



Pacific Fishery Management Council

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Marc Gorelnik, Chair | Merrick J. Burden, Executive Director

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The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary, Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington D.C. 20240

Re: Information to Inform Interagency Efforts to Develop the America Conservation and Stewardship Atlas

Dear Secretary Haaland:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the development of the American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas (Atlas). The Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) manages fishing activities in the United States West Coast Exclusive Economic Zone, from 3 – 200 miles offshore. These fisheries include commercial, recreational, and Tribal fisheries for salmon, groundfish, coastal pelagic species, and highly migratory species. The Council operates in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and other applicable law to sustainably manage fishery resources, including conserving and protecting important fishery habitats that provide vital ecosystem services.

The Council practices sustainable conservation and our actions align closely with the eight core principles described in the *Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful* (ATB) Report issued on May 6, 2021. The MSA mandates the Council utilize the best scientific information available to conserve and manage fisheries and the habitats on which they depend. The statute's definition of conservation and management focuses on ensuring a sustainable seafood supply, providing recreational opportunities, and avoiding irreversible or long-term adverse effects on fish stocks and the marine ecosystem. By necessity this includes establishing rigorous conservation measures to protect fish stocks and essential fish habitat (EFH), as well as protecting forage fish resources, non-target stocks, and the broader marine ecosystem.

The Council established a Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) in 2013, with the goal of incorporating ecosystem science and objectives into its fishery management decisions. The Council receives an annual report on vital ecosystem information and has identified initiatives that focus on specific ecosystem topics. Recent initiatives include protection of unfished forage fish, developing a suite of ecosystem indicators, and exploring the effects of climate change on fishing communities. We offer the following comments in response to the six questions posed in the Federal Register Notice.

What data sources, standards, and technical approaches should be applied to data included in the Atlas to ensure that it is an authoritative and useful tool for the public?

The Council, in collaboration with the other Regional Fishery Management Councils (RFMC) have carefully considered the role of the Councils in achieving the conservation goals described in the ATB Report. The definition of “conservation area” is among the first decisions to be made. The Council considers a working definition of a conservation area to be

An established, geographically defined area, with planned management or regulation of activities that provides for the maintenance of biological productivity and biodiversity, and ecosystem function and services (including providing recreational opportunities and healthy, sustainable seafood to a diverse range of consumers).

For fisheries management-related actions, the data sources that will inform the Atlas should be approved or adopted by the RFMCs or the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the Federal agency with authority over living marine resources, including fisheries management and habitat protection actions. The Council Coordination Committee (CCC) of the RFMCs developed a preliminary report in October 2021 that identified at least 663 conservation areas in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), with a final report expected in May 2022. Each individual RFMC, including the Pacific Council, is refining its own suite of conservation areas and actions that represent a continuum, ranging from harvest restrictions to habitat and ecosystem protections. For example, the Council and NMFS identify and establish EFH areas which can include area closures to protect important habitats and ecosystem services, especially within designated habitat areas of particular concern. The Atlas should utilize the conservation areas, metrics, and actions developed by the Council and NMFS. The CCC anticipates providing detailed information on conservation areas and actions in the final report.

How can the Atlas reflect the meaningful conservation work already underway in America?

The Atlas should consider existing conservation areas and ongoing management actions, consistent with the definition above. The MSA, reauthorized in 1996 and in 2007, included increasingly precautionary mandates to conserve fish populations and protect important habitats, including EFH. As a result, conservation actions have been in place for many years, and should be considered with respect to the goal of conserving 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030. As a result of science-based conservative management, almost all Pacific Coast groundfish stocks declared overfished 20 years ago have since been rebuilt. Via the Council’s FEP, a forage fish prohibition on several taxa of currently unfished forage fish and krill was adopted in 2015. And since 2006 significant areas of the West Coast EEZ have been closed to bottom trawl fishing and/or all bottom contact fishing. In 2018 the Council adopted a blanket closure to all bottom contact fishing in West Coast EEZ waters deeper than 3500 meters. These are all examples of existing conservation actions that should be reflected in the Atlas.

What stewardship actions should be considered, in addition to permanent protections, to capture a more complete picture of conservation and restoration in America?

Many management actions are designed to conserve species or habitat resources, but do not necessarily fit a simple definition of conservation. Nonetheless, these areas and actions should be recognized for the conservation value they provide. One example is seasonal closures that are not spatially defined. For example, harvest specifications, expressed as annual catch limits or harvest quotas, are science-based management measures that are designed to conserve fish populations and prevent overfishing. However,

they do not fit the definition of conservation area, and thus would need to be accounted for in a different manner to give a complete picture of conservation and restoration in America.

