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October 18, 2016

Mr. Chris Rilling
Fishery Monitoring and Analysis Division (FMA)
Alaska Fishery Science Center
NOAA Fisheries' National Marine Fisheries Service
7600 Sand Point Way N.E., Bin C15700, Building 4
Seattle, WA 98115-0070

RE: Consistency of Methods for Observer Viability Sampling in Deck-Sorting Exempted Fishing Permit

Dear Chris,

As you are aware, the Alaska Seafood Cooperative (AKSC) is engaged in a multi-year exempted fishing permit (EFP) to further develop ways to reduce mortality of halibut bycatch on catcher processor trawl vessels in non-pollock fisheries in the Bering Sea. Our ongoing effort this year and next includes AKSC member vessels and non-AKSC vessels in the Amendment 80 sector, Trawl Limited Access, and Community Development Quota fisheries where reducing halibut mortality is a priority.

The success of the deck sorting EFP in achieving halibut mortality reductions depends on using the best methods for handling halibut by crew members and the correct and most expeditious methods for collection of data (halibut counts, lengths, and viabilities) for halibut sampled in the EFP. While overall things have gone very well in 2016, we recognize there is always room for improvements. One area is halibut handling by crewmembers. To this end, we have committed to working with NMFS' Regional Office this winter to review crew handling procedures with EFP captains and we will make improvements where necessary.

Another area of emphasis should be the assessment of viability utilizing the steps of the dichotomous key for trawl vessels as described in the observer manual. Based on feedback from our field project managers this year, we think it would be useful for FMA to reinforce the need for observers to use correct and consistent methods for assessing viabilities on halibut selected for sampling under the EFP sampling protocols. Increasing training efforts on halibut viability may be needed in this regard. We also understand that we have a shared responsibility here to work with EFP captains to keep the number of deck sorted halibut per haul at reasonable levels so that data can be collected correctly within the timeframe when survival rates are expected to be high. We have been working with captains on this and anticipate improvements. All of these steps combined should benefit the fishery management and scientific objectives of the EFP.

Careful handling and consistent data collection methods that still allow us to return halibut to the water as soon as possible are important and something we all want to achieve. With these improvements, we

expect the success of the EFP will be even greater next year and we will be one big step closer to being able to expand the program to its full potential.

We look forward to working with FMA and the Alaska Region of NMFS on all of the above in the coming year.

Sincerely,



John R. Gauvin
Fishery Science Projects Director

CC: Brandee Gerke, NMFS AKR
David Wilson, IPHC
Dan Hull, NPFMC