



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XF682]

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

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 (EFP) application contains all of the required information and warrants further consideration. The EFP would allow federally permitted fishing vessels to fish outside fishery regulations in support of exempted fishing activities proposed by the Gulf of Maine Research Institute (GMRI). Regulations under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act require publication of this notification to provide interested parties the opportunity to comment on applications for proposed EFPs.

DATES: Comments must be received on or before **[INSERT DATE 15 DAYS AFTER DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE FEDERAL REGISTER]**.

ADDRESSES: You may submit written comments by email: nmfs.gar.efp@noaa.gov.

Include in the subject line “Using electronic jigging machines as a novel, ultra-low impact, gear type to collect catch data and biological samples in the Gulf of Maine (GOM) Groundfish Closure Areas.” All comments received are a part of the public record and may be posted for public viewing without change. All personal identifying information (*e.g.*, name, address, *etc.*), confidential business information, or otherwise sensitive information submitted voluntarily by the sender will be publicly accessible.

NMFS will accept anonymous comments (enter "anonymous" as the signature if you wish to remain anonymous).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Elise Scholl, Fishery Management Specialist, *elise.scholl@noaa.gov*, (978) 281-9189.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The applicant submitted a complete application for an EFP to conduct commercial fishing activities that the regulations would otherwise restrict. This EFP would exempt the participating vessels from the following Federal regulations:

Table 1 -- Requested Exemptions

CFR Citation	Regulation	Need for exemption
50 CFR 648.83(a)	Minimum fish size requirements for Northeast multispecies	To retain sublegal size pollock and Atlantic cod for sampling
50 CFR 648.81(a)(1)	Cashes Ledge Closure area except the Ammen Rock Habitat Management Area	To allow commercial fishing activity in the specified closed areas
50 CFR 648.81(e)(1)	Western GOM Closure Area	

Table 2 -- Project Summary

Project title	Using electronic jigging machines as a novel, ultra-low impact, gear type to collect catch data and biological samples in the GOM Groundfish Closure Areas.
Project start	05/01/2026
Project end	04/30/2027
Project objectives	Continue a cooperative research project which will provide data on the distribution, size and sex composition, feeding habits, and physical characteristics of pollock in data-limited areas in the GOM. Opportunistically collect Atlantic cod biological data.
Project location	Statistical areas 513, 514, and 515
Number of vessels	1
Number of trips	20
Trip duration (days)	2
Total number of days	40
Gear type(s)	Hook, Rod and Reel
Number of tows or sets	4
Duration of tows or sets	3 hours

Project Narrative

GMRI is requesting an EFP to continue a pilot cooperative research study aimed at collecting data on the distribution, size and sex composition, feeding habits, and physical characteristics of pollock in data limited areas within the GOM. The vessel would also opportunistically collect non-lethal cod biological samples in support of research being conducted by New Hampshire Sea Grant. This will be a continuance of the study conducted under DA24-074.

The 2025 study aimed to complete 30 total trips and sample at least 250 pollock. However, due to funding, scheduling, and weather difficulties, only 11 trips were completed with 21 pollock sampled. Additional funding has been secured through The Nature Conservancy, which will allow four more trips for the 2025 groundfish fishing season with an anticipated 40 more pollock samples. These funds also allow GMRI to compensate the F/V Lady Rebecca for the sample pollock, eliminating the need for dockside sampling for the remainder of the 2025 season and the 2026 season.

The project aims to collect data through haul-level catch and effort data collection, biological sampling, and discard monitoring via electronic monitoring (EM). The participating vessel is authorized to use EM through its Sector Operations Plan. The project aims to fulfill specific research needs of GMRI's pollock study and address research priorities identified in the 2022 pollock stock assessment, including research on geographic distribution by size. The exemptions would allow sampling inside the Western GOM Closure Area and Cashes Ledge Closure Area in order to evaluate pollock size distributions and reproductive dynamics inside and outside the closed areas. The exemption to the minimum pollock size would allow the vessel to retain sublegal size pollock to collect catch data and biological samples.

Sampling would be conducted with hook jigging gear, including auto-jigs and rod and reel. The applicant claims that the auto-jigging machines are low-impact due to this

method being associated with minimal bycatch and discards exhibiting relatively high survivability. There would be up to four auto-jigs, and two rod and reels deployed at a time. The applicant estimates there would be 20 total trips with two to four fishing efforts per trip. GMRI researchers are seeking at least 150 tagged pollock. Fishing effort may occur in both closed and open areas on the same trip.

To help expand the temporal and spatial scope of the samples, every 10th pollock would be separated from the commercial catch, and tagged with a color-coded zip tie differentiating its harvest location. Sub-legal sized pollock selected for biological sampling would be measured according to the Vessel Electronic Monitoring Plan (VMP) prior to storing in slush ice while sub-legal sized pollock not selected for biological sampling would be live discarded according to the VMP. All other species of sublegal size fish would be live discarded according to the VMP. Once returned to port, sampled fish will be frozen for bulk collection by GMRI scientific staff. Data collected from each sampled fish will include length, weight, sex, stomach contents, and a photo to document physical characteristics. Haul level catch, discard, and fishing effort data collection would be completed using the Northeast Fisheries Science Center Fisheries Logbook Data Recording Software. No sub-legal fish will be sold.

The project would also provide 50 cod fin clips from inside the GOM Closed Area to expand the geographic range of an ongoing cod DNA study being conducted by Dr. Linas Kenter, New Hampshire Sea Grant. Samples would consist of a fingernail size fin clip from the top of the tail, presumably posing no threat to the survivability of the released cod. The project seeks to sample cod catch, including undersized cod.

If approved, the applicant may request minor modifications and extensions to the EFP throughout the year. EFP modifications and extensions may be granted without further notice if they are deemed essential to facilitate completion of the proposed research and have minimal impacts that do not change the scope or impact of the initially

approved EFP request. Any fishing activity conducted outside the scope of the exempted fishing activity would be prohibited.

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

Dated: April 8, 2026.

David R. Blankinship,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries,

National Marine Fisheries Service.

[FR Doc. 2026-07053 Filed: 4/10/2026 8:45 am; Publication Date: 4/13/2026]