

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON INITIAL HARVEST SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES FOR 2023-24 MANAGEMENT

The Habitat Committee (HC) reviewed the draft range of management measure alternatives for the upcoming two-year groundfish management cycle and offers the following comments.

Management Measures

Reopening of the Cowcod Conservation Areas (CCAs)

The HC would like to thank Ms. Caroline McKnight and Mr. Todd Phillips for being present to answer questions during our discussion of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife proposal ([Agenda Item G.2.a Supplemental CDFW Report 1, March 2021](#) and [Agenda Item G.6.a, Supplemental CDFW Report 1, June 2021](#)) to repeal the Cowcod Conservation Areas (CCAs) in the Southern California Bight.

The HC looked at the Western CCA overlaid with available information from the groundfish Amendment 28 essential fish habitat (EFH) review on the presence and abundance of habitat-forming invertebrates like corals and sponges, as well as known areas of hard substrate. Both these habitat characteristics have been characterized as indicative of areas that are more sensitive to disturbance by fishing activities and that take longer to recover from those disturbances (NMFS and PFMC 2019). There are numerous areas of coral and sponge presence and abundance within the Western CCA, as well as numerous areas of hard substrate (Figure A).

Previous studies and reports by the NEFMC (2011) and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (2010) examined the effects of various gears on different habitats and structure-forming invertebrates and scored the ecological impacts in terms of loss of habitat functional value. Longline gear and bottom gillnet were found to have caused reduced functional value in some rocky habitats. The HC therefore recommends that a thorough yet efficient habitat impacts analysis of this reopening is warranted, and appreciates that the Groundfish Management Team (GMT) has factored this need into their planning, as stated in [Agenda Item C.8.a, GMT Report 1, September 2021](#).

The HC reviewed the GMT report on impacts for non-trawl Rockfish Conservation Area (proposals for 2021-22 prepared during the June 2020 Council meeting ([Agenda Item F.1.a, Supplemental GMT Report 4, June 2020](#))). The HC recommends that the seven-point analytical framework provided in the report be used as the framework for the preliminary impacts analysis that the GMT will develop for management measures proposed in the current GMT report ([C.8.a, GMT Report 1, September 2021](#)). The HC recommends that the analysis consider metrics to estimate fishing effort by gear type because effort indicates the amount of physical pressure on the habitat. The HC further recommends that this analytical framework should be revised to explicitly incorporate a thorough review of past and recent information on the habitat impacts of non-trawl gear.

Additionally, new data relevant to a habitat impact analysis has become available since the 2012 publication of data sources used in the groundfish EFH review that were referenced in the GMT June 2002 report. The HC recommends that the GMT's analysis be based on updated seafloor

mapping data and updated habitat classification schemes to better identify and quantify habitats likely to be impacted by some bottom contact gears. The HC also recommends including new data on the locations and abundance of structure-forming invertebrates from numerous recent surveys conducted by the Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program (DSCRTP). Finally, the HC recommends the GMT consult the DSCRTP to identify specific areas within the CCA that are likely to be most sensitive to bottom contact gears.

The HC appreciates the offer extended by Council staff to keep the HC updated on GMT analyses, including plans for GMT discussions on this topic, and will strive to have HC representation at GMT meetings when this topic is discussed. The HC notes the Council's previous request of National Marine Fisheries Service under this agenda item ([April 2021 Decision](#)) for technical assistance on habitat impacts however, this request was not found in the written transcript of the Council's discussion. The HC also welcomes Council guidance on how the HC can contribute to the analytical effort.

Prohibiting Directed Fishing for Shortbelly Rockfish

The Council recommended in June to continue scoping a [proposal](#) by Audubon and Oceana to prohibit directed fishing on shortbelly rockfish, a potential prey species to stocks in all of the management plans, as well as birds and other unfished aquatic species. In light of Council intentions to limit overfishing yet recognize incidental catch, the HC supports continued evaluation of ways to limit directed fishing on shortbelly rockfish.

