

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[ID. 020497A]

Peer Review Panels; Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Research

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

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: Notice is hereby given that the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, is accepting nominations from academic institutions, state fishery management agencies, the fishing industry, other interested non-governmental organizations, and the public for membership on three peer review panels. The panels are being convened under section 407(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Act), to review the basis for management of the red snapper stock in the Gulf of Mexico.

Three panels of independent experts will be established to conduct various parts of the review as required by the Act. The Statistics Review Panel will review the accuracy, precision and adequacy of the commercial, recreational and charter boat red snapper catch and effort statistics. The Economics Review Panel will review the costs and benefits analyses conducted in preparation of Amendment 8 to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan; this will include a review of all reasonable alternatives to an individual fishing quota program for the red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. The Science and Management Review Group will review the scientific and management basis for managing the red snapper stock in the Gulf of Mexico. The Science and Management Review Panel will be charged with evaluating the existing scientific information and management measures for red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico *in toto*, and will include the results from the statistics and economic reviews. In addition, this panel will review the results from the 1995 assessment and the independent assessments currently being conducted, the appropriateness of the scientific methods, information, and models used to assess the status and trends of the red snapper stock, and the appropriateness and adequacy of the management measures in the fishery management plan for red snapper for conserving and managing the fishery. Each reviewer

will prepare a report of his/her findings and recommendations.

DATES: Nominations must be received by close of business on March 28, 1997.

ADDRESSES: Nominations along with a listing of background, experience and credentials are to be submitted to the Director, Office of Science and Technology, NMFS, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: The Director, Office of Science and Technology, at (301) 713-2367.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Act requires the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) to conduct a thorough and independent evaluation of the scientific and management basis for conserving and managing the red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. Specifically section 407(a) of the Act requires the Secretary to, "initiate an independent peer review to evaluate: (A) the accuracy and adequacy of fishery statistics used by the Secretary for the red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico to account for all commercial, recreational, and charter fishing harvests and fishing effort on the stock; (B) the appropriateness of the scientific methods, information, and models used by the Secretary to assess the status and trends of the Gulf of Mexico red snapper stock and as the basis for the fishery management plan for the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery; (C) the appropriateness and adequacy of the management measures in the fishery management plan for red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico for conserving and managing the red snapper fishery under this Act; and (D) the costs and benefits of all reasonable alternatives to an individual fishing quota program for the red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico."

Any person or organization may submit nominations for any of the panels. When submitting nominations, include the submitting person or organization's name and affiliation along with a detailed listing of each nominee's background, experience and credentials. Nominees for any of the review panels must have outstanding scientific or management credentials relevant to the charge to the panel. Nominees may be made from international as well as national scientific bodies, fishery management organizations, academia or similar organizations. Members will be selected by a panel of senior NMFS scientists in consultation with appropriate interested parties.

To avoid conflicts of interest, nominees who have been directly involved in the collection, evaluation and interpretation of information used

in the management of the red snapper or shrimp fishery in the Gulf of Mexico or in the management of red the snapper in the Gulf of Mexico during the last 4 years, who may gain financially from the outcome of this review, or whose immediate family, organization or company may gain financially from the outcome of these reviews will not be accepted.

Each review panel will meet one or two times. At least one of these meetings will be for the presentation of information to the panel by scientists, fishery managers, and fishing industry representatives; a second meeting may be necessary to review results of additional analyses, or to discuss findings and recommendations. In addition, the reviewers may caucus by conference call to discuss review plans or the result of particular analyses. Each panel will have five or six members. A NMFS scientist will serve as a facilitator/coordinator for the panels.

Format of the Reviews

The reviews will require that each panel meets for 5 days. The first 2 days of the reviews will involve scientists from NMFS, fishery management agencies, academia and the fishing industry that have been involved in research or management of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico or as part of the fishing industry. The final 3 days of the review will be reserved for panel deliberations and preliminary report writing. Following the panel meeting, the panel will work by correspondence. A final report will be prepared by each of the reviewers and submitted to the Director of the Office of Science and Technology. Additional meetings may be necessary to discuss issues arising during preparation of the panel report.

Statistics Review

The Statistics Review Panel will consider the accuracy and adequacy of fishery statistics for the red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico to account for all commercial, recreational, and charter fishing harvests and fishing effort on the stock. In addition, the Statistics Review Panel will consider the collection of information on bycatch in the shrimp trawl fishery in the Gulf of Mexico and the estimation of total bycatch for the shrimp fishery. The Statistics Review Panel will consider the current data collection programs conducted by NMFS and states which are used in the assessment process including the cooperative commercial fisheries statistics program, the Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey, the headboat sampling program, the observer program which collects

bycatch information for the shrimp fishery, fishery independent surveys and appropriate state sampling programs such as those conducted by Texas Parks and Wildlife. The goal of this review is to examine the fishery information collection programs in the Gulf of Mexico which provide the scientific data for managing the fishery, setting regulations, determining allocations and conducting stock assessments. The report from this review will be part of the information to be considered during the Science and Management Review.

