8/30/13

Mrs. Dorothy Lowman - Chair
Pacific Fishery Management Council
7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 101
Portland, OR 97220-1384

RE: Developing a comprehensive, collaborative proposal for reconfiguring the trawl Rockfish Conservation Area

Dear Chair Lowman,

Over the last ten years, the Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCAs) have been an important management strategy for minimizing the catch of depleted species and promoting their rebuilding. At the same time, it is also a coarse tool and may close some areas unnecessarily, especially in light of the catch share system’s hard bycatch caps, observer coverage, and strong fishermen incentives to avoid species of concern. The creation of a catch share system for the trawl sector has provided a more direct means of controlling mortality and ensuring that Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) are not exceeded. One of the principal advantages of catch shares is that the accountability they provide can often replace less effective or direct input controls. Given this, there have been increasing calls for the removal or liberalization of the RCAs as part of post rationalization management.

Based on this rationale, the Oregon Trawl Commission, the California Risk Pool, the Midwater Trawlers Cooperative, Fishermen’s Marketing Association, Coos Bay Trawlers, Environmental Defense Fund, and The Nature Conservancy are partnering over the coming year to develop a comprehensive proposal to reconfigure the trawl RCA. Our group does not necessarily believe that the RCAs should be opened up completely, but believes a thorough exploration of the possibilities is warranted. After a close look at the available data and taking into account the history and experience of harvesters, there may be hotspots or areas of high relief habitats that should remain protected. The challenge is to identify these areas and to balance the benefit of increased access to target stocks afforded by 100% accountability, with the risk of encountering species of concern and any potential threats to rebuilding goals.

We believe that strategic RCA reconfiguration needs to be done in a comprehensive, coast wide manner and our project partners will be engaged in developing an initial proposal for the Council and other members of the fleet and the public to consider. The extensive data layers developed as part of the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) process are an excellent foundation to help identify critical areas. Most importantly, local fishermen knowledge and strong incentives to avoid species of concern and promote rebuilding will help us propose a set of openings and retained closures that will balance the various goals of effective management. We will strive to make development of this initial proposal as inclusive as possible.
We anticipate that we will submit the proposal for consideration in September 2014. Our hope is that at that time it can be included, along with remaining rulemaking priorities, for consideration during 2015 with potential implementation in January of 2016. We recognize and support that localized RCA liberalization may take place in the meantime, including the current proposal which passed successfully through the Council in June that would affect shoreward and seaward boundaries of the trawl RCA for period 6 in 2013 and all of 2014. At the same time we also believe that a systematic, coastwide approach will ultimately be the best means of balancing the goals of the program. If this potential pathway does not seem feasible given time, workload, or process constraints, we request Council guidance on alternatives under which such a proposal might be considered.

While this process will be focused on the trawl RCA, some of the members of our coalition from the California Risk Pool may also propose a separate, stand alone proposal for the non-trawl RCA for the area south of Cape Mendocino.

We appreciate the Council’s consideration of this issue and thank you in advance for any guidance you may provide us in moving ahead. We look forward to working through the Council process on this critical aspect of the catch share program’s implementation.

Sincerely,

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Cc:
Will Stelle - West Coast Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries
Frank Lockhart - West Coast Regional Assistant Administrator, NOAA Fisheries
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