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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 229

[Docket No. 030221039-6029-27; I.D. 020606D]

Taking of Marine Mammals Incidental to Commercial Fishing Operations; Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan (ALWTRP)

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

ACTION: Temporary rule.

SUMMARY: The Assistant Administrator for Fisheries (AA), NOAA, announces temporary restrictions consistent with the requirements of the ALWTRP's implementing regulations. These regulations apply to lobster trap/pot and anchored gillnet fishermen for 15 days in an area southeast of Portland, ME, totaling approximately 886 nm² to 1,569 nm² (3,039 km² to 5,382 km²), depending on the temporal and spatial overlap with two other DAM zones currently in effect. The two other overlapping DAM zones are in effect from 0001 hours February 3, 2006 through 2400 hours February 17, 2006, and from 0001 hours February 10, 2006, through 2400 hours February 24, 2006. The purpose of this action is to provide protection to an aggregation of northern right whales (right whales).

DATES: Effective beginning at 0001 hours February 15, 2006, through 2400 hours March 1, 2006.

ADDRESSES: Copies of the proposed and final Dynamic Area Management (DAM) rules, Environmental Assessments (EAs), Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team (ALWTRT) meeting summaries, and progress reports on implementation of the ALWTRP may also be obtained by writing Diane Borggaard, NMFS/Northeast Region, One Blackburn Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Diane Borggaard, NMFS/Northeast Region, 978-281-9300 x6503; or Kristy Long, NMFS, Office of Protected Resources, 301-713-2322.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Electronic Access

Several of the background documents for the ALWTRP and the take reduction planning process can be downloaded from the ALWTRP web site at <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/whaletrp/>.

Background

The ALWTRP was developed pursuant to section 118 of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) to reduce the incidental mortality and serious injury of three endangered species of whales (right, fin, and humpback) due to incidental interaction with commercial fishing activities. In addition, the measures identified in the ALWTRP would provide conservation benefits to a fourth species (minke), which are neither listed as endangered nor threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ALWTRP, implemented through regulations codified at 50 CFR 229.32, relies on a combination of fishing gear modifications and time/area closures to reduce the risk of whales becoming entangled in commercial fishing gear (and potentially suffering serious injury or mortality as a result).

On January 9, 2002, NMFS published the final rule to implement the ALWTRP's DAM program (67 FR 1133). On August 26, 2003, NMFS amended the regulations by publishing a final rule, which specifically identified gear modifications that may be allowed in a DAM zone (68 FR 51195). The DAM program provides specific authority for NMFS to restrict temporarily on an expedited basis the use of lobster trap/pot and anchored gillnet fishing gear in areas north of 40° N. lat. to protect right whales. Under the DAM program, NMFS may: (1) require the removal of all lobster trap/pot and anchored gillnet fishing gear for a 15-day period; (2) allow lobster trap/pot and anchored gillnet fishing within a DAM zone with gear modifications determined by NMFS to sufficiently reduce the risk of entanglement; and/or (3) issue an alert to fishermen requesting the voluntary removal of all lobster trap/pot and anchored gillnet gear for a 15-day period and asking fishermen not to set any additional gear in the DAM zone during the 15-day period.

A DAM zone is triggered when NMFS receives a reliable report from a qualified individual of three or more right whales sighted within an area (75 nm² (139 km²)) such that right whale density is equal to or greater than 0.04 right whales per nm² (1.85 km²). A qualified individual is an individual ascertained by NMFS to be reasonably able, through training or experience, to

identify a right whale. Such individuals include, but are not limited to, NMFS staff, U.S. Coast Guard and Navy personnel trained in whale identification, scientific research survey personnel, whale watch operators and naturalists, and mariners trained in whale species identification through disentanglement training or some other training program deemed adequate by NMFS. A reliable report would be a credible right whale sighting.

On February 2, 2006, an aerial survey reported a sighting of seven right whales in the proximity 42° 59' N. lat. and 69° 26' W. long. This position lies southeast of Portland, ME. After conducting an investigation, NMFS ascertained that the report came from a qualified individual and determined that the report was reliable. Thus, NMFS has received a reliable report from a qualified individual of the requisite right whale density to trigger the DAM provisions of the ALWTRP.

