

## HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON GROUND FISH ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT (EFH) AND ROCKFISH CONSERVATION AREA (RCA) AMENDMENT

### **Groundfish EFH/RCA Project Team Report**

The Habitat Committee (HC) received a briefing on the Groundfish Essential Fish Habitat (EFH)/Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) Team Report from Kerry Griffin, John Stadler, Waldo Wakefield, Bonnie Shorin, and Kelly Ames. The total number of alternatives for EFH (19) and RCAs (6) is a huge workload for the review teams. The HC considered this workload and provides recommendations that reduce the range of alternatives (ROAs) in order to stay on track for a draft preliminary preferred alternative by September 2016. The HC also provides recommendations on the analytical approach and analysis metrics and future presentation of EFH materials.

### **Council Action 1: Analytical Approach and Metrics**

The HC agrees with the Team's approach for a two-level approach to the analysis, one at the scale of the alternative and the second at the scale of polygons within the alternatives. To date, much of the information in the EFH review process has been summarized by four biogeographic subregions and three depth zones. Fishery regulations are also typically stratified to the same or similar geographic scale. In addition to the two-level approach, it would be consistent and appropriate for this analysis to calculate metrics to the same ecological scale.

The biogeographic/depth region approach is equally useful for comparing relative amounts of available habitat types (including priority habitat types) against current and proposed EFH areas.

The Team might explore analytical methodologies designed for conservation planning that can provide a range of 'best fit' scenarios designed to meet both resource conservation and socio-economic goals.

### **Metrics**

- Metric #2 – This substrate metric considers only the coarse-scale lithology classifications of hard, mixed, soft, and unknown substrate types, but it will be necessary to calculate the amount of "priority habitat" in the current and proposed EFH Conservation Areas (EFHCAs). Priority habitats (as described in this report and provided in Amendment 19) are specifically identified in Alternative 2.b and 2.c that resulted from the Council's motion in September to add new EFHCAs in the trawl RCA based on priority habitats. Priority habitats are also the basis of proposed areas in other Alternatives. The individual priority habitat classes should be calculated independently, similar to the lithology classes.
- Metric #5 - The catch composition metric should include bycatch of other economically important non-trawl species such as salmon and halibut.
- Metric #7 – Biogenic data products developed for the EFH Catalog and National Marine Fisheries Service Synthesis analysis for the purpose of informing the development and evaluation of EFHCA proposals should be used to augment presence/absence data.

- Metric #8 – This metric should provide insight into the ecosystem services of polygons, e.g., the ability of habitats to support an abundance and diversity of groundfish species.
- All metrics are necessarily measured with error and vary temporally and spatially. Therefore, the HC recommends that level of uncertainty be included for all metrics.

## **Council Action 2: Consider and Revise Range of Alternatives**

The Project Team Report suggests that the Council’s stated Purpose and Need to “*minimize the adverse effects of fishing to the extent practicable*” provides the rationale needed to reduce the ROAs. The team also suggests that spatial overlap among alternatives provides additional rationale. The HC suggests an additional rationale for practicability that considers whether the alternatives were developed in a collaborative manner. The HC suggests that this approach to narrowing alternatives and reducing the scope of necessary analysis will facilitate the present schedule for final action at the Council’s September meeting.

To this end, the HC considered how the rationale applies to each ROA and offers the following recommendations:

### Alternatives: 1.b and 1.b.i

Alternative 1.b and 1.b.i consist of opening all the EFHCAs contained in the six public alternatives to bottom trawl, yet does not contain any closure areas. This alternative does not meet the Council’s Purpose statement or the regulatory standard of “*minimizing adverse effects of fishing on EFH*” and could be removed from further consideration.

### Alternatives: 1.c and 1.c.i, and 1.f and 1.f.i

These two coastwide Alternatives, the Collaborative (1.c) and Oceana (1.f), cover a wide range of habitat protection and varying degrees of fishery impacts. Together they provide the Council with a diverse set of options from which to select the preliminary preferred alternative (PPA).

### Alternatives: Greenpeace (1.d, 1.d.i) and MCI (1.e,1.e.i)

The Greenpeace (1.d, 1.d.i) and MCI Alternatives (1.e,1.e.i) displace a disproportionate amount of trawl effort compared to other Alternatives at 25 percent and 14 percent, respectively. Both alternatives are beyond a reasonable amount of trawl effort displacement, and neither alternative incorporated a collaborative effort with other stakeholders; thus, these alternatives do not meet the standard of practicability or the Council’s purpose statement. The HC recommends that these alternatives be removed as stand-alone alternatives. However, considering that both alternatives were designed to protect priority habitats, the individual closures should be analyzed for consideration when selecting the PPA.

### Alternatives: FMA (1.g), GFNMS (1.h) and MBNMS (1.i).

These alternatives are largely contained within other alternatives, and the HC recommends removing these as stand-alone alternatives since these three will largely retain their spatial integrity within the larger alternative, and be incorporated into the analysis.

