

REPORT OF THE HABITAT STEERING GROUP (HSG)

HSG Administrative Matters

Dr. Don McIsaac and several members of the Council met with the HSG to provide clarification and direction on the priorities that the Council desires for the HSG. There was general recognition that the HSG has provided the Council with direction and needed input on priority items, but that new priorities for the Council were emerging. Dr. McIsaac related four areas that Council members thought important for the HSG to consider in its role:

1. An emphasis on communication with the Council regarding current priorities, especially items on the Council Agenda
2. Increased emphasis on marine issues, such as rebuilding plans
3. Taking an active role in commenting on Marine Reserves Committee composition and review of marine reserve proposals presented to the Council
4. Ensuring a thorough review of information presented to the HSG before reporting to the Council.

Other topics that were covered by Council members included:

1. Conducting a review of the Council Operation Procedures (COP) for the HSG, and ensuring consistency with current direction
2. A desire to minimize the quick response process for approval of Council letters
3. Providing an opportunity for the Council and HSG to interact on setting future HSG agendas.
4. Having documents that are presented to the HSG by members of public be reviewed by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee in advance.

The HSG discussed the guidance it received from the Council. In order to be more effective in providing the Council advice, the HSG believes that it needs to be included in the development processes (e.g., for groundfish rebuilding plans). In addition, given the expanded role of the HSG, the HSG believes that it will likely need more time for future meetings; perhaps having our meetings extended to two days, rather than our current one-day meetings.

The HSG does not have any proposed action items; however, we will be commenting separately on other Council agenda items.

The HSG received presentations on the following issues:

Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs)

The HSG received a presentation on HAPCs from Cyreis Schmitt, National Marine Fisheries Service, Northwest Fisheries Science Center. Cyreis reiterated that there are no requirements for the designation of HAPCs and no required management measures to be applied to HAPCs; however, the plan is to factor the relationship of HAPC designation to groundfish management into the groundfish environmental impact statement (EIS) which is currently being developed. NMFS staff are currently working on several groundfish habitat projects, including a review of gear impact studies from around the world and an analysis of site-specific creel census data for bocaccio and cowcod.

Fishing Gear Impacts

Cyreis also updated the HSG on the following projects:

1. National Undersea Research Program project using laser line-scan to look at groundfish habitat and ocean conditions. As part of the study NMFS scientists will look at before and after comparisons of trawl fishing gear impacts to determine the capability of this technology to measure gear effects.
2. NMFS is working with the states to develop a fish-habitat coastwide GIS database.
3. NMFS will be adding a week to this summer's slope surveys to conduct experiments on the shelf, including taking sediment samples off California.

4. NMFS is planning to co-host a research forum with the states next year, and the HSG has requested a workshop prior to the forum to discuss and develop a work-plan for addressing habitat and gear impact issues.

Essential Fish Habitat – Magnuson-Stevens Act Review

The HSG received an update from Nora Berwick and Mark Helvey on the number of EFH consultations and templates added to the NMFS Northwest region website (www.nwr.noaa.gov) to assist the action agencies with EFH assessments. To date there have been approximately 400 EFH consultations conducted in the Northwest and approximately 75 conducted in California.

San Francisco Airport Expansion

The San Francisco Airport Authority has yet to identify a preferred alternative for the proposed runway landfill. Questions of habitat mitigation are still unresolved, although restoration of former wetlands in south and north San Francisco Bay is being seriously considered. Peer review of project impacts to biological resources and Bay hydrology will be conducted by an independent panel of scientists. This panel plans to convene in October to present their findings to the public and regulatory agencies. The HSG will get an update on this in November.

Kelp Management Plan

The HSG had been interested in kelp as essential fish habitat and a habitat area of particular concern and has been following kelp management in California. The environmental document “Giant and bull kelp commercial and sport fishing regulations” was adopted by the California Fish and Game Commission on April 16th. The document is available on California Fish and Game’s website: www.dfg.ca.gov.

Klamath Flow Issue

This is the driest year on record for the Upper Klamath basin. May 1 snow-pack is 28% of normal, expected May-September net in-flow to Upper Klamath Lake to be 35% of average. Two biological opinions issued in early April resulted in a determination of jeopardy due to the continued operation of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s Klamath Irrigation Project. The respective reasonable and prudent alternatives prescribed higher Upper Klamath Lake water levels to protect suckers and increased flows below Iron Gate Dam to increase survival of coho fry and juveniles. These flows are higher than ever previously delineated during a critically dry water-year. This has resulted in an 86% reduction in Klamath Project irrigation deliveries. NMFS plans to issue a revised biological opinion by the end of August addressing the October 2001 – March 2002 period and multiple water-year types, based on new information contained in the Utah State University (Hardy) Phase II Flow Study Report. This report has not yet been finalized. We are not aware of any EFH consultations relative to Klamath Project operations this year.

FERC relicensing of the Klamath Hydropower Project continues. The first-stage consultation document responses resulted in 175 letters regarding the licensee’s proposed studies. Concerns were centered on the documents lack of detail to allow understanding of the complex issues involved in relicensing. The licensee will prepare a summary of comments in matrix form and a list of proposed studies by mid-June 2001.

HSG Proposed September Agenda Items

1. Sacramento winter chinook vs. Clifton Pumps
2. Sacramento winter chinook recovery plan update
3. Queets River coho report review
4. Channel Islands NMS recommendation
5. HAPC document review
6. Klamath flow presentation
7. FERC relicensing programmatic letter
8. Lower Willamette superfund assessment