Public Comment #2

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Robert D. Mecum
Acting Administrator, Alaska Region
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
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December 19, 2008

Re: Bering Sea Chinook Salmon Bycatch Management Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Regulatory Impact Review/Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis (DEIS/RIR/IRFA)

Dear Mr. Mecum:

The undersigned representatives of the Bering Sea pollock industry are writing to request a forty-five (45) day extension in the public comment period associated with the above-referenced DEIS/RIR/IRFA (the "DEIS" or "the document"). At the present time, the 60-day comment period on the document is due to close on February 3, 2009.

While a 60 day comment period may, under normal circumstances, provide an adequate time in which to respond to a proposed federal action, the length of this particular document, the complexity of the issues being evaluated, the potential impacts of the alternative management measures under consideration, and the unfortunate timing of the comment period itself make it very difficult for the members of our respective organizations to prepare and submit meaningful comments within the 60 day period provided.

Of all these reasons, the timing of the comment period is perhaps the most challenging. As you know, the Bering Sea pollock fishery is the largest fishery in the United States and one of the largest and most valuable fisheries in the world. In order to prepare informed comments on an issue as important as salmon bycatch management and the proposed options that the North Pacific Fishery Management Council ("NPFMC") has under consideration, we will need to collect data, information and other input from our associations and their respective members who own and operate the vessels and plants that participate in the fishery and who engage in the production and sale of various pollock products in the world markets for whitefish. That data and information will need to be reviewed and analyzed and then incorporated into the comments that our organizations will be preparing on the DEIS.

This would be a daunting task under the best of circumstances, but the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the comment period straddles the busiest time of the year for our associations and their memberships. Not only have our associations been pre-occupied with the groundfish plan team meetings (where the status of pollock and other groundfish stocks are reviewed and preliminary harvest recommendations for the upcoming fishing year are developed) and other preparations leading up to the all-important December meeting of the NPFMC and its related advisory bodies, but December is also the month that we are scheduled to hold our annual membership meetings, finalize our budgets for the coming year, organize our skipper meetings, prepare our annual co-op reports, complete arrangements for the research projects we plan to undertake during the upcoming fishing season (including research designed to develop an effective salmon excluder device for use by our member vessels), re-negotiate co-op and inter-co-op agreements (ICAs), develop a new ICA re salmon bycatch reduction incentives and otherwise prepare for the opening of the 2009 pollock fishery on January 20th. We also need to prepare for the February meeting of the NPFMC.

Even more problematic is the fact that a great deal of the data and information needed to prepare our comments on the DEIS has to be generated by our respective members. This is the time of the year that most of them are already pre-occupied with shipyard and other annual repair and maintenance work on their vessels and in their plants in order to prepare for the 2009 pollock "A" season that starts on January 20th. It is also the time of the year that they hire and train their crewmembers and processing workers, re-provision their vessels and plants, develop fishing and processing plans for the upcoming fishing year, fine-tune marketing plans and strategies and otherwise prepare to resume fishing and processing operations in the Bering Sea on January 20th.

To complicate things further, many of the people on whom we must rely to provide the data and other information needed to meaningfully respond to the DEIS will be out of town or otherwise unavailable due to the upcoming holiday season. These times are particularly important to the men and women engaged in the fishing industry who spend a great deal of their time away from their families during the rest of the year and who routinely schedule vacations during the holidays at the end of the year.

For these reasons, an extra forty-five (45) days will greatly assist the pollock industry in preparing the kind of analyses, data and information necessary to inform the NPFMC about the costs, benefits and other environmental impacts of the proposed Chinook salmon bycatch amendment described in the DEIS and the various alternatives that are currently under consideration.

It is also important to note that the requested extension will not interfere with or otherwise jeopardize the NPFMC's stated goal of having a new Chinook salmon bycatch limitation plan in place in time for the start of the 2011 Bering Sea pollock fishery. In order to comfortably meet that goal, and given the time necessary to accommodate Secretarial review and public comment following Council action, the NPFMC needs to take final action on the amendment package at its meeting next June. A 45-day extension

in the comment period on the DEIS would result in a comment period ending on or about next March 20th The Council would then have more than two months to review comments on the document before its June meeting. That should provide the Council with more than adequate time to review the comments before it takes action on the bycatch amendment.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. If you have any questions concerning the need for the extension or any of the other points discussed in this letter, please give any one of us a call.

At-Sea Processors Assn. Pacific Seafood Processors Assn. United Catcher Boats

By: Stephanie Madsen By: [illegible] By: Brent C. Paine