Once a DAM zone is triggered, NMFS determines whether to impose restrictions on fishing and/or fishing gear in the zone. This determination is based on the following factors, including but not limited to: the location of the DAM zone with respect to other fishery closure areas, weather conditions as they relate to the safety of human life at sea, the type and amount of gear already present in the area, and a review of recent right whale entanglement and mortality data.

NMFS has reviewed the factors and management options noted above relative to the DAM under consideration. As a result of this review, NMFS prohibits lobster trap/pot and anchored gillnet gear in this area during the 15-day restricted period unless it is modified in the manner described in this temporary rule.

The DAM zone overlaps with two other DAM zones: one in effect from 0001 hours February 3, 2006, through 2400 hours February 17, 2006 (71 FR 5180, February 1, 2006), and the other in effect from 0001 hours February 10, 2006, through 2400 hours February 24, 2006 (70 FR 6396, February 8, 2006). Effective from 0001 hours February 15, 2006 through 2400 hours February 17, 2006, the DAM zone is bounded by the following coordinates when it overlaps these previously established DAM zones:

43° 18' N., 69° 53' W. (NW Corner)
43° 18' N., 69° 15' W.
42° 49' N., 69° 15' W.
42° 49' N., 68° 58' W.
42° 39' N., 68° 58' W.
42° 39' N., 69° 32' W.
43° 00' N., 69° 32' W.
43° 00' N., 69° 53' W.

Effective from 0001 hours February 18, 2006, through 2400 hours February 24, 2006, after the February 1, 2006, DAM zone (71 FR 5180) expires, the DAM zone is bounded by the following coordinates:

43° 18' N., 69° 53' W. (NW Corner)
 43° 18' N., 68° 58' W.
 42° 39' N., 68° 58' W.
 42° 39' N., 69° 32' W.
 43° 00' N., 69° 32' W.
 43° 00' N., 69° 53' W.

Effective from 0001 hours February 25, 2006, through 2400 hours March 1, 2006, after the February 8, 2006, DAM zone (70 FR 6396) expires, the DAM zone is bounded by the following coordinates:

43° 18' N., 69° 53' W. (NW Corner)
 43° 18' N., 68° 58' W.
 42° 39' N., 68° 58' W.
 42° 39' N., 69° 53' W.

In addition to those gear modifications currently implemented under the ALWTRP at 50 CFR 229.32, the following gear modifications are required in the DAM zone. If the requirements and exceptions for gear modification in the DAM zone, as described below, differ from other ALWTRP requirements for any overlapping areas and times, then the more restrictive requirements will apply in the DAM zone. Special note for gillnet fisherman: a portion of this DAM zone overlaps the year-round Cashes Ledge Closure Area found at 50 CFR 648.81(d) and the February Cashes Ledge Closure Area for harbor porpoise found at 50 CFR 229.33(a)(6). Due to these closures, sink gillnet gear is prohibited from these portions of the DAM zone.

Lobster Trap/Pot Gear

Fishermen utilizing lobster trap/pot gear within the portion of the Northern Nearshore Lobster Waters Area that overlap with the DAM zone are required to utilize all of the following gear modifications while the DAM zone is in effect:

1. Groundlines must be made of either sinking or neutrally buoyant line. Floating groundlines are prohibited;
2. All buoy lines must be made of either sinking or neutrally buoyant line, except the bottom portion of the line, which may be a section of floating line not to exceed one-third the overall length of the buoy line;
3. Fishermen are allowed to use two buoy lines per trawl; and
4. A weak link with a maximum breaking strength of 600 lb (272.4 kg) must be placed at all buoys.

Fishermen utilizing lobster trap/pot gear within the portion of the Offshore Lobster Waters Area that overlap with

the DAM zone are required to utilize all of the following gear modifications while the DAM zone is in effect:

1. Groundlines must be made of either sinking or neutrally buoyant line. Floating groundlines are prohibited;
2. All buoy lines must be made of either sinking or neutrally buoyant line, except the bottom portion of the line, which may be a section of floating line not to exceed one-third the overall length of the buoy line;
3. Fishermen are allowed to use two buoy lines per trawl; and
4. A weak link with a maximum breaking strength of 1,500 lb (680.4 kg) must be placed at all buoys.

