

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON REVIEW OF ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT – PHASE 2

The Habitat Committee (HC) was briefed by Mr. Kerry Griffin on the Phase 2 Action Plan for the ongoing review of essential fish habitat (EFH) in the Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan (HMS FMP). The HC appreciates the work of the HMS EFH Review Team and provides the following suggestions for additional development of the Phase 2 Action Plan.

The proposed Scope importantly includes consideration of the scientific information identified in Phase 1 to determine if Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs) should be identified. Identifying HAPCs for HMS will further characterize the ecological importance of particular habitats for HMS species, and could help advance research interests in the role of habitat in species productivity. Additionally, Federal actions with potential adverse impacts to HAPCs are more carefully scrutinized during the EFH consultation process.

As currently written, it is unclear if the scope entails a thorough enough review of the Phase 1 information to facilitate the ability to detect candidate HAPCs and outline conservation measures that might be needed to avoid, minimize, mitigate, or otherwise offset adverse effects on those HAPCs. The HC suggests clarifying this intention in the Scope, as well as adding a placeholder for potential HAPC designation (or conservation measures as discussed below) to the schedule. The HC recommends the following additions to the Phase 2 Action Plan:

Scope:

- Produce a Phase 2 report that summarizes the findings of the scientific information identified in the Phase 1 report into narrative format, including a summary of the spatial associations with ocean features where they exist (static or dynamic).
- Produce a qualitative synthesis of the scientific information to evaluate if new information indicates HAPCs are warranted, and if so, develop recommendations for the consideration of potential HAPCs as a component of the EFH description. For example, there is an abundance of new information on strong site fidelity in the Southern California Bight as nursery and/or pupping habitat for mako sharks, thresher sharks, and blue sharks, as well as winter foraging habitat for broadbill swordfish. Additionally, mako sharks and bluefin tuna are shown to have strong spatial associations with primary productivity and chlorophyll-a concentrations which can be spatially delineated and could meet the HAPC criterion regarding providing an important ecological function.
- The synthesis described above should similarly evaluate the new information in the Phase 1 report to determine if it indicates the need for new conservation measures to minimize adverse effects on HMS EFH. For instance, the Phase 1 report did identify new information on prey species of HMS species, and the Phase 2 Action Plan indicates that the scope will include potential EFH modifications [to the EFH description] regarding habitat associations and preferred prey, but does not commit explicitly to an analysis of whether

or how fishery removals of HMS prey species (e.g. sardine, anchovy, and shortbelly rockfish) may affect HMS EFH (i.e., prey as EFH).

Objectives:

- The Action Plan provides objectives for the review process but does not include habitat conservation objectives. The recommendations above indicate the need for the Council to establish habitat conservation objectives as provided for in Council Operating Procedure 22. Draft conservation recommendations could be provided as part of the Phase 2 report.

Schedule:

If the Council wishes to consider the potential identification of HAPCs and habitat conservation measures, the schedule should include a placeholder for these process steps, if required.

PFMC
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