and requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks must comply in order to operate outside of the sector process (i.e., be allocated ACE and provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors).

This amendment does not address non-NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks (e.g., private permit banks). The Council may consider modifying the Northeast Multispecies FMP to explicitly recognize and address non-NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks in a future action.

Proposed Action

Through Amendment 17 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP, the Council proposes to define NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks and to authorize entities that meet this definition to be allocated ACE and to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors.

Chapter 2

Description of the Alternatives

For each existing NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank, a Federal grant was awarded in 2010 to a state fishery management agency for the express purpose of obtaining Federal fishing vessel permits for use by the state to establish a state-operated permit bank. Prior to the award issuance, each state was required to negotiate and enter into a formal memorandum of agreement (MOA) with NMFS that stipulates the agreed-upon terms and conditions under which the state may operate the permit bank. The terms and conditions of the MOAs between NMFS and the states are designed to establish specific criteria for determining which fishing vessels and sectors may qualify for access to the fishing privileges held by the permit bank, and include other requirements with which the state must comply, such as a requirement to declare annually which Federal permits held by the permit bank will be used for providing ACE and/or DAS to sectors and which will be used to provide DAS to common pool vessels, and annual reporting requirements. The MOAs may be modified at any time by agreement of both NMFS and the state and, once signed, are valid for 3-year terms but may be renewed with the consent of both signatories. This chapter presents the alternatives considered in Amendment 17 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP.

This amendment does not propose to *establish* any NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks; these entities are established by joint agreement between NMFS and each partner state. Also, this amendment does not propose to *authorize* the formation or operation of any NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks (these entities are established and authorized through the NOAA grants process and by virtue of the signed MOAs). Absent this action, these entities are, by default, authorized to operate so long as all actions of the permit banks remain consistent with existing provisions of the Northeast Multispecies FMP and the applicable MOA. Thus, the alternatives presented below are narrowly focused on the administrative procedures and requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would be subject in order to operate.

Alternatives Considered

Alternative 1: No Action (Non-Preferred)

NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may continue to operate⁴, but must comply with all administrative and procedural requirements for groundfish sectors, as defined in Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP. These requirements include:

⁴ Pursuant to the requirements of the authorizing grant award and MOA with NMFS.

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1. Prepare and submit a sector allocation proposal. Sector allocation proposals must be submitted to the Council to request that the sector be implemented through either a biennial adjustment or a framework adjustment, and be submitted at least 1 year prior to the date the sector wants to begin operations.
 2. Meet the “rule of three.” Sectors must be comprised of at least three Northeast multispecies limited access permits issued to at least three different persons, none of whom have any common ownership interests in the permits, vessels, or businesses associated with the permits issued to the other two persons in the sector.
 3. Prepare and submit a sector operations plan and sector contract. A sector operations plan must be submitted to the Regional Administrator no later than September 1 prior to the fishing year in which the sector intends to begin operations. The operations plan may cover a 1- or 2-year period. Sector operations plans and contracts must contain the following elements:
 - a. A list of all parties, vessels, and vessel owners who will participate in the sector;
 - b. A list of all Federal and state permits held by persons participating in the sector, including an indication for each permit whether it is enrolled and will actively fish in a sector, or will be subject to the provisions of the common pool;
 - c. A contract signed by all sector participants indicating their agreement to abide by the operations plan;
 - d. The name of the designated representative or agent of the sector for service of process;
 - e. A plan for consolidation or redistribution of ACE detailing the quantity and duration of such consolidation or redistribution within the sector;
 - f. A list of specific management rules the sector participants will agree to abide by in order to avoid exceeding the allocated ACE for each stock, including a plan of operation or cessation of operations once the ACEs of one or more stocks are harvested;
 - g. A plan that defines the procedures by which members of the sector that do not abide by the rules of the sector will be disciplined or removed from the sector, and a procedure for notifying NMFS of such expulsions from the sector;
 - h. A plan of how the ACE allocated to the sector is assigned to each vessel;
 - i. Detailed information about overage penalties or other actions that will be taken if a sector exceeds its ACE for any stock;
 - j. Detailed plans for the monitoring and reporting of landings and discards by sector participants, including:

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- i. Identification of the independent third-party service providers employed by the sector to provide dockside/roving and at-sea/electronic monitoring services;
 - ii. The mechanism and timing of any hail reports necessary to coordinate the deployment of dockside/roving and at-sea/electronic monitors and electronic monitoring equipment; and
 - iii. A list of the specific ports where vessels will land fish;
 - k. ACE thresholds that may trigger revisions to sector operations to ensure allocated ACE is not exceeded, and details regarding the sector's plans for notifying NMFS once the specified ACE threshold has been reached;
 - l. Identification of any potential redirection of effort into other fisheries expected as a result of sector operations;
 - m. A description of how regulated species and ocean pout will be avoided while participating in other fisheries that have a bycatch of regulated species or ocean pout if the sector does not have sufficient ACE for stocks of regulated species or ocean pout caught as bycatch in those fisheries; and
 - n. A list of existing regulations from which the sector is requesting exemptions during the following fishing year.
 4. Submit to the Regional Administrator a final sector roster, sector contract, and list of Federal and state permits held by participating vessels for each sector no later than December 1 prior to the fishing year in which the sector intends to begin operations.
 5. Comply with all sector monitoring and reporting requirements. All approved sectors are required to monitor and report catch by participating sector vessels to ensure that ACEs are not exceeded during the fishing year. In order to comply with this requirement, the following must be completed:
 - a. Beginning in fishing year 2010, all sectors must develop, implement, and pay for (to the extent not funded by NMFS) an independent third-party dockside/roving program for monitoring landings and utilization of sector ACE. Dockside/roving monitors shall monitor landings of regulated species and ocean pout by sector vessels to verify such landings. Beginning in fishing year 2012, an at-sea/electronic monitoring program must be implemented to verify area fished, as well as catch and discards by species and gear type.
 - b. Each sector must submit weekly reports to NMFS stating the remaining balance of ACE allocated to each sector. The weekly reports must include:
 - i. Week ending date;
 - ii. Species, stock area, gear, number of trips, reported landings, discards, total catch, status of the sector's ACE, and whether this is a new or updated record of sector catch for each Northeast multispecies stock allocated to that particular sector;

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- iii. Sector enforcement issues, including any discrepancies noted by dockside/roving monitors between dealers and offloads;
 - iv. Summary of offloads witnessed by dockside/roving monitors for that reporting week; and
 - v. A list of vessels landing for that reporting week.
 - c. Each sector must submit an annual year-end report to NMFS and the Council that summarizes the fishing activities of participating permits/vessels. The annual report must include:
 - i. Catch, including landings and discards, of all species by sector vessels;
 - ii. The permit number of each sector vessel that fished for regulated species or ocean pout;
 - iii. The number of vessels that fished for non-regulated species or ocean pout;
 - iv. The method used to estimate discards by sector vessels;
 - v. The landing port(s) used by sector vessels;
 - vi. Enforcement actions; and
 - vii. Other relevant information required to evaluate the biological, economic, and social impacts of sectors and their fishing operations.
 6. Develop and submit to NMFS an appropriate NEPA analysis assessing the impacts of forming the sector and operating under the measures (including any proposed exemptions) described in the sector operations plan.

Under the No Action Alternative, the only entities authorized to be allocated and to transfer ACE (and DAS) to approved groundfish sectors would be another approved groundfish sector, defined as a group of three or more persons, none of whom have an ownership interest in the vessels owned or permits held by the other two persons in the sector, holding limited access vessel permits who have voluntarily entered into a contract and agree to certain fishing restrictions for a specified period of time, and which has been granted a total allowable catch (TAC) in order to achieve objectives consistent with the applicable FMP goals and objectives. Under this alternative, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would continue to be required to either (1) join as a member (permit holder) of an existing groundfish sector, or (2) form one or more groundfish sectors, in combination with other vessel permit holders (private vessels permit holders or other states).

The states, in developing a proposed sector and sector operations plan, may request specific exemptions from some of the operational and administrative requirements listed above; however, sectors may not seek exemptions from prerequisites for forming a sector, such as: The requirement to prepare and submit a sector allocation proposal to the Council; the requirement to prepare and submit a sector operations plan and sector contract every 1-2 years; and, importantly, the requirement that the sector must be comprised of at least three different permit holders that have no common ownership interests. Under the no action alternative, states with NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would continue to be

required to fulfill all of these requirements in order to operate the permit banks (i.e., provide ACE to other sectors).

Alternative 2: NOAA-Sponsored, State-Operated Permit Banks Authorized to Provide ACE and/or DAS to Sectors (Council's Proposed Action)

This alternative defines a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank as an agreement between NOAA and one or more states in which Federal grant funds are used by the state(s) to establish a bank of Federal fishing vessel permits and to obtain Federal fishing vessel permits so that the fishing access privileges associated with those permits may be allocated by NMFS to the states' permit banks so that the state permit banks may transfer ACE and/or lease DAS to qualifying groundfish sectors and their member commercial fishermen according to criteria to which NOAA and the state(s) have agreed. NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are subject to U.S. Department of Commerce regulations regarding program income, such that any revenue generated by the permit banks may only be used to defray the program costs of operating the permit bank, or must be returned to the Federal Government to reduce the amount of the initial grant award.

Under this alternative, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would be allocated ACE and specifically authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors for the purpose of enhancing the fishing opportunities available to sector members, provided the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks comply with the terms and conditions of any applicable Federal grant agreement (i.e., a Federal grant award provided to a state for the purpose of establishing, enhancing, or operating a permit bank) and an MOA established with NMFS for the administration of a permit bank that must meet certain minimum criteria.

The specific provisions of this proposed action are:

1. The amount of ACE allocated to a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank to provide to sectors in any fishing year shall be, on a stock-by-stock basis, the product, in pounds, of multiplying the stock's available commercial sub-ACL⁵ by the sum of the PSCs of that stock for all permits held by the state in the permit bank and appropriately declared by the state to be "ACE permits" for that fishing year, consistent with the terms of the state's permit bank MOA.

⁵ Sub-ACLs are smaller portions of the overall ACL for a stock attributed to specific fisheries. The ACL for each groundfish stock is broken into three sub-ACLs: State; Groundfish; and Other. The State sub-ACL accounts for catch in state waters by state-permitted fisheries. The Groundfish sub-ACL accounts for all catch under the Northeast Multispecies FMP (including recreational catch by recreational vessels and commercial catch by sector vessels and common pool vessels). The Other sub-ACL accounts for assorted catch not otherwise accounted for, such as bycatch in exempted fisheries. The Groundfish sub-ACL is further broken into at least two sub-components--Common Pool and Sector--and may also include a Recreational sub-component. Sub-components are further divisions of a sub-ACL that are not considered ACLs.

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2. NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may not acquire additional ACE for a fishing year through a transfer from a sector. If a sector receives a transfer of ACE from a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank, but wishes to return this ACE to the permit bank (unused), NMFS would, upon written agreement by both parties, void the initial transfer to the sector, thereby returning the ACE to the permit bank. The state permit bank may then redistribute the available ACE to another sector.
 3. Subject to the terms and conditions of the states' permit bank MOAs with NMFS, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may transfer ACE, on a stock-by-stock basis, to other NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks for the purpose of maximizing the fishing opportunities made available by the permit banks to sector members. For example, the Rhode Island state permit bank may transfer Gulf of Maine ACE to the Maine state permit bank in exchange for Southern New England or Mid-Atlantic ACE.
 4. The number of DAS available for a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank to provide to sectors for the purpose of sector vessels fishing for monkfish and/or skates in any fishing year shall be the accumulated Northeast Multispecies "A" DAS assigned to the fishing vessel permits held by the state and appropriately declared by the state to be "ACE permits" for that fishing year, consistent with the terms of the state's permit bank MOA.
 5. NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may not acquire additional A DAS through a lease from a vessel permit (including permits held by other state-operated permit banks). If a vessel receives a lease of DAS from a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank, but wishes to return these DAS to the permit bank (unused), NMFS would, upon written agreement by both parties, void the initial lease to the vessel, thereby returning the DAS to the permit bank. The state permit bank may then redistribute the available DAS to another vessel.
 6. For analytical purposes, the total amount of ACE allocated to the groundfish sector sub-component in any fishing year shall be, on a stock-by-stock basis, the sum of all PSCs assigned to all vessels enrolled in sectors, *plus* the sum of the accumulated PSCs assigned to all the fishing vessel permits held by all states with established NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks and appropriately declared by the states to be "ACE permits" for that fishing year, multiplied by that stock's sub-ACL. In the event that a state does not affirmatively declare which permits will be "ACE permits" for the fishing year prior to the time at which the analysis must be initiated, the analysis shall assume that *all* permits held by the state will be "ACE permits" for the year. A state may submit such a declaration later, but this would have the same impact as a vessel initially enrolled in a sector withdrawing from the sector for the year to enter the common pool—that is, the analysis would capture the maximum case for potential sector-related fishing effort.

