

Proposed Change to Groundfish Possession and Landing Requirement

At the December 2013 meeting, the Council initiated a regulatory amendment adjusting the maximum retainable allowance (MRA) enforcement period for all groundfish species harvested in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) and the Gulf of the Alaska (GOA). Specifically, the proposed action would change the enforcement period from an instantaneous (at any point in time during a trip) to the time of offload. The intent of the action is to increase efficiency and reduce regulatory discards.

With the exception of pollock in the BSAI for non-AFA vessels, current regulations prohibit the retention of a species that are closed to directed fishing in an amount that exceeds the MRA percentage of the basis species at any point in time during a fishing trip. Catch that exceeds the MRA percentage must be discarded. Under the proposed action, compliance with the MRA would be determined at the end of each offload, and any catch that exceeds the MRA at the time of offload must be discarded.

The benefit of this action is that vessels could choose to retain species that are closed to directed fishing in excess of the MRA as long as the amount retained at the time of offload is at the specified MRA percentage with respect to the basis species or species groups retained. For example, if the Greenland turbot fishery is closed to directed fishing, and a vessel operator catches Greenland turbot early in a trip in excess of the MRA, the vessel operator may choose to retain the species and move to an area with lower incidental catch rates of the species, thereby lowering the percentage of Greenland turbot retained, with respect to other basis species, prior to the offloading of catch. As long as the amount of Greenland turbot is at or below the appropriate MRA at the time of offload, the vessel operator would be in compliance.