### Alternative: 2.b and 2.c

All habitat classification is performed with some uncertainty, including “verified” habitats. Therefore, the HC recommends removing Alternative 2.b and 2.b.i because they are contained within 2.c and 2.c.i, respectively. Following the suggestion above for reporting uncertainty for metrics, levels of uncertainty for habitat classification can be included in the analysis.

### Alternative 3: Adjustments to trawl RCA

The HC recognizes that RCA closures are primarily a stock recovery tool and were not put in place to protect habitat. Nevertheless, RCAs have led to changes in EFH, a point recognized in Alternative 2. In this context, the HC recommends the Council consider three issues when considering Alternative 3. First, changes to EFH for any proposal should be considered in light of what habitat protections will remain in place, should RCAs be opened. Second, any decisions about RCAs should ensure that EFHCAs from subject areas 1 and 2, above, are in place before RCA adjustment.

Third, there is substantial debate within the Council and its advisory bodies about whether RCAs have worked as a management tool. Any consequences of RCA closures may have occurred because of fishing, benefits to stocks through habitat recovery, or both. Effects of fishing on habitat have been identified as a primary research and data need by the EFH Review Committee and by the Council. Discretionary authority for research closures should be used under alternatives 3.b-3.d (including “i” options) to perform research to address these issues. Whereas EFHCAs have been designated solely on habitat aspects and not on fishing, RCA closures allow for the development of studies to simultaneously examine the importance of both fishery closures and habitat recovery. A sampling design integrating research closures could be developed to recognize priority fishing areas, should RCAs be opened. The HC recommends that the Council request that NMFS develop a research plan by September to address this possibility.

### **Council Action 3: Identify PPA if possible**

- Alternative 4.b, 5.b, 6.b, 7b, 8.b, 9.b, 10.b

### **Council Action 4: Provide Additional Guidance**

#### **a) Guidance on Presentation of Analytical Information**

The HC recommends that the team should consider presenting the data in graphic form as well as tabular data for ease of understanding.

#### **b) Guidance on Priority Habitats**

The report identified priority habitats as “complex and sensitive” from Amendment 19. We suggest that an additional priority habitat be added. There is emerging interest in cold seeps and gas hydrate deposits. Scientists have developed a preliminary map and are currently conducting a West Coast-wide survey of these features. Seep communities are ecologically and economically valuable as sources of food and refuge for an array of species. Under certain conditions, cold seeps are the source of carbonate rock substrate and therefore can represent areas of hard substrate where they would not normally occur (in soft bottom). This, in turn, is known to form substrate for structure forming invertebrates.

### **c) Guidance on Habitat Objectives**

The HC suggests that the objectives as articulated in the Decision for Amendment 19 (NMFS 2006) are relevant to this current EFH process.

1. Protect a diverse array of habitat types across latitude ranges and within biogeographic zones that occur in the project area.
2. Protect the full range of benthic habitat to account for each managed species.
3. Prioritize pristine or sensitive habitats and the gear types most likely to have the highest impact.

In addition, the HC recommends two additional objectives:

- Develop EFHCAs that consider connectivity between conservation areas (including protected areas in state waters) and that consider the size, distribution, and relative abundance of habitats.
- Assure the net gain in the protection of EFH priority habitats through Amendment 28,

### **SUMMARY OF HABITAT COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Reduce the range of alternatives for further analysis in order to stay on track for selecting a PPA in September 2016.
- Support the two-level approach to the analysis, one at the scale of the alternative and the second at the scale of polygons within the alternatives.

### **Council Action 1: Analytical Approach and Metrics**

- Scale metrics appropriately for level one and level two analysis.
- Explore analytical methodologies to provide a range of best fit scenarios for resource conservation and socioeconomic goals.

### **Metrics Recommendations**

- HC recommends that level of uncertainty be included for all metrics.
- Metric #2 - Priority habitat metric, similar to lithology classes.
- Metric #5 - The catch composition metric should include bycatch of other economically important non-trawl species such as salmon and halibut.
- Metric #7 – Biogenic data products should be used to augment presence/absence data.
- Metric #8 – This metric should provide insight into the ecosystem services of polygons.

### **Analyze the following Alternatives:**

- No Action Alternatives 1.a, 2.a, 3.a
- Alternatives 1.c, 1.c.i (Collaborative), 1.f, 1.f.i(Oceana et al), 2.c, 2.c.i(EFHCA within RCA verified and modeled habitats)
- Revise Alternative 1.f and 1.f.i ONO – as proposed in their public comment
- Alternative 3: Consider EFH and RCA changes together; consider having NOAA develop a research plan for RCA

### **Identify PPA for the following Alternatives at this meeting:**

- Alternative 4.b, 5.b, 6.b, 7b, 8.b, 9.b, 10.b

### **Additional Guidance**

- Update the list of priority habitats as needed and include chemosynthetic environments.
- Incorporate the HC recommendations on the analytic methods and metrics.
- Update the habitat objectives to include connectivity of EFHCA and net gain in EFH priority habitats.

PFMC  
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