

COUNCIL STAFF ACTIVITIES AND COMMENTS CONCERNING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DEEP SEA CORAL RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) as amended in 2007, directs the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, in consultation with Regional Fishery Management Councils, and in coordination with other Federal agencies and educational institutions, to establish a Deep-Sea Coral Research and Technology Program (DSCRTP). The MSA also authorizes Councils to designate zones to protect deep sea corals and sponges from damage caused by fishing gear under fishery management plan discretionary provisions.

Council Staff recently attended a workshop on research priorities for West Coast corals, in Portland, Oregon. The 2010 Federal budget contains dollars for corals research, and the DSCRTP considers West Coast corals research a high priority. The workshop served to help prioritize research activities for the next three years. This research (\$800,000 in FY10) will provide improved understanding of the distribution, density, abundance, and biology of corals and sponges; and ultimately will help to inform management decisions in West Coast waters.

On a related matter, Council Staff was asked in late 2009 to provide comments on a draft Report to Congress on the DSCRTP. The timing and duration of the comment period precluded a full review by the Council or by the Habitat Committee. Therefore, Council Staff provided general comments expressing the Council's interest in the topic and a request to be kept apprised of developments. The following was sent as an email to Mr. Tom Hourigan (NMFS Office of Habitat Conservation), who is coordinating the Report.

Dear Mr. Hourigan:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft Report to Congress on Implementation of the Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program. The timing and short duration of the comment period preclude the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) or its Habitat Committee from providing detailed comments. The best way to ensure our ability to provide substantive comments in the future is to establish the review period around one of our scheduled Council meetings (March, April, June, September, and November—see our website at <http://www.pcouncil.org/events/future.html> for specific dates) so that the document is available at least two weeks prior, and the comment deadline falls a week or two after the meeting. That way, our Habitat Committee can review, discuss, and respond meaningfully. Nevertheless, the Council is very interested in working with NOAA on this topic, and we offer these general comments, based on a quick review by Council Staff:

- The draft document states on page 16 that a West Coast regional research priorities workshop is scheduled for January, 2010. Please provide us with an update and details of that workshop if possible. We would like to participate, but it will be a challenge on short notice.

- The draft document notes on page 15 that the Coral Program will “convene a regional coordination meeting and identify a regional planning team.” Is that a different meeting than the one referenced above? If this regional planning team is to include non NOAA partners, please keep us informed of the progress and makeup of that team. We would be interested in participating.
- The draft document states that essential fish habitat (EFH) is slated to be reviewed by the Council in 2010 (page 35) and 2011 (page 43). A more accurate statement would be to say that “the Council is scheduled to review groundfish EFH in 2011.”
- Is the Deep Sea Coral and Sponge Research and Management Strategic Plan available? The link on the Coral Program’s website appears to be broken.

We look forward to working closely with the NOAA Coral Program during 2010 and beyond, to set research priorities and to help implement the Deep-Sea Coral Research and Technology Program. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

John Coon, Ph.D.
Deputy Director

PFMC
02/17/10