

associated with marine mammal bycatch. However, it would be a mistake to make a blanket exemption for all net pen aquaculture because it does have the potential for entanglement in lines and other associated gear such as anti-predator nets.

*Response:* Again, NMFS does not have sufficient documentation indicating that there is more than a remote likelihood of bycatch associated with tuna aquaculture net pen operations. NMFS is retaining these fisheries as exempt unless they have a documented bycatch of marine mammals.

3. *Should net cage aquaculture for finfish be considered an exempt fishery? Why or why not?*

*Comment:* NRDC *et al.*, recommended that net cage aquaculture for finfish should be considered an export fishery based on literature regarding lethal predator control and entanglement. WWF stated that well-managed and properly sited aquaculture facilities should not be associated with marine mammal bycatch. However, it would be a mistake to make a blanket exemption for all net pen aquaculture because it does have the potential for entanglement in lines and other associated gear such as predator nets. India had no comments to offer as cage aquaculture of finfish is not commercially practiced in the marine environment in India.

*Response:* NMFS does not have sufficient documentation indicating that there is more than a remote likelihood of bycatch associated with finfish aquaculture net pen operations. NMFS is retaining these fisheries as exempt unless they have a documented bycatch of marine mammals or engage in the intentional killing or serious injury of marine mammals.

4. *Should lift net or other such nets be considered an exempt fishery? Why or why not?*

*Comment:* WWF stated that most lift net fisheries do not appear to be associated with marine mammal bycatch but there is nevertheless potential for bycatch. Specifying exactly what a lift net fishery involved would make a general exemption very difficult. India stated that lift nets are passive gears and mostly operated from land in India (e.g., Chinese dip net). Such nets are operated in shallow backwater areas where mostly low saline environments prevail. The numbers are quite minimal and the nets are small in size, operated by traditional small scale fishermen, posing no threat or injury to the marine mammal populations. Hence they should be considered an exempt fishery.

*Response:* NMFS agrees. While it does not have sufficient documentation indicating that there is more than a remote likelihood of bycatch associated with finfish aquaculture net pen operations, the size, scale, and operational characteristics of lift nets do not appear capable of capturing marine mammals. NMFS is retaining these fisheries as exempt unless they have a documented bycatch of marine mammals.

5. *Would nations prefer to submit their information in the form of a database?*

*Comment:* Few nations commented on those questions, but those that did indicated that they prefer to submit their information using a streamlined and consistent format.

*Response:* NMFS agrees and is open to developing databases that facilitate the submission of information needed to maintain the LOFF.

6. *Should nations with only exempt fisheries be allowed to apply for a comparability finding every eight years rather than every four years?*

*Comment:* NRDC *et al.*, recommended that nations with only exempt fisheries should have to apply for a comparability finding at least every four years to ensure compliance with the import provisions of the MMPA. WWF noted that fisheries practices can change very quickly in response to changes in stocks, quotas or markets. An eight-year option may well miss emerging fisheries with a high bycatch risk. Four years is a good compromise between being too onerous but still allowing for emerging fisheries to be evaluated.

*Response:* NMFS notes these comments and will continue to consider mechanisms to streamline this process, reduce unnecessary work, while still meeting the mandate of the MMPA.

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Dated: March 12, 2018.

**Samuel D. Rauch III,**

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

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**BILLING CODE 3510–22–P**

## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

**RIN 0648–XG083**

#### New England Fishery Management Council; Public Meeting

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

**ACTION:** Notice of change of times of public meeting webinar.

**SUMMARY:** The New England Fishery Management Council's is convening an ad-hoc sub-panel of its Scientific and Statistical Committee to peer review two reports.

**DATES:** This webinar will be held on Friday, March 30, 2018, at 1 p.m. and will end at 4 p.m.

**ADDRESSES:** Webinar registration URL information: <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/7860925786623688961>. Call in information: +1 (951) 384–3421, Attendee Access Code: 937–123–775.

*Council address:* New England Fishery Management Council, 50 Water Street, Mill 2, Newburyport, MA 01950.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Thomas A. Nies, Executive Director, New England Fishery Management Council; telephone: (978) 465-0492.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The meeting was previously scheduled for 1:30 to 4 p.m. It will now begin at 1 p.m. and end at 4 p.m. The original notice published in the **Federal Register** on March 12, 2018 (83 FR 10678). All other previously published information remains unchanged.

