

GROUND FISH ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT REVIEW: SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS RECEIVED AND PROCESS FOR COMPLETION

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) issued a request for proposals to modify provisions of Pacific Coast groundfish essential fish habitat (EFH), with proposals due July 31, 2013. Eight proposals were received, representing a wide substantive and geographic range. Two proposals were from National Marine Sanctuaries (NMS), four were from conservation organizations, one from a commercial fishing-related group, and one was co-sponsored by a NMS and the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife. All eight proposals and supporting documentation are available on the Council's ftp site: ftp.pccouncil.org/pub/GF_EFH_Review_2011-2012. The RFP and other primary documents related to the EFH review can be found at <http://www.pccouncil.org/2013/05/25450/rfp-gf-efh-may2013/>. Following is a brief summary of each proposal.

Proposal Summaries

Fishermen's Marketing Association (FMA)

The FMA proposal is to modify the existing bottom trawl closed area known as Eel River Canyon, such that the eastern boundary of the closure would align with the 75 fathom contour. This also aligns with the eastern boundary of the trawl RCA. The proponents state that the existing eastern boundary extends into sandy bottom habitat that is outside of the canyon area. The proposal was considered by the Council in 2008, under an interim proposal process, but the decision was made at that time to forego any EFH changes until the periodic review was completed.

Oceana/Natural Resources Defense Council/Ocean Conservancy (Oceana/NRDC/OC)

Oceana also submitted a proposal in 2008 under an interim proposal process, but on a much more limited scale than the current proposal. As with the Eel River Canyon proposal, the Council chose to forego making any changes to EFH, until the periodic review was completed. The current Oceana/NRDC/OC proposal is to create or modify 66 bottom trawl closed areas, open nine areas to bottom trawling that are currently closed, improve enforcement of EFH Conservation Areas, implement new management measures related to midwater trawl gear in EFH Conservation Areas, improve the identification of major prey species for groundfish, and add all West Coast waters deeper than 3500 meters, as EFH.

Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary (MBNMS)

The MBNMS proposal is to create three and modify seven discrete areas that would be closed to bottom trawling (except demersal seine gear), and to open five areas that are currently closed to bottom trawling. The proposal also includes conceptual "Voluntary Management Areas" as a pilot project that would involve voluntary agreements to avoid bottom trawling in three areas; and proposes added enforcement provisions related to location and deployment of trawl gear.

Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (GFNMS)

The GFNMS proposal is to modify one existing bottom trawl closed area and add two additional areas, based on presence of biogenic habitats including rocky reefs and canyons, which are currently included in groundfish EFH descriptions as habitat elements of HAPCs. The proposal offers options for one of the new closed areas to be closed to bottom trawl gear (except demersal

seine), or to all bottom contact gear. The other two areas are proposed as closed to bottom trawl gear (except demersal seine).

Greenpeace

Greenpeace proposes identifying nine submarine canyon areas as EFH, applying protective measures to freeze the existing footprint of fishing activities, and beginning a process to phase out some fishing gear types such as drift gill nets and bottom trawls. In many cases, the proposed canyon areas co-occur with existing HAPCs or other management or Conservation Areas. The nine proposed areas are distributed between the Washington coast and (approximately) Morro Bay, California.

Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)

EDF proposes eliminating the small footprint requirement south of 40° 10'N, Latitude, to provide greater protection to shelf soft bottom habitats. The requirement was designed to decrease effort over rocky reef habitats, but EDF notes that greater impact to soft bottom habitat has been a trade-off. The proposal suggests that rocky reef habitats and species will still be protected because of the risk of catching rebuilding species and exceeding individual quota pounds.

Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary (OCNMS) and Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW)

This proposal offers three options for modifying the existing Olympic 2 bottom trawl closed area. All three options include extending the current prohibition on bottom trawl gear to include all bottom contact gear. Option 1 maintains status quo spatial boundaries, while Options 2 and 3 propose expanding the spatial boundaries. The proposal would apply only to non-tribal fisheries.

Marine Conservation Institute (MCI)

The MCI proposes 29 new areas for additional habitat protections. Most are adjacent to existing closed areas, although several are spatially distinct from existing areas closed to various types of bottom fishing gear. Seven areas would be closed to all bottom contact gear 22 of the new areas are proposed to be closed to bottom trawl gear and the proposed closed areas are distributed along the entire West Coast.

Process

The proposals were posted to the Council's ftp site on August 5, 2013, and are available to Council members, Council Advisory Bodies (ABs), and the public who wish to read them. Although groundfish EFH is not on the September agenda, some ABs expressed interest in initiating review of the proposals as soon as possible. Therefore, they have been made available.

The Essential Fish Habitat Review Committee will develop the EFH review Phase 2 Report for consideration by the Council at the November 2013 meeting in Costa Mesa, California. The report will also summarize and offer evaluations of the proposals, and will potentially identify EFH topic areas that were not addressed by any of the proposals. The report will also briefly summarize the new information and data compiled during Phase 1 of the review process and make recommendations to the Council about moving forward with changes to groundfish EFH.

If the Council chooses to make changes to groundfish EFH, it will initiate a fishery management plan amendment process and may use recommendations from the EFHRC, ABs, the public, and the proposals to frame the overall scope of the amendment. Under that scenario, the proposals, the Phase 1 and Phase 2 Reports, the data catalogue, and the National Marine Fisheries Service Synthesis document will provide important resources in establishing alternatives for the Council to consider during the amendment process.