SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE REPORT ON HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT (EFH) AMENDMENT – PRELIMINARY

The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) reviewed proposed modifications to Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) (Agenda Item I.5, Attachment 1), presented by Kerry Griffin, Eric Chavez, and Nicole Nasby-Lucas. The proposed modifications are principally in the delineation of EFH within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), though there are minor updates on life history summaries and distributions by life stage within geographical regions of the EEZ based on recent publications and available data.

The SSC finds that the scientific literature and compiled information represent an adequate basis for making decisions concerning EFH and recommends its use to designate HMS EFH.

The SSC noted the lack of information to support model-based EFH designations. The distribution maps proposed for HMS EFH are from data compiled by the International Union for Conservation for Nature rather than from species distribution models, as was previously the case for HMS EFH. The current EFH is identified qualitatively based on expert opinion. This is consistent with HMS EFH developed by other Councils, but the SSC recommends continued model development and inclusion of additional data sources, e.g. fisheries data, to establish clear standards.

Fishing impacts focused on prey of HMS and were considered to be minor. The HMS EFH did not include reference to the fact that fisheries that target a multitude of prey species are specifically prohibited by the Council. The SSC recommends that this reference be included.

Potential impacts of offshore wind projects on EFH were not discussed in detail in Agenda Item I.5, Attachment 1 (see Agenda Item I.5 Attachment 1, Table 1: Non-fishing activities proposed for inclusion in the HMS Fishery Management Plan). The SSC recommends that offshore wind projects be included in the HMS Fishery Management Plan as a non-fishing activity that would potentially adversely affect EFH.

PFMC
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