

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES MANAGEMENT REPORT ON MARINE PLANNING UPDATE

The Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) would like to thank the representatives from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), and each of the state data portals for the February 24, 2021 update they provided to the Habitat Committee (HC) regarding the siting and approval process for aquaculture opportunity areas (AOAs) and offshore wind (OSW) energy projects. After review of several advisory body reports, and a joint discussion with the Highly Migratory Species Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS), the HMSMT offers the following comments for Council consideration.

The HMSMT shares the concerns raised by the Ecosystem Work Group ([C.2.c, Supplemental EWG Report 1](#)) that the permanence of AOA and OSW structures could impede adaptive management, especially for HMS. Given that oceanographic processes influence HMS distributions, the HMSMT recommends that NOAA and BOEM specifically incorporate current and anticipated ocean conditions in the siting and approval process to address potential shifts in HMS stocks. The HMSMT is concerned the use of available fisheries data without comprehensive input from subject matter experts may result in the determination that an area is suitable for offshore development when siting in this area may be disruptive to fishery operations. The displacement of fishing effort may result in changes to the interpretation of fishery-dependent data and influence the effectiveness of management measures. Additionally, [HMS Essential Fish Habitat \(EFH\) is under review](#) and new information being collected and compiled, as part of that process should be taken into consideration.

The HMSMT has concerns in line with those raised by the HMSAS, Council advisory bodies, and other constituents about the data analyses presented at the February 24 HC briefing. A key question is whether available fisheries data sets, such as landings data, vessel monitoring systems and automatic identification systems, would yield a complete characterization of the location, quality, intensity, and frequency of fishing activities in the areas proposed for AOA and OSW sites. Comprehensive engagement of subject matter experts, in both fisheries and these data sets, should be prioritized by BOEM and NOAA, and the methodologies of the analyses should be disclosed to interested stakeholders for review and input. The HMSMT strongly feels that further engagement with fishing community members who are familiar with fishing activities at the proposed sites would help provide a more complete description of fishing operations that may be impacted by aquaculture or OSW installations.

The HMSMT continues to support the Council's development of a committee or advisory body to address this topic, as previously mentioned in its [September 2020 Agenda Item C.7.a](#) report. The HMSMT views this as an important next step given the HC's concerns regarding their capacity to address the range of marine spatial planning items before the Council, including OSW energy, aquaculture and other related topics.