Essential Fish Habitat Review Committee (EFHRC) REPORT ON
GROUNDFISH ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT REPORT AND REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

The Essential Fish Habitat Review Committee (EFHRC) reviewed the draft National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) report entitled "Groundfish Essential Fish Habitat Synthesis Report" (Agenda Item D.6.b, NMFS Synthesis Report) and the associated appendices (Agenda Item D.6.b, Supplemental NMFS Report 2). The EFHRC commends the NMFS Team for a tremendous effort in compiling the Synthesis Report, and appreciates the willingness to accommodate suggestions.

The EFHRC offers the following comments:

1   The NMFS Synthesis Report and Appendices (Agenda Item D.6.b, Supplemental NMFS Report 2) contains a significant amount of information that complements the Phase 1 Report (September 2012 Agenda Item H.6.b, EFHRC Report 1) and the data available on the online data catalogue (http://efh-catalog.coas.oregonstate.edu/overview/). Together, these provide a sufficient basis for anyone wishing to submit a proposal for changes to groundfish essential fish habitat (EFH). The EFHRC endorses the NMFS Synthesis Report, with the following changes that were developed in collaboration with the report's authors. With these changes, the concerns of the EFHRC will have been addressed:

    a   Replace the descriptor "ecological importance" with "probability of occurrence" and/or "occupancy."
    b   Add language describing the differences between the document's analysis of habitat occupancy and the 2005 Habitat Suitability Probability (HSP) analysis (*see below).
    c   Minor editorial changes.

2   The EFHRC suggests that once the described changes have been made to the report, the Council should issue the request for proposals (RFP) with at least a 90-day open period. This means that proposals would be due in late July 2013. The EFHRC will begin initial proposal review thereafter.

3   The EFHRC would like to convene for two days at the September 2013 Council meeting to continue review of proposals, and to provide the Council with an initial summary of the number, scope, and general content of proposals. Final action should remain scheduled for the November 2013 Council meeting.

4   The EFHRC reiterates the research priorities contained in its September 2012 Supplemental Report (September 2012 Agenda Item H.6.b, Supplemental EFHRC Report 2). The draft NMFS Synthesis Report addressed and was responsive to many of the "Information and Research Needs" identified by the EFHRC in September 2012 (September 2013 Agenda Item H.6.b, Supplemental EFHRC Report 2). However, there remain some outstanding issues that

the EFHRC recommends remain a top priority for completion during Phase 2, concurrent with the proposal process:

a   Include an assessment of physical and biogenic substrate types inside and outside EFH conservation areas based on the data available in 2005 to contrast with the assessments based on 2011 data.

b   Qualitative comparison of high and low areas using HSP and probability of occurrence models for the six groundfish species assessed.

c   Update analysis of midwater trawl habitat impacts based on new fleet-based estimates of bottom contact frequency and duration.

d   Re-assess the role of corals and sponges as habitat for groundfish based on an updated literature review.

e   Update the HUD database.

5   In considering the NMFS Synthesis report and the relevance of the new information in the Phase 1 report, the EFHRC highlights the following key conclusions:

a   Hard seabed habitat types are less abundant, or rare, in comparison to soft seabed though the relative proportions of each type within depth strata are fairly consistent across biogeographic subregions. There is a significantly new understanding of hard substrate shape and distribution in federal waters inside and outside EFH conservation areas in Northern Washington and throughout Oregon. However, the 2005 understanding of hard substrate distribution in federal waters off California is essentially unchanged (with the exception of the Gulf of the Farallon Islands region).

b   Much of the new information on biogenic habitat is in the form of a large database of records of deep-sea corals and sponges. There are numerous sites outside EFH conservations areas where corals and sponges have been observed in higher relative numbers off all three states.

c   The level of bottom trawl fishing effort within closed areas is fairly consistent both pre- and post- EFH conservation areas, indicating that those closures resulted in minimal disruption of bottom trawl fishery dynamics.

d   Midwater trawl fishing is permissible within all Amendment 19 EFH conservation areas since it was assumed to have no contact with the seafloor. Annually, midwater trawling occurs over 8-31% of EFH conservation areas where bottom trawling is prohibited, and bottom contact is estimated by the fleet to occur on up to 25% of tows predominantly in soft sediment habitats, as referenced in the Phase 1 Report.

e   There is new quantitative and species specific prey information for 11 groundfish species enabling assessments of "major prey" for those species.

*This language should be added to the Introduction of the NMFS Synthesis Report:

This report provides summaries and characterizations of information developed during Phase I of the EFH 5-year review (2012). It is not intended as a full EFH analysis, but rather, to provide supporting and contextual information for those making proposals or evaluating proposals in Phase II. There are a variety of aspects that are not addressed in this work, including the importance of juvenile habitat and the association of groundfish with biogenic habitat. Thus, information previously developed to support the 2005 EFH EIS is still relevant.

In this document, we provide an analysis of habitat associations for six representative species, using the NWFSC trawl survey data as a primary input, coupled with a range of environmental parameters. It also incorporates some information from visual surveys in rocky areas. Because it uses these recent data, this analysis reflects current distributions of these species and characteristics of the habitats they currently occupy, and projects those associations in areas that have not been sampled. It is an empirically based assessment of the likelihood of finding a species at a particular location under current conditions.

For the 2005 EFH EIS, an analysis termed the HSP that also produced distributional maps was conducted. That analysis was based on habitat mapping, the Habitat Use Database (a multidimensional relational database of species and life stages related to substrate types), the literature, and was moderated by expert opinion. It presents a depiction of potential distribution, or idealized distribution, independent of current conditions – it estimates the intrinsic potential for a particular habitat to support each species. When using these analyses to support or evaluate proposals, stakeholders, managers and scientists should keep the different approaches in mind.

PFMC
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