

## HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON CORDELL BANK CONSERVATION AREA REVISIONS

The Habitat Committee (HC) heard a presentation from Jessi Waller on proposed revisions to the Cordell Bank Conservation Areas. The proposal highlights the complexities of multiple gear restrictions that are likely challenging for the fishing community to follow, and by addressing these issues, the proposed action is expected to result in habitat conservation benefits. However, the HC is concerned that currently there is outdated or conflicting data and analysis to determine a prudent course of action. Therefore, HC recommends (1) additional work toward resolving some of the data issues, and (2) consideration of additional possible alternatives, as follows:

1. The HC noted some broad data issues in the preliminary environmental assessment (PEA, [I.5, Attachment 1](#)) related to identifying important habitat features and for addressing potential fishing impacts. Each of these has implications for habitat conservation. Notably:
  - Coral and sponge observations differed from several modeled distributions. Priority areas of protection will depend on the importance placed on modeled versus observed distributions.
  - Data layers of habitat distribution exhibit differences in their interpretation of the extent of rocky habitat, the areas most sensitive to disturbance and most challenging for fishing gear. Consultations (see attachment below) by members of the HC with Guy Cochrane, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) geophysicist who developed some of the substrate data products, revealed that rocky substrate is well characterized by the geophysical methods used to produce substrate maps in Figures 8 and 9. These maps indicate that rocky substrate is likely to occur at a greater extent than suggested by Figure 6 alone. An older habitat classification available in a supplemental report shows both similar and contrasting results with respect to rocky substrate compared to that in Figures 8 and 9. Differences in data sources used to depict substrate habitat (e.g., rugosity, groundtruthing, Coastal Marine and Estuarine Classification System classification, data quality scores) should be discussed in more detail in the PEA. This has been done to some extent within the supplemental report and could be improved to highlight areas where classifications differ.
  - Various fishing activities occur in the area, and the projected impacts of various proposed changes are based on older literature. Alternative 1's proposed changes include possible increases in non-trawl bottom-contact gear in one area and trawling and other bottom contact gear in another area. Any potential adverse effects on EFH from the proposed actions should be analyzed using the best available information. For example, new information through the new [fishing effects database](#) could be used to improve the analysis of multiple potential fishing impacts on EFH.
2. These issues suggest that additional alternatives should be considered, such as alternative groundfish exclusion area boundaries that encompass more of the rocky and coral habitats than in Alternative 1.

### **Attachment: Consultation with Guy Cochrane (USGS) on mapped substrate products for Cordell Bank**

After a briefing on the PEA of Cordell Bank Conservation Area Revisions, several members of the HC subsequently met with Dr. Guy Cochrane, the USGS geophysicist who developed the substrate data for Figures 8 and 9 of the PEA and who is equally familiar with the data for the map in Figure 6. The substrate map produced for the top of the bank in Figure 6 is based on analysis of the multibeam sonar data that incorporates rugosity (roughness), acoustic backscatter, and ground truthing (visual observation), and is from a single multibeam survey. The use of rugosity, backscatter, and ground truthing (“supervised” classification) provides rigorous analysis to infer the identification of “rocky reef” with high confidence.

In contrast, the substrate map presented in Figures 8 and 9 is the product of three additional multibeam surveys located on top of the bank, to the west of the bank and one that runs north-south of the bank. The analysis is based on the numerical classification of depth, slope and the backscatter, but lacks the rugosity parameter. Ground-truthing data were not available for these surveys to further confirm numerical interpretation (i.e., an “unsupervised” classification). Because the classification was “unsupervised”, habitat interpretations are labeled “predictive” in the map legend. Additionally, the "predicted habitat" does not have an associated data quality layer that the Fig. 6 "rocky reef" data has. However, areas identified as "hard sloping" in the predicted habitat data likely contain hard substrate.

Rock substrate may also be present in areas described by the “mixed” classification. For the multibeam datasets examined, the swath of “mixed” that runs diagonally from the north survey area into the west section of the proposed bottom trawl polygon (purple polygon) in Figure 8 is “hard flat” as identified in the backscatter signal, which is either flat/hard rock or flat/coarse sediment. Confirmation of sediment type can only be achieved by ground truthing. In addition, the unmapped region between the north survey area and the top of the bank (and within the purple polygon proposed to be opened to bottom trawl) is likely a continuation of the substrate types that flank this area to the north and south (i.e., mixed and soft). In other words, it’s possible this area contains hard substrate.

PFMC  
11/08/24