



May 27, 2009

Mr. Donald K. Hansen  
Chair, Pacific Fishery Management Council  
7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 101  
Portland, OR 97220

**RE: Agenda Item E.1. Groundfish Essential Fish Habitat Review**

Dear Chairman Hansen and Council Members:

Ocean Conservancy, Natural Resources Defense Council, Oceana, and the Marine Fish Conservation Network request that the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) move forward with analysis and review of the Oceana proposal to protect sensitive coral and sponge habitat in the Juan de Fuca and Grays Canyon areas off the Washington coast. The Council's Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) interim review process provides an important opportunity to take an adaptive management approach to improve the conservation and management of EFH.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, the astonishing discoveries of diverse deep sea coral communities, including *Lophelia* coral not previously known to exist in the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary, and ancient glass sponge reefs at Grays Canyon, combined with the fragility of these habitats, makes this proposal especially timely for Council review and consideration.

In 2006, research on deep sea corals in the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary (OCNMS) greatly increased scientific knowledge of the importance, distribution and sensitivity of coral habitat in the Juan de Fuca Canyon area. OCNMS researchers documented eighteen species of corals plus reef building sponges at 14 of 15 dive locations, both inside and outside of the Olympic 2 EFH Conservation Area (Brancato et al. 2007). The researchers' observations included aggregations of rockfish nestled among coral and sponge structures (including overfished



Darkblotched rockfish in red tree coral. OCNMS.

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<sup>1</sup> 50 C.F.R. § 600.815(a)(10). "Councils and NMFS should periodically review the EFH provisions of FMPs and revise or amend EFH provisions as warranted based on available information. ... The review of information should include, but not be limited to, evaluating published scientific literature and unpublished scientific reports; soliciting information from interested parties; and searching for previously unavailable or inaccessible data."

darkblotched rockfish), plus shark egg cases attached to coral colonies. Unfortunately, researchers also documented coral rubble in areas impacted by bottom trawling, trawl tracks in the seafloor, plus lost longline gear wrapped in corals and around boulders. It is clear that many of these habitats have already been degraded by fishing and if action is not taken to protect them, they will be further degraded or lost.

In late June 2007, University of Washington scientists made an exciting and important discovery of an enormous reef of glass sponges in the Grays Canyon area, about 30 miles west of Grays Harbor—the only known reef of its kind in U.S. West Coast waters. Previously, the only known glass sponge reefs on the West Coast were reported in Canadian waters. University of Washington scientist Paul Johnson continues to make important discoveries on the relationship between these sponge communities and methane seeps, saying, "It's a whole ecosystem that people didn't know about" (Stiffler 2007).



Glass Sponge, Grays Canyon. Paul Johnson UW.

While individual sponges may take a hundred years or more to grow, a reef like the one discovered may take thousands of years to develop as layers of sponges accumulate upon one another. Unfortunately, no permanent habitat closures exist to protect this incredible sponge reef from bottom trawling.

In light of these new and unique discoveries, as well as clear evidence of destruction of coral and sponge habitats, we request that you fully consider and analyze the Oceana proposal to protect coral and sponge habitats off the Washington coast during this EFH interim review. It is the Council and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's responsibility to ensure that fishing activities do not destroy these fragile and unique habitats.<sup>2</sup> We urge the

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<sup>2</sup> "NOAA will continue to support the Councils by providing information on DSCS [Deep Sea Coral and Sponge] location and function as potential habitat for Federally managed species. NMFS will encourage Councils in each region to use all available information to describe and identify such EFH, and to identify specific areas as HAPCs where appropriate." In addition, "NMFS will work with each Council to evaluate and take action, where applicable, to prevent or prohibit expansion of mobile bottom-tending gear into new areas that may support substantial DSCS, until NMFS has determined through necessary discovery, mapping, and research that such fishing activities would not be likely to damage major DSCS habitats." And, "...the NMSP [National Marine Sanctuary Program] intends to initiate deep-sea coral surveys at all the national marine sanctuaries, and where appropriate, seek to protect these fragile sanctuary resources through regulation, education, research, monitoring and enforcement." 70 Fed. Reg. 39,700, 39,702, 39,705 (July 11, 2005).

