Cowcod Conservation Area (CCA) Management Alternatives for 2007-2008 Groundfish Management

Options for Consideration
The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) has received requests from both commercial and recreational fishermen to modify the boundaries of the Cowcod Conservation Area (CCA) for 2007-2008. Commercial fishermen have requested access to deeper waters within the current CCA boundaries through modification of the outer perimeter coordinates of the CCA, and recreational fishermen have requested a modification to the inner perimeter to allow access to additional fishing areas in shallow water.

Background
The Cowcod Conservation Area (CCA) closures were established in 2001 in response to an overfished determination for the cowcod rockfish stock, and a federal requirement to restore the population to a healthy status. The intent of the CCAs is to reduce the cowcod catch so that the rebuilding Optimum Yield/Total Allowable Catch (OY/TAC) will not be exceeded. Rebuilding analyses suggest that recovery would be jeopardized if rebuilding OY/TACs are exceeded by any significant amount. The stock was reassessed in 2005, which indicates that cowcod biomass size is in slightly better shape than the last assessment (18% versus 7% of unfished biomass), although results of rebuilding analysis suggest that the previous analysis was not incorrect to suggest that rebuilding of cowcod may take several decades. A new series of annual rebuilding OY/TACs have been calculated for implementation beginning in 2007-2008.

The CCA closures are primarily located far offshore where cowcod catches and catch rates remained historically high, but where total groundfish effort has been much lower than for fishing grounds closer to the mainland shore. Therefore, the CCA closures were initially adopted because they were less disruptive to southern California fisheries than alternative measures that would have been applied across the board to all shelf fishing grounds.

When the CCAs were first established, enforcement concerns dictated the outer boundaries to be long, straight lines so that enforcement by aircraft could be effective. This resulted in inclusion of some deep water (slope) habitat in the closure, where cowcod are not found, and thus access to associated target species was prevented,. Since then, an electronic Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) has been adopted by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) for commercial groundfish vessels, which is intended to provide effective enforcement without the need for long straight boundaries for offshore area closures.

Outer Perimeter Alternatives
For the 2007-2008 management cycle, alternative outer boundaries for the CCAs may be considered, that still preserve the original intent of maintaining cowcod fishing mortality levels within the rebuilding OY/TAC. Three alternatives are presented for consideration.

- Alternative 1. For all vessels except those carrying VMS, the current boundaries and restrictions for the CCAs would be maintained. For vessels that employ VMS, the CCA closure areas would be limited to the depth range that is utilized by cowcod, which would remove current bottom fishing restrictions from a large area of fishing grounds that are too deep to be considered cowcod habitat. Available information suggests that the normal depth limit for cowcod in the southern California Bight is within the range of 150-200+ fathoms. Alternative 1 redefines the outer perimeters as a series of waypoints that

