

## HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON GROUND FISH NON-TRAWL SECTOR AREA MANAGEMENT MEASURES

The Habitat Committee (HC) was briefed on Non-Trawl Sector Area Management Measures by Todd Phillips and offers the following comments. The HC considered Alternatives 1 and 2 which would allow open access and limited entry fixed gear fisheries to use Council-approved hook-and-line gear (vertical longline, jig, troll) in the non-trawl Rockfish Conservation Area (RCA) (as defined in Agenda Item E.6, Attachment 1). This would exclude the use of bottom longline, dinglebar, and pot/trap gear in the non-trawl RCA. While hook-and-line gear can make contact with the seafloor, the effects on benthic habitats are likely minimal. **The HC has no habitat-related concerns with the use of approved hook-and-line gear in the non-trawl RCA.**

Alternative 3 would reopen portions of the non-trawl RCA to all types of authorized non-trawl gear, including bottom-contacting gears. There are multiple Essential Fish Habitat Conservation Areas (EFHCA) closed to bottom trawl but not closed to fixed gear that are partially or completely encompassed by the non-trawl RCA. Removing or reducing the non-trawl RCA would subject sensitive habitats in newly-opened areas to groundfish non-trawl fishing. The HC is concerned with the effects of Alternative 3 on rocky reef Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC), particularly in EFHCAs. Figure 1 provides an illustration of how some EFHCAs would become open to fixed gear fishing, should the non-trawl RCA be reduced.

Under EFHCA protection for over 15 years, benthic habitats may be returning to pre-bottom trawling condition. For example, recent surveys at Coquille Bank (Bandon High Spot EFHCA) by NOAA's Deep-Sea Coral found that gorgonian coral density had increased by 1,400 percent. Moving the seaward boundary of the non-trawl RCA from 100 to 80 fathoms would remove Coquille Bank from within the non-trawl RCA, thereby exposing it to fixed gear fishing. In addition, Coquille Bank provides the Council with a unique opportunity to study long-term effects of bottom-contact gear closures on habitat recovery and fish abundance, a research need the Council has previously identified. This research opportunity could be compromised if fixed gear fishing activity were to resume in that area.

The [GMT's June 2020 report](#) notes that the fixed gear sectors would primarily target fish in rocky habitats in areas opened by the narrowing of the non-trawl RCA. Preliminary HC mapping indicates a large proportion of the rocky habitat in the non-trawl RCA is within EFHCAs. Therefore, the HC supports management measures that continue to protect rocky reef HAPCs in EFHCAs. **The HC recommends adding an alternative (or sub-option to Alternative 3) to keep the non-trawl RCA closed to certain bottom contact gear (longline, dinglebar, pot/trap) in areas that currently overlap with EFHCAs, if the non-trawl boundary is modified as proposed under Alternative 3.**

Should the Council include Alternative 3 in the Range of Alternatives, the HC offers additional recommendations to consider for a habitat analysis, many of which were provided in previous HC reports on the non-trawl RCA ([April 2021](#)) and the Cowcod Conservation Area ([September 2021](#)) summarized as follows:

- Include new survey data from the Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program (DSCRTP) on coral and sponge distribution and seek assistance from DSCRTP to identify sensitive coral/sponge areas in the non-trawl RCA.
- Include new seafloor mapping data for the habitat analysis, and apply a substrate classification scheme that groups seafloor substrates into ecologically-relevant habitats (e.g., rock, boulder, cobble, gravel, sand, mud) to identify diverse habitats that can be more susceptible to disturbance ([FMP Appendix C](#)).
- Estimate the amount of anticipated fishing effort by bottom-contact gear type, habitat type, and EFHCA in areas proposed to be opened by Alternative 3, and summarize the analysis by gear type, habitat type, and EFHCA within CCE biogeographic subregions.

The HC is available to assist as needed.

