

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON SCOPING OF PRIORITIZED NON-TRAWL SECTOR AREA MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Todd Phillips briefed the Habitat Committee (HC) on the scoping of modifications to non-trawl sector management measures. The HC focused its discussion and comments on boundary modifications to the non-trawl Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) and habitat issues related to scoping. The HC has several recommendations that are summarized at the end of this report.

The HC acknowledges that certain non-trawl gear types will have minimal or no seafloor contact and would therefore not impact benthic habitats. From this perspective, the HC does not have habitat-related concerns with allowing fishing access in the non-trawl RCA for non-bottom contact gear types (hook and line gear, jig gear or etc.) at this time, such as the actions proposed in the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations proposal and the Emley-Platt proposal.

The HC notes that bottom contact gear will have habitat impacts that should be addressed during scoping.

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) proposal in Table 1, Item 2 ([F.3, Attachment 1](#)) would modify the shoreward and seaward RCA boundaries between 40°10'N and 46°16'N for all gear types, in part to provide access to lingcod and rockfish associated with rocky habitats.

The HC notes that rocky habitats in the non-trawl RCA have not been subjected to certain bottom-contact gear types (longline, fish pots or dinglebar) by the fixed-gear sector for nearly two decades. Likewise, bottom trawlers and commercial crabbers tend to avoid complex rocky habitats. It is probable that some rocky areas in the non-trawl RCA are in the process of returning to their pre-RCA condition. In their Information Report 4 (June 2020), the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) anticipates future targeted fishing with bottom longline in rocky habitats based on 2017-2019 landings and would result in 21 percent of lingcod landings and 37 percent of midwater rockfish landings. This suggests that scoping should include an analysis of fishing effort in terms of bottom contact by gear type and habitat type for state and Federal fisheries.

Few studies have quantified the effects of non-trawl bottom-contact gear on geological and biological habitat components. However, the findings of these studies have been consistent: longline gear and pot gear impact corals, sponges, and emergent structural features, and can reduce the habitat's functional value up to 25 percent in pebble, cobble, and rocky habitats. Longline gear can cause damage as it sweeps across the seafloor, overturning and undercutting structures and structural organisms. Commercial pots can smother benthic habitats, dislodge organisms, and drag across the bottom with strong current. Longline and pot gear types can be particularly damaging to rocky reefs as they easily entangle on structures and organisms and engage in ghost fishing when lost.

The GAP's proposal to move the RCA shoreward boundary from 30 fathoms to 40 fathoms would open nearly 25 square miles of rocky reef habitat on Arago Reef to fishing by bottom contact gears. This area contains a diverse assemblage of structure-forming invertebrates

(including species of black corals, gorgonian corals, stony corals, soft corals, branching hydrocorals, branching sponges, sea whips and sea pens) were discovered and catalogued. These observations suggest that portions of Arago Reef are of particular ecological importance in the shallow shelf region off Oregon and informed the decision to designate Arago Reef as a groundfish essential fish habitat (EFH) conservation area under Amendment 28.

Scoping should examine new information that was compiled after the Amendment 28 groundfish EFH review process. National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA's) Deep Sea Coral Program conducted 50 new surveys (200 transects) off all three West Coast states in 2018 and 2019, and there is new high-resolution seafloor mapping data off all three states. NOAA's preliminary analysis of their deep-sea coral survey data at Coquille Bank (Bandon High Spot Essential Fish Habitat Conservation Area (EFHCA)) indicates strong recruitment of the coral *Swiftia pacifica* after nearly 20 years of closure to bottom trawling, based on comparisons with 2005 survey data. The HC notes that the GAP proposal to move the seaward boundary of the non-trawl RCA from 100 fathoms to 80 fathoms would subject Coquille Bank EFHCA to impacts from bottom-contact gear and potentially reverse the improvement in habitat conditions that has occurred there. The historic survey data on Coquille Bank presents the unique opportunity to study habitat recovery over time if bottom gear closures remain in place.

The HC's recommendations follow:

1. If the Council includes moving the shoreward or seaward RCA boundaries within the scope of management measures, the HC recommends that the Council consider alternatives that exclude areas to bottom-contact gear where there is potentially high impact to structure-forming invertebrates and sensitive habitats.
2. The HC supports the GMT's statement in its June 2020 report to not open EFHCAs that are closed to all bottom contact gear.
3. The Council should consider the effects of non-trawl bottom-contact gear on the EFHCAs that are only closed to bottom trawling in the scope of management measures. This would acknowledge the broader benefits of protecting productive habitats of Council-managed species from the effects of fishing.
4. The HC suggests that each of the purpose and need statements include minimizing impacts to structure-forming invertebrates and sensitive habitats.
5. Finally, the HC appreciates the GAP's March 2021 suggestion to consider having the HC assist with the development of future analysis of habitat impacts related to these management measures.

PFMC
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