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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 648

[Docket No. 181210999-9239-02]

RIN 0648-XX016

Fisheries of the Northeastern United States; Atlantic Sea Scallop Fishery; Closure of the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area to General Category Individual Fishing Quota Scallop Vessels

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

ACTION: Temporary rule; closure.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces that the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area is closed to Limited Access General Category Individual Fishing Quota scallop vessels for the remainder of the 2019 fishing year. No vessel issued a Limited Access General Category Individual Fishing Quota permit may fish for, possess, or land scallops from the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area. Regulations require this action once it is projected that 100 percent of trips allocated to the Limited Access General Category Individual Fishing Quota scallop vessels for the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area will be taken.

DATES: Effective 0001 hr local time, October 2, 2019, through March 31, 2020.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Travis Ford, Policy Analyst, (978) 281-9233.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Regulations governing fishing activity in the Sea Scallop Access Areas can be found in 50 CFR 648.59 and 648.60. These regulations authorize vessels issued a valid Limited Access General Category (LAGC) Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) scallop permit to fish in the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area under specific conditions, including a total of 1,713 trips that may be taken during the 2019 fishing year. Section 648.59(g)(3)(iii) requires the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area to be closed to LAGC IFQ permitted vessels for the remainder of the fishing year once the NMFS Greater Atlantic Regional Administrator determines that the allocated number of trips for fishing year 2019 are projected to be taken.

Based on trip declarations by LAGC IFQ scallop vessels fishing in the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area, analysis of fishing effort, and other information, NMFS projects that 1,713 trips will be taken as of October 2, 2019. Therefore, in accordance with § 648.59(g)(3)(iii), NMFS is closing the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area to all LAGC IFQ scallop vessels as of October 2, 2019. No vessel issued an LAGC IFQ permit may fish for, possess, or land scallops in or from the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area after 0001 local time, October 2, 2019. Any LAGC IFQ vessel that has declared into the Mid-Atlantic Access Area scallop fishery, complied with all trip notification and observer requirements, and crossed the VMS demarcation line on the way to the area before 0001, October 2, 2019, may complete its trip without being subject to this closure. This closure is in effect for the remainder of the 2019 scallop fishing year, through March 31, 2020.

Classification

This action is required by 50 CFR part 648 and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866. NMFS finds good cause under to 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B) to waive prior notice and the opportunity for public comment because it would be contrary to the public interest and impracticable. The Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area opened for the 2019 fishing year on April 1, 2019. The regulations at § 648.59(g)(3)(iii) require this closure to ensure that LAGC IFQ scallop vessels do not take more than their allocated number of trips in the area. The projected date on which the LAGC IFQ fleet will have taken all of its allocated trips in an Access Area becomes apparent only as trips into the area occur on a real-time basis and as activity trends begin to appear. As a result, NMFS can only make an accurate projection very close in time to when the fleet has taken all of its trips. To allow LAGC IFQ scallop vessels to continue to take trips in the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area during the period necessary to publish and receive comments on a proposed rule would likely result in the vessels taking much more than the allowed number of trips in the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area. Excessive trips and harvest from the Mid-Atlantic Scallop Access Area would result in excessive fishing effort in the area, where effort controls are critical, thereby undermining conservation objectives of the Atlantic Sea Scallop Fishery Management Plan and requiring more restrictive future management measures. Also, the public had prior notice and full opportunity to comment on this closure process when it was enacted. For these same reasons, NMFS

further finds, under to 5 U.S.C 553(d)(3), good cause to waive the 30-day delayed effectiveness period.

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

Dated: October 1, 2019.

Jennifer M. Wallace,
Acting Director,
Office of Sustainable Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.

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