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7. State-operated permit banks shall be deemed to meet the definition above for a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank, and therefore qualify to operate as intended in this proposed action so long as the state-operated permit bank was *initially* established using a Federal grant award from NOAA for this purpose and maintains a valid MOA with NMFS that meets the following minimum criteria:
- a. That the MOA stipulates that the state may not associate the permit bank permits with any active vessels, to be defined such that no fishing or other on-the-water activities may be engaged in by any vessels to which these permits are assigned;
 - b. That the MOA stipulates the minimum eligibility criteria to be used by the state to determine whether a sector and its associated vessels are qualified to receive either ACE or DAS from the permit bank;
 - c. That the MOA identifies a program contact person for the state agency administering the permit bank;
 - d. That the MOA stipulates that the state(s) provide to NMFS a list of all permits held by the state under the aegis of the permit bank, and identify whether the fishing privileges associated with each permit are to be used in the coming fishing year for (a) DAS leasing to common pool vessels, or (b) transferring ACE to sectors (including the leasing of DAS to sector vessels for the purpose of complying with the requirements of other FMPs);
 - e. That the MOA stipulates that the state is required to prepare and submit an annual performance report to NMFS, and that said performance report include, at a minimum, the following elements:
 - i. A comprehensive listing of all permits held by the permit bank, identifying whether the permit was used for ACE/DAS transfers to sectors, or DAS leases to common pool vessels, the total amount of ACE, by stock, and DAS available to the permit bank for transfers and leases to sectors and vessels;
 - ii. A comprehensive listing of all sectors to which ACE was transferred from the permit bank, including the amount, by stock, of ACE transferred to each sector, including a list of all vessels that harvested the ACE transferred to the sector and the amounts harvested;
 - iii. A comprehensive listing of all sector vessels to which DAS were leased from the permit bank, including the number of DAS leased to each sector vessel;
 - iv. A comprehensive listing of all common pool vessels to which DAS were leased from the permit bank, including the number of DAS leased to each common pool vessel; and
8. NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks shall report to the Council annually on the performance of the permit bank. Such reports shall include, to the extent

that the information does not conflict with any regulations regarding the protection of personal and/or proprietary information, all elements listed above in item e.

9. If more funds become available to the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, the use of those additional funds in NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks described herein shall be reviewed by the Council for consistency with the goals and objectives of the Northeast Multispecies FMP prior to the state using those funds for the purpose of the permit bank outside of the sector process. That is, a state may not be allocated or transfer any ACE that may be associated with new permits obtained as a result of the additional funds, unless the state either (1) provides the Council the opportunity to review the implications of the expanded permit bank with regards to the goals and objectives of the Northeast Multispecies FMP, or (2) forms or joins an approved groundfish sector.
10. Any of the specific provisions of this alternative may be modified through a framework adjustment to the Northeast Multispecies FMP.

Although the permit bank MOAs between NMFS and the states may be changed at any time by joint agreement of the signatories, under this alternative only those states with MOAs that continue to meet all of the requirements listed above in item 7 would be considered to comply with the definition of a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank for the purpose of this action. If a change resulted in an MOA that did not fully comply with the requirements listed above in item 7, that state could continue to operate its permit bank, but would be required to form or join an approved groundfish sector before it could provide ACE and/or DAS to another approved groundfish sector.

Rationale for the Proposed Action

The primary purpose of this administrative action is to address an existing regulatory constraint that prevents NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks from operating as efficiently as possible. This action would create a new provision such that NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may be allocated and provide ACE and DAS to approved groundfish sectors without first becoming, or joining, a groundfish sector. The action would define NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks as separate entities from the groundfish sectors, and establishes certain minimum criteria for these newly defined entities in order to qualify for the streamlined administrative procedures proposed in this amendment. This action, in itself, does not establish, authorize, or promote the formation of any NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks. Absent this amendment, such permit banks are free to form—subject to support and funding from NOAA—and operate to transfer ACE and/or DAS to sectors, according to the terms and conditions placed upon them by any NOAA grant award and/or MOA signed with NMFS, so long as they fully comply with the administrative and procedural requirements currently established for groundfish sectors in the Northeast Multispecies FMP.

This action would not change the fundamental principle of the groundfish sector program of the Northeast Multispecies FMP, in which the *sector* is the unit recipient of the groundfish catch share (ACE) and the only entity authorized to harvest ACE. Under this action, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would only be able to contribute to the total amount of ACE available to a sector by providing ACE to that sector based on the fishing vessel permits obtained and held by the state for the purpose of the permit bank. The NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks do not share the same flexibilities and opportunities available to sectors. The NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may not sell, trade⁶, increase (e.g., lease in additional), or harvest the ACE derived from the permits held by the state. Through this action, the Council recognizes that NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are fundamentally different entities from sectors, and intends to provide a means for these entities to operate effectively and efficiently to provide ACE to sectors. NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would also be able to provide groundfish DAS to sector vessels for the purpose of targeting skates and/or monkfish.

One objective of this amendment is to clearly distinguish between sectors (as fishing operations) and NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks (as government entities). For example, sectors are collectives of fishing vessel operations joined together to maximize the economic efficiency of harvest, and the permit banks function as agents of state government agencies with different objectives and legal constraints. As opposed to an independent business operation with a direct financial interest in the fishing privileges associated with any fishing vessel permits it holds, a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank operates on behalf of the fishing communities in the state and members of the fishing industry that reside in and/or operate from the state. The state is not a profit-seeking entity, and is subject to Department of Commerce grant regulations regarding any revenue that may be generated through the operation of the permit bank (i.e., the state may only use such revenue to offset the costs associated with administration of the permit bank program, or must return the revenue to NOAA as a reduction in the amount of the initial grant award). In addition, pursuant to state law, states may be precluded from deriving *any* revenue from the permit bank program.

The Council considered the specific requirements and procedures to which sectors are bound in order to operate under the Northeast Multispecies FMP, and compared those requirements with those proposed for NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks under this action. In some cases, there are strong similarities and redundancies between sector requirements and the requirements placed on NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks through the MOAs to which each relevant state is currently subject. In other cases, the sector requirements appear to not be relevant to NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks because such permit banks have no active fishing vessels and are prohibited (under the terms of the permit bank MOAs) from actively engaging in fishing activities. In yet other cases, the requirements are more appropriately placed on the sector(s) that would receive ACE from the

⁶ This action proposes to allow NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks to trade ACE with other NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, but would not authorize these permit banks to receive ACE from sectors.

NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, as these are the entities that would actually harvest the fish associated with the ACE provided by the permit bank. Table 1 lists each sector requirement, and identifies whether a comparable requirement exists in the NMFS-state permit bank MOAs, or, if a comparable requirement does not exist in the MOAs, whether the requirement is applicable to the operation of NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks. Absent Amendment 17 (e.g., if NMFS does not approve the Council's proposed action), NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would remain subject to all of the requirements listed in Table 1, many of which are redundant with the requirements to which such permit banks are already subject pursuant to the NMFS-state permit bank MOAs.

One of the primary requirements for a groundfish sector is to prepare and submit a sector operations plan, which must be submitted to NMFS for review and approval before the sector may operate. Sector operations plans are required to provide information regarding the structure and membership of the sector (including a roster of all sector members, vessel permits held by sector members, and whether the permits will be enrolled in the sector or will remain in the common pool), a plan for distribution of ACE among sector members, steps the sector will take to avoid exceeding the ACE, penalties if the sector exceeds the sector's ACE, plans for monitoring and reporting catch by sector members, among other things. According to this proposed action, rather than prepare and submit a sector operations plan, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would be required to maintain an MOA with NMFS that addresses the relevant key issues that sectors must address in the sector operations plans (see Table 1).

Under this proposed action, the permit bank MOA must identify the program contact person administering the permit bank (comparable to the sector requirement to identify the sector representative or agent), include a list of all permits held by the state for the permit bank and, for each permit, whether it will be used to provide ACE/DAS to sectors, or be used to lease DAS to common pool vessels (comparable to the sector requirement to identify all permits held by sector members and whether those permits will be enrolled in the sector or remain in the common pool). This action also stipulate basic information to be included in reports to be prepared by the states and submitted annually to NMFS and the Council (comparable to the sector requirement to provide NMFS and the Council with an annual year-end report summarizing the fishing activities of sector members).

Not all of the required elements in a sector operations plan would be similarly required of a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank. Some of the provisions, such as rules to avoid exceeding the allocated ACE, disciplinary procedures should a sector member not abide by the rules of the sector, a plan assigning ACE to each sector vessel, overage penalties, plans for monitoring and reporting landings and discards by sector members, and several other requirements that are specific to descriptions of vessel operations are not relevant to NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, given that these entities cannot include active vessels and would be precluded from conducting any actual fishing activities. This action recognizes that these sector requirements are not relevant to the administration of a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank (see Table 1). The sector operations plans are also used to request,

on behalf of the sector, exemptions from fishing regulations in order to provide operating efficiencies to the sector members. A comparable provision does not apply to the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, as these entities would be precluded under this action from requesting any such exemptions.

Sectors are required to provide weekly catch reports that include information on the remaining ACE balances for the sector. Sectors are also required to establish an independent dockside monitoring program for monitoring landings, as well as to ensure that at-sea monitors are available to monitor catch, including discards, on sector fishing trips. None of these sector requirements are relevant to NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, again due to the nature of these entities, which are precluded from including active vessels and from engaging in any fishing activities. However, the sectors receiving ACE from the permit banks would remain subject to these monitoring and reporting requirements, as part of normal sector operations, and so the ACE provided by NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would remain properly tracked and catch pursuant to that ACE would be accounted for by the receiving sectors. Additionally, ACE transfers by NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are processed by NMFS; therefore, NMFS maintains these data.

One of the central requirements that sectors must meet in order to be consistent with the provisions of Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP is the “rule of three” owners. This rule stipulates that a sector must be composed of at least three permit holder entities that have no ownership interest in the permits held by the other two. The rule of three owners was introduced in Amendment 16 to address questions of what constituted a clear minimum size for the formation of the distinct legal entity serving as a sector. Prior to Amendment 16, a sector was defined simply as “persons entering into a contract,” implying, but not clearly establishing, that a sector had to be composed of more than one separate legal entity. During deliberations on Amendment 16, some Council members raised concerns regarding the potential for an individual owner of multiple vessel permits, held in the name of multiple and separate corporations, to form a sector and gain individual control over a portion of ACE. These concerns were, in part, allayed by the change to the sector provisions to require at least three separate owners, without any common ownership interests, to serve as the minimum size for the formation of any sector. The Council and NMFS determined this change to be consistent with the original intent of the definition of a sector. By defining NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks as a separate and distinct type of entity that can provide ACE to sectors, without first becoming sectors, such permit banks would not be subject to the rule of three. This does not compromise the intent of the rule of three provision, which was implemented in order to prevent an individual permit holder from gaining complete control over a portion of fishable ACE. Under this proposed action, and under the terms and conditions of the NMFS-state MOAs, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may not actually engage in any fishing activities, and may only provide ACE to sectors that would, by definition, meet the rule of three requirement.

The Council has no direct control over the terms and conditions established in the permit bank MOAs, which remain independent administrative arrangements between the

relevant signatories, and this action asserts no such control. NMFS and the states remain free to modify the terms and conditions of the permit bank MOAs in any way they deem fit, without the need to consult with the Council or obtain Council approval. However, this action proposes to (1) require that a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank have an MOA with NMFS, and (2) establish a set of minimum criteria that these MOAs must meet in order for the permit bank to meet the definition established through this action and therefore be able to avail itself of the modified administrative procedures. Although a state and NMFS may, in the future, agree to terminate the MOA and allow the state to continue to operate the permit bank, such a state-operated permit bank would no longer meet the definition adopted in this action, and would only be able to provide ACE and/or DAS to sectors if it first became or joined a sector and complied with all of the relevant sector requirements. Similarly, because the Council cannot bind the states or NMFS as to the content of the permit bank MOAs, nothing precludes these parties from modifying the MOAs in the future. However, if any such modifications result in a permit bank MOA that fails to meet the minimum criteria proposed in this action, the state-operated permit bank would only be able to provide ACE and/or DAS to sectors if it first became or joined a sector and complied with all of the relevant sector requirements.

In addition to the ability to provide ACE and/or DAS to groundfish sectors, as described above, without first becoming or joining a groundfish sector, this action also allows NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks to transfer ACE to/from other NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks. The intent of this provision of this action is to facilitate the most efficient use of the ACE which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are able to provide sectors. As NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks obtain fishing vessel permits (under the terms of the NOAA grant awards), the portfolio of fishing privileges represented by the permits the individual permit banks hold may not represent the ideal balance of ACE, by stock, that can best serve the needs of the sectors to which the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are providing ACE. By allowing ACE trades among the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, the Council intends to facilitate for the states a means to improve the balance of ACE available to create a “best fit” scenario of ACE for the permit banks to provide to groundfish sectors. Although this action would allow such transactions among NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, they are currently not allowed under the NMFS-state permit bank MOAs. However, it is the Council’s preference that future iterations of the permit bank MOAs allow this type of transaction, and to facilitate such a change in the MOAs by not precluding ACE trades among NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks in this action.