Blanket regulations that are designed for conservation of resources are another example of this point. There are region-wide management measures such as a prohibition on the harvest of krill and other lower trophic level species. These prohibitions apply across the West Coast EEZ and while it is not practical to designate the entire West Coast EEZ as a conservation area based on these prohibitions, protecting the ecosystem's forage base is clearly conservation-oriented with broad-based ecosystem benefits.

What are the attributes of lands and waters that should be included in the Atlas? Considerations could include, for example, a clearly defined geographic boundary, status of ecological function, representation of species and habitats, extent of disturbance, expected future risks from climate change or other human stressors, ecosystem connectivity, or durability of management status.

All the examples listed above are attributes that should be included in cataloging and monitoring conservation and restoration in the United States. Several other attributes should be considered for inclusion. These include:

- Regulation and enforcement. Conservation areas should have a clear governance structure of Federal, state, local, or Tribal regulation, and should include a degree of enforceability of boundaries and activities.
- Research and monitoring. The attributes of conservation areas should include some level of monitoring, which could include visual or remote surveys, stock assessments, or other means to measure and monitor conservation benefits.
- Framework for adaptive management and monitoring. The Atlas should include a mechanism designed to identify changing environmental conditions and to support adaptive decision making, in the context of conservation areas. This concept is incorporated into the Council's FEP.
- Secondary benefits. In many cases, conservation areas established for specific purposes provide secondary benefits that magnify the conservation benefits of a particular area. For example, the Council established "Rockfish Conservation Areas" in 2002, which established coastwide depth-based closures to bottom trawl fishing gear, with the specific purpose of conserving fish stocks. This resulted in many other benefits including recovery of biogenic habitats and numerous non-target fish stocks, in addition to the intended benefits of protecting and rebuilding groundfish stocks.

How can the Atlas best reflect the contributions of State, local, Tribal, territorial, and private lands?

States, Tribes, and local jurisdictions should provide information on conservation areas under their jurisdiction, and these areas should be evaluated using the same attributes used for Federal conservation areas. Further, each jurisdiction should be responsible for providing the information for conservation areas under their authority. For example, information on state-established marine reserves should come from individual states.

How can the Atlas best reflect land and water contributions to biodiversity, climate change mitigation and resilience, and equitable access to nature and its benefits?

The Atlas should establish a system of metrics based on the attributes that are adopted for defining and cataloging conservation areas. These metrics should be quantifiable and measurable and should include indicators such as species richness and diversity, genetic diversity, and trends.

Non-quantifiable benefits should also be captured, such as a framework for adaptive decision making as listed above. This can include addressing factors such as changes in water quality, coastal upwelling, and the Pacific Decadal Oscillation. In both cases, a framework for reporting progress and trends should be established.

The Council receives an annual report on status and trends in the California Current Ecosystem (CCE). The California Current Integrated Ecosystem Assessment Team, composed of staff from the NMFS Northwest and Southwest Fisheries Science Centers and the NMFS West Coast Region produces the report, which provides substantial detail on status and trends of ecosystem and community indicators. The Atlas should consider engagement with reputable science institutions such as the Federal fisheries science centers and universities, as a mechanism for reflecting the contributions of conservation areas to biodiversity, climate change mitigation and resilience, and equitable access to nature.

In summary, the MSA and its implementation through the Council has provided a structure for meaningful fishery, habitat, and ecosystem conservation actions. Such actions protect well over 30 percent of marine habitats in the West Coast EEZ, and the Council, in partnership with NMFS, is continually seeking ways to protect and conserve important marine resources, as well as addressing the needs of coastal communities. We use a public, collaborative process to engage state and Federal agencies, Tribal representatives, fishermen, conservation representatives, and other key stakeholders in the conservation and management of living marine resources using the best scientific information available. The MSA not only works well but is the gold standard worldwide for sustainable fishery conservation programs.

The Council looks forward to continued collaboration and participation as the Atlas is developed and offers our support in identifying and cataloging conservation areas and actions that will populate the Atlas. Please contact Kerry Griffin of Council staff if you have any questions or need further information (Kerry.griffin@noaa.gov; 503-820-2409).

Sincerely,



Marc Gorelnik
Chair

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Cc: Council Members
Mike Conroy
Susan Chambers