HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON BIENNIAL MANAGEMENT MEASURES FOR 2023-2024

The Habitat Committee (HC) discussed potential habitat issues regarding the removal of the Cowcod Conservation Area (CCA), protecting a significant prey species (short belly rockfish), and the status of quillback and copper rockfish.

The HC concurs with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) recommendation in Agenda Item E.5.a, NMFS Report 1 that removal of the CCA should be considered under the Non-Trawl Rockfish Conservation Area Agenda Item (E.6) rather than this Agenda Item (E.5), since this CCA action doesn't have to be done by January 1, 2023. In addition, it would facilitate completion of additional habitat impact analyses, and discussions between California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oceana, and industry on new measures to protect coral and sponge habitat within the former CCA. The HC had provided recommendations for a habitat analysis on this measure in September 2021 and suggests these may still be relevant to the proposal.

The HC continues to support consideration of a prohibition on a directed fishery for shortbelly rockfish to maintain these important forage species and their contributions to groundfish (as a component of essential fish habitat) and the broader ecosystem. As the HC included in our September report to the Council on Groundfish specifications, shortbelly rockfish are potential prey species for stocks in all of the management plans, as well as birds and other unfished marine species. In light of Council intentions to limit overfishing yet recognizing that incidental catch occurs, the HC supports continued evaluation of ways to limit directed fishing on shortbelly rockfish.

Regarding quillback and copper rockfish, habitat and ecosystem considerations may be relevant to depletion. For example, these fishes have small home ranges and are closely associated with local nearshore reefs and kelp forests. Kelp forests are vulnerable to warming oceans and have been decimated in many areas by urchins as a result of cascading environmental conditions within the nearshore ecosystem, and invasive kelp species. Rebuilding plans should take these factors into account.

PFMC
11/18/21