

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON
GROUND FISH ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT -
FINAL PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

In the June Briefing Book, the GMT provided a report on the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), including recommendations for the designation of EFH and Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC), some of the alternatives to minimize adverse impacts to EFH, and alternatives for research and monitoring. During the current June meeting, the GMT has had further discussions on the EFH EIS. These discussions have focused on management issues and the feasibility of alternatives to minimize adverse impacts to EFH. This statement outlines the key points generated from these discussions and builds on the statement provided in the briefing book.

EFH General Comments:

The GMT is concerned that the current inadequacy of spatial data for many fisheries limits our ability to fully evaluate the impact of many of these alternatives.

The GMT is not clear where there is flexibility in the implementation and future evaluation of EFH habitat designations and area closures when new information becomes available. We believe that the Council and Council community need to be made cognizant of this as they make their decisions.

The GMT supports provisions that would allow for changes in habitat protection measures in response to new information on potential impacts of different gear types.

The GMT also would appreciate clarification on the exact areas (e.g. state versus federal waters) in which these measures may or may not apply, particularly as concerns state jurisdictions.

Alternatives to Minimize Adverse Impacts to EFH

The GMT does not support using broad coastwide area and depth closures such as described in Alternative C.2. for protection of habitat. Rather, such closures (e.g. RCAs), are used for managing the take of overfished species and should continue to be used in this manner.

As efforts are made to streamline RCAs, the GMT recognizes that it may be possible to configure RCAs to serve joint purposes. However, doing so would require an analysis of both dimensions, bycatch and habitat. This analysis is currently not available. The GMT long term objective is to minimize area closures while still meeting our bycatch and EFH objectives.

The GMT notes that Alternative C.4.1 uses federal groundfish trawl logbook data (and does not include state trawl logbook data) from the years 2000-2002 to separate trawled areas (referred to as a trawl footprint) from untrawled areas. However, this time period does not include years, such as during the mid-1990s, when catches of deeper trawl species such as sablefish and thornyheads were higher. From a review of coastwide trawl logs from 1993-1996, over 99% of the tows off Oregon and California occurred inside of 700 fathoms. If the Council decides to adopt Alternative C.4., and thus freeze a trawl footprint, then the GMT recommends only

freezing the westward boundary for trawl fishing to 700 fathoms from Point Conception (34°27' N Latitude) to the U.S./Canada border and to 300 fathoms from the U.S./Mexico border to Point Conception to prevent expansion of directed groundfish bottom trawl fishing into deeper waters. Any boundaries eastward of this line, however, may not capture the actual footprint since we do not have comprehensive trawl location data from state fisheries.

With respect to non-trawl gear (Alternative C. 4.2.), the GMT is supportive of the concept of a non-trawl footprint, but is concerned that the analysis of spatial effort patterns has focused almost exclusively on trawl gear, and there has been little or no analysis or inventory of available spatial data for non-trawl bottom-contacting gear.

Regarding Alternative C.6., the GMT sees great value in closing areas of high groundfish diversity (defined within the draft EIS as “hotspots”); however, the GMT believes that data are insufficient at this time to identify these areas of high diversity and recommends that this be an area for future research.

Regarding Alternative C.9., the GMT notes the following:

Several of the gear restrictions have the probability of severely impacting or even eliminating state trawl fisheries, most notably C.9.2 prohibiting flat trawl doors, C.9.5 prohibiting dredge gear, C.9.6 prohibiting beam trawl gear, and C.9.7 prohibiting set gill nets in waters deeper than 60 fathoms.

Flat trawl doors are used coastwide to take pink shrimp over sediment habitat. Other trawl door types have been found to be ineffective at catching pink shrimp within this habitat. Also, fishermen targeting pink shrimp are not currently aware of this proposed restriction to their fishery. Dredge gear is currently used in Washington to target oysters in Grays Harbor and Willapa Bay while beam trawl gear is used in both Puget Sound and San Francisco Bay to target shrimp. In regards to the beam trawl gear, it is possible that this gear could be modified to reduce impacts to EFH. Set gill nets are prohibited within California state waters, but are used outside of 3 miles in waters deeper than 60 fathoms to take state species such as California halibut and groundfish species such as blackgill rockfish. As a consequence, Alternative C.9.7 essentially eliminates this fishery.

The GMT also notes that these minimization measures would apply to fisheries within EFH which could include state waters. If these measures are adopted by the Council, then states would have to notice and adopt compliance regulations through their state regulatory processes before implementing them within state waters.

