

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON CURRENT HABITAT ISSUES

Columbia River Biological Opinion letter

As per Council request in September, the Habitat Committee (HC) prepared a draft letter on the Federal Columbia River Power System Biological Opinion (Agenda Item H.1, Attachment 1) for Council review.

Fisheries-Specific Habitat Objectives

The Habitat Committee (HC) received a presentation from Matt Yergey, Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC), on the Fisheries-Specific Habitat Objectives Pilot Project (Supplemental Informational Report 5). This report addressed input that was received at the June 2015 Council meeting from the HC and the Scientific and Statistical Committee.

The pilot project identified both qualitative and quantitative approaches for specifying fisheries-specific habitat objectives. The lack of quantitative data on habitat use by the focal groundfish species required habitat objectives be developed through a qualitative risk assessment for those species. The pilot project focused on identifying anthropogenic stressors to habitat using a qualitative risk assessment coastwide, and at a finer scale for Puget Sound and the Southern California Bight. The pilot project report also includes a quantitative life cycle modeling assessment for Oregon coho species.

The pilot project is a partnership among various NMFS science centers and habitat programs, the Council, PSMFC, and others. The purpose of the pilot project is to contribute to rebuilding and maintaining selected stocks managed by the Council by developing a process to create targeted habitat conservation objectives and strategies for implementation by NMFS and the Council.

The HC found this effort useful in helping to focus on types of stressors to evaluate for essential fish habitat (EFH) consultations, and possibly to identify stressor hotspots. Findings from this effort may be relevant to EFH sections regarding scientific research and non-fishing impacts, as well as to the NMFS Regional Office, other federal programs focused on habitat protection, and state departments of Fish and Wildlife.

Oroville Reservoir Update

Brett Kormos (California Department of Fish and Wildlife) and Fred Jurick (HC) discussed the upcoming biological opinion on relicensing Oroville Dam. The Oroville water storage facility is the second largest hydropower project in California next to Shasta Dam. It was completed in 1968, and its Federal Energy Regulatory Commission relicensing agreement was signed in 2006.

The Oroville relicensing agreement is relevant to EFH and productivity of fall- and spring-run Chinook salmon. The Sacramento spring Chinook run is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and low productivity of spring-run populations can constrain harvest of the fall run.

Fall run production by the Feather River Hatchery, an original mitigation requirement for storage operations, supplies 60% of the California ocean salmon catch.

The spring run originally spawned above Oroville Dam, and the remnant population is forced to spawn below the dam. Due to limited spawning habitat below the dam and overlapping spawn timing, fall and spring-run stocks are interbreeding. Additionally, fall-run spawners can superimpose redds over those of spring-run spawners, so a weir is planned under the relicensing agreement to separate the two runs. The weir location is under debate, and may depend on locations of possible temperature impacts; storage facilities associated with Oroville dam control downstream releases and may result in temperature impacts on the lower spawning reaches of the Feather River.

The NMFS biological opinion addressing the relicensing agreement may be released this month. The HC will review the EFH recommendations in the biological opinion, when released, and will report to the Council in March.

Bureau of Ocean Energy Management Update

The HC heard an update from Jean Thurston of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM). Specifically, Ms. Thurston explained the competitive lease process for wind energy projects off Central California. Currently, two developers (Trident Winds and Statoil Wind) have expressed interest in leasing an area off Morro Bay for a potential wind project.

The BOEM competitive lease process may take several years and will include multiple comment opportunities. The BOEM Ocean Renewable Energy Task Force for California had its first meeting last month. During the lease process, BOEM is considering California state recommendations and is moving forward with the state on a spatial data gathering effort between the southern boundary of Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and Point Conception. This effort may be finished in the next six to nine months. In response to California's input, recommendations, and leadership, BOEM and the state will identify environmentally sensitive areas, economic concerns, archaeological sites, and other commercial and recreational uses while considering areas appropriate for energy development before leases are granted.

Addressing Deadlines that do not Coincide with Council Meetings

As directed by the Council in September, the HC discussed the process for responding to deadlines that do not coincide with Council meetings. The HC reviewed Council Operating Procedure 6 and the "quick response" letter procedures (COP 1):

For new policy matters that will be implemented or have a comment deadline prior to the next Council meeting, the Council Chair is authorized to send a letter on behalf of the Council using the following procedure: Staff will distribute a summary of the issue and a proposed response to all Council members. If the Council Chair receives a response from at least one voting member from each state, staff may send an official Council comment letter taking into account the responses received from members. Consensus is not required.

The HC is drafting internal guidelines on how to address this issue, and will provide this information to the Council in March.

Hells Canyon Dam Section 401 Certification

As part of the FERC relicensing process for the Hells Canyon Dam complex, Idaho Power has submitted a Section 401 water quality certification application to the Idaho and Oregon Departments of Environmental Quality. The Snake River downstream of Hells Canyon Dam is EFH for Snake River fall Chinook salmon, which are the ESA-listed component of the upper Columbia River Bright stock of fall Chinook salmon. This project is likely to substantially affect the habitat of an anadromous fishery resource, and therefore falls under the Council's EFH authority for Council comment and/or recommendations.

The 60-day public comment period for Idaho DEQ is expected to open in early December. This may be an opportunity to use the "Quick Response Procedure" noted previously. Currently, Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife staff have offered to assist Council staff in preparing a letter.

Topics for Council Discussion and Potential Action

- Letter on Federal Columbia River Power System Biological Opinion (Att. 1)
- Hells Canyon Dam relicensing comment opportunity

PFMC
11/17/16