In conclusion, the Council’s intent for this action is to streamline the administrative and procedural requirements of the Northeast Multispecies FMP so that NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks can operate effectively and efficiently to the benefit of the states’ fishing industry and communities. This action does not propose to authorize any activity to occur that could not already occur through another, albeit more cumbersome, process.

Table 1. This table maps each current requirement to establish a sector with whether a comparable requirement would apply to NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, or whether the requirement should not apply to the permit banks.

Sector Requirement	Comparable Requirement for State-Operated Permit Banks?	Comment/Explanation
1. Prepare and submit a sector operations plan and sector contract.	Yes	Each state that wishes to operate a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank is required to develop, sign, and maintain an MOA with NMFS that specifies the requirements, criteria, and constraints on how the state will operate/administer the permit bank. This is the functional equivalent of the sector operations plan and contract. Such MOAs must be renewed at least every 3 years, but can be revised more frequently as needed.
2. Rule of three owners	N/A ⁷	As separate and distinct from sectors for the purpose of providing ACE to sectors, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank would not be subject to the rule of three owners; however, the intent of this sector provision is maintained because such permit banks may only act to provide ACE to sectors (which remain subject to the rule of three provision) and may not otherwise benefit as permit holders.
3. Provide a list of all parties, vessels, and vessel owners participating in the sector	N/A	The MOAs governing the operation of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks prohibit the states from holding the permit bank permits on active vessels, and the states are required to be the sole owner of record of each permit held in the permit banks.
4. Provide a list of all permits held by persons participating in the sector, indicating for each permit whether it is enrolled and will actively fish in the sector or will be subject to the provisions of the common pool	Yes	The MOAs governing the operation of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks require each state to provide annually a list of all Federal permits held by the permit bank, and to declare for each permit whether its associated fishing privileges will be used to provide ACE and DAS to sectors, or whether it will be used to lease DAS to vessels in the common pool.
5. The name of the designated representative or agent of the sector	Yes	The MOAs governing the operation of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks require the states to identify, and provide contact information for, a contact representative for the permit bank.
6. A plan for consolidation/re-distribution of ACE within the sector	Yes	The MOAs governing the operation of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks require the states to provide NMFS a proposal describing how the state intends to allocate available ACE from the permit bank to fishing vessel sectors and/or DAS to vessel owners.
7. A list of specific rules the sector participants agree to abide by in order to avoid harvesting more than the allocated ACE for each stock	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from engaging in fishing activities, and may only act to provide ACE to sectors, such permit banks are not capable of harvesting more than the allocated ACE. The sectors that receive ACE from the permit banks would remain subject to this provision, as described in the sector operations plans.

⁷ N/A = Not Applicable

Sector Requirement	Comparable Requirement for State-Operated Permit Banks?	Comment/Explanation
8. A plan that defines the disciplinary procedures for sector members that do not abide by the rules of the sector	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are not sectors, and do not have members, it is unnecessary for the state to define such disciplinary procedures. There are separate provisions, under NOAA grant rules, the state-NMFS MOAs, and the regulations at 50 CFR 648.4(n), that define the procedures available to NMFS should a state violate the terms and conditions of either the permit bank grant award or the permit bank MOA.
9. A plan of how ACE allocated to the sector is assigned to each vessel	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply.
10. Information on overage penalties to be taken if a sector harvests more than its allocated ACE for any stock	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply.
11. Plans for monitoring and reporting of landings and discards by sector participants	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply. Sectors receiving ACE from a permit bank would be responsible for complying with this requirement.
12. ACE thresholds that may trigger revisions to sector operations to ensure allocated ACEs are not exceeded, and details for notifying NMFS once an ACE threshold has been reached	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply. Sectors receiving ACE from a permit bank would be responsible for complying with this requirement.
13. Identification of any potential redirection of effort into other fisheries expected as a result of sector operations	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply. Sectors receiving ACE from a permit bank would be responsible for complying with this requirement.
14. Description of how regulated species and ocean pout will be avoided while participating in other fisheries	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply. Sectors receiving ACE from a permit bank would be responsible for complying with this requirement.
15. A list of regulations from which the sector is requesting exemptions	N/A	NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may not request exemptions from regulations.
16. Monitor and report catch by sector vessels to ensure that ACEs are not exceeded during the fishing year.	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply. Sectors receiving ACE from a permit bank would be responsible for complying with this requirement.
17. Establish an independent third-party dockside/roving program for monitoring landings.	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply. Sectors receiving ACE from a permit bank would be responsible for complying with this requirement.

Sector Requirement	Comparable Requirement for State-Operated Permit Banks?	Comment/Explanation
18. Weekly catch reports to NMFS stating the remaining balance of ACE allocated to each sector.	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, this requirement does not apply.
19. Annual year-end report to NMFS and the Council that summarizes the fishing activities of participating permits/vessels.	Yes	The MOAs governing the operation of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks require the states to provide NMFS annual reports documenting the performance of the permit bank. Such reports must describe each permit bank transaction for the preceding fishing year, provide summary information for the preceding fishing year, and evaluate the impact of the permit bank program.
20. Develop and submit to NMFS an appropriate NEPA analysis assessing the impacts of forming the sector and operating under the measures described in the sector operation plan.	N/A	Because NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are prohibited from assigning the permits held by the permit bank to active vessels, and from harvesting fish, there are no direct effects on the environment that stem from the operation of the permit banks. However, by providing ACE and/or DAS to sectors, the permit banks would increase the amount of fishing opportunities available to the sectors that receive the ACE/DAS. The environmental impacts associated with such an increase in the ACE or DAS available to members of a sector would be addressed and analyzed in the appropriate NEPA analysis for each sector. Sectors receiving ACE from a permit bank would be responsible for complying with this requirement. Also, Federal grant awards to a state for the purpose of establishing, or expanding, a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank are subject to NEPA requirements.

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Chapter 3

Description of the Affected Environment

The purpose of this amendment can most succinctly be summarized as facilitating more efficient operation of the several NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks that are being established in New England. The amendment facilitates these permit banks by defining a second type of entity that is authorized, under the Northeast Multispecies FMP, to be allocated ACE and to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. This amendment proposes to authorize NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks to be allocated and provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors *without first forming or joining an approved groundfish sector*, provided the permit banks meet all the terms and conditions of the definition of a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank set out in this action. This would improve the efficiency of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks by removing the redundant and/or unnecessary administrative requirements that are otherwise required in order for these entities to first form or join an approved groundfish sector (see Table 1).

Because this amendment is concerned primarily with the administrative provisions under which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors, the scope of the “environment” affected by this action is atypical for an FMP amendment. Most FMP amendments (and related actions) focus on changes to fishing regulations, which have a direct impact on fishing vessel operations (by modifying where, when, and/or how fishing may take place). These impacts on fishing vessel operations almost always affect the ways in which these fishing activities directly or indirectly interact with living marine resources, marine habitat, and the socio-economic constructs of the human environment. Thus, generally, for a fishery management action or an amendment of this type, an “Affected Environment” section would include specific, detailed information on the particular fishery and non-fishery species, the habitats of these species, and the fishing businesses and communities expected to be directly or indirectly affected by the proposed action.

However, the focus of this amendment is on defining a second type of entity that is authorized administratively to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors, and the impacts of the preferred alternative only directly affect the state fishery management agencies subject to these administrative procedures in order to operate NOAA-sponsored permit banks. Therefore, a detailed description of the environmental components including the biological resources, physical environment, and socio-economic structure that could be affected by the alternatives under consideration is not necessary. Rather, this amendment builds on, but does not alter, the analysis of impacts developed for Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP. Commensurate with the anticipated limited nature of the impacts associated with the proposed action (i.e., only socio-economic), this section of the amendment provides a brief description of the affected environment that includes the areas in which the Northeast

multispecies fishery occurs, and a brief overview of the primary ports engaged in the fishery. This is an appropriate baseline for which to analyze the socio-economic impacts of the proposed action. This section will also include references for more detailed information on these topics, should any reader wish to become more familiar with the features of the environment in which the Northeast multispecies fishery occurs.

The fishing activities affected by the Northeast Multispecies FMP occur off the Atlantic coast of the U.S., primarily from Cape Hatteras, NC, to the U.S./Canada border. This area of the Northwest Atlantic Ocean is also known as the Northeast U.S. Continental Shelf Large Marine Ecosystem (Sherman et al., 1996) and includes the subsystems known as the Gulf of Maine, Georges Bank, and the Mid-Atlantic Bight. For more information about the physical characteristics of the environment described below, reference NEFMC (2004a); NEFMC (2004b); Sherman et al. (1996); and Stevenson et al. (2004). See Figure 1 for a map of the Northeast Region with the three major subsystems identified.

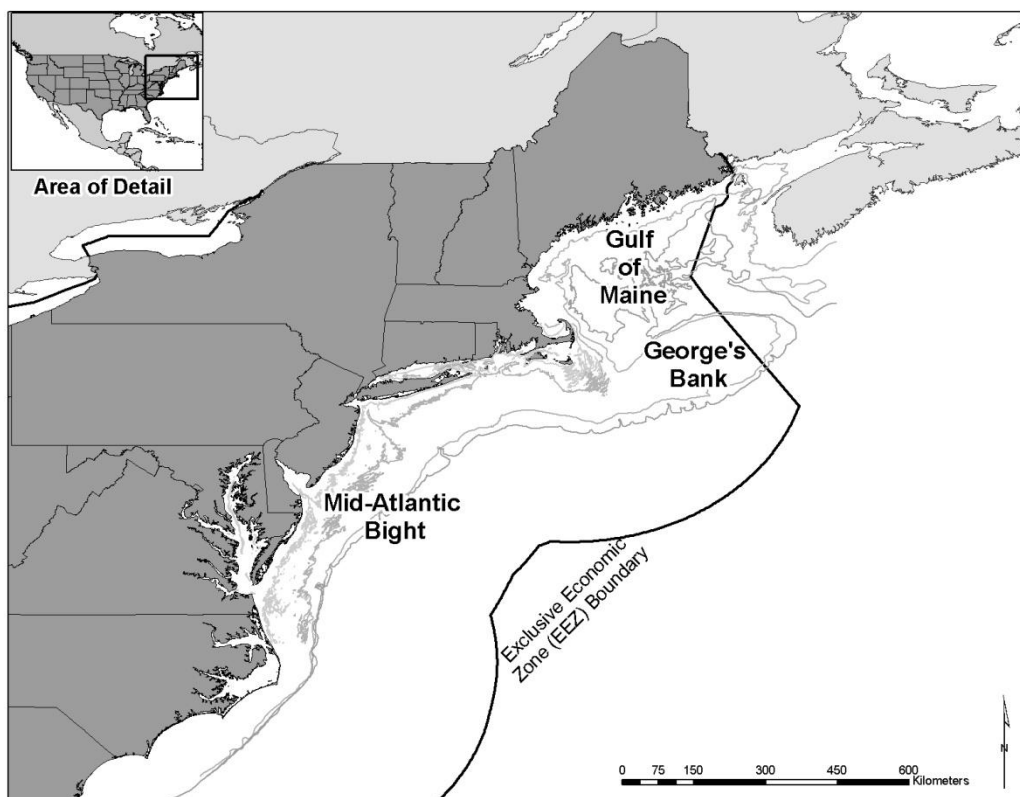


Figure 1. Map of the Gulf of Maine, Georges Bank, and Mid-Atlantic Bight.

Analyses of socio-economic impacts are generally conducted at three levels: The level of the individual fishing vessel, the level of the fishing sector or fleet (typically defined as all permit holders of one type – e.g., all commercial moratorium summer flounder permit holders), and at the level of the fishing community. Individual impacts of fishing regulations (changes to the cost of operations, changes to expected revenues, profits, etc.) occur at the level of the

fishing vessel or permit holder, while cumulative impacts across the fishery occur at the level of the sector, fleet, fishing port and/or community. The relative impacts of any proposed regulatory change depend upon several factors: Whether a vessel holds a permit in the affected fishery; whether a vessel holds multiple permits (permits in addition to the affected fishery); the dependence on fishing, and on the affected fishery in particular, of the permit holder; the number of affected permit holders in a sector, fleet, or community; the number of permit holders in the affected fishery versus alternative fisheries; and the overall dependence on fishing, and on the affected fishery in particular, of the fishing community.