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Council to move forward with this proposal in the interim review so that all options can be considered to protect these habitats, not only for their importance as Essential Fish Habitat, but also for opportunities to continue to advance science, and to ensure healthy ocean habitats for this and future generations. Importantly, we recognize that the treaty rights of Pacific Northwest Tribes require that any protective measure affecting treaty areas is a matter for consultation between NOAA and the Tribes and we encourage the on-going consultation on such matters of habitat protection.

Failure to act on the best available scientific information would mean continued habitat degradation if not irrevocable loss of these valuable habitats.

Sincerely,

Jen Kassakian  
Pacific Fishery Sustainability Manager  
Ocean Conservancy

Ben Enticknap  
Pacific Project Manager  
Oceana

Laura Pagano  
Oceans Attorney  
Natural Resources Defense Council

Bruce J. Stedman  
Executive Director  
Marine Fish Conservation Network

Citations:

Brancato, M.S., C. E. Bowlby, J. Hyland, S.S. Intelmann, and K. Brenkman. (2007). Observations of Deep Coral and Sponge Assemblages in Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary, Washington. Cruise Report: NOAA Ship McArthur II Cruise AR06-06/07. Marine Sanctuaries Conservation Series NMSP-07-03. U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Sanctuary Program, Silver Spring, MD. 48 pp.

Stiffler, L. (July 28, 2007). Reef of glass sponges found off Washington's coast. 'Living hotels' are rich with sea life. *Seattle Post Intelligencer*.



May 26, 2009

*Mr. Donald K. Hansen  
Chair, Pacific Fishery Management Council  
7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 101  
Portland, OR 97220*

**Re: Essential Fish Habitat Modification**

Dear Chairman Hansen and Council Members:

Marine Conservation Biology Institute (MCBI) is pleased that the Pacific Fishery Management Council is conducting a biennial review of the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). We strongly urge you to take this opportunity to strengthen biogenic habitat protection in the existing EFH trawl closures and expand the closures to include deep sea corals and sponge reefs that have been scientifically documented since the 2006 EFH designation.

As you are aware, section 303(b) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, reauthorized in 2007, grants the Council the authority to designate zones to protect deep sea corals from fishing impacts.

However, in its 2008 report to Congress on the implementation of the Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program, NOAA found that fishery management councils nationwide have not yet used their new discretionary authority to recommend designating zones to prevent interactions between deep sea corals and fishing gears. The report also identified the coral habitats discovered in 2006 outside of the Olympic 2 trawl closure off Washington as insufficiently protected from fishing activities, and recommended the Council evaluate this area for protection. Therefore, a careful review of these coral habitats is warranted and pursuant to NOAA policies and Congress guidance.

Like deep sea corals, glass sponge reefs are important three-dimensional habitat providers. Though little is known about their ecology, their brittle structures are just as vulnerable to contact with bottom-tending gears, according to NOAA's draft Deep-Sea Coral and Sponge Research and Management Strategic Plan (2008). Hence, the recently described sponge reefs in Grays Canyon deserve the Council's attention as you consider modifying EFH closures to improve habitat protection.

In 2006, you received a peer-reviewed national status assessment of deep sea corals that MCBI had produced. As you may recall, our assessment found bottom fishing to be a major threat to seafloor communities and deep sea corals. Based on the longevity and vulnerability of deep sea corals and sponges, as well as their medical, scientific and habitat values, we recommended that fishery management councils take immediate steps to prohibit bottom fishing in coral areas while integrating new coral findings into the crafting of conservation measures in an on-going, adaptive



## Marine Conservation Biology Institute

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manner. The corals and sponge reefs off Washington that have since come to light present an opportunity to implement this adaptive approach.

We urge the Council to elevate the EFH modification proposal submitted by Oceana, focusing on the corals and sponge reefs in Juan de Fuca and Grays Canyons, into a full analysis at the June 2009 Council meeting. These deep sea coral and sponge areas should be closed to bottom gears as ecologically important areas within the EFH or as coral closure zones authorized by the 2007 MSA amendment.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of assistance in the Council's EFH review process.

Sincerely,

Sandra Brooke, Ph.D.  
Coral Conservation Director

Fan Tsao  
Conservation Scientist