

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON  
GROUND FISH ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT REVIEW

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) discussed the groundfish essential fish (EFH) habitat review process with Mr. Chuck Tracy and offers the following recommendations.

The GAP is concerned about the process for considering new EFH closed areas and strongly recommends a systematic and science-based approach for considering new EFH designations. The GAP recommends the Council and the Council's Groundfish EFH Review Committee (EFHRC) first review the goals, objectives, and criteria used in deciding EFH areas before modifying existing EFH areas or considering new EFH designations.

The GAP strongly believes there is a need for more scientific information to inform new EFH areas. The GAP believes the Amendment 19 process that established the current system of EFH closed areas lacked a robust scientific evaluation of habitats. For instance, some EFH closed areas, such as a portion of the Eel River canyon, are now closed to fishing despite being flat, sand/mud bottom substrate. Closing this area has inconvenienced fishermen in the area by needlessly closing habitats that are not particularly valuable to most groundfish species or vulnerable to bottom disturbance. Therefore, the GAP recommends the EFHRC first review all the scientific information available from habitat surveys before soliciting nominations for new EFH closed areas. There should also be an evaluation of the effectiveness of EFH area management in increasing groundfish stock size. The EFHRC should also provide industry with habitat maps of the coast; review the relevant enforcement issues of managing current EFH closed areas; and evaluate current EFH area boundaries in relationship to current RCA boundaries. Only after these tasks are completed should the EFHRC solicit input from industry and the public on modifying existing EFH closed areas and considering new EFH designations.

The GAP notes that closed EFH areas should theoretically help mitigate management and scientific uncertainty and provide benefits to directed groundfish fisheries. However, the GAP is frustrated because of the difficulty in evaluating these potential benefits given that survey and fishery-dependent data from EFH areas are lacking that could inform stock assessments. The GAP therefore concludes there is little benefit to the fishing industry from managing EFH closed areas and instead increases costs to industry. EFH closed areas limit the ability to target fish within their range and incurs higher impacts on remaining open areas. Until there is some benefit provided to industry from managing EFH closed areas, the GAP is concerned about the potential proliferation of new EFH designations.