The Northeast multispecies fishery operates primarily through the use of limited access fishing vessel permits, although there are a few categories of open access permits that provide limited fishing opportunities for those that do not hold a limited access permit. In 2011, 1,133 vessels held limited access Northeast multispecies permits, with another 195 limited access permits held in Confirmation of Permit History but not issued to a specific fishing vessel, and 82 limited access permits have either not been renewed yet for the 2011 fishing year or are in the process of a vessel replacement. In addition to the limited access permits, 1,562 vessels held one of the open access permits for the 2011 fishing year. Of the limited access permits, 827 (59 percent) are enrolled in a sector and 583 (41 percent) remain in the common pool for the 2011 fishing year. However, the sector vessels landed 98 percent of the ACL for the entire fishery.

In 2010, the dealer purchase report database includes 532 ports of record among the 12 states in the Northeast Region. Of these, the top 91 ports contributed 90 percent of the total ex-vessel revenue in the region (for all species landed), and 50 percent of the total ex-vessel value came from only 9 ports. For groundfish, the top six ports contributed 90 percent of the total ex-vessel revenue for the regulated large-mesh multispecies (Gloucester, New Bedford, Boston, Chatham, and Scituate, MA, and Portland, ME). Nationally, 15 Northeast Region ports rank in the top 50 of all ports in the country for both quantity of fish landed and for total ex-vessel value of the fish landed (see Table 2).

New Bedford, MA, the top port nationally by value in recent years, is a primary port for Atlantic sea scallops, monkfish, and the large-mesh groundfish species (e.g., yellowtail flounder, winter flounder, haddock, and Atlantic cod). The Hampton, VA, area (including Newport News, VA) is also a primary port for Atlantic sea scallops, as well as summer flounder and blue crabs. Cape May, NJ, is another leading sea scallop port, and is also a primary port for squid (*Loligo* and *Illlex*) and Atlantic mackerel. Gloucester, MA, and Portland, ME, are similarly important ports for American lobster, groundfish, monkfish, and Atlantic herring. Point Judith, RI, is a primary port for American lobster, squid (*Loligo* and *Illlex*), summer flounder, monkfish, and silver hake. Reedville, VA, one of the top ports in the country by weight of landings, deals primarily in menhaden as well as blue crabs, but does not feature as a primary port for any Northeast Region FMP species.

Port	Quantity (million lb)		Port	Value (million dollars)	
	2009	2010		2009	2010
Reedville, VA	349.4	426.1	New Bedford, MA	249.2	306.0
New Bedford, MA	170.0	133.4	Cape May-Wildwood, NJ	73.4	81.0
Gloucester, MA	122.3	88.8	Hampton Roads Area, VA	68.1	75.4
Cape May-Wildwood, NJ	63.9	43.1	Gloucester, MA	50.4	56.6
Portland, ME	37.3	38.2	Stonington, ME	26.5	45.3
Point Judith, RI	39.9	35.6	Reedville, VA	25.9	34.2
Wanchese-Stumpy Point, NC	25.5	25.6	Point Judith, RI	32.4	32.2
Atlantic City, NJ	33.0	24.2	Long Beach-Barneget, NJ	21.7	25.8
Rockland, ME	21.4	22.6	Point Pleasant, NJ	20.2	22.8
Point Pleasant, NJ	18.4	20.9	Wanchese-Stumpy Point, NC	23.1	22.0
Stonington, ME	14.8	17.0	Provincetown-Chatham, MA	20.0	19.9
Ocean City, MD	8.6	16.7	Portland, ME	16.6	18.8
Hampton Roads Area, VA	18.0	16.1	Montauk, NY	14.6	17.7
Provincetown-Chatham, MA	16.1	15.9	Atlantic City, NJ	22.2	17.3
Montauk, NY	11.5	12.9	Boston, MA	11.9	15.1

Table 2. Commercial fishery landings and value at major Northeast Region ports, 2009-2010 (from NMFS 2011).

Figures 2 and 3 display 2010 commercial fishing landings for major U.S. ports, both by weight and by value. These figures display the relative importance of Northeast Region ports compared to other major U.S. ports. Based on a classification scheme developed by Hall-Arber et al. (2001), the top-ranked ports in New England are: New Bedford, MA; Portland, ME; Gloucester, MA; Chatham, MA; Point Judith, RI; and Portsmouth, NH. This ranking accounts for overall fishery dependence and availability of fishing infrastructure. For a more detailed description of the fishing communities in the New England area, see Hall-Arber et al. (2001). This document provides profiles of many ports from Connecticut to Maine, and evaluates fishery dependence. For a more detailed description of the fishing communities of the Mid-Atlantic area, see McCay and Cieri (2000), for profiles of many ports from North Carolina to New York.

As noted earlier, economic impacts of a fishery management action are most directly seen at the level of the individual vessel, but larger scale economic impacts are also seen at the level of the fishing sector and fleet. Cumulative economic impacts are also often expected at the port or community level. Social impacts (as differing from purely economic impacts) can also be seen at the level of the individual vessel (sometimes differentiated based on position on the vessel – owner, captain, crew, etc.), the fishing sector, fleet, port, or community. Ports and communities with the highest degree of dependence on a fishery subject to a management action are the ones most likely to face social impacts as well as economic impacts resulting from a management action. The above mentioned references (Hall-Arber et al., 2001, and McCay and Cieri, 2000) provide detailed information of the social characteristics of New England and Mid-Atlantic ports and fishing communities.

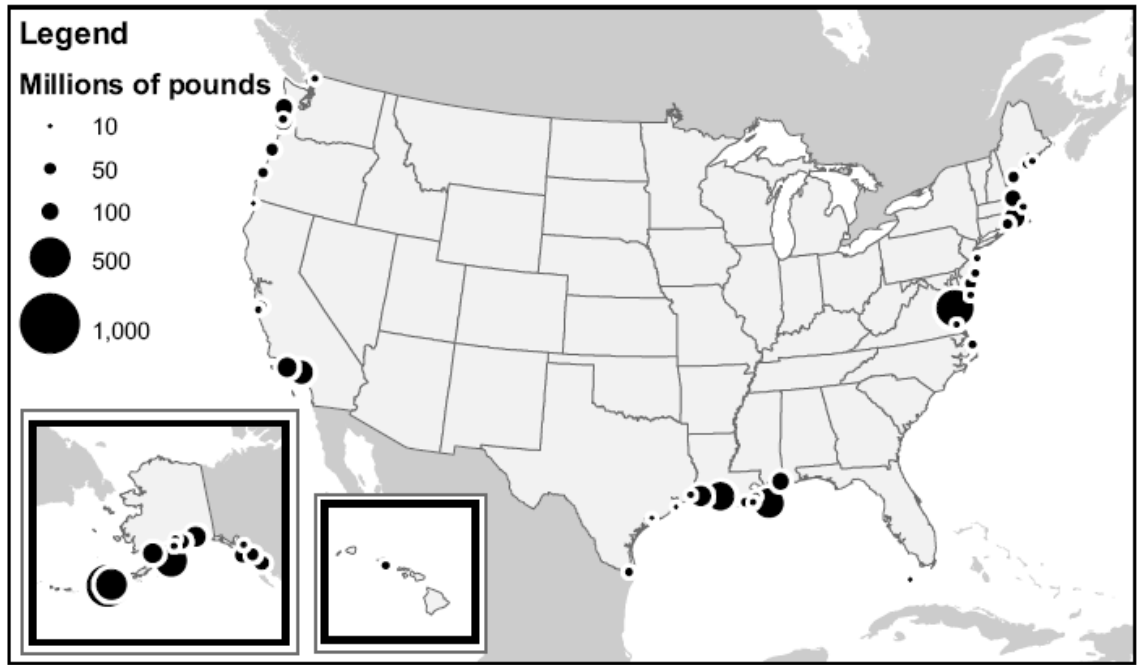


Figure 2. 2010 commercial fishery landings, by weight, at major U.S. ports (from NMFS 2011).

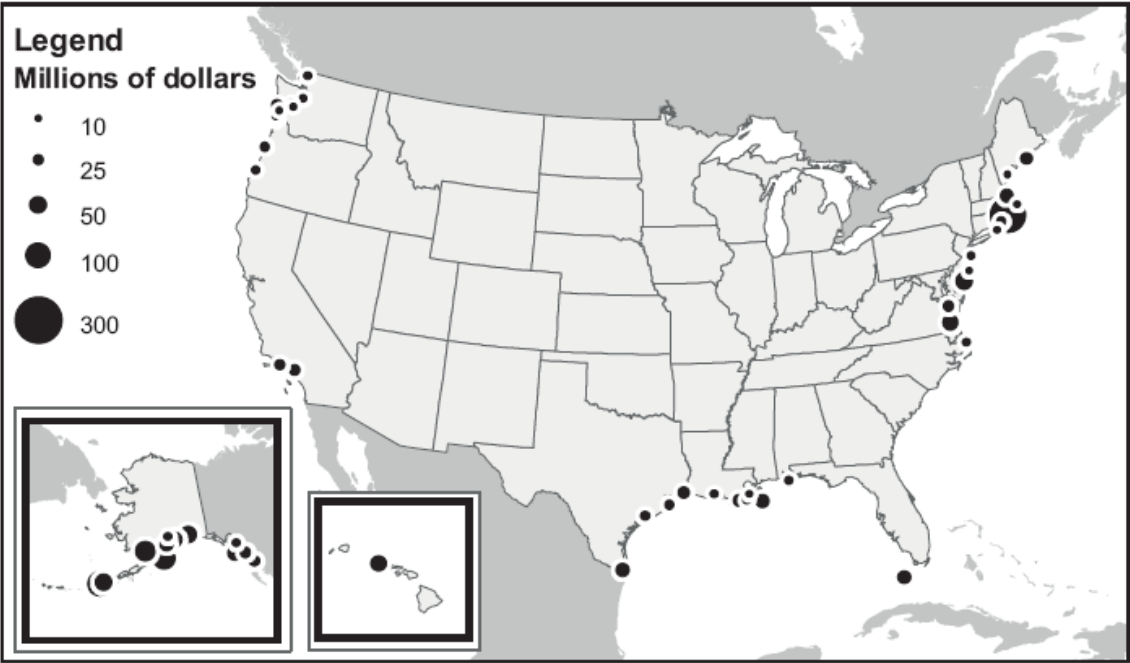


Figure 3. 2010 commercial fishery landings, by value, at major U.S. ports (from NMFS 2011).

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Chapter 4

Environmental Consequences of the Alternatives, Including a Fishery Impact Statement

Background

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires that an environmental assessment (EA) briefly describe the probable environmental impacts of the proposed action and alternatives to the proposed action considered by the action agency (NEPA, section 102(2)(E)). The following sections address the reasonably foreseeable direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the alternatives considered in Amendment 17.

As noted above in the introduction to the affected environment, this amendment is wholly procedural in nature—focused on the administrative provisions under which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. Subsequently, there are no expected direct physical or biological impacts associated with the alternatives under consideration, particularly for the preferred alternatives. As described below, there are some potential economic effects associated with savings afforded the participating state fishery management agencies operating permit banks due to the more streamlined administrative process proposed in this amendment, but, overall and due to the nature of the provisions to be implemented through this amendment, there are no functional differences (as far as environmental effects generally considered in an EA are concerned) between the no action/status quo alternative and the preferred alternative.

The expected direct effects are generally well-defined for most fishery management actions, but indirect effects are often less so. While NEPA requires consideration of “reasonably foreseeable effects,” it does not require consideration of remote and speculative impacts; these effects remain outside the scope of a NEPA analysis (Bass et al. 2001). During the development of this amendment, there have been occasions when discussions began to diverge from the requirements to which states should be subject in order to operate permit banks into discussions about the potential management implications of an expanded permit bank program. These discussions generally focused on the potential that substantial increases in the amount of funding provided to the state permit banks could affect the open market for fishing vessels and associated permits.

Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP established that the only entities authorized to be allocated ACE or to transfer ACE to approved groundfish sectors are other approved groundfish sectors. Amendment 16 also established that DAS associated with a vessel permit enrolled in an approved groundfish sector may be leased or transferred only to other vessels similarly enrolled in approved groundfish sectors. Amendment 16 further established a set of administrative procedures that must be followed by an entity in order to be

deemed an approved groundfish sector, including the requirements to develop and submit a sector operations plan and be composed of at least three independent vessel permit holders (see chapter 2, Alternative 1, for a complete description of these requirements). All potential impacts to the human environment of the groundfish sector program were presented in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that accompanied Amendment 16. This action proposes no changes to the overall groundfish sector program previously considered and implemented, save to define a second type of entity that may be authorized administratively to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors, provided that such an entity (a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank) meets the criteria established in this amendment to be so deemed.

This action does not reverse any decisions made during the development of Amendment 16 regarding the administrative provisions to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks should be subject, because at the time Amendment 16 was developed and approved by the Council, the establishment of any NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank had not been contemplated, and no such permit banks existed. During the initial development of the terms and conditions under which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would operate, and subsequent to the approval and implementation of Amendment 16, the relevant states and NMFS identified several administrative complexities that arise if state-operated permit banks must first form or join approved groundfish sectors in order to operate and provide ACE and/or DAS to other approved groundfish sectors. This amendment was initiated by the Council at the request of the affected states as soon as these complexities were recognized in order to consider options for amending the FMP to facilitate the efficient and effective operation of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks.