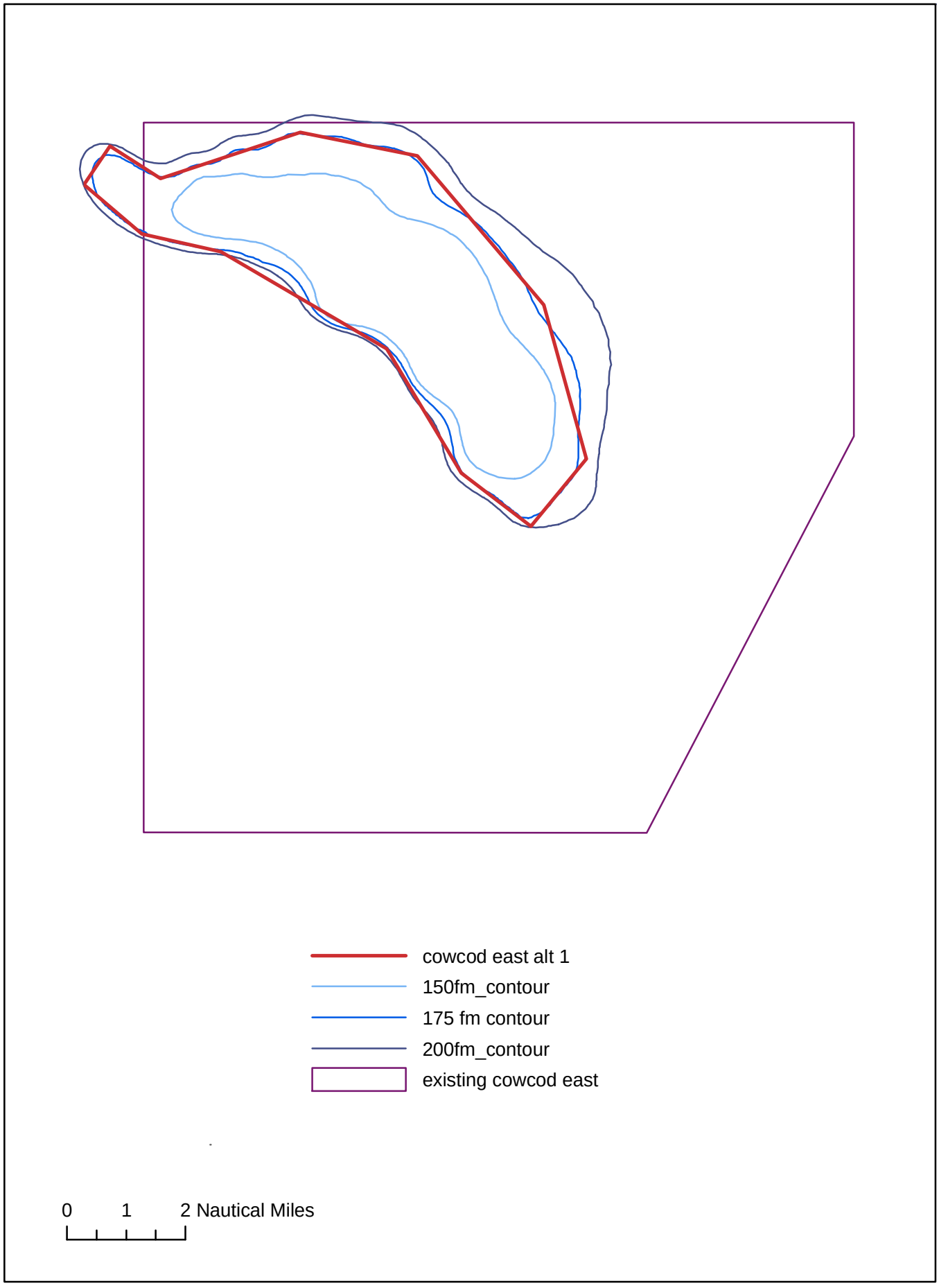
fall within (or beyond) that depth range, centering on the 175 fathom contour. Some additional considerations would be necessary to provide effective enforcement for this alternative:
    - Only vessels with VMS would be eligible to fish between the current CCA boundaries and the new outer perimeter lines.
    - CDFG enforcement of the new Alternative 1 waypoints would rely on timely access to VMS information, and the ability to use that information in state court to prosecute violations.
    - Vessels intending to fish using the new Alternative 1 boundaries would be required to declare their intent prior to departure from port for each trip.
    - End buoys for longline sets would be required to employ radar reflectors and strobe lights. Also, the practicality of employing transponders (or other technologies) similar to VMS for the end buoys would be considered as a regulatory requirement.
- Alternative 2. Eliminate the CCAs. This alternative would provide for management of the CCA areas as part of the routine groundfish management process. Any depth and area restrictions would be developed and adopted under the Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) regulations.
- Alternative 3. Status quo (no action). Maintain the current boundaries and restrictions for the CCAs. This alternative provides boundaries that have been shown to be easily understandable to fishers and enforcement. Conservation for cowcod and other overfished groundfish that are found within the area is achieved. However, potential fishing opportunities for target slope species are not realized.

Inner Perimeter Alternatives

The current 0-20 fathom shallow fishing opportunity within the CCA is limited to nearshore species which are typically only found in the 0-20 fathom depth zone. This eliminates any incentive to fish deeper than in very shallow water, so that cowcod are not expected to be encountered. If a 0-30 fathom (or deeper) opportunity were to be allowed, the newly open area between 20-30 fathoms (or deeper) would be expected to encounter shelf species. Consequently, fishing in that depth zone would create significant discards if no provision was made to allow retention of shelf species. If such an allowance was made, it would be difficult to have confidence that some fishing was not occurring deeper than 30 fathoms by recreational vessels that do not carry VMS, thus posing a potential for increased take of cowcod and other overfished shelf groundfish.

The CDFG will be conducting analysis relative to potential impacts to cowcod resulting from the alternatives described in this report before final action is taken by the Council.

Cowcod East, Alternative 1, Maximum Waypoints



Cowcod West, Alternative 1, Maximum Waypoints