

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON GROUND FISH ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT AMENDMENT TO MODIFY AND TO ADJUST ROCKFISH CONSERVATION AREAS

The Habitat Committee (HC) considered the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Range of Alternatives. The HC offers the following comments:

Purpose and Need statement:

- Revise Need #1 to read: “Consider new information on seafloor habitats, the distribution of fishing effort, the distribution of deep-sea corals, *and new ecosystem-related products such as ecosystem indicators* as they relate to protecting EFH from the adverse effects of fishing.”
- Incorporate EFH research into the purpose and needs statement for both EFH and Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCAs) (e.g to determine the effects of EFH closed areas and bottom trawling on groundfish EFH by providing research areas that are closed to all bottom trawling, or to determine recovery rates of areas in the RCA).

Priority Habitats

The distillation of information provided in the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Synthesis report and re-emphasized in their current report advises that across the assemblage of groundfish Fishery Management Plan species, all habitats are likely important depending on the species, life stage, and probability of occurrence. Also noted is the disparity of habitat protections geographically, by habitat, and relative to fishing pressure and current protections. For example, only 10 percent of the upper slope and shelf have EFH protection.

The Habitat Committee concurs with NMFS’ statement that: “Given the insufficient amount of information on survival, fecundity, growth, or other life history parameters across habitat types at each life stage, an approach that works to protect a variety of habitats is consistent with precautionary fisheries management.”

With this in mind, the HC offers the following guidance on Priority Habitats and Habitat Objectives:

In June, the HC suggested that the five objectives from Amendment 19, Record of Decision (NMFS 2006) are appropriate for guiding the development of the range of alternatives. In consideration of these objectives, our additional guidance to the Council is the following:

1. Protect a diversity of habitats across latitude ranges, biogeographic and depth zones, and substrate types supporting all managed species and life stages.
2. Develop conservation areas with a diversity of habitat types incorporating the ecological principles of connectivity, size, distribution, and relative abundance.
3. Prioritize pristine or previously protected areas, or areas with low levels of fishing or non-fishing impacts.

4. Protect habitats sensitive to fishing gear and habitats of high complexity across habitat types.
5. Conduct scientific research to further our understanding of the effects of fishing gear on EFH.
6. Minimize fishing impacts on habitat by measures in addition to conservation closures (e.g. by adopting gear modifications to trawls such as those adopted by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council) to reduce the area of direct sea floor contact.

The HC recommends that priority habitats be identified by the NMFS Science Center Habitat Scientists using these objectives.

Groundfish EFH Alternatives

The HC considered the range of alternatives presented in Appendix A and supports collapsing Alternatives 1, 2, and 3 into a single alternative because they all address EFH closed areas. This single alternative would contain four subalternatives that reflect an amount of change in total protected area: 1) no action, 2) a net decrease, 3) a net neutral, and 4) a net increase. The draft alternatives can then be developed using components identified in the original subalternatives (e.g., drawing from EFH Conservation Areas, proposal areas, and RCA areas). These subalternatives should incorporate research closures and openings into the alternatives so the effect of fishing impacts on habitat can be evaluated.

Alternative 4:

The range of alternatives would open the trawl RCA to bottom trawling, particularly in the core RCA where groundfish bottom trawling has been prohibited since 2003, and could degrade recovered habitats and reduce habitat quality for groundfish. Before adopting any re-openings, the Council should identify sensitive, recovered, and biogenic habitats and consider EFH protection for those areas. RCAs represent another opportunity to implement and evaluate research closures.

The HC recommends that alternatives 5 through 10 remain unchanged.

Alternative 11:

The Habitat Committee has long supported the Council applying precautionary measures to protect unfished, pristine deepwater habitats and vulnerable biogenic habitats from the damaging effects of fishing. The HC fully supports the inclusion of the Alternative that uses the Council's Discretionary Authority to provide these protections.

PFMC
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