During development of this amendment, various interested parties expressed some concern regarding how the operations of state permit banks might affect the distribution of ACE among the sectors, or the amount of ACE available for use by sectors. The specific action proposed in this amendment—modifying the administrative process to facilitate the transfer of ACE and DAS from NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks to approved groundfish sectors—would have no direct effect on either the distribution of ACE among sectors or on the amount of ACE available for use by sectors. Figure 4 (below) is intended to illustrate this conclusion. Regardless of whether the state permit banks first form or join sectors (consistent with the existing regulations implementing Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP), or are defined as separate entities allocated and authorized to transfer ACE (and DAS) to sectors, the total amount of ACE available for harvest by approved sectors in the groundfish fishery would not change. Also, because this Council action makes no changes to the MOAs held by the states with NMFS, the criteria to be used by the states to determine to which sectors and vessels the permit bank ACE and DAS will be eligible to receive ACE transfers, this assessment presumes no changes in the final distribution of ACE and DAS among the approved groundfish sectors, with or without this action.

In fact, even if it were relevant to this amendment to consider the potential effects of the four NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks on the distribution of ACE and fishing

effort across the Northeast multispecies fishery, the best that could be hoped for is a tenuous and speculative qualitative analysis. NOAA has awarded grants to the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, with which the states are purchasing fishing vessels in order to obtain Northeast multispecies limited access fishing vessel permits that have been assigned PSC for use in determining a sector’s potential ACE allocation. However, at the time the Council took final action on this amendment, only Maine has expended any grant funds they have been awarded. The actual amount of ACE that may be available to be allocated to a state based on the permits it may be able to obtain with the grant funding is unknown at this time, making it extremely difficult to project the effects that this unknown amount of ACE may have on the overall distribution of ACE throughout the region. Two states, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, have expressed interest in exploring a different model for how to utilize the grant funds: Massachusetts has requested the grant award be converted from a permit bank to a revolving loan fund, and Rhode Island is considering such a request as well. This potential change has implications for the overall effect of the permit bank program, which could be limited to only the states of Maine and New Hampshire should both Massachusetts and Rhode Island instead establish revolving loan funds instead of permit banks.

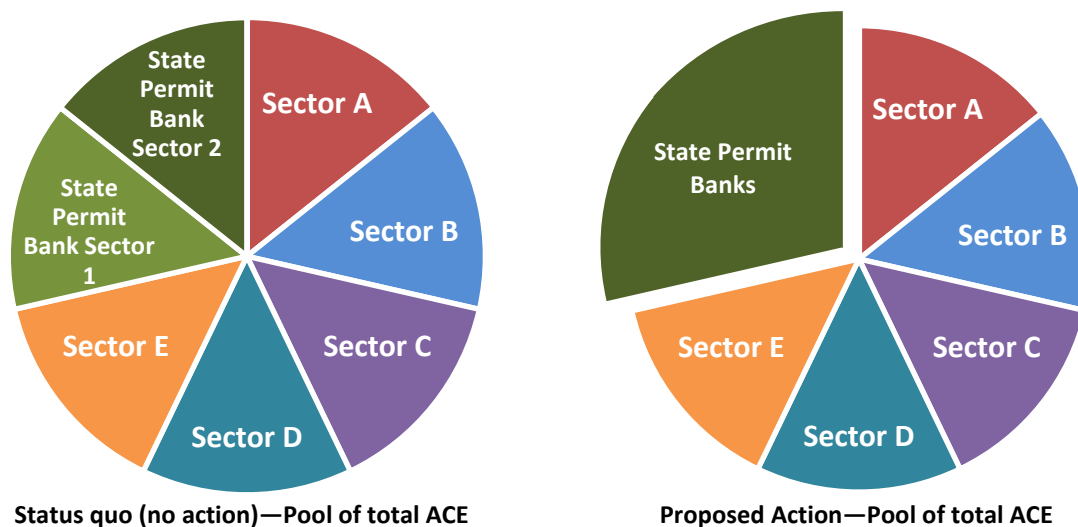


Figure 4. Under the current groundfish sector program (absent this proposed action), the total amount of ACE available is composed of the ACE held by all the approved groundfish sectors. In the status quo case, the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would fulfill the requirements to form sectors, and the total pool of ACE that could be available to any sector active in fishing would be the sum of all the approved sectors’ ACE. Under the proposed action, the total amount of ACE available is composed of the ACE held by all the approved groundfish sectors, *plus* the ACE represented by the fishing vessel permits held by all the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks as “ACE permits.” In this case, the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would not form sectors, but the total pool of ACE that could be available to any sector active in fishing would be the same as in the status quo case.

Another limitation on the analysis of potential effects of the permit bank program at this time is related to the issue of potential reallocation of fishing effort as a result of the terms and conditions in the current MOAs between NMFS and the states. Because the MOAs currently restrict access to the permit banks to certain classes of sectors and vessels based on criteria

related to vessel and community size, there could be a potential reallocation of fishing effort if the states primarily purchase vessels that would not meet these same criteria (e.g., the vessels purchased exceed the maximum size criteria) and then transfer the ACE derived from the permits obtained from those vessels to sectors and vessels that do meet the criteria. However, there are two further constraints on analyzing these potential effects. For one, the states have not yet completed purchasing fishing vessels, so it is not known whether there is a potential effort reallocation associated with the permit banks. For another, even if it could be known whether the vessels themselves would have met the criteria for access to the permit banks, it cannot be determined at this time how the fishing effort associated with those permits would have been used in the absence of the permit banks. That is, the permit holders who choose to sell their vessels (and associated permits) to the states for the purpose of the permit bank could, in the absence of the permit banks, have selected from among several other options: (1) Sell their vessels/permits to another bidder, who may or may not have qualified for access to the permit bank; (2) joined a sector that would have qualified for the permit bank, remained inactive, and allowed others in the sector to harvest the allocation derived from their permits; (3) joined a sector that would have qualified for the permit bank and actively fished to harvest some amount of ACE allocated to the sector; (4) joined a sector that would not have qualified for the permit bank, remained inactive, and allowed others in the sector to harvest the allocation derived from their permits; (5) joined a sector that would not have qualified for the permit bank and actively fished to harvest some amount of ACE allocated to the sector; (6) remained in the common pool, remained inactive, and leased the DAS associated with their permits to others in the common pool; or (7) remained in the common pool and actively fished under the common pool regulations.

In order to operate as a sector, an entity must first be approved by the Council and added to the list of approved groundfish sectors through a framework adjustment to the Northeast Multispecies FMP. In November 2010, the Council took final action on Framework Adjustment 45 and approved five new groundfish sectors: (1) State of Maine Permit Bank Sector; (2) State of Rhode Island Permit Bank Sector; (3) State of New Hampshire Permit Bank Sector; (4) Commonwealth of Massachusetts Permit Bank Sector; and (5) Sustainable Harvest Sector 3.⁸ Framework Adjustment 45, therefore, serves as the vehicle through which the Council approved the future operations—as sectors—of the four NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks. The remaining procedural step for the state permit banks to operate as sectors would be for the states to submit to NMFS, and have approved, annual sector operations plans (as described in chapter 2, Alternative 1).

Absent this action, the entities that would meet the proposed definition to be considered NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks would remain able to operate and function exactly as proposed under this action, provided they prepared and submitted annual

⁸ The Council adopted Framework Adjustment 45 on November 18, 2010, and submitted the final version of the document to NMFS for review and implementation on January 21, 2011. On April 25, 2011, NMFS published a final rule implementing Framework 45. This final rule notified the public that the Council had approved the four state permit banks to operate as sectors.

sector operations plans.⁹ That is, if a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank prepared, submitted, and had approved a sector operations plan that included at least two other permit holders; and complied with the reporting provisions of the regulations implementing Amendment 16, the permit bank would be able to transfer ACE and/or DAS to any sector(s) or sector vessel(s) that met the criteria set out in the state's MOA with NMFS. In this context, Amendment 17 would have no net effect on the recipients of the ACE and DAS provided by the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks, but would only affect the administrative procedures with which the states must comply in order to provide the ACE and DAS to those recipients. Functionally, then, regardless of whether the permit bank entity operates as a groundfish sector or as a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank, the same amount of ACE and DAS would be available for transfer to the same sector(s) and sector vessels. Therefore, there are no distinguishable impacts to the human environment, the fishery, fishery participants, or fishing communities that can be attributed to this proposed action (distinct from the effects of the permit banks themselves). What remains are the differences in administrative requirements the permit bank entity must fulfill in order to provide the ACE and/or DAS to those sectors and sector vessels (see Table 1).

The appropriate action to consider the environmental impacts of the fishing effort conducted by vessels in groundfish sectors is the annual approval, by NMFS, of the set of sectors authorized to operate in any given fishing year. The set of sectors, the number and characteristics of the vessels operating in each sector, the regulatory exemptions requested by the sectors, and the total amount of potential fishing effort (as represented by the ACE available to the sectors) will vary each fishing year. For this reason, it was not possible to conduct an environmental analysis in Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP that would comprehensively evaluate the impacts of the sector program as it is implemented each fishing year.

Instead, NMFS (working collaboratively with the sectors proposed for each fishing year) conducts this analysis on an annual basis in conjunction with the Federal rulemaking that authorizes the sectors to operate each year. This analysis considers the characteristics of each proposed sector (the number and types of vessels, the types of fishing gears to be used, proposed exemptions, etc.) and evaluates the likely impacts to the environment of the proposed operations of that sector. Although each sector is initially allocated a specific amount of ACE based on the PSCs of its members, the environmental analysis conducted in support of the annual sector authorizations must consider that the sectors would be authorized to acquire additional ACE from other sectors (which may include the so-called "lease-only" sectors that propose to have no active fishing vessels, but use the ACE allocated to the sector to lease to other approved sectors). Therefore, the analysis conducted in support of these annual actions has, and would be expected to continue to, evaluated the impacts on the environment of each sector fishing all available ACE. That is, the analysis takes a "worst case" approach and, for the

⁹ As of July 2011, only the State of Maine has prepared and submitted to NMFS a complete sector operations plan to operate as a sector in fishing year 2011. The remaining three states intending to operate NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks have the option to submit, by September 1, 2011, sector operations plans to operate as sectors beginning in fishing year 2012.

purpose of identifying all the potential impacts of the proposed sectors, assumes that each sector could gain access to 100 percent of the ACE available to all sectors for that fishing year.¹⁰

Under the no action alternative, nothing in this approach would change. Because the state permit banks would remain obligated to form or join a sector in order to be allocated ACE and authorized to transfer ACE to other sectors, the current analytical framework would utilize the ACE initially allocated to each permit bank sector in its “worst case” analysis. However, because the state permit banks are not allowed (pursuant to the permit bank MOAs with NMFS) to engage in any active fishing, a state permit bank (only) sector (e.g., if three or more state permit banks formed as a single sector, or if a state permit bank formed a sector with at least two other non-fishing permit holders) would only affect the analysis by increasing the total amount of ACE that could be available to sectors with active fishing vessels.¹¹

Although the proposed action would relieve the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks from the requirements associated with forming or joining a sector in order to operate by authorizing entities that meet the proposed definition to be allocated and authorized to transfer ACE and DAS to approved groundfish sectors, this action would not substantively alter the analysis conducted by NMFS as part of the annual sector approval rulemaking. As summarized in Figure 4 above, the proposed action would have no effect on the total pool of ACE available to be harvested collectively by the approved sectors in any given year.¹² Instead, it would create an administrative distinction between the ACE allocated to the approved sectors and the ACE allocated to the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks. When analyzing the potential impacts to the environment of the annual set of proposed sectors, NMFS must consider the impacts of each sector with active fishing vessels gaining access to all available ACE. Because the total amount of ACE available to be harvested collectively by the approved sectors would not change under this proposed action, NMFS’s analysis would be incomplete if it did not continue to incorporate the ACE available to the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks as part of the pool of ACE available to each active sector. So, although NMFS would be required under the proposed action to ensure its analysis recognizes and incorporates the ACE available to the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks in addition to the ACE allocated to the proposed sectors, the analytical framework remains essentially the same (see Figure 4) and the results of the analysis would not change (relative to the no action).

¹⁰ Even though this is never expected to actually occur, this type of analysis guards against any unexpected impacts if a sector acquires more ACE than the level assumed in an analysis that constrained itself to a more limited view of the potential ACE that could be fished by any one sector.

¹¹ A state could, under the current regulations and the terms of the existing MOAs, form (or join) a sector with two or more permit holders of active fishing vessels, and that sector would be allocated ACE to include the permits held by the permit bank. This ACE could be fished by the active vessels enrolled in the sector or transferred to another sector. The Council’s proposed action for Amendment 17 would not affect a state’s ability to enroll in such a sector.

