

## HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON CURRENT HABITAT ISSUES

The Habitat Committee (HC) spent the majority of its time discussing groundfish essential fish habitat (EFH), which will be the subject of separate comments.

### *Klamath River Operations*

Litigation on juvenile salmon disease issues continues between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Yurok Tribe, Hoopa Valley Tribe, and Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations regarding the release of additional water flows to minimize disease issues during this dry winter. Juvenile disease associated with low water flows contributed to the recent collapse of Klamath Fall Chinook.

### *Good News for Columbia River Salmon*

On Monday, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed a lower court decision to increase spill over hydroelectric dams in the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) to increase juvenile salmon and steelhead survival. The additional spill was injunctive relief requested by the plaintiffs in an ongoing litigation which primarily concerns the application of the Endangered Species Act to the management of the FCRPS.

### *California Offshore Renewable Energy Taskforce*

As reported in September 2016, Trident Winds proposed an offshore wind facility near Morro Bay. The Department of Defense released a report in fall of 2017 stating that areas off southern and central California (roughly from Monterey to San Diego) are not compatible with military operations without further project definition. Therefore, the focus for offshore wind has shifted to the area off Humboldt Bay.

In response to this shift in focus, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) California Offshore Renewable Energy Taskforce will be holding outreach meetings in Humboldt County during the week of April 16th. Information on the upcoming meetings will be available soon.

BOEM and the Taskforce are expecting an unsolicited lease request for a site off Humboldt Bay in the near future. Current understanding is that this lease request may be for a site 22 miles offshore of Humboldt Bay.

### *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA's) Deep Sea Coral Program*

The HC received a presentation from Dr. Elizabeth Clarke (National Marine Fisheries Service [NMFS] Northwest Fisheries Science Center) and Heather Coleman (NMFS Headquarters) on the NOAA Deep Sea Coral Program, and more specifically on the research conducted on the Pacific Coast as part of the Deep Sea Coral Initiative. Deep sea corals occur below the photic zone, in depths as shallow as 50m.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) provides broad authority to protect deep sea corals through limiting fishing and bycatch. Four councils, including the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean, have used this authority to develop deep sea coral fishery management plans to protect them.

The MSA also provides funding for deep-sea coral research to understand deep sea coral biology, distribution, and ecology, develop technologies or methods to reduce interactions between fishing gear and deep sea corals, and recommend priority areas for management.

Since 2009, the program has conducted field research initiatives that rotate from region to region every three years. The West Coast initiative was conducted in 2010-2013 and surveyed 200,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Scientists mapped and characterized deep sea corals and sponges at 14 areas across the Pacific coast, assessed high-bycatch areas and quantified damage off northern California, characterized and quantified marine debris sites and quantified coral and sponge condition in these sites, described several new species, and identified range extensions of several known species.

The Research Panel is now circling back to the Pacific Coast (2018-2021), and the program is planning its research priorities at a workshop during the week of April 16<sup>th</sup> in Santa Barbara. The Program is very interested in any research priorities the Council might have to inform the group at this upcoming meeting and in the future. The HC suggests that the Council take this opportunity to provide input to the program on research priorities related to EFH for groundfish.

The HC recommends the following research priorities:

- Identify and quantify associations between fish and deep-sea corals, sponges, and other habitat-forming invertebrates (HFI).
- Compare fish densities where HFI occur and do not occur among similar substrates and depth ranges.
- Determine baseline conditions of HFI prior to re-opening areas for bottom contact fishing gear.
- Examine response of HFI to re-openings and closures of EFH Conservation Areas and Rockfish Conservation Areas.

#### *Council Research and Data Needs*

The HC discussed Council Research and Data Needs. Review and recommendations are needed by May 4th. The HC will form a subcommittee to get comments and recommendations to John Devore. The comments on corals above will be included in these recommendations.

PFMC  
4/6/18