PFMC  
11/18/21

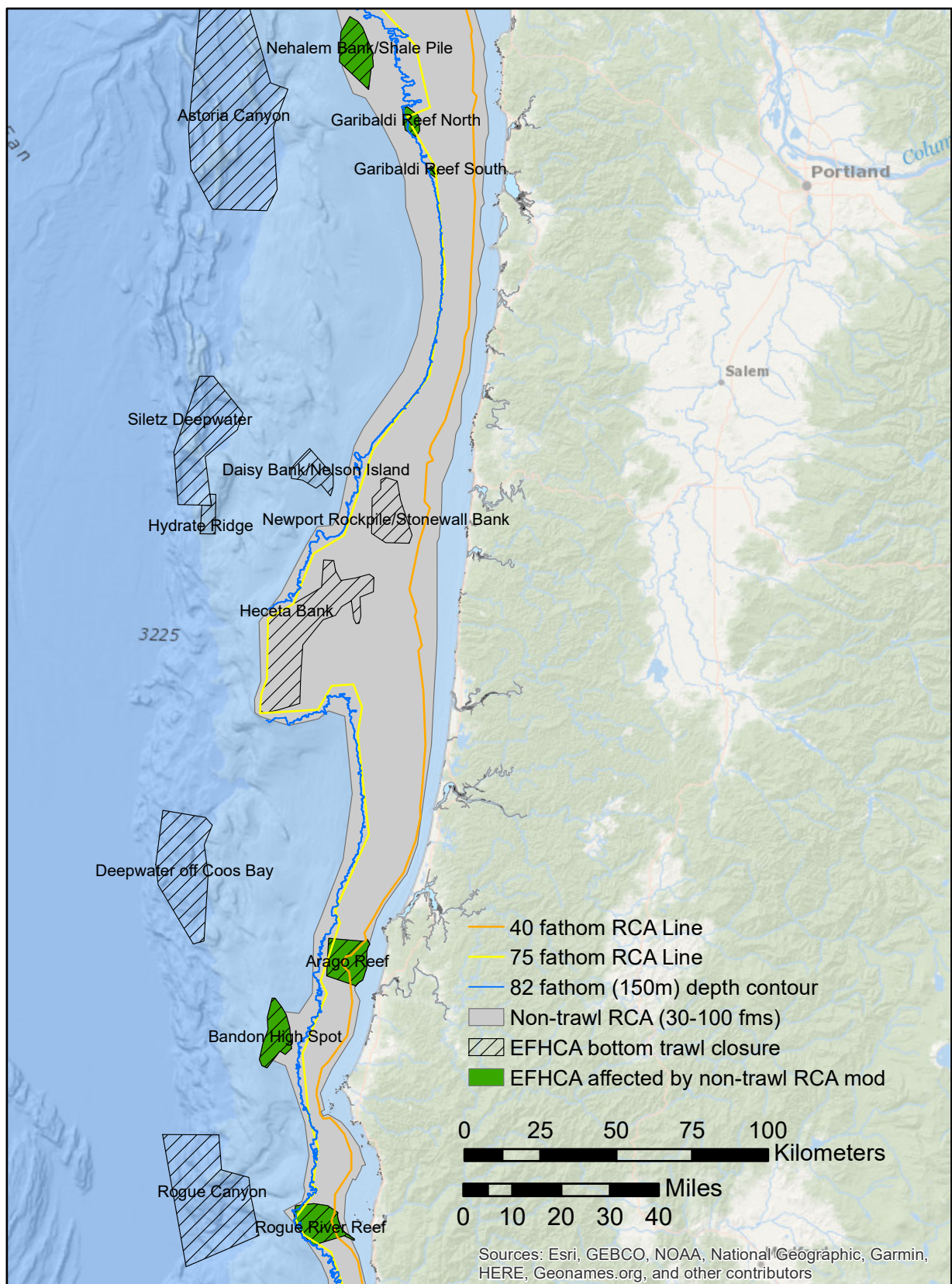


Figure 1. Map showing the overlap of Essential Fish Habitat Conservation Areas (EFHCA) with the non-trawl RCA off Oregon. EFHCAs in green would be affected by the proposed narrowing (40 - 80 fathoms) of the non-trawl RCA.