ECOSYSTEM ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON MARINE PLANNING UPDATE

The Ecosystem Advisory Subpanel (EAS) appreciated the opportunity to attend presentations from NOAA and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) regarding NOAA Offshore Aquaculture Areas of Opportunity and BOEM Wind Energy made to the Habitat Committee on February 24, 2021. The EAS appreciated the opportunity to learn about the data collection and analysis processes used in these efforts.

A key question related to engaging fisheries participants was "How are they evaluating the role of fishing or the importance of fishing communities?" While the fishery-related data sources for both projects appeared to be relatively comprehensive, to date, there has been limited apparent outreach to knowledgeable members of the public.

NOAA Aquaculture Opportunity Area Siting

NOAA staff provided an overview of the spatial planning process that is underway to identify Aquaculture Opportunity Areas off southern California, focusing on public outreach and an overview of their Data Inventory. Presenters summarized their "extensive stakeholder engagement activities" that encompassed about 150 meetings, although a combined total of only 500 attendees. The data inventory included a combination of commercial and recreational fisheries datasets (e.g., using Vessel Monitoring System (VMS), state and Federal landings information, as well as habitat information). Despite the amount of public involvement to date, and given the number of databases included; the amount of serious vetting of fisheries-related data by fishery participants, managers, scientists, or fishing-dependent communities appeared to be very limited. The current stage of the process indicates National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) scoping will begin in May 2021, thus new or additional input, such as more specific fisheries data, should be considered during that phase. NOAA staff acknowledged that this data acquisition/review process was relatively brief, due to a foreshortened timeline, but stated their next process would be a more participatory mapping process.

The EAS discussed the fact that the presentation overlooked the significant differential impacts from various types of aquaculture, and how those would play a role in the focus of the types of aquaculture eventually proposed. Major differences exist between the types of aquaculture in terms of impacts and ecosystem services gained. It's not clear what the modeling of likely biological interactions of the aquaculture with natural systems (e.g., wild fisheries, etc.) has been to understand how various forms of aquaculture might impact and modify the ecosystem and what the extent of such impacts might be. If not at this stage, then in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process, the analysis of biological interactions will be critically important.

The EAS further expressed concern that ecosystem impacts of offshore aquaculture are not well constrained and emphasized that continued vigilance in conservation of ecosystem services, inclusive of productive fisheries, be maintained.

Offshore Wind Energy

The EAS discussed the importance of a meaningful and effective engagement process that includes coastwide representation by West Coast fishing communities, and collaborative engagement rather than what may be perceived as perfunctory outreach. Moreover, given the scope of West Coast fisheries, broader representation is recommended, even for regional deliberations. Collaborative engagement is necessary, and will better inform similar, future processes along the entire West Coast. Sustained investment in the planning process by the fishing community will lead to improved outcomes for both parties but requires authentic efforts by planners to invite that engagement.

BOEM staff provided an overview of their current efforts to use available data to narrow the siting of "call blocks" for offshore energy along the west coast to about six, which would be evaluated as potential wind farm lease blocks that are ultimately presented to the public during the EIS phase. It would not be until that point in the process that the public could provide comments on the data used in evaluating the six sites. California Energy Commission staff participating on the BOEM energy task force provided an overview of offshore wind databases that are part of the California Offshore Wind Energy Gateway project for use as a planning tool. This effort can be accessed at https://caoffshorewind.databasin.org and was presented as an opportunity for active engagement by interested parties, although any broad, effective efforts to inform the public of this opportunity were not apparent.

Council Committee

The EAS restates its position from September 2020 that a committee to address offshore development activities would be useful in effectively engaging fisheries stakeholders, reducing conflicts among users, incentivizing new research, and helping the Council address these important issues.

PFMC
03/04/21