¹² This is separate from any limits imposed by the permit bank MOAs as to which individual sectors may receive ACE transferred from the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks. Such limits may constrain the individual sectors with access to some percentage of the total ACE available, but the analysis described here is focused on changes at the scale of the fishery, which is unaffected by the proposed action.

Therefore, relative to the no action, the proposed action introduces no changes to the environmental analysis that NMFS is required to complete for each fishing year that sectors are approved and authorized to operate. The discussion of environmental effects that follows is organized to present separately the biological, physical, and socio-economic considerations of the alternatives at issue in this amendment. Thus, for the two alternatives, the effects on biological resources are discussed, followed by the effects on the physical environment (habitat), and then followed by the socio-economic effects. In this way, full consideration may be given to all the potential impacts associated with this amendment. Due to the administrative nature of this action, by which is meant that the action is focused on the administrative provisions under which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are allocated ACE and authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors, rather than on implementing changes to fishing operations (e.g., gear, area, season, etc.), there are no environmental impacts associated with the action under consideration.

Direct and Indirect Effects of the Action

This amendment includes two alternatives addressing the processes by which a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank would be allocated ACE and authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. In contrast to the no action/status quo alternative, the preferred alternative would define NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks and authorize entities that meet this definition to be allocated ACE and to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors without first forming or joining an approved groundfish sector.

Biological Impacts

Because the alternatives considered deal entirely with the process by which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are allocated ACE and authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors, neither of the alternatives would affect the level of fishing activity, fishing operations, the species targeted, or areas or times fished in the Northeast Region. The differences between the alternatives would be in the administrative procedures to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks must comply in order to be allocated ACE and authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. Therefore, there are no direct or indirect impacts on biological resources (including fishery resources, protected resources, and other non-fishery resources) associated with either of the alternatives. As there are no biological impacts associated with these alternatives, there are no differences between them.

Impacts to Habitat, including Essential Fish Habitat

Because neither the preferred alternative nor the other alternatives would directly impose or likely result in any changes in fishing effort or behavior, fishing gears used, or areas fished, there are no potential impacts to the physical environment (including EFH) associated

with the alternatives under consideration. There are also no differences between the alternatives.

Socio-Economic Impacts

Because of the limited nature of this action, the expected economic effects of the alternatives are considered to be not significant. This conclusion is reached based on a consideration of the differences in administrative procedures to which a state operating a NOAA-sponsored permit bank would be subject under the No Action versus Preferred alternatives. If Amendment 17 is not approved and implemented (No Action), states operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks would be required to (1) solicit for and find at least two other independent Northeast multispecies limited access permit holders to enroll in a sector with the state, (2) prepare and submit a sector operations plan to NMFS for approval, identifying all permit holders enrolled in the state's permit bank sector, and (3) comply with all other sector requirements as specified in the regulations at 50 CFR 648.87 (see chapter 2 for a summary of these requirements). The economic impacts associated with the No Action derive from the costs incurred by the states in order to comply with all the associated sector requirements in addition to the requirements to which the states must comply pursuant to the permit bank MOAs with NMFS.

If Amendment 17 is approved and implemented as recommended by the Council, states operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks would be authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to qualifying sectors and permit holders through an abbreviated administrative process. That is, the states would not be required to prepare and submit sector operations plans to NMFS but would instead be able to rely on the permit bank MOAs each state maintains with NMFS, and would be relieved of any need to find additional permit holders to meet the "rule of three" for sector membership. Any other administrative or reporting requirements to which sectors are required to comply that would be redundant with the requirements imposed on states through the MOAs would be eliminated, reducing the costs imposed on the states and thereby resulting in fewer economic impacts than the No Action. However, because many of the requirements to which sectors must comply are also required of states operating under permit bank MOAs with NMFS, the magnitude of the cost differential is not expected to be significant given that the entities on which these requirements would be imposed are agencies of state governments (contrasted with individual permit holders, the entities typically affected by fishery management actions).

Although the direct effects of this action only apply to states operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks, there could be indirect economic effects to members of the fishing industry that participate in the permit bank program if the states engage in some form of cost recovery. That is, the terms of the permit bank grant awards and the MOAs allow the states to generate revenue from the operation of the permit banks.¹³ Revenue could be generated by the state

¹³ However, the use of such revenue by grant recipients, considered "program income" under Department of Commerce regulations at 15 CFR 24.25, is limited to either the purpose of the original grant (e.g., defraying the

charging a fee to receive ACE and/or DAS from the permit bank, through an auction price paid for the ACE, a landings tax, or some other process. So if a state determines that it will recover the costs to administer the permit bank by charging a fee to those sectors and fishermen that receive ACE and/or DAS from the permit bank, the higher the state's administrative costs, the higher the fees to the industry. However, because the Proposed Action is expected to reduce the administrative burden on the states, any indirect economic impacts associated with the permit bank program would be expected to be lower under the Proposed Action than under the No Action.

Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP examined the expected costs associated with sector formation, operations plans, and annual reports, and based on the available information, estimated that these costs could range from \$60,000-\$150,000 per sector per year, though the analysis admits that the true costs associated with forming and operating a sector may be lower and that the true costs will remain difficult to estimate until there is more experience with sectors. In the initial grant proposals from each state receiving NOAA funds to establish and operate a permit bank, the states estimated their operating costs to range from \$46,000-\$73,000. However, in the operating costs estimates in their grant applications, none of the states included any additional costs in order to operate the permit bank as a sector. Nonetheless, for the purpose of Amendment 17, the Council assumes that the costs to a state agency to operate its permit bank as a sector would be close to the low end estimate for sector formation, operations, and reporting (\$60,000). This is due to the fact that a state permit bank sector would likely be formed of the minimum three permit holders, have no active fishing vessels and therefore be exempt from at-sea and dockside monitoring costs, and have reduced reporting requirements due to the non-fishing, transfer-only nature of the permit banks. This assumed cost can be contrasted with the states' proposed costs to establish and operate the permit banks under the terms of the MOAs with NMFS, and the cost differential appears negligible, but to the extent that there is an effect of the proposed action it would be expected to be marginally positive for the states and permit bank participants.

Summary of the Cumulative Effects Associated with the Preferred Alternative

According to the Council for Environmental Quality's (CEQ) NEPA regulations, cumulative effects are effects that result from the incremental impacts of a proposed action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, regardless of which agency (Federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such actions. Cumulative effects can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions that take place over a period of time.

In general, a cumulative effects assessment should address:

- The area in which the effects of the proposed action will occur;

administrative and/or operational expenses associated with implementing the permit bank program) or must be returned to the Government to defray the amount of the initial grant award.

-
- the impacts that are expected in that area from the proposed action;
 - other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions that have or are expected to have impacts in the area that have or are expected to have impacts related to the resources affected by the proposed action;
 - the impacts or expected impacts from these other action; and
 - the overall impact that can be expected if the individual impacts are allowed to accumulate.

However, as established above, the actions being considered in this amendment focus solely on the administrative processes through which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are allocated ACE and authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. Therefore, it is not possible to conduct what is generally considered a traditional cumulative effects assessment for this action. This amendment does not address fishing effort or operations or other issues related to the management measures utilized in the Northeast multispecies fishery. Although the Maine state permit bank is operational in 2010, in order to operate the State complied with all existing requirements under the FMP to form and operate as an approved groundfish sector. Therefore, this is the first action of its kind to modify the administrative processes to which such permit banks are subject.

This action would not result in any changes to fishing operations in areas covered by the Northeast Multispecies FMP. There are no incremental impacts to any fishing areas or living marine resources associated with the proposed action, relative to the no action baseline. The procedural changes proposed in this amendment that diverge from the status quo—defining a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank, establishing the terms that must be met by a state in order to meet this definition, and the authorization that entities that meet this definition may be allocated ACE and provide this ACE, and/or DAS, to approved groundfish sectors—are purely administrative features intended to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the state permit bank programs by removing unnecessary and redundant administrative requirements. Other than some potential economic benefits to the participating state fishery management agencies resulting from lower administrative costs, nothing in this proposed action is associated with impacts to any fishing areas or living marine resources within the Northeast Region that could be distinguished from the no action baseline. For instance, Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP estimated sector expenses to range from \$60,000-\$150,000 per sector per year. These costs include expenses with developing operations plans, monitoring sector catch, and producing annual reports. In the initial grant proposals from each state receiving NOAA funds to operate a permit bank, the states estimated their operating costs to range from \$46,000-\$73,000. State-operated permit banks are less expensive to operate because there are fewer members than most sectors and no active fishing effort, therefore less monitoring and reporting is required by state-operated permit banks.

Even absent contemporaneous direct or indirect impacts, a cumulative effects assessment must also consider potential impacts deferred in time or space. For these

“downstream” impacts to be relevant to the cumulative effects assessment, however, they must be reasonably foreseeable and directly linked to the initial action. Because this action is wholly administrative in nature, in that it is focused on establishing alternative administrative procedures rather than on implementing changes to fishing operations, other than some potential economic benefits to the participating state fishery management agencies resulting from lower administrative costs, any such potential downstream impacts are not relevant to this analysis. To conclude that there would be relevant species-level impacts resulting from this amendment, two notable differences would have to exist: (1) that absent this action, a certain amount of fishing activity would not occur, or that certain fishing activities would occur in different areas or with different gear types; or (2) that absent this action, some amount of ACE would not be available and/or used by approved groundfish sectors.

For these differences to be realized, implementation of the administrative procedures in this amendment would have to facilitate permit bank operations that could otherwise not occur if this amendment was not implemented. However, as explained in previous sections, absent the proposed action in this amendment, all the existing state permit banks would still be expected to operate, albeit through a more cumbersome administrative process. Therefore, given the limited and procedural nature of this action and the preferred alternatives, this action is not related to any other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

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Chapter 5

Relationship to Applicable Laws and Directives

Administrative Procedure Act (APA)

Section 553 of the APA establishes procedural requirements applicable to informal rulemaking by Federal agencies. The purpose of these requirements is to ensure public access to the Federal rulemaking process, and to give the public adequate notice and opportunity for comment. The Council is not requesting any abridgement of the rulemaking process for this action.

Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA)

Section 307(c)(1) of the Federal CZMA of 1972 requires that all Federal activities that directly affect the coastal zone be consistent with approved state coastal zone management programs to the maximum extent practicable. However, because this action deals solely with the administrative provision under which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors, the preferred alternative associated with this action does not directly affect the coastal zone of any state. In addition, pursuant to the CZMA regulations at 15 CFR 930.33(a)(2) and 930.35, a negative determination does not appear to be required, and coordination with the state coastal zone management agencies under section 307 of the CZMA does not appear to be necessary.

Endangered Species Act (ESA)

Section 7 of the ESA requires Federal agencies conducting, authorizing, or funding activities that affect threatened or endangered species to ensure that those effects do not jeopardize the continued existence of listed species. Based on the administrative nature of the action, the Council has determined preliminarily that there would be no direct or indirect impacts on protected resources, including endangered or threatened species or their habitat.

E.O. 12866

A Regulatory Impact Review (RIR) is required by NMFS for all regulatory actions that either implement a new FMP or significantly amend an existing FMP. An RIR is required by NMFS for all regulatory actions that are part of the “public interest.” The RIR is a required component of the process of preparing and reviewing FMPs or amendments and provides a comprehensive review of the economic impacts associated with proposed regulatory actions. The RIR addresses many concerns posed by the regulatory philosophy and principles of E.O.

12866, and serves as the basis for assessing whether or not any proposed regulation is a "significant regulatory action" under criteria specified by E.O. 12866.

The RIR must provide the following information: (1) A comprehensive review of the level and incidence of economic impacts associated with a proposed regulatory action or actions; (2) a review of the problems and policy objectives prompting the regulatory proposals; and (3) an evaluation of the major alternatives that could be used to meet these objectives. In addition, an RIR must ensure that the regulatory agency systematically and comprehensively consider all available alternatives such that the public welfare can be enhanced in the most efficient and cost effective manner.

Under the Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA) of 1980, as amended by Public Law 104-121, new FMPs or amendments also require an assessment of whether or not proposed regulations would have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small business entities. The primary purposes of the RFA are to relieve small businesses, small organizations, and small government agencies from burdensome regulations and record-keeping requirements, to the extent possible.

This section of Amendment 17 provides an assessment and discussion of the potential economic impacts, as required of an RIR and the RFA, of the proposed action, consistent with the purpose of this action.

Statement of the Problem and Need for Action

The statement of the problem and the purpose and need for this action are described in chapter 1. It is intended that the changes to the administrative procedures for transferring ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors by NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks proposed to be implemented through this amendment would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks by removing some of the administrative burdens that currently apply to such entities.

Management Objectives

The rationale for the Council's proposed action is found in chapter 2. The purpose and need for this amendment is found in chapter 1.

Description of the Affected Entities

As noted in earlier sections, this amendment is concerned primarily with the administrative provisions under which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. Thus, the scope of the impacts associated with this amendment is atypical for an FMP amendment. Most FMP amendments focus on changes to fishing regulations in order to effect a direct change in either fishing effort or fishing practices, and these regulatory changes generally result in direct effects on fishing vessel operations (by modifying where, when, and/or how fishing may take place).