Economics Review

The Economics Review Panel will consider the data which are available to conduct economic inquiries and will review and evaluate the economic analyses which are currently available and which contribute to the understanding of the economic ramifications of alternative management strategies for red snapper. The goal of this review is to examine the analyses conducted in support of establishing and individual transferable quota system for the red snapper fishery and determine whether the analyses were sufficient and whether additional analyses of other alternatives are called for.

Science and Management Review

The Science and Management Review Panel will consider all aspects of the scientific and management basis for managing the red snapper stock in the Gulf of Mexico. The review will consider the appropriateness of the scientific methods, information, and models used to assess the status and trends of the Gulf of Mexico red snapper stock and their usefulness as the basis for the fishery management plan for the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery, and the appropriateness and adequacy of the management measures in the fishery management plan for red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico for conserving and managing the red snapper fishery under the Act. The goal of this review is to examine the available scientific data relating to the status of U.S. Gulf of Mexico red snapper and determine the best scientific advice to be derived from it and to determine whether the preferred management options are supported by the scientific advice.

Dated: March 7, 1997.

Charles Karnella,
Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.
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[I.D. 030497C]

Marine Mammals; California Sea Lion Foraging and Predation on Salmonids

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

ACTION: Notice of availability and request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces the availability of an Environmental Assessment (EA) that examines the environmental consequences of preventing California sea lion foraging and predation on salmonids at the Willamette Falls in Oregon. The proposed non-lethal removal of nuisance marine mammals is authorized under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

DATES: Comments on the EA must be received by April 14, 1997.

ADDRESSES: Comments on the EA should be addressed to William Stelle, Jr., Administrator, Northwest Region, NMFS, 7600 Sand Point Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115. Copies of the EA may be obtained by writing to this address or by telephoning the contact listed below.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Joe Scordino, 206-526-6143.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Section 109(h)(1)(C) of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*) provides Federal, state, and local government officials with authority to take marine mammals in the course of their official duties. Under this authority NMFS and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) may non-lethally remove California sea lions to prevent them from preying on salmonids at the Willamette Falls fish passage facility in Oregon City, OR.

NMFS has determined that California sea lions at the Willamette Falls are a "nuisance" because of the vulnerability of salmonids to predation at this location, and because Willamette Falls are 128 miles (205 km) from the lower Columbia River estuary where California sea lions normally occur. Since 1990, California sea lions have been observed in the lower Willamette River (between the falls and the confluence with the Columbia River) during the winter/spring months from February to May coinciding with the spawning migrations of spring chinook salmon and winter and summer steelhead, and the downstream migration of smolts. ODFW has documented sea lions foraging near the fishway entrances at the Willamette Falls fishway in each of the last 4 years

and preying on adult spring chinook salmon and steelhead. In recent years, the spring chinook salmon and winter steelhead populations, which are the only native salmonid populations above the falls, have declined, raising concerns from the public about the potential effects of sea lions foraging on salmonids migrating through the fishway at the Willamette Falls. A preliminary assessment of this situation indicates that a few California sea lions are returning each year to the Falls and that the number of sea lions involved may be increasing.

In response to concerns over the possible impacts of increasing predation on returning salmonids, NMFS and ODFW propose to implement a program of non-lethal removal measures to prevent sea lion predation at the Willamette Falls while continuing to monitor the resource conflict at this site. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires that federal agencies conduct an environmental analysis of their actions to determine if the actions may affect the environment. Accordingly, NMFS jointly prepared with ODFW an EA that explores the environmental consequences of three alternatives: (1) No action; (2) Non-lethal removal of California sea lions (proposed action); and, (3) Lethal removal of sea lions foraging at Willamette Falls. The draft EA was prepared in accordance with NEPA and implementing regulations at 40 CFR Parts 1500 through 1508 and NOAA guidelines concerning implementation of NEPA found in NOAA Administrative Order 216-6.

Dated: March 7, 1997.

Hilda Diaz-Soltero,
Acting Director, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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[I.D. 030597F]

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; Public Meeting

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

ACTION: Notice of public meeting.

SUMMARY: The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) will convene a public meeting of the Mackerel Stock Assessment Panel.

DATES: This meeting will begin at 1:00 p.m. on March 31, 1997, and will conclude by 5:00 p.m. on April 4, 1997.