

REPORT OF THE HABITAT STEERING GROUP

At its meeting on Monday, April 3, 2000, the Habitat Steering Group (HSG) discussed the following issues:

San Francisco Airport Expansion

The HSG received an update on the proposal to expand the San Francisco airport by adding another runway. Currently, the runways at the airport are not far enough apart to meet Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations. Various runway alternatives have been proposed which include Bay landfills ranging from 430 to 1,300 acres. The proposed project will adversely affect the quality and/or quantity of essential fish habitat (EFH) of a significant number of Council-managed species, including several flatfishes, coastal pelagic species, and chinook salmon. We have prepared a letter for Council Chair's, Jim Lone, signature to the FAA which describes the potential for EFH impacts as a result of the project and their responsibilities relative to EFH regulations in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. NMFS has brought to our attention the Council has the ability to comment on proposals which may adversely affect EFH and provide conservation recommendations separately from NMFS. For this reason, with the Council's approval, the HSG plans to draft a follow-up letter for the September Council meeting which describes our specific concerns regarding EFH impacts and may suggest appropriate conservation recommendations.

Klamath River Flow Rates

In response to unanticipated significant changes in proposed flow rates for the Klamath River by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), the HSG is recommending the Council approve a letter utilizing the fast-track process. Last Friday, BOR significantly lowered its proposed flow rates from its previous proposal, and the HSG is concerned these reduced flow rates may significantly impact anadromous fish. A draft biological assessment on the proposed flows will be completed by the end of next week, and NMFS may have a Biological Opinion completed as early as the end of May. The HSG believes it would be timely to send a letter to BOR following the release of the biological assessment and prior to NMFS drafting the Biological Opinion. With this timing in mind, the HSG is proposing to draft a letter to BOR for the Council to approve via its fast-track process by May 1.

Oregon and Washington Salmon Recovery Efforts

The HSG received informational presentations from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife regarding their respective salmon recovery efforts. Copies of their presentation materials are being made available to the Council.

EFH Interim Final Rule and Salmon Plan Amendment 14

At the request of the HSG, NMFS provided an update on the status of the EFH interim final rule and Amendment 14. Public comments on the interim final rule have been organized into five categories, and teams have been identified to develop solutions for the issues. A meeting is scheduled for the third week of May to reach final resolution on the five topics. Following that, a final rule will be published in the federal register. Regarding Amendment 14, NMFS is expected to approve the final document by the end of the summer.

Highly Migratory Species EFH

The HSG received an update on the development of the highly migratory species fishery management plan, including the EFH components for the management unit species. The HSG will review and provide comments on the draft plan in November.

Fishing Gear Impacts

It is our understanding the Fishing Gear Impacts workgroup is an ad-hoc, budget-neutral, committee made up of HSG and Groundfish Advisory Subpanel members. Last year, the Council directed the HSG to address the issue of fishing gear impacts on habitat; the HSG plans to fulfill this responsibility and request feedback from the ad-hoc workgroup on its proposals, as necessary. Given recent developments on marine habitat issues, we are requesting a meeting concurrent with the June Council meeting. We will take the lead in drafting an agenda and will circulate it to the ad-hoc workgroup for review and approval.

Process for Designating Habitat Areas of Particular Concern

The HSG received a presentation from Mr. Ian Butler, NMFS, on the proposed process for designating Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs) for West Coast groundfish. The HSG felt the process was thorough and provides adequate opportunities for public involvement. The HSG approved the proposed process which will be presented to the Council and other advisory groups at the June Council meeting.

Columbia River Dredge Disposal Sites

The HSG received an invitation to participate on a task force to address the location of the Columbia River dredge ocean disposal sites. The Council sent a letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers last year describing its concerns with the Columbia River Channel deepening project. This invitation was in response to our request to be kept informed on this issue. Because NMFS is already participating in this process, the HSG discussed having NMFS be the liaison for the group.

Housekeeping Issues

The HSG usually does not provide comments to the Council as an advisory entity on salmon or groundfish agenda items other than through our general report. The HSG decided to have a placeholder on its agendas to review the Council agenda and, in the future, plans to provide comments on habitat-related issues on the Council's agenda.

Action Items:

1. Letter to the FAA regarding the San Francisco Airport expansion for Council signature.
2. Letter to BOR regarding Klamath River flow rates for the Council's fast-track process.
3. Approval to schedule Fishing Gear Impacts workgroup meeting concurrent with June Council meeting (budget-neutral).

PFMC

04/06/00