

PROPOSAL 221

5 AAC 28.130. Lawful gear for Eastern Gulf of Alaska Area.

Reduce the minimum inside diameter of circular escape rings from four inches to three and three-fourths of an inch on pots used to take sablefish, as follows:

5 AAC 28.130 (f) is amended to read:

(f) In the Eastern Gulf of Alaska Area, pots may not be longlined, except that pots may be longlined in the Southern Southeast Inside Subdistrict sablefish fishery. At least one buoy on each groundfish pot must be legibly marked with only the permanent department vessel license plate number of the vessel operating the gear. The number must be placed on the top one-third of the buoy in numerals at least four inches high and one-half inch wide, must be in a color contrasting to the color of the buoy, and must be visible above the water surface when the buoy is attached to the groundfish pot. If groundfish pots are longlined under this subsection, a buoy is not required for each pot, but at least one buoy must be attached to the longline, and the buoy must be marked as described in this subsection. In a directed fishery for sablefish, pots used to take sablefish must have at least two circular escape rings with a minimum inside diameter of [FOUR INCHES] **three and three-fourths inches** installed on opposing vertical or sloping walls.

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? The current regulatory language is based on estimated length at 50% maturity (L_{50}) of sablefish (63 cm) in the Northern and Southern Southeast Inside Subdistricts and supplemental research from British Columbia, Canada, which has a minimum escape ring size of 3.5 inches and a L_{50} of 55 cm. The proposed regulatory modification to reduce the minimum inside diameter of the escape ring size from 4 inches to 3.75 inches is based on results of an escape ring experiment conducted during the department's sablefish marking pot survey in 2019. The optimal escape ring size results in low catches of immature sablefish while maintaining high catch per unit of effort (CPUE) of mature sablefish. To analyze the impact of escape rings on capture efficiency and size-selectivity of sablefish, pots with three alternative escape ring sizes (3.5, 3.75, and 4.0 inches) were evaluated alongside control pots with no escape rings. The results of this study indicated that pots with 3.75-inch escape rings minimized catches of small, immature fish, thus reducing discard mortality, and maximized catches of larger, more desirable fish. Escape rings greater than 3.75 inches may not provide any additional benefits.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game

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