

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE REPORT ON GROUND FISH ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT (EFH) MODIFICATIONS

Mr. Brad Pettinger, Chairman of the Essential Fish Habitat Review Committee (EFHRC), presented the two proposals to modify EFH closed areas; 1) “Proposal to modify the northeast boundary of the Eel River EFH no-trawl area,” submitted by Peter Leipzig, Executive Director of the Fishermen’s Marketing Association; and 2) “Proposal to the Pacific Fishery Management Council To Modify Essential Fish Habitat Conservation Areas: Juan De Fuca Coral Canyons & Grays Canyon Sponge Reefs Important Ecological Areas,” submitted by Oceana. Mr. Chuck Tracy of the Council Staff was also present to answer questions, and the EFHRC evaluation of the proposals was available to inform the discussion.

The first proposal suggests reducing the size of the Eel River EFH no-trawl area by excluding the area shoreward of the 75 fm rockfish conservation area (RCA) boundary (although these lines do not closely follow the 75 fm bathymetric curve). This request was made to allow fishing on the shallow sandy areas which were included in the no-trawl area in 2005, but which are not actually part of the Eel River Canyon. There is some concern that the 75 fm RCA boundary excludes part of the canyon head from the EFH closed area. A line that more closely followed the actual 75 fm curve would lead to less concern about potential impacts to the canyon itself.

The second proposal suggests increasing the size of the Juan de Fuca and Grays Canyon EFH conservation areas (no-trawl areas) and adding no bottom contact areas within the new Juan de Fuca EFH conservation area. These changes were proposed in order to protect benthic invertebrates and associated biogenic habitat. While the proposal contains a wealth of information from research around the globe, it is not clear from the document exactly how the boundaries of the proposed closed areas were arrived at, although new data from dive sites, data on catch of corals and sponges from Northwest Fisheries Science Center (NWFSC) trawl survey, and hard substrate distribution data were all considered.

Some information is still needed before these proposals can be fully evaluated. For example, socio-economic information is lacking at this point for both proposals.

The SSC concurs that both proposals have merit, contain rational reasons for modifying EFH, and should go forward for consideration. The urgency of these proposals has yet to be evaluated. More information would be needed before the SSC could make a recommendation regarding whether the interim proposals are necessary as opposed to waiting for the scheduled 5-year EFH review process to begin. The SSC notes that the probability that the RCA would be relaxed in the next several years is quite low, so much of the Oceana proposal may not be urgent. However, the protection of glass sponges in the vicinity of Grays Canyon, given their rarity and the potential damage to habitat and organisms, is more likely to merit consideration under the interim process. Depending upon the socio-economic impacts, the proposal to modify the Eel River closed area may also merit consideration under the interim process.