

REPORT OF THE HABITAT STEERING GROUP

The Habitat Steering Group (HSG) met on Monday, September 11 and recommends the Council take action on the following item.

HECETA BANK RESEARCH

The HSG received a presentation on Heceta Bank research activities from Ms. Jennifer Bloeser, Pacific Marine Conservation Council. There is a two-year field effort designed to answer the following questions, (1) At what scales are there quantifiable relationships between groundfish population and seafloor morphology/texture?, (2) What changes have occurred in the fish populations at Heceta Bank after a decade?, and (3) What is the character of and what is the extent of natural refugia? The first part of this research was completed in June and a brief summary was presented to the Council at the June 2000 meeting.

The HSG has a draft letter of support for Council consideration (Exhibit C.2) directed to the current funder of the cooperative research taking place on Heceta Bank, the National Undersea Research Program, and would assist in obtaining future funding for this type of research. This mode of research will assist the Council in accomplishing the goals of the groundfish strategic plan as outlined in the letter.

In addition, the HSG discussed the following issues:

KELP MANAGEMENT

At its request, the HSG received a presentation on kelp management issues from California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) and the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Kelp has been identified as an essential habitat for a number of Council-managed species. Giant kelp (*Macrocystis*) in particular, has a narrow temperature tolerance range and is sensitive to turbidity. There are 74 square miles of kelp beds off California -- approximately 1/3 of these are leased for harvest (primarily south of Pt. Conception) and 50% of the remaining 2/3 are open to harvest. The CDFG is in the process of updating its kelp management plan for 2000-2005. The HSG plans to receive periodic updates on kelp management issues.

MARINE AND ESTUARINE EXPANSION OF THE CALIFORNIA WILDLIFE HABITAT SYSTEM

The HSG received a presentation from CDFG on the addition of marine and estuarine habitat types to the California Wildlife Habitat Relationship system. This database could assist the Council in managing fish species by identifying and describing the species/habitat associations. The HSG has members on the core group for this project who will keep the HSG informed of its progress.

ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT (EFH) GUIDELINES

At the request of a Council member the HSG will review the EFH mandates contained in the Magnuson-Stevens Act and the EFH guidelines on the NMFS Northwest Region website for consistency. We will report to the Council on our preliminary findings at the November meeting.

COMMUNICATION PARTNERSHIP FOR SCIENCE AND THE SEA (COMPASS)

COMPASS is a partnership of the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Island Press, and SEAWEB advised by a science panel chaired by Jane Lubchenco, Oregon State University. A meeting was held August 27-30 in Monterey to discuss the development of marine reserves on the West Coast. There was interest expressed among the scientific committee to develop criteria for siting reserves on the West Coast. The HSG recommends the Council receive a presentation on the COMPASS process at its November meeting.

The HSG also received updates on Klamath flow issues and the San Francisco airport expansion.

Council Action:

1. Heceta Bank letter

HABITAT STEERING GROUP PROPOSED ACTION FORM

HSG Sponsor: Jennifer Bloeser

Title of Issue: Council support for Heceta Bank research

Deadline (if any): None

Proposed Action: Letter

Addressed To:

Barbara Moore, Director
National Undersea Research Program
SSMC3, R/NURP, Room 11359
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: 301/713-2427

Dr. Raymond C. Highsmith, Center Director
West Coast & Polar Regions Undersea Research Center
University of Alaska, Fairbanks
213 O'Neill Bldg.
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cc Penny Dalton
Bob Embley
Steve Hammond
Linda Jones
Richard Methot
Cyreis Schmitt
Michael Tillman
Brian Tissot
Usha Varanasi
Mary Yoklavich

Description of Issue:

The letter of support from the Council would be directed to the current funder of the cooperative research taking place on Heceta Bank, the National Undersea Research Program, and would hopefully assist in obtaining future funding for this type of research. The first part of this research was completed in June and a brief summary was presented to the Council at the June 2000 meeting.

This two-year field effort is designed to answer the following questions: (1) At what scales are there quantifiable relationships between groundfish population and seafloor morphology/texture?, (2) What changes have occurred in the fish populations at Heceta Bank after a decade?, and (3) What is the character of and what is the extent of natural refugia?

Information from this research is intended to assist with West Coast groundfish management by;

1. Leading to a more quantitative approach for mapping essential fish habitat,
2. Leading to a model approach for characterizing and quantifying habitat associations of benthic animals (on a scale meaningful to the stock assessment of commercial species),
3. Contributing to the design of stock assessment surveys, and
4. Providing a unique opportunity to examine the possible impact of a decade of intense bottom fishing at a critical place on the outer continental shelf of the Northwest United States.

Additionally, this research will assist the Council in meeting goals listed in the strategic planning document including;

1. Promote scientific research on the impacts of fishing gear on various habitat types and the feasibility of habitat restoration, and
2. Create cooperative partnerships between state, federal, private foundations, and other private entities to collect and analyze the scientific data needed to manage groundfish.

Relevance To EFH? Yes No

For Which Species?

Numerous Groundfish Species, including species considered overfished by the Council

Potential Benefits of Proposed Action:

Potential benefits of the proposed action include additional funding for the research described above leading to more and better data for managing groundfish and their associated habitat.

Attachment
Draft Letter

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
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University of Alaska, Fairbanks
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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. In addition, the Pacific Council process would greatly benefit from further research in other areas of the West Coast. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.
Sincerely,

Jim Lone, Council Chair

cc Penny Dalton
Bob Embley
Steve Hammond
Linda Jones
Richard Methot
Cyreis Schmitt
Michael Tillman
Brian Tissot
Usha Varanasi
Mary Yoklavich