In regard to Alternative C.9.1., restricting large roller gear would impact the coastwide DTS fishery. Trawling over continental slope sediments requires larger roller gear. Smaller roller gear tends to dig into the soft sediment resulting in a greater impact and creating a safety issue for fishermen using this gear.

The GMT believes that Alternative C.11 could have habitat benefits only if it were modified to allow trawl vessels to switch to fixed gear. However, the GMT is concerned that such an alternative would be initially difficult to implement with current administration and management systems, and believes that relaxing the gear endorsement would likely function better under an

IFQ program. For example, anticipating when trawl vessels would switch to fixed gear without a declaration mechanism would be difficult, and predicting the fishing success of those vessels would initially be complicated. In addition, allocations for sablefish, trawl, DTL, and tier fisheries may need to be adjusted and tracking catches against allocations would add another layer of complexity to an already complex tracking system.

With respect to Alternative C.12 and the conservation areas recommended in both the Oceana Alternative and the Trawl Industry Alternative, the GMT recognizes that the states have spent considerable time and expertise evaluating fisheries trawl data in the federal waters fished by their state's vessels. The GMT believes that this is the appropriate way to evaluate these data and to adjust area boundaries to minimize impacts to fisheries while ensuring that multiple habitat types are covered in closed areas. Thus, the GMT recommends consideration of state proposals for modification of closed areas based on state fishery data.

The GMT recommends an exemption for Scottish seine from trawl closures south of 40°10' that target sanddabs. This gear is used by a small number of vessels and has less impact on bottom habitat and low bycatch rates of rockfish.

The GMT also recommends requiring VMS on all bottom trawl vessels for enforcement purposes, noting that there are currently state trawl fisheries without VMS.

The GMT would like to commend Oceana on their efforts to incorporate fishery-specific location data and adjust areas to reduce impacts while not compromising their objectives under EFH. We also appreciate the efforts by the industry to balance their need to maintain fishing opportunities with Oceana's proposals for protecting habitat. We believe that both Oceana and the trawl industry's efforts represent movement in the appropriate direction for considering alternative configurations of protected areas under C.12.

With respect to action on deepwater structures (seamounts, atolls), the GMT recognizes that closing these regions to bottom-contacting gear would have no foreseeable impact on current fishing activities.

The GMT recognizes that the main focus of the current impact minimization effort is on the impacts of bottom trawling on essential groundfish habitat, as trawling impacts have the most habitat-impact related research available. The GMT would like to avoid inadvertently restricting other gears by closing areas without evaluating both the impacts to these fisheries, and the cumulative impacts of other gears on EFH.

The GMT believes that there is a need in the future to direct more NMFS resources and contributions in the process of evaluating alternatives such as C.12.

In regard to Alternative C.13, the GMT recommends that this measure apply only to the Davidson Seamount Area and Cordell Bank as discussed by the Council under the National Marine Sanctuaries. Area included is within the coordinates of the Davidson Seamount Area, and at Cordell Bank, this is depths less than a 50 fm isobath as approximated by series of waypoints. (not the way Oceana drew out Cordell). Prohibit bottom-tending gear (with exceptions noted in Cordell Bank NMS language). For consistency recommend that this also be adopted for the federal portion of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary.

Recommend that could incorporate various fishing provisions that have already been agreed upon between the State of California and the Sanctuary and public process.

GMT RECOMMENDATIONS:

- A. Designation of EFH: Adopt one of the Council’s preliminary preferred alternatives (Alt. A.2 A.3)
- B. Designation of Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC):
Adopt Council’s preliminary preferred alternatives (Alts B.2, B.3, B.4 and B.5) to designate HAPC (estuaries, canopy kelp, seagrass, and rocky reefs), and Alt. B.9 to review and modify HAPC (4-year period)
- C. Measures to Minimize Impacts of Fishing on EFH:
 - Adopt Alternative C.4.1 as modified in the statement (westward boundary at 700 fathoms north of Point Conception and 300 fathoms south of Point Conceptions with no eastward boundary)
 - Adopt elements of Alternative C.12 based on recommendations from states. Include:
 - Scottish seine exemption
 - Requirement for VMS on all bottom trawl vessels
 - Adopt Alternative C.13: Close ecologically important areas to bottom-contacting gear for
 - Davidson Seamount Area
 - Cordell Bank to 50 fm (vertical hook and line exempted)
 - Federal portion of Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary with allowances for state-sanctuary agreements
- D. Research and Monitoring: Adopt elements of alternatives D.2, D.3, and D.4 as far as practicable.
- E. Address C.6, C.7, C.8, and C.14 under Council discussion of Marine Reserves; C.11 under an IFQ program