

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT (EFH)  
REVIEW PHASE 2 REPORT AND PROPOSALS TO MODIFY EFH

Introduction

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) appreciated receiving a briefing from Mr. Kerry Griffin of Council staff and others from the Essential Fish Habitat Review Committee (EFHRC) and offers the following thoughts and advice. We cursorily reviewed the seven remaining proposals to modify essential fish habitat (EFH) designations and management measures. The proposals range from small boundary changes to large suites of new closures. There are also some other regulatory changes proposed and a proposal that includes designating major prey species. However, given other workload priorities (stock complexes, biennial harvest specifications and management measures, etc.) and the impact of the federal government shutdown the full Team was unable to devote time for a thorough discussion of the details of any of the proposals. Therefore we do not have specific recommendations or comments on any of the proposals.

Review of the EFH designations and management measures is primarily the purview of the EFHRC ([COP 22](#)); however we are providing comment here, as the primary body for technical review of groundfish management measures. Should Phase 3 be initiated, the GMT foresees having a role in analyzing any proposed modifications to EFH areas and the fishery management plan (FMP) amendment, as needed. We are concerned that such an analysis will be difficult without first clearly understanding the policy objectives of the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) with regard to EFH.

Many of the proposals rely on the availability of new and/or improved habitat data such as high-resolution sonar, mapping, visual data, etc. as justification that the proposal should be considered (i.e. based on the best available science). Though new data may inform any given proposal, it is difficult to prioritize the various proposals without clear guidance on the efficacy of measures to “minimize the effects of fishing on EFH to the extent practicable.” It remains unclear to the GMT: 1) the extent to which changes to EFH need to be made and 2) whether a given proposal, part of a proposal, or combination of some aspects of several proposals will accomplish any needed or desired changes.

Program review

As we pointed out in our September statement on the sablefish permit stacking program review ([Agenda item G.2.b, Supplemental GMT Report](#)), the first step in any program review is to determine whether the program is working as intended. Revisiting the stated goals and objectives of the program is necessary to see if they have been met. However, in order to perform such a review, the objectives or policy goals of the program must be stated such that there are metrics against which they can be measured. As mentioned in our statement on stock complexes at this meeting (Agenda Item H.4) our analytical work is smoothest when the policy goals are clear and the metrics against which performance is measured are clear. With EFH, the GMT recognizes that only limited clarity may be achievable. What science can measure for groundfish habitat is

limited and the question of how much habitat to protect will remain one mostly within the realm of policy judgment.

In this first periodic EFH review, exploring modifications to the program or expanding its scope has begun prior to a complete synthesis of whether the program is working as intended. The GMT suggests that prior to exploring modification to the program (or indeed any program) it is useful to know how that program is performing. Yet again, the ability to measure that performance may be limited in this case.

### Need for Metrics

We know that the purpose of Amendment 19 to the groundfish FMP was to update the EFH designations, including habitat areas of particular concern (HAPCs) as well as designating ecological closures to minimize the adverse effects of fishing on EFH, to the extent practicable. We do not, however, have performance metrics to determine whether this program is achieving its goals.

It is our understanding that the review of proposals being put forward by the EFHRC is based on the individual scoring of how satisfied each member of the committee was that a given proponent had satisfied the requirements of the request for proposals. The proposals were not judged specific to individual sites or habitats within those sites. While this scoring may be a useful metric for considering completeness of a proposal, it does not answer the question of whether the current designations or management measures are adequate, and the EFHRC has not been tasked to address that question.

While directly measuring the efficacy of EFH designations and closures would require long-term monitoring that can be resource intensive, such monitoring is not necessary for successful review of the program. Such review can be based on clearly stating our current understanding of habitat quality and mapping (i.e. as was done with the EFH Synthesis Report). That understanding of the state of habitats can then be placed in the context of existing management measures to determine whether that management may still be considered precautionary; however, policy objectives are needed to provide benchmarks for measuring success. Such policy guidance will also make future decisions on EFH designation and management more transparent. In short, we do not need to know exactly what the seafloor looks like or have robust measures of how protections translate into production of a fish stock, but we do need standards that relate our relative understanding to the magnitude of the management measures that are in place as well as new measures that might be contemplated.

Such objectives may take the form of areal coverage goals by habitat type or number of representative habitat types protected. Objectives may even be placed on the understanding of habitat importance for each of the FMP fishery management unit species such as the level 1-4 analysis called for in EFH regulations (50 CFR 600.815). Alternatively, the policy objective could take a broader view and consider changes once scientific evidence showed that the original designations and/or management measures were not working as originally intended. We list these to provide examples of the sorts of objectives that would provide for meaningful benchmarks against which the project team that would scope the issue should Phase 3 go forward (i.e. presumably consisting of the Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS))

staff) could gauge new information. Development of such objectives would best be done in coordination with the various Council Advisory Bodies and NMFS Science Centers.

The GMT recommends that Phase 3 should include development of such policy goals for measuring the effectiveness of the EFH designations and management measures. This will markedly improve the analyses for this first review, including development of alternatives if the Council so desires, and facilitate future reviews of the program. It is our understanding that the Council could give guidance and clarification on their policy goals with regard to the program at this meeting. Scoping of the analysis and establishment of an analytic team could be scheduled for a future meeting (e.g. March is identified in the current year at a glance). Then that team could develop action alternatives for the Council's consideration at some point after that (e.g. September). Therefore, we do not have recommendations for picking proposals for inclusion or exclusion at this time. Also, we recommend against crafting alternatives at this meeting; rather we suggest that development and articulation of policy goals will facilitate scoping of the issues and understanding the appropriate range of action alternatives coming from the existing proposals.

PFMC  
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