Anchored Gillnet Gear

Fishermen utilizing anchored gillnet gear within the portion of the Other Northeast Gillnet Waters Area that overlap with the DAM zone are required to utilize all of the following gear modifications while the DAM zone is in effect:

1. Groundlines must be made of either sinking or neutrally buoyant line. Floating groundlines are prohibited;
2. All buoy lines must be made of either sinking or neutrally buoyant line, except the bottom portion of the line, which may be a section of floating line not to exceed one-third the overall length of the buoy line;
3. Fishermen are allowed to use two buoy lines per string;
4. Each net panel must have a total of five weak links with a maximum breaking strength of 1,100 lb (498.8 kg). Net panels are typically 50 fathoms (91.4 m) in length, but the weak link requirements would apply to all variations in panel size. These weak links must include three floatline weak links. The placement of the weak links on the floatline must be: one at the center of the net panel and one each as close as possible to each of the bridle ends of the net panel. The remaining two weak links must be placed in the center of each of the up and down lines at the panel ends;
5. A weak link with a maximum breaking strength of 1,100 lb (498.8 kg) must be placed at all buoys; and
6. All anchored gillnets, regardless of the number of net panels, must be securely anchored with the holding power of at least a 22 lb (10.0 kg) Danforth-style anchor at each end of the net string.

The restrictions will be in effect beginning at 0001 hours February 15, 2006, through 2400 hours March 1, 2006, unless terminated sooner or extended by NMFS through another notification in the **Federal Register**.

The restrictions will be announced to state officials, fishermen, ALWTRT members, and other interested parties through e-mail, phone contact, NOAA website, and other appropriate media immediately upon filing with the **Federal Register**.

Classification

In accordance with section 118(f)(9) of the MMPA, the Assistant Administrator (AA) for Fisheries has determined that this action is necessary to implement a take reduction plan to protect North Atlantic right whales.

Environmental Assessments for the DAM program were prepared on December 28, 2001, and August 6, 2003. This action falls within the scope of the analyses of these EAs, which are available from the agency upon request.

NMFS provided prior notice and an opportunity for public comment on the regulations establishing the criteria and procedures for implementing a DAM zone. Providing prior notice and opportunity for comment on this action, pursuant to those regulations, would be impracticable because it would prevent NMFS from executing its functions to protect and reduce serious injury and mortality of endangered right whales. The regulations establishing the DAM program are designed to enable the agency to help protect unexpected concentrations of right whales. In order to meet the goals of the DAM program, the agency needs to be able to create a DAM zone and implement restrictions on fishing gear as soon as possible once the criteria are triggered and NMFS determines that a DAM restricted zone is appropriate. If NMFS were to provide prior notice and an opportunity for public comment upon the creation of a DAM restricted zone, the aggregated right whales would be vulnerable to entanglement which could result in serious injury and mortality. Additionally, the right whales would most likely move on to another location before NMFS could implement the restrictions designed to protect them, thereby rendering the action obsolete. Therefore, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B), the AA finds that good cause exists to waive prior notice and an opportunity to comment on this action to implement a DAM restricted zone to reduce the risk of entanglement of endangered right whales in commercial lobster trap/pot and anchored gillnet gear as such procedures would be impracticable.

For the same reasons, the AA finds that, under 5 U.S.C. 553(d)(3), good cause exists to waive the 30-day delay in effective date. If NMFS were to delay for 30 days the effective date of this

action, the aggregated right whales would be vulnerable to entanglement, which could cause serious injury and mortality. Additionally, right whales would likely move to another location between the time NMFS approved the action creating the DAM restricted zone and the time it went into effect, thereby rendering the action obsolete and ineffective. Nevertheless, NMFS recognizes the need for fishermen to have time to either modify or remove (if not in compliance with the required restrictions) their gear from a DAM zone once one is approved. Thus, NMFS makes this action effective 2 days after the date of publication of this document in the **Federal Register**.

NMFS determined that the regulations establishing the DAM program and actions such as this one taken pursuant to those regulations are consistent to the maximum extent practicable with the enforceable policies of the approved coastal management program of the U.S. Atlantic coastal states. This determination was submitted for review by the responsible state agencies under section 307 of the Coastal Zone Management Act. Following state review of the regulations creating the DAM program, no state disagreed with NMFS' conclusion that the DAM program is consistent to the maximum extent practicable with the enforceable policies of the approved coastal management program for that state.