**Special Accommodations**

This meeting is physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Thomas A. Nies, Executive Director, at (978) 465-0492, at least 5 days prior to the meeting date.

**Authority:** 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: March 13, 2018.

**Jeffrey N. Lonergan,**

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

[FR Doc. 2018-05397 Filed 3-15-18; 8:45 am]

**BILLING CODE 3510-22-P**

**DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

**RIN 0648-XG091**

**Magnuson-Stevens Act Provisions; General Provisions for Domestic Fisheries; Application for Exempted Fishing Permit**

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Notice; request for comments.

**SUMMARY:** The Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, Greater Atlantic Region, NMFS, has made a preliminary determination that an Exempted Fishing Permit application submitted by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center contains all of the required information and warrants further consideration. This Exempted Fishing Permit would exempt participating vessels from the following types of fishery regulations: Minimum fish size restrictions; fish possession limits; and, in limited situations for research purposes only, retaining and landing prohibited fish species. Regulations under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act require publication of this notice to provide interested parties the opportunity to comment on Exempted Fishing Permit applications.

**DATES:** Comments must be received on or before *April 2, 2018*.

**ADDRESSES:** You may submit written comments by either of the following methods:

- *Email:* [nmfs.gar.efp@noaa.gov](mailto:nmfs.gar.efp@noaa.gov).

Include in the subject line “Comments on NEFSC Study Fleet EFP.”

- *Mail:* Michael Pentony, Regional Administrator, NMFS, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930. Mark the outside of the envelope “Comments on NEFSC Study Fleet EFP.”

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Spencer Talmage, Fishery Management

Specialist, 978-281-9232, [Spencer.Talmage@noaa.gov](mailto:Spencer.Talmage@noaa.gov).

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The Northeast Fisheries Science Center submitted a complete application for an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) on February 9, 2018, for the 2018 Study Fleet Program. The EFP would exempt 31 commercial fishing vessels from the minimum size and possession limits for species of interest, as well as allow temporary retention of species that will be discarded.

The Center established the Study Fleet Program in 2002 to more fully characterize commercial fishing operations and provide sampling opportunities to augment NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service’s data collection programs. Partnership with the commercial fishing industry allows the Center to provide samples for stock assessment and fish biology research when traditional sampling sources might otherwise be unavailable. Table 1 includes all of the regulations specified at 50 CFR part 648 that participating vessels would be exempt from for at-sea sampling, or when retaining and landing fish for research purposes. The exemptions listed in Table 1 are necessary for contracted vessels to acquire the biological samples needed to meet Center research objectives.

TABLE 1—SPECIFIC REGULATIONS COVERED BY THE PROPOSED EXEMPTED FISHING PERMIT

	NEFSC Study Fleet Program EFP
Number of Vessels .....	31.
Exempted regulations in 50 CFR part 648 .....	<p><i>Size limits:</i></p> <p>§ 648.83 NE multispecies minimum sizes.</p> <p>§ 648.93 Monkfish minimum fish size.</p> <p>§ 648.147 Black sea bass minimum fish size.</p> <p><i>Possession restrictions:</i></p> <p>§ 648.86(a) Haddock.</p> <p>§ 648.86(b) Atlantic cod.</p> <p>§ 648.86(c) Atlantic halibut.</p> <p>§ 648.86(d) Small-mesh multispecies.</p> <p>§ 648.86(l) Zero retention of Atlantic wolffish and windowpane flounder.</p> <p>§ 648.86(o) Possession limits implemented by Regional Administrator.</p> <p>§ 648.94 Monkfish possession limit.</p> <p>§ 648.322 Skate possession and landing restrictions.</p> <p>§ 648.145 Black sea bass possession limits.</p> <p>§ 648.92(b)(2)(i) Prohibition from landing NE multispecies on monkfish-only day-at-sea.</p> <p>§ 648.293 Golden tilefish.</p>

Any fish retained under the EFP would be delivered to Center staff upon

landing. Additionally, prior to landing, the Center would issue a formal

Biological Sampling Request to the vessel to retain fish for the Study Fleet