

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT

The Habitat Committee (HC) met on Tuesday, October 25, 2005, in Portland, Oregon, to discuss Agenda Items D.2 (krill management), H.7 (Amendment 19 – essential fish habitat), I.1 (Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary) and other topics. As directed by the Council, the HC prepared a draft response to the Department of Interior's July 7, 2005 letter (Agenda Item F.1, Supplemental Attachment 2). The HC also discussed:

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Policy Document

As requested by the Council at the September 2005 meeting, the HC reviewed a policy document developed by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) on the protection of essential fish habitat (EFH) from energy exploration, development, transportation, and hydropower re-licensing. The SAFMC identified EFH at risk, specific threats to marine and estuarine resources, and general policy statements intended to avoid, minimize, or offset impacts to EFH. In addition, the SAFMC recommended that specific requirements apply to license, application, or permit decisions by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Minerals Management Service, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Lastly, the SAFMC reiterated their objection to proposed oil and gas exploration proposals based on the potential degradation or loss of extensive live bottom and other habitat essential to fisheries under SAFMC jurisdiction.

The policy document is useful for a number of reasons. The document clearly identifies concerns of the SAFMC on issues that have the potential to have significant effects on EFH. Developing policy statements is informative to the public and regulatory agencies, and elevates particular issues that have significance to the conservation and enhancement of EFH. The document provides SAFMC recommendations on ways to avoid, minimize, and offset adverse impacts to EFH, which fulfills the SAFMC's statutory responsibilities under Section 305(b)(3)(A) and (B) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. In addition, it provides information useful to National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for consultation purposes under Section 305(b)(4)(A). Lastly, the policy recommendations may ensure consistency across the region and establish common ground for coastal development activities.

The HC believes similar policy statements would be useful for protection of EFH within the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (Council) jurisdiction. The Council has already adopted a guidance document titled "Non-fishing Impacts to Essential Fish Habitat and Recommended Conservation Measures." This reference document was prepared to assist NMFS biologists in reviewing proposed projects and considering potential impacts that may adversely affect EFH and to provide consistent and substantiated EFH conservation recommendations. The development of formal policy statements is a logical next step for those non-fishing impacts considered most significant by the Council. The HC recommends that the Council proceed with the development of a similar policy document.

The HC suggests considering liquefied natural gas facilities, offshore aquaculture, oil and gas exploration and development, mining, and other marine and land-based management issues of immediate concern in this policy document. The HC would be willing to develop a more comprehensive and prioritized list if directed by the Council.

PFMC
10/27/05