

DRAFT/August 22, 2000

Barbara Moore, Director
National Undersea Research Program
SSMC3, R/NURP, Room 11359
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dr. Raymond C. Highsmith, Center Director
West Coast & Polar Regions Undersea Research Center
University of Alaska, Fairbanks
213 O'Neill Bldg.
PO Box 757220
Fairbanks, AK 99775-7220

Dear Ms. Moore and Dr. Highsmith,

The purpose of this letter is to convey the support of the Pacific Fishery Management Council for the research taking place on Heceta Bank which is funded by the National Undersea Research Program.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) is a federally mandated group created by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) in 1976. Its primary role is the management of fisheries conducted within federal waters off Washington, Oregon, and California. Subsequent congressional amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act in 1986, 1990, and 1996 added emphasis to the Council's role in fish habitat protection. The 1996 amendments directed the Council to identify and describe "essential fish habitat," (EFH) the habitat essential to the spawning, breeding, feeding or growth-to-maturity of the fish species it manages.

The current situation in the groundfish fishery of declining stocks and resulting economic hardship experienced by industry prompted the Council to develop a strategic plan for the fishery. It is hoped that the serious changes proposed in the document including major reductions in fishing effort, use of marine reserves as a management tool, and prioritization of research needs, will result in healthy fish stocks and economically profitable fisheries sustainable for the long term.

We feel that information resulting from this Heceta Bank research that will result in a more quantitative approach for mapping essential fish habitat, a model approach for characterizing and quantifying habitat associations of benthic animals (on a scale meaningful to the stock assessment of commercial species), and help refine stock assessment survey design, will assist in improving the management of west coast groundfish. This research also, provides a unique opportunity to examine the possible impacts of bottom fishing at a critical place on the outer continental shelf of the Northwest United States. Such research efforts will assist the Council in meeting the new EFH mandates in the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Information from this research will also aid the Council in meeting goals listed in our strategic plan for the groundfish fishery. These include,

1. Promoting scientific research on the impacts of fishing gear on various habitat types and the feasibility of habitat restoration, and

2. Creating cooperative partnerships between state, federal, private foundations, and other private entities to collect and analyze the scientific data needed to manage groundfish.

The tools utilized for data collection in this project, the Delta submersible and ROPOS ROV (Remotely Operated Vehicle), could contribute significantly to the management of west coast groundfish and complement the traditional survey method of bottom trawling by providing stock information from untrawlable areas. For the reasons outlined in this letter we convey our support for this research and urge you to continue your funding support. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Jim Lone, Council Chair

cc Bob Embley
Steve Hammond
Linda Jones
Richard Methot
Brian Pissot
Cyreis Schmitt
Usha Varanasi
Mary Yoklavich