These types of changes to fishing vessel operations almost always have socio-economic impacts on the participants of the subject fisheries.

However, the focus of this amendment is on defining a second type of entity (a permit bank) that is authorized administratively to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors, and the impacts of the preferred alternative only directly affect the state fishery management agencies subject to these administrative procedures in order to operate NOAA-sponsored permit banks. Indirectly, sectors and permit holders selected to participate in the permit bank process (e.g., to receive ACE and/or DAS transfers from the permit bank) may be affected if the states choose to pass on the administrative costs associated with operating the permit banks to those to whom they provide ACE and/or DAS. Higher administrative costs incurred by the states could translate into higher participation costs passed on to the industry (if the subject states engage in some form of cost recovery). Because this action proposes to reduce the administrative burden on states, this action should reduce any participation costs to which the industry may be subject.

Description of the Alternatives

A complete description of the alternatives considered during the development of this amendment can be found in chapter 2.

Expected Economic Effects of the Alternatives

Because of the limited nature of this action, the expected economic effects of the alternatives are considered to be not significant. This conclusion is reached based on a consideration of the differences in administrative procedures to which a state operating a NOAA-sponsored permit bank would be subject under the No Action versus Preferred alternatives. If Amendment 17 is not approved and implemented (No Action), states operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks would be required to (1) solicit for and find at least two other independent Northeast multispecies limited access permit holders to enroll in a sector with the state, (2) prepare and submit a sector operations plan to NMFS for approval, identifying all permit holders enrolled in the state's permit bank sector, and (3) comply with all other sector requirements as specified in the regulations at 50 CFR 648.87 (see chapter 2 for a summary of these requirements). The economic impacts associated with the No Action derive from the costs incurred by the states in order to comply with all the associated sector requirements in addition to the requirements to which the states must comply pursuant to the permit bank MOAs with NMFS.

If Amendment 17 is approved and implemented as recommended by the Council, states operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks would be authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to qualifying sectors and permit holders through an abbreviated administrative process. That is, the states would not be required to prepare and submit sector operations plans to NMFS but would instead be able to rely on the permit bank MOAs each state maintains with NMFS, and would be relieved of any need to find additional permit holders to meet the "rule of three" for sector membership. Any other administrative or reporting requirements to which sectors are

required to comply that would be redundant with the requirements imposed on states through the MOAs would be eliminated, reducing the costs imposed on the states and thereby resulting in fewer economic impacts than the No Action. However, because many of the requirements to which sectors must comply are also required of states operating under permit bank MOAs with NMFS, the magnitude of the cost differential is not expected to be significant given that the entities on which these requirements would be imposed are agencies of state governments (contrasted with individual permit holders, the entities typically affected by fishery management actions).

Although the direct effects of this action only apply to states operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks, there could be indirect economic effects to members of the fishing industry that participate in the permit bank program if the states engage in some form of cost recovery. That is, the terms of the permit bank grant awards and the MOAs allow the states to generate revenue from the operation of the permit banks.¹⁴ Revenue could be generated by the state charging a fee to receive ACE and/or DAS from the permit bank, through an auction price paid for the ACE, a landings tax, or some other process. So if a state determines that it will recover the costs to administer the permit bank by charging a fee to those sectors and fishermen that receive ACE and/or DAS from the permit bank, the higher the state's administrative costs, the higher the fees to the industry. However, because the Proposed Action is expected to reduce the administrative burden on the states, any indirect economic impacts associated with the permit bank program would be expected to be lower under the Proposed Action than under the No Action.

Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP examined the expected costs associated with sector formation, operations plans, and annual reports, and based on the available information, estimated that these costs could range from \$60,000-\$150,000 per sector per year, though the analysis admits that the true costs associated with forming and operating a sector may be lower and that the true costs will remain difficult to estimate until there is more experience with sectors. In the initial grant proposals from each state receiving NOAA funds to establish and operate a permit bank, the states estimated their operating costs to range from \$46,000-\$73,000. However, in the operating costs estimates in their grant applications, none of the states included any additional costs in order to operate the permit bank as a sector. Nonetheless, for the purpose of Amendment 17, the Council assumes that the costs to a state agency to operate its permit bank as a sector would be close to the low end estimate for sector formation, operations, and reporting (\$60,000). This is due to the fact that a state permit bank sector would likely be formed of the minimum three permit holders, have no active fishing vessels and therefore be exempt from at-sea and dockside monitoring costs, and have reduced reporting requirements due to the non-fishing, transfer-only nature of the permit banks. This assumed cost can be contrasted with the states' proposed costs to establish and operate the permit banks under the terms of the MOAs with NMFS, and the cost

¹⁴ However, the use of such revenue by grant recipients, considered "program income" under Department of Commerce regulations at 15 CFR 24.25, is limited to either the purpose of the original grant (e.g., defraying the administrative and/or operational expenses associated with implementing the permit bank program) or must be returned to the Government to defray the amount of the initial grant award.

differential appears negligible, but to the extent that there is an effect of the proposed action it would be expected to be marginally positive for the states and permit bank participants.

Determination of Significance under E.O. 12866

E.O. 12866 requires that the Office of Management and Budget review proposed regulatory programs that are considered to be significant. A “significant regulatory action” is one that is likely to: (1) 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, safety, or state, local, or tribal Governments or communities; (2) create a serious inconsistency or otherwise interfere with an action taken or planned by another agency; (3) materially alter the budgetary impact of entitlements, grants, user fees, or loan programs, or the rights and obligations of recipients thereof; or (4) raise novel legal or policy issues arising out of legal mandates, the President’s priorities, or the principles set forth in this Executive Order.

A regulatory program is “economically significant” if it is likely to result in the effects described above. The RIR is designed to provide information to determine whether the proposed regulation is likely to be “economically significant.”

The Council has preliminarily determined that, given the information presented above, there would be marginal net benefits to the states derived from the implementation of Amendment 17. Because none of the factors defining “significant regulatory action” are triggered by this proposed action, the action has been determined to be not significant for the purposes of E.O. 12866.

E.O. 13132

This E.O. established nine fundamental federalism principles for Federal agencies to follow when developing and implementing actions with federalism implications. The E.O. also lists a series of policy-making criteria to which Federal agencies must adhere when formulating and implementing policies that have federalism implications. However, no federalism issues or implications have been identified relative to the measures under consideration in Amendment 17. This action does not contain policies with federalism implications sufficient to warrant preparation of an assessment under E.O. 13132. The affected states have been closely involved in the development of the proposed management measures through their representation on the Councils and through the development of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks at issue. Thus far, no comments were received from any state officials relative to any federalism implications that may be associated with this action.

Information Quality Act

Pursuant to NOAA guidelines implementing section 515 of Public Law 106-554 (the Information Quality Act), all information products released to the public must first undergo a

Pre-Dissemination Review to ensure and maximize the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of the information (including statistical information) disseminated by or for Federal agencies. The following sections address these requirements.

Utility

The information presented in this document is helpful to the intended users (the affected public) by presenting a clear description of the purpose and need of the proposed action, the measures proposed, and the impacts of those measures. A discussion of the reasons for selecting the preferred alternative is included so that intended users may have a full understanding of the preferred alternative and its implications.

Until a proposed rule is prepared and published, this document is the principal means by which the information contained herein is available to the public. The information provided in this document is based on the most recent available information relevant to the action. The development of this document and the decisions made by the Council to this point are the result of a multi-stage public process.

This document will be available in several formats, including printed publication and online through the Council's and NMFS's web pages.

Integrity

Prior to dissemination, information associated with this action, independent of the specific intended distribution mechanism, is safeguarded from improper access, modification, or destruction, to a degree commensurate with the risk and magnitude of harm that could result from the loss, misuse, or unauthorized access to or modification of such information. All electronic information disseminated by NMFS adheres to the standards set out in Appendix III, "Security of Automated Information Resources," of OMB Circular A-130; the Computer Security Act; and the Government Information Security Act. All confidential information (e.g., dealer purchase reports) is safeguarded pursuant to the Privacy Act; Titles 13, 15, and 22 of the U.S. Code (confidentiality of census, business, and financial information); the Confidentiality of Statistics provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act; and NOAA Administrative Order 216-100, Protection of Confidential Fisheries Statistics.

Objectivity

For purposes of the Pre-Dissemination Review, this document is considered to be a "Natural Resource Plan." Accordingly, the document adheres to the published standards of the Magnuson-Stevens Act; the Operational Guidelines, Fishery Management Plan Process; the National Standard Guidelines; and NOAA Administrative Order 216-6, Environmental Review Procedures for Implementing the National Environmental Policy Act.

This information product uses information of known quality from sources acceptable to the relevant scientific and technical communities. The policy choices are clearly articulated, in chapter 2 of this document, as the management alternatives considered in this action.

The review process used in preparation of this document involves the responsible Council, the NMFS Northeast Regional Office, and NMFS Headquarters. The Council review process involves public meetings at which affected stakeholders have opportunity to provide comments on the document. Review by staff at the Regional Office is conducted by those with expertise in fisheries management and policy, habitat conservation, protected species, and compliance with the applicable law. Final approval of the action proposed in this document and clearance of any rules prepared to implement resulting regulations would be conducted by staff at NMFS Headquarters, the Department of Commerce, and the U.S. Office of Management and Budget.

Magnuson-Stevens Act

The preferred alternative identified in this amendment does not propose to modify any of the management measures previously implemented under the Northeast Multispecies FMP, which was found to be fully in compliance with all national standards of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The action currently proposed to be implemented through this amendment is focused primarily with the administrative provision under which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are allocated ACE and authorized administratively to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. This action is not required by, nor does it directly address, any required provision of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Although this action does not directly address any of the national standards, the objectives of the NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks echo the goals of Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP and recognize the importance of fishery resources to communities and, therefore, such permit banks are intended to promote the sustained participation of fishing communities in the groundfish fishery by mitigating some of the adverse socio-economic impacts on such communities associated with catch share programs. By providing an administrative mechanism to enable NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks to operate more efficiently, this action indirectly supports the intent of National Standard 8.

Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA)

Based on the administrative nature of the action, the Council has concluded preliminarily that there would be no direct or indirect impacts on marine mammals, that the preferred alternative appears consistent with the provisions of the MMPA, and that the preferred alternative would not alter existing measures to protect the species likely to inhabit the management units of the subject fisheries.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

Environmental Assessment

An assessment of the expected impacts of the preferred alternative, and other alternative considered as part of this amendment, is presented in chapter 4. This environmental assessment was prepared according to the provisions of NOAA Administrative Order 216-6.

Need for the Action

The purpose and need for this action are described in chapter 1 of this document. Other sections in chapter 1 describe the specific problem to be addressed and the background for the action.

Management Alternatives

The alternatives to the proposed action are identified and described in chapter 2 of this document.

Environmental Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

A description of the affected environment, along with a description of the environmental impacts of the proposed action and the no action alternative are provided in chapter 4.

Agencies and Persons Consulted

The development of this amendment was a joint effort between the New England Fishery Management Council and NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. No other Federal agencies participated in the development of this action.

Finding of No Significant Impact

NOAA Administrative Order 216-6 (NAO 216-6) (May 20, 1999) contains criteria for determining the significance of the impacts of a proposed action. In addition, CEQ regulations at 40 CFR 1508.27 state that the significance of an action should be analyzed both in terms of "context" and "intensity." Each criterion listed below is relevant in making a finding of no significant impact and has been considered individually, as well as in combination with the others. The significance of this action is analyzed based on the NAO 216-6 criteria and CEQ's context and intensity criteria.

Criteria to Determine Significance of Action

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

Response: The measures proposed in Amendment 17 are not expected to jeopardize the sustainability of any target species that may be affected by the action. As described in chapters 1 (Introduction and Background) and 2 (Description of the Alternatives), the focus of this amendment is on the administrative requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are subject in order to be allocated ACE and authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. The measures would not impose or result in any changes to fishing operations, fishing behavior, fishing gears used, or areas fished. As such, the impacts of the preferred alternatives, described and analyzed in chapter 4 (Analysis of the Alternatives), on any species that may be affected by the measures are wholly administrative in nature; there are no expected direct or indirect physical or biological impacts associated with the preferred alternative.

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

Response: The measures proposed in Amendment 17 are not expected to jeopardize the sustainability of any non-target species that may be affected by the action. As described in chapters 1 (Introduction and Background) and 2 (Description of the Alternatives), the focus of this amendment is on the administrative requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are subject in order to be allocated ACE and authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. The measures would not impose or result in any changes to fishing operations, fishing behavior, fishing gears used, or areas fished. As such, the impacts of the preferred alternatives, described and analyzed in chapter 4 (Analysis of the Alternatives), on any species that may be affected by the measures are wholly administrative in nature; there are no expected direct or indirect physical or biological impacts associated with the preferred alternative.

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 FMPs?