References cited:

NMFS and PFMF. 2019. Changes to Pacific Coast Groundfish Essential Fish Habitat Conservation Areas and Boundaries of the Trawl Gear Rockfish Conservation Area Final Environmental Impact Statement, [Final Environmental Impacts Statement. July 25, 2019.](#)

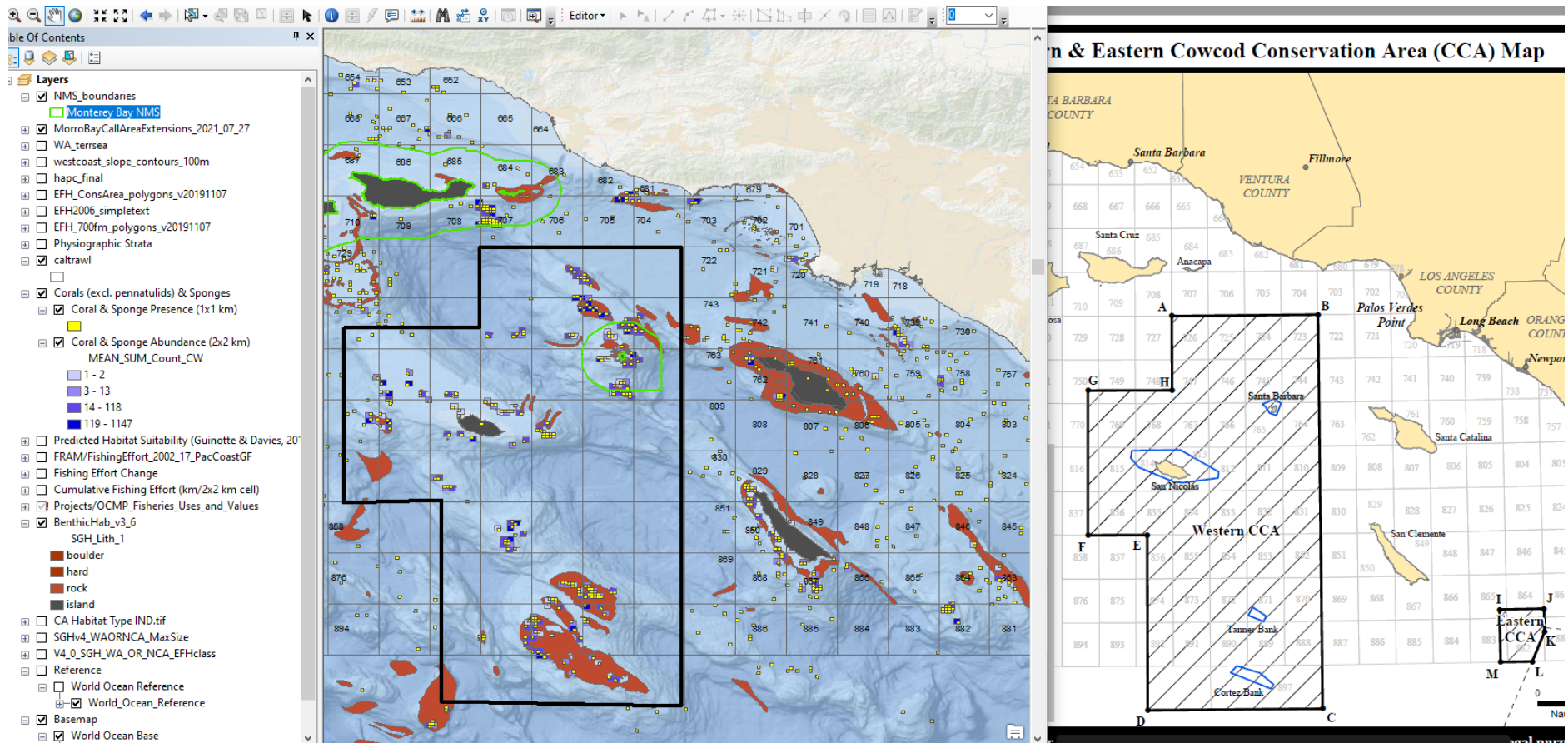


Figure A: Presence of sensitive habitat characteristics within the approximation of the Western Cowcod Conservation Area (CCA) boundary. This is an unofficial map developed for discussion and illustrative purposes by the HC.