

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON OFFICE OF MARINE SANCTUARIES: CORAL  
RESTORATION AND RESEARCH PLAN – RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES AND  
PRELIMINARY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The Habitat Committee (HC) received a briefing from Jessi Doerpinghaus, Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) staff, on the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) Coral Restoration and Research Plan Range of Alternatives (ROA). The ONMS originally identified 10 areas suitable for coral restoration and research which were scaled back to three areas within the Monterey Bay NMS, as recommended by the Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) in September 2023. The three sites are presented in the suite of Alternatives in the ROA. Council staff analyzed the impact of the Alternatives on fishing effort and gross revenue for the three commercial bottom-contact Federal fisheries that operate in those areas but could not sufficiently quantify those impacts due to restricted access to fishing information and data limitations. The analysis does suggest that closing these areas to bottom fishing could lead to a spatial shift in fishing effort but a negligible reduction in gross revenue.

The HC defers to the fishery advisory bodies regarding the proposal's effects on fishing, and instead focused our discussion on the habitat benefits afforded by this action. As noted in the analysis, the Alternatives would likely have a positive impact on benthic habitats and the ecosystem. An increase in the amount of biogenic habitat may eventually contribute to improved fish abundance. The HC appreciates that the ONMS research plan for the sites includes studying fish utilization of coral as fish habitat which is also a habitat research priority for the Council.

To support the intended research, including understanding potential deep-sea coral propagation and fish utilization of coral habitat, as well as maximizing restoration success, the research areas need to be larger than where restoration is taking place. In addition, deep-sea coral restoration is inherently challenging. For these reasons, the HC believes it will be important to maintain flexibility (e.g., number of areas, spatial extent, and depth strata) for habitat restoration, research activities, and to minimize disruptions to fishing. Choosing a single alternative constrains this flexibility. Therefore, the HC recommends adopting all three areas in the ROA.

PFMC  
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