Response: The unique characteristics of the geographic area in which the fisheries governed by the Northeast Multispecies FMP, which this action amends, include the presence of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and an abundance of life forms of commercial and non-commercial value. The value of this area was described in the amendment (see chapter 3), and an analysis of the action on ocean and coastal habitats and EFH was conducted. The measures proposed in Amendment 17 are not expected to result in any direct physical or biological impacts to the affected environment and therefore would not cause substantial damage to ocean and coastal habitats or EFH. As described in chapters 1 (Introduction and Background) and 2 (Description of the Alternatives), the focus of this amendment is on the administrative requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are subject in order to be allocated ACE and authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. As such, the impacts of the preferred alternative, described and analyzed in chapter 4 (Analysis of the Alternatives), are entirely administrative in nature with no associated direct impacts on the

environment. Because this action would not result in direct adverse impacts to ocean and coastal habitats or EFH, an EFH consultation under the Magnuson-Stevens Act was not required nor conducted.

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

Response: The preferred alternative described in chapter 2 (Description of the Alternatives) would not impose or result in any changes to fishing operations, fishing behavior, fishing gears used, or areas fished. The measures are entirely administrative in nature. Therefore, implementation of Amendment 17 would not have a direct impact on the public health or safety of either people directly involved in the fishing industry or the public at large.

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

Response: The measures proposed in Amendment 17 are not expected to adversely affect endangered or threatened species, marine mammals, or critical habitat of these species. As described in chapters 1 (Introduction and Background) and 2 (Description of the Alternatives), the focus of this amendment is on the administrative requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are subject in order to be allocated ACE and authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. The measures would not impose or result in any changes to fishing operations, fishing behavior, fishing gears used, or areas fished. As such, the impacts of the preferred alternatives, described and analyzed in chapter 4 (Analysis of the Alternatives), are wholly administrative in nature; there are no expected direct or indirect adverse impacts on any endangered or threatened species, or their critical habitat, associated with the preferred alternative.

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.)?

Response: The preferred alternative described in chapter 2 and analyzed in chapter 4 would not impose or result in any changes in fishing operations or behavior, fishing gears used, or areas fished. The impacts of modifying the requirements for NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permits to be allocated ACE and authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors are administrative. Because the impacts of the proposed action would be procedural, with no direct or indirect impacts to the marine environment, there are no expected impacts to biodiversity or ecosystem function in the affected area.

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

Response: The preferred alternative would modify the requirements for NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permits to be allocated ACE and authorized to transfer ACE and/or

DAS to approved groundfish sectors. There may be marginally positive economic benefits for the state fishery management agencies operating the subject permit banks associated with proposed action that could be distinguished from taking no action. These benefits would be in the form of lower operational costs for the states, but none of these potential cost savings are interrelated with any natural or physical environmental effects as they would simply represent the lower costs associated with streamlined and less redundant administrative requirements.

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

Response: The impacts on the quality of the human environment of the proposed action in Amendment 17 are not expected to be highly controversial. Amendment 17 endeavors to modify the requirements for NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permits to be allocated ACE and authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. Amendment 17 does not address fishing effort, operations, or other issues related to the management measures utilized in the Northeast Multispecies FMP.

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?

Response: Amendment 17 would not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor is it expected to cause loss or destruction to significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources, because none of these features are present in the affected area. Amendment 17 is specific only to Federally-managed fisheries that operate in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), as described in chapters 1, 2, and 3, and the unique areas described herein do not occur in the action area, nor would they be affected by this administrative action.

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

Response: Implementation of Amendment 17 is not expected to result in highly uncertain effects on the human environment or involve unique or unknown risks. As described in chapters 1 (Introduction and Background) and 2 (Description of the Alternatives), the focus of this amendment is on the administrative requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are subject in order to be allocated ACE and authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. The measures would not impose or result in any changes to fishing operations, fishing behavior, fishing gears used, or areas fished. As such, the impacts of the preferred alternatives, described and analyzed in chapter 4 (Analysis of the Alternatives), on the human environment are wholly administrative in nature.

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

Response: As described in chapter 4 of the document, the actions being considered as part of Amendment 17 solely address the administrative processes through which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks may be allocated ACE and authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. Amendment 17 does not address fishing effort, operations, or other issues related to the management measures utilized in the Northeast Multispecies FMP. Therefore, given the limited and procedural nature of this action and the preferred alternative, Amendment 17 is not related to any other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

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?

Response: There is no evidence that the implementation of Amendment 17 will adversely affect entities listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or will cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. Compliance with the preferred measures will not result in the permanent loss or destruction of resources.

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

Response: The implementation of Amendment 17 would not result in any actions that would be expected to result in the introduction or spread of a nonindigenous species. The measures included in Amendment 17 are administrative in nature (chapter 4).

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

Response: The implementation of Amendment 17 does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The administrative procedures proposed to be implemented would provide an alternative for state fishery management agencies operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks to be able to operate said permit banks without first forming or joining an approved groundfish sector. The rationale for this action is to streamline the procedures such state agencies must follow in order to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of the permit bank programs.

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?

Response: There is no evidence that implementation of Amendment 17 would result in a violation of a Federal, state or local law for environmental protection. Furthermore, an analysis of the relationship of the proposed action with applicable Federal laws and Executive Orders was conducted (chapter 4) and it was determined that the measures included in Amendment 17 are consistent with all applicable Federal laws and Executive Orders.

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?

Response: As described in chapters 1 (Introduction and Background) and 2 (Description of the Alternatives), the focus of this amendment is on the administrative requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks are subject in order to be allocated ACE and authorized to provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors. The measures would not impose or result in any changes to fishing operations, fishing behavior, fishing gears used, or areas fished. As such, the impacts of the preferred alternatives, described and analyzed in chapter 4 (Analysis of the Alternatives), on any species that may be affected by the measures are wholly administrative in nature; there are no expected direct or indirect physical or biological impacts associated with the preferred alternative. Therefore, given the limited and administrative nature of this action and the preferred alternative, Amendment 17 may not reasonably be expected to result in cumulative adverse effects that could have a substantial effect on the target species or non-target species.

Determination

In view of the information presented in this document and the analysis contained in the supporting Environmental Assessment prepared for Amendment 17 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP, it is hereby determined that Amendment 17 will not significantly impact the quality of the human environment as described above and in the supporting Environmental Assessment. In addition, all beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action have been addressed to reach the conclusion of no significant impacts. Accordingly, preparation of an EIS for this action is not necessary.

Administrator, NMFS Northeast Region

Date

Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA)

The purpose of the PRA is to control and, to the extent possible, minimize the paperwork burden for individuals, small businesses, nonprofit institutions, and other persons resulting from the collection of information by or for the Federal Government. The preferred alternative proposed in this amendment does not propose to modify any existing collections, or to add any new collections; therefore, no review under the PRA is necessary.

Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA)

The objective of the RFA is to require consideration of the capacity of those affected by regulations to bear the direct and indirect costs of regulation. If an action would have a significant impact on a substantial number of small entities, an Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis must be prepared to identify the need for action, alternatives, potential costs and benefits of the action, the distribution of these impacts, and a determination of net benefits. The RFA requires the Federal rulemaker to examine the impacts of proposed and existing rules on small businesses, small organizations, and small Governmental jurisdictions.

The Small Business Administration (SBA) has defined all fish-harvesting or hatchery businesses that are independently owned and operated, not dominant in their field of operation, and with annual receipts (gross revenues) not in excess of \$4,000,000 as small businesses. In addition, seafood processors with 500 or fewer employees; wholesale industry members with 100 employees or fewer; party and charter vessels with annual receipts not in excess of \$6,500,000; and environmental, conservation, and wildlife organizations with annual receipts less than \$14,000,000 are also classified as small businesses. Small business size standards are not established for the public administration sector (i.e., Federal, state, and local government agencies), but under the RFA, government jurisdictions with populations of less than 50,000 are considered small entities for the purpose of the RFA.

If an action is determined to affect a substantial number of small entities, the analysis must include:

1. A description and estimate of the number of small entities and total number of entities in a particular affected sector, and the total number of small entities affected; and
2. Analysis of the economic impact on small entities, including the direct and indirect compliance costs of completing paperwork or recordkeeping requirements, effect on the competitive position of small entities, effect on the small entity's cash flow and liquidity, and ability of small entities to remain in the market.

If it is clear that an action would not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities, the RFA allows Federal agencies to certify the proposed action to that effect to the SBA. The decision on whether or not to certify is generally made after the final

decision on the preferred alternatives for the action and may be documented at either the proposed rule or the final rule stage.

Based on the information and analyses provided in earlier sections of this amendment, it is clear that this action would not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities, and that certification under the RFA is warranted. The remainder of this section establishes the factual basis for this determination, as recommended by the Office of Advocacy at the SBA.

Basis and Purpose of the Action

This amendment is needed to modify the Northeast Multispecies FMP to formally define, and facilitate the effective operation of, NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks. The purpose of this amendment is to: (1) Define a NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit bank and distinguish this type of entity from that of a groundfish sector; and (2) clarify and streamline the administrative procedures and requirements to which NOAA-sponsored, state-operated permit banks must comply in order to operate outside of the sector process (i.e., be allocated ACE and provide ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors).

Description and Estimate of the Number of Small Entities to Which the Action Applies

Because of the limited scope of the action proposed in this amendment, the impacts of the preferred alternative only directly affect the state fishery management agencies subject to the administrative procedures for operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks. Thus, there are currently four state agencies that would be directly affected by this action: The State of Maine Department of Marine Resources; the State of New Hampshire Fish and Game Department; the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Marine Fisheries; and the State of Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. Should NOAA provide additional funding to other Northeast region states for the same purpose (establishing and operating permit banks for the Northeast multispecies fishery), the number of entities directly affected by this action could expand to as many as 12 (all coastal states from North Carolina through Maine that are represented on either the Mid-Atlantic or New England Fishery Management Councils).

However, none of these state agencies would be considered “small entities” for the purpose of the RFA, which limits consideration of government jurisdictions to those with fewer than 50,000 residents. Delaware, the least populous state in the Northeast region, is estimated to have nearly 900,000 residents (per the 2010 U.S. Census).

Economic Impacts on Small Entities

As explained above, the only entities directly affected by the regulations proposed in Amendment 17 are state fishery management agencies either currently operating, or that in the future may operate, a NOAA-sponsored permit bank. None of these state agencies are classified as small entities for the purpose of the RFA; therefore, there are no economic impacts on small entities as a direct result of this action.

Criteria Used to Evaluate the Action

Significant Economic Impacts

The RFA requires Federal agencies to consider two criteria to determine the significance of regulatory impacts: Disproportionality and profitability. If either criterion is met for a substantial number of small entities, then the action should not be certified.

Disproportionality

For this action, none of the directly regulated entities meet the definition of a small entity. Therefore, because different classes of entities are not an issue, there are no small entities that are disproportionately affected (put at a disadvantage) relative to large entities, and the disproportionality criterion is not met.

Profitability

As noted above, none of the elements of this proposed action are associated with economic impacts on small entities. Therefore, no reductions in profit are expected for any small entities, and the profitability criterion is not met. Also, the entities directly affected by this action, as state government agencies operating on grant funding, may not “profit” from the operation of the permit banks. Any revenue generated by the state through the operation of the permit bank (e.g., through an auction bid, cost-recovery fee, landings tax, etc.) is considered “program income” under Department of Commerce regulations (15 CFR 24.25) and may only be used by the state to offset costs incurred in the administration and operation of the permit bank program, or must be returned to NOAA to defray the amount of the initial grant award.

Substantial Number of Small Entities

No small entities are expected to incur any economic costs as a direct result of the regulations proposed to implement this amendment.

Description of, and Explanation of, the Basis for All Assumptions Used

Because the action proposed in this amendment is entirely focused on the administrative process by which state fishery management agencies operating NOAA-sponsored permit banks may be authorized to transfer ACE and/or DAS to approved groundfish sectors and sector members, there are no direct or economic impacts on small entities associated with this amendment. No assumptions are necessary to conduct the analyses in support of this conclusion.

List of Preparers

Michael Pentony, National Marine Fisheries Service, Gloucester, MA

List of Agencies and Persons Contacted

National Marine Fisheries Service, Gloucester, MA

Maine Department of Marine Resources, Boothbay, ME

New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, Durham, NH

Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, Boston, MA

Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Providence, RI

John D. Crawford, Ph.D., Pew Environmental Group, Boston, MA (submitted written comments on draft)

David E. Frulla, Kelly Drye and Warren, LLP, Washington, DC (submitted written comments on draft)

Erik O'Brien, SouthWest Alaska Municipal Conference, Anchorage, AK (submitted written comments on draft)

Jackie O'Dell, Northeast Seafood Coalition, Gloucester, MA (submitted written comments on draft)

Meri Ratzel, Harwich, MA (submitted written comments on draft)

Brett Tolley, Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, Gloucester, MA (submitted written comments on draft)

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