

ECOSYSTEM WORKGROUP REPORT ON MARINE PLANNING UPDATE

The Ecosystem Workgroup (EWG) has three categories of comments on this agenda item: 1) connections between the Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) Update and marine planning within the Council process; 2) comments on the February 24, 2021 advance briefing and advance briefing book items for C.2.c; and 3) the future Council process for considering marine planning issues, including new offshore aquaculture and energy installations.

1. Connections between the FEP update (I.3.a.) and marine planning

The EWG submitted [I.3.a, EWG Report 2](#) on the FEP Update in response to the Council's September 2020 request for a draft outline of a stand-alone Council guidance document on agency activities in the California Current Ecosystem. As explained in that report, the Council had asked that we pull the existing Chapter 5, *PFMC Policy Priorities for Ocean Resource Management*, from the FEP and convert it to a draft stand-alone document to ensure that it would receive more attention and consideration from agencies undertaking or permitting non-fishing activities in the ecosystem.

As the Council discusses this Marine Planning Update, C.2.c., the EWG encourages the Council to consider how the policy priorities proposed for discussion in the stand-alone document could be helpful to agencies needing guidance on priorities for analyzing the potential effects of their actions on fish stocks, fisheries, and the larger marine ecosystem.

2. Advance briefing session and items for the marine planning update

The EWG would like to thank the representatives from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, and state data portals for the February 24, 2021 update that they provided to the Habitat Committee and other attendees on the process for siting and approving aquaculture opportunity areas (AOAs) and wind energy projects. We recommend that project organizers for both AOAs and wind energy projects conduct more outreach to the fishing industry, including commercial fisheries, charter boat and recreational fleets, harbor operators, and fish dealers and processors. Outreach should be targeted to the specific and localized geographic areas that may be affected by new activities, and analyses of the projects' potential effects should address all of the diverse fisheries that occur in the potentially affected areas.

When considering the siting of offshore structures, it is important to consider both the potential effects of individual structures and sites, and the cumulative impacts of these activities on the ecosystem and coastal communities and ports over time. Offshore structures have the potential to affect where and how stocks of fish and other marine species are distributed, and where and how fisheries operate, both on the ocean and in our ports. Offshore structures can act as fish aggregating devices, and could become favorite haul-out areas for pinnipeds or affect cetacean migration patterns. Closing large ocean areas to fishing could concentrate fishing effort in open areas, which in turn might affect catch of target species and bycatch of non-target species. New offshore

structures could also affect the operations of the fishery-independent surveys that underlie our stock assessments and ecosystem status reports, and planning and mitigating for those changes will likely be costly for surveying agencies.

New offshore installations are likely to remove access to fishing areas. Agencies should recognize that the best available maps are not likely to fully capture the importance of those fishing areas. Engagement with the people with local knowledge, people who may have been fishing with the historical knowledge gained from years of experience or even from their grandparents and great-grandparents, or as the fishing tribes remind us, “since time immemorial,” will be needed to understand the importance of particular fishing areas. Onshore effects could include competition for space in small ports, competition for support infrastructure needed for fishing versus vessels supporting the energy industry, funds for dredging that are based on taxes on landings receipts, etc. Notably underrepresented in vessel monitoring system and automatic identification system data are small-scale commercial and recreational fishers operating smaller vessels. Furthermore, use of declaration codes available in vessel monitoring system data alone often does not accurately reflect the type of fishing activity that has actually occurred. One starting point for better understanding the fisheries that occur in Federal waters could be the Council’s list of authorized fisheries and gear at 50 CFR 600.725(v), although these fisheries occur at depths that vary regionally and over time.

We are also concerned about the permanence of aquaculture and energy structures and how they will affect adaptive management. Near-term climate variability and long-term climate change will affect where our fish stocks are distributed, which will in turn affect where fisheries target those stocks. As has been illustrated by the new habitat compression index in the Ecosystem Status Report, by recent marine heatwaves, upwelling indexes, and other oceanic indicators, marine habitat is not static, and changing habitat and shifting species need to be considered in analyses of the effects of these installations. We would like to see more explicit consideration of future ocean conditions in the siting and approval processes, to consider both changes in the physical conditions such as currents and significant wave heights as well as changing habitats and shifting fisheries. We note that there are existing studies that model expected changes to ocean conditions through the end of the century that can help guide these efforts. Analyses under the National Environmental Policy Act and other applicable laws should explicitly consider the issues discussed in this section.

The EWG also notes that the fisheries mapping approaches used by the different agencies during this update were very similar and yet appear to have been conducted largely independent of each other. Greater coordination between different state and Federal agencies conducting marine spatial planning would result in greater efficiency. Standardized approaches would ease the burden on managers and decision-makers. At the same time, local and regional knowledge should not be sacrificed for the sake of standardization. We encourage continued and more in-depth collaboration between National Marine Fisheries Service, other Federal agencies, and the state agencies to develop standardized tools and portals (ideally with common protocols, application programming interfaces, or cross-compatibility for data access), noting that this does not replace the need for direct, robust consultation with fisheries participants and other local experts.

Finally, we thank the State of Washington for submitting its Report 1 at C.2.a., the overview of Washington’s Marine Spatial Plan. In the Northeastern United States, individual states have had

a great deal of influence over when and where offshore energy installations are considered for both state and Federal waters. Marine planning initiatives from the states and tribes can have similar influence here on the West Coast. We particularly note that Washington's Marine Spatial Plan includes the following Fisheries Use Protection Standards for offshore proposed project areas:

- i) There are no likely long-term significant adverse effects to fisheries.
- ii) All reasonable steps are taken to avoid and minimize social and economic impacts to fishing.

3. *Future Council processes for considering offshore activities and other marine planning issues.*

In September and November 2020, the Council discussed several different possibilities for processes to ensure more input from fishing communities and the Council on new offshore activities. The EWG discussed the need for fisheries involvement in these projects at local and regional scales, and whether a permanent advisory body could effectively address region-specific issues. If the Council creates a new advisory body to analyze the potential effects of offshore activities on CCE fish stocks and fisheries, we recommend that the Council keep the composition of that body fluid, so that participants can be moved on and off the committee as new areas of the coast are explored for new installations. We note that such an advisory body would likely require significant scientific capacity to generate the analyses needed to inform Council recommendations on these activities.

Lastly, we note that the Habitat Committee's February 24, 2021, briefing on offshore aquaculture and offshore energy reached maximum attendance and was heavily attended by members of the public and other advisory body members. The Ecosystem Workgroup and Ecosystem Advisory Subpanel February 23 briefing on the ecosystem status report and the new research and data needs database was also heavily attended. We recommend that the Council use these pre-Council briefing webinars as a model for future Council meetings, in order to provide advance briefings for advisory bodies and the public on issues that cross the interests of multiple advisory bodies.

PFMC
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