

HABITAT STEERING GROUP REPORT TO THE COUNCIL

The Habitat Steering Group (HSG) has one action item for Council consideration and two additional fast-track items for Council approval. The HSG would like the Council to send identical letters to PacifiCorp and the Federal Energy Regulation Commission (FERC) regarding the Klamath FERC relicensing. PacifiCorp has drafted a first stage consultation document which describes the studies that need to be conducted in drafting an EIS with alternatives for the restoration of anadromous salmonids in the upper Klamath basin. The purpose of the letter is to ensure that studies are conducted which adequately assess the effects of the project on Klamath salmonids and to assess a range of alternatives which will result in successful restoration of these salmonids. The comment deadline is March 27.

The first fast-track letter is also regarding the Klamath River. It will be addressed to NMFS regarding the final Biological Assessment (BA) prepared by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR). The NMFS will consider the BA in drafting its Biological Opinion (BO) which is expected to be produced around the first of April and NMFS has requested comments before the BO is completed. Therefore, a draft letter will be circulated among Council members for approval around March 15. The HSG will continue to have a placeholder on its agenda for Klamath River issues.

The second fast-track letter is to the Secretary of Commerce regarding the draft Artificial Reef National Plan Revision. An HSG subcommittee is collating comments and drafting a letter for HSG and Council review. The comment deadline on the plan is April 1.

The rest of the HSG meeting was informational in nature with a wide variety of presentations and discussions.

NMFS Consultation on Oil and Gas Pipeline

The National Marine Fisheries Service reviewed the Essential Fish Habitat Assessment for re-issuance of the Environmental Protection Agency's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System general permit for oil and gas platforms off the California coast. The general permit would cover 22 existing production platforms. Of the 82 fish species federally managed in the West Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan, 39 have been recorded in various water depths over a 35-year period at southern California platforms. Some of the more common groundfish species consistently observed include all life stages of bocaccio, brown, olive, widow, blue, and flag rockfishes as well as the subadult and adult life stages of California scorpionfish, cabezon and lingcod; the affected coastal pelagic species are Northern anchovy, Pacific sardine, and jack mackerel.

NMFS recommends that the EPA adopt four conservation measures, one requiring extensive studies of the effects of discharge on the juvenile and adult life stages of rockfish and lingcod. EPA is drafting a report utilizing existing information which it will present to NMFS in May; if this satisfies the NMFS requirements, consultation will be closed. We will receive an update from NMFS at the June HSG meeting.

Marine Reserves

The HSG received an update on the coordination of West Coast marine reserve efforts through the COMPASS (COMMunication PARTnership for Science and the Sea) process. COMPASS's West Coast Marine Reserve Coordinating Committee met in February concurrent with the AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science) meeting in San Francisco. The Coordinating Committee has identified high priority marine reserve activities and discussed mechanisms for integration with the Council's marine reserve process. The HSG also received an update on the results of the Council's Ad Hoc Marine Reserve Process Development Committee meeting, the HSG will have a more in-depth discussion on marine reserve efforts at our April and June meetings.

EFH/Magnuson Act Review

At its November 2000 meeting the HSG requested that NMFS provide an update on the number of EFH consultations that have occurred to date. We also requested clarification on how to facilitate coordination between the Council and NMFS on consultations. NMFS has recently developed a system to track EFH consultations. To date the Southwest Region has conducted approximately 65 consultations since March 1999, and the Northwest Region has conducted 45 consultations since October 2000. There are different types of consultations: (1) Informal consultations, which are presented in the form of a letter from NMFS to the action agency, (2) Formal consultations, which occur on combined endangered species act and EFH issues which take the form of formal meetings, and (3) Expanded consultations, which are on EFH issues only and also take the form of formal meetings. The regional EFH coordinators will keep the Council apprised of formal and expanded consultations and will recommend Council action on the issues that may benefit from additional Council input.

Other Issues

The HSG also received updates on the San Francisco airport expansion, the Lower Willamette Superfund Assessment, and the Queets River EFH overfishing outline review.

Administrative Items

The HSG unanimously decided to have co-chairs (vs. a chair and vice chair) with designated government and non-government seats to capture the diversity present in the group as well as share the increasing workload. The HSG is recommending Michele Robinson and Jennifer Bloeser for these seats.

The HSG also formed subcommittees to address the artificial reef plan review and ongoing FERC relicensing issues.

Council Action:

1. Letter to FERC and PacifiCorp regarding Klamath River relicensing.
2. Fast-track letter to NMFS regarding Klamath River BA
3. Fast-track letter to Secretary of Commerce regarding the draft Artificial Reef Plan Revision.