NMFS evaluated whether the petition met the ESA's standard for ''substantial information'' and applied this standard in determining whether to accept the petition as well as whether to invoke an emergency listing under the ESA. NMFS believes it is appropriate to accept the petition to list the species but to reject the petitioner's request for an emergency listing as ''endangered.'' On this latter issue the petition failed to present new and substantial information to resolve longstanding uncertainties about ESU configuration and level of risk to these populations. However, the petition does highlight key issues warranting consideration by NMFS, including: (1) recent genetic evidence bearing on the issue of whether to split the southwest Washington/lower Columbia River ESU; (2) viability analyses indicating that Clackamas and Sandy River coho salmon populations are at high risk of extinction; and (3) evidence that populations may persist in other lower Columbia River tributaries. NMFS believes that an emergency listing should occur only after the ESU structure has been determined. NMFS will not presuppose the outcome of a more rigorous status review and BRT assessment.

Petition Finding

After reviewing the information contained in the petition, as well as information readily available to NMFS scientists, the Secretary determines that the petition presents substantial scientific information indicating the petitioned action may be warranted. However, NMFS does not believe that available information supports the petitioner's request for an emergency listing. In accordance with section 4(b)(3)(B) of the ESA, the Secretary will make his determination whether the petitioned action is warranted for this species within 12 months from the date the petition was received (i.e., by July 24, 2001).

Listing Factors and Basis for Determination

Under section 4(a)(1) of the ESA, a species can be determined to be threatened or endangered based on any of the following factors: (1) The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of a species' habitat or range; (2) overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; (3) disease or predation; (4) inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; or (5) other natural or manmade factors affecting the species continuing existence. Listing determinations are based solely on the best available scientific and commercial data after taking into account any efforts being made by any state or foreign nation to protect the species.

Information Solicited

To ensure that the status review is complete and based on the best available scientific and commercial data, NMFS solicits information and comments concerning the status of Columbia River basin coho salmon populations (see **DATES** and **ADDRESSES**). Specifically, the agency is seeking updated information since 1994 on: (1) abundance estimates and measures of population productivity, including spawner-recruit or spawner-spawner survival data, smolt production estimates, size and fecundity data, and ocean survival rates; (2) impacts associated with hatchery production including estimates of hatchery fish releases, straying rates, and proportions of hatchery fish in spawner escapements to lower Columbia River tributaries; (3) estimates of hatchery fish survival and their reproductive success in the wild; (4) genetic, life history, habitat, and other evidence distinguishing Columbia River coho salmon populations from coastal populations; (5) current or planned activities and their possible impact on this species (e.g., harvest measures and habitat actions); and (6) efforts being made to protect coho salmon in Washington and Oregon.

NMFS also requests information describing the quality and extent of freshwater, estuarine and marine habitats for Columbia River coho salmon, as well as information on areas that may qualify as critical habitat. Areas that include the physical and biological features essential to the recovery of the species should be identified. Essential features include, but are not limited to, the following: (1) Habitat for individual and population growth, and for normal behavior; (2) food, water, air, light, minerals, or other nutritional or physiological requirements; (3) cover or shelter; (4) sites for reproduction and rearing of offspring; and (5) habitats that are protected from disturbance or are representative of the historic geographical and ecological distributions of the species. NMFS is also seeking information and maps describing natural and manmade barriers within the species' current and historical range in the Columbia River basin.

For areas potentially qualifying as critical habitat, NMFS also requests information describing (1) the activities that affect the area or could be affected by the designation, and (2) the economic costs and benefits of additional requirements of management measures likely to result from the designation. The economic cost to be considered in a critical habitat designation under the ESA is the probable economic impact ''of the (critical habitat) designation upon proposed or ongoing activities'' (50 CFR 424.19). NMFS must consider the incremental costs specifically resulting from a critical habitat designation that are above the economic effects attributable to listing the species. Economic effects attributable to listing include actions resulting from section 7 consultations under the ESA to avoid jeopardy to the species and from the taking prohibitions under section 9 or 4(d) of the ESA. Comments concerning economic impacts should distinguish the costs of listing from the incremental costs that can be directly attributed to the designation of specific areas as critical habitat.

On July 1, 1994, NMFS, jointly with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, published a series of policies regarding listings under the ESA, including a policy for peer review of scientific data (59 FR 34270). The intent of the peer review policy is to ensure that listings are based on the best scientific and commercial data available. NMFS now solicits the names of recognized experts in the field who could take part in the peer review process for the agency's status review of Columbia River coho salmon. Peer reviewers may be selected from academic and scientific community, tribal and other Native American groups, Federal and state agencies, the private sector, and public interest groups.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*

Dated: October 30, 2000.

