

## HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON OFFICE OF NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES REPORT

The Habitat Committee (HC) received an update from Laura Ingulsrud (Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS)) on the annual ONMS report. Among many interesting aspects of this report are items related to groundfish essential fish habitat (EFH). Therefore, the HC focused its discussions on the Monterey Bay NMS Kelp Forest Research and Restoration program and research on the association of groundfish and structure-forming invertebrates (SFIs) in California. The HC also discussed the timing of the Olympic Coast NMS management plan review.

Kelp forests are designated as habitat areas of particular concern (HAPC) in the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan and are at risk from sea urchin grazing in Monterey Bay NMS. In response to the urchin population explosion at Monterey Bay NMS, the California Fish and Game Commission amended sport fishing regulations to allow unlimited take of purple and red sea urchins within a designated area by recreational divers using hand-held tools. Monitoring was initiated by Monterey Bay NMS and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to assess urchin and kelp densities, direct impacts to the reefs, and impacts to organisms and habitat resulting from culling urchins with hand tools by recreational divers. The HC recommends an analysis of trade-offs of culling urchins from the habitat and including the analysis in the final report.

Understanding the function of deep-sea corals (DSCs) and other SFIs as groundfish habitat is fundamental to the review and management of groundfish EFH. Researching the benefits that DSCs bring to commercial fisheries and the California economy is set to take place. The research will be centered around highlighting associations between commercially landed species and DSCs, while also developing an economic valuation paper and spatial analysis of locations with high landings values associated with DSCs. The HC will be closely tracking this and would appreciate additional presentations on this topic as information becomes available, as this has the potential to be of relevance to groundfish EFH.

Finally, the HC would appreciate it if the timing of the public comment period for the Olympic Coast NMS draft management plan and draft environmental analysis, aiming to be released by mid-2025, could overlap with a Council meeting, thereby avoiding the Quick Response letter development process.

PFMC  
04/11/25