The DAM program under which NMFS is taking this action contains policies with federalism implications warranting preparation of a federalism assessment under Executive Order 13132. Accordingly, in October 2001 and March 2003, the Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs, Department of Commerce, provided notice of the DAM program and its amendments to the appropriate elected officials in states to be affected by actions taken pursuant to the DAM program. Federalism issues raised by state officials were addressed in the final rules implementing the DAM program. A copy of the federalism Summary Impact Statement for the final rules is available upon request (**ADDRESSES**).

The rule implementing the DAM program has been determined to be not significant under Executive Order 12866.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.* and 50 CFR 229.32(g)(3)

Dated: February 8, 2006.

James W. Balsiger,

Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 648

[Docket No. 051209329-5329-01; I.D. 020306B]

Fisheries of the Northeastern United States; Atlantic Mackerel, Squid, and Butterfish Fisheries; Closure of the Quarter I Fishery for *Loligo* Squid

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

ACTION: Closure.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces that the directed fishery for *Loligo* squid in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) will be closed effective 0001 hours, February 13, 2006. Vessels issued a Federal permit to harvest *Loligo* squid may not retain or land more than 2,500 lb (1,134 kg) of *Loligo* squid per trip for the remainder of the quarter (through March 31, 2006). This action is necessary to prevent the fishery from exceeding its Quarter I quota and to allow for effective management of this stock.

DATES: Effective 0001 hours, February 13, 2006, through 2400 hours, March 31, 2006.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Don Frei, Fishery Management Specialist, 978-281-9221, Fax 978-281-9135.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Regulations governing the *Loligo* squid fishery are found at 50 CFR part 648. The regulations require specifications for maximum sustainable yield, initial optimum yield, allowable biological catch, domestic annual harvest (DAH), domestic annual processing, joint venture processing, and total allowable levels of foreign fishing for the species managed under the Atlantic Mackerel, Squid, and Butterfish Fishery Management Plan. The procedures for setting the annual initial specifications are described in § 648.21.

The regulations at § 648.21(d)(1) allow for the previous year's annual specifications to remain in effect if the annual specifications for the new fishing year are not published in the **Federal Register** prior to the start of the

fishing year. The 2005 annual quota for *Loligo* squid was 16,744.9 mt, with 5,564.3 mt allocated to Quarter I (70 FR 13406, March 21, 2005).

The allowable biological catch in 2006 is not proposed to change from the 2005 value, but because the proposed 2006 Research Set-Aside (RSA) is greater than the 2005 RSA allocation, the initial optimum yield and the individual quarterly quotas are minimally different. The proposed rule for the 2006 annual specifications published on December 27, 2005 (70 FR 76436), with a comment period that ended January 11, 2006. The proposed 2006 annual quota for *Loligo* squid is 16,872.50 mt. This amount is proposed to be allocated by quarter, as shown below.

TABLE. 1 *Loligo* SQUID QUARTERLY ALLOCATIONS.

Quarter	Percent	Metric Tons ¹	Re-search Set-aside
I (Jan-Mar)	33.23	5,606.70	N/A
II (Apr-Jun)	17.61	2,971.30	N/A
III (Jul-Sep)	17.3	2,918.90	N/A
IV (Oct-Dec)	31.86	5,375.60	N/A
Total	100	16,872.50	127.5

¹Quarterly allocations after 127.5 mt re-search set-aside deduction.

Section 648.22 requires NMFS to close the directed *Loligo* squid fishery in the EEZ when 80 percent of the quarterly allocation is harvested in Quarters I, II, and III, and when 95 percent of the total annual DAH has been harvested. NMFS is further required to notify, in advance of the closure, the Executive Directors of the Mid-Atlantic, New England, and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils; mail notification of the closure to all holders of *Loligo* squid permits at least 72 hours before the effective date of the closure; provide adequate notice of the closure to recreational participants in the fishery; and publish notification of the closure in the **Federal Register**. The Administrator, Northeast Region, NMFS, based on dealer reports and other available information, has determined that 80 percent of the DAH for *Loligo* squid in Quarter I will be harvested. Therefore, effective 0001 hours, February 13, 2006, the directed fishery for *Loligo* squid is closed and vessels issued Federal permits for *Loligo* squid may not retain or land more than 2,500 lb (1,134 kg) of *Loligo* during a calendar day. The directed fishery will reopen effective 0001 hours, April 1, 2006, when the Quarter II quota becomes available.