William T. Hogarth,

Deputy Administrator for Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

[FR Doc. 00–28306 Filed 11– 2–00; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510–22–S

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 648

[I.D. 091800K]

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council; Public Hearings

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Cancellation of public hearings.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces the cancellation of two public hearings that had dates and locations yet to be determined by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) and held in the states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island on the public hearing draft of Amendment 13 to the Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan. The intent to schedule these meetings was announced in the **Federal Register** on September 27, 2000.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Daniel T. Furlong, Executive Director of the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council), 302–674–2331, ext. 19, or John Dunnigan, Executive Director, ASMFC, 202–289–6400, ext. 304.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: NMFS, the Council, and ASMFC jointly manage the summer flounder fishery off the Atlantic coast. An earlier notice, published in the **Federal Register** (65 FR 58035, September 27, 2000) announced four public hearings with specific locations and dates to gather public comments on draft Amendment 13. The same notice also advised the public that two additional hearings (one in Massachusetts and one in Rhode Island) would be held at locations and times to be determined by the ASMFC and announced later through another notice in the **Federal Register**. The ASMFC has decided not to hold these hearings.

Dated: October 30, 2000.

Bruce C. Morehead,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

[FR Doc. 00–28305 Filed 11–2–00; 8:45 am]

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 001023289–0289–01; I.D. 083000C]

RIN 0648–AO25

Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone Off Alaska; Extension of the Interim Groundfish Observer Program through December 31, 2002

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Proposed rule; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS proposes a rule to extend through 2002 the existing regulations for the Interim North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program (Observer Program), which otherwise would expire December 31, 2000. This action is necessary to ensure uninterrupted observer coverage through December 31, 2002. The intention is to advance the management objectives of the Fishery Management Plan for the Groundfish Fishery of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Area and the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska (FMPs). The proposed rule would not amend the existing regulations, except to extend the certifications of observer contractors who are currently certified by NMFS.

DATES: Comments on this proposed rule must be received by November 20, 2000.

ADDRESSES: Comments should be sent to Sue Salveson, Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, Alaska Region, NMFS, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802, Attn: Lori Gravel, or delivered to the Federal Building, 709 West 9th Street, Juneau, AK. Copies of the Environmental Assessment/Regulatory Impact Review/Final Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (EA/RIR/FRFA) prepared for the 1997 Interim Groundfish Observer Program, the RIR/FRFA prepared for the 1998 Interim Groundfish Observer Program, the RIR/FRFA prepared for the 1999–2000 Interim Groundfish Observer Program, and the RIR/Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (IRFA) prepared for this proposed regulatory action may also be obtained from the same address. Send comments on any ambiguity or unnecessary complexity arising from the language used in this proposed rule to the Regional Administrator, Alaska Region, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau AK 99802.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Bridget Mansfield, 907–586–7228.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

NMFS manages the U.S. groundfish fisheries of the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Area in the Exclusive Economic Zone under the FMPs. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) prepared the Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) pursuant to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). Regulations implementing the FMPs appear at 50 CFR part 679. General regulations that pertain to U.S. fisheries appear at subpart H of 50 CFR part 600.

The Council adopted and NMFS implemented the Interim Groundfish Observer Program (Interim Program) in 1996, which superseded the North Pacific Fisheries Research Plan (Research Plan). The requirements of the 1996 Interim Program were extended through 1997 (61 FR 56425, November 1, 1996), again through 1998 (62 FR 67755, December 30, 1997), and again through 2000 (63 FR 69024, December 15, 1998). The Interim Program provides the framework for the collection of data by observers to obtain information necessary for the conservation and management of the groundfish fisheries managed under the FMPs. Further, it authorizes mandatory observer coverage requirements for vessels and shoreside processors and establishes vessel, processor and contractor responsibilities relating to the observer program. NMFS' intent is that the Interim Program be effective until a long-term program is developed and implemented that addresses several current concerns. These include data integrity, observer compensation, working conditions for observers, and equitable distribution of observer costs.

NMFS is working with the Council and the Council's Observer Advisory Committee (OAC) to address the concerns above and to develop new options for an alternative infrastructure for the Observer Program. A new infrastructure would be expected to ensure the continued collection of quality observer data and address observer coverage cost distribution issues through a fee system or alternate funding mechanism.

The development of a new infrastructure will require extensive time and coordination among NMFS staff, the OAC, and representatives of the industry sectors and observer interests. The intent of NMFS and the Council is to implement a replacement structure for the program prior to the proposed expiration of the current Interim Observer Program on December 31, 2002.

A description of the regulatory provisions of the Interim Groundfish Observer Program was provided in the proposed and final rules implementing this program (61 FR 40380, August 2, 1996; 61 FR 56425, November 1, 1996, respectively) as well as the proposed and final rules extending this program through 1998 and again through 2000 (62 FR 49198, September 19, 1997; 62 FR 67755, December 30, 1997; 63 FR 47462, September 8, 1998; 63 FR 69024, December 15, 1998, respectively). No changes to the existing regulations are proposed in this rulemaking, except to extend certification of observer