

**OFFICE OF NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES,  
WEST COAST REGION REPORT**

**Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCA) Amendment 28 –  
Final Action**

NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS), West Coast Region appreciates the collaborative relationship with the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) regarding marine habitats. We have appreciated participating on the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Review Committee and the Habitat Committee. The west coast region's national marine sanctuaries have been engaged in the process to modify EFH for Pacific Coast Groundfish because of the close alignment between the Council's protection of groundfish EFH from adverse impacts from fishing with the ONMS's goals of protecting benthic habitat and associated ecological communities. Furthermore, we share the goal of developing conservation practices for benthic habitat in close concert with potentially affected fishermen.

Two national marine sanctuaries, Monterey Bay and Greater Farallones (MBNMS and GFNMS) in 2013 submitted proposals to modify groundfish EFH that have been incorporated into the action alternatives (1a and 1b). All sanctuary-proposed modifications to EFH were designed with a diverse array of stakeholders, including the relevant members of the fishing community. The proposed modifications aim to achieve the EFH provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), and are consistent with strategies outlined in sanctuary management plans that address ecosystem-based management, resource protection and fishing activities within the sanctuaries. MBNMS and GFNMS staff have continued to collaborate with scientists and local stakeholders to facilitate information flow to the Council and minimize economic impact to the fishery in a practicable manner.

**MBNMS**

The 2013 MBNMS proposal to modify trawl EFH Conservation Areas (EFHCA) within the Monterey Bay sanctuary was a collaborative proposal among Monterey Bay trawl fishermen, the California Risk Pool (aka CA Groundfish Collective) and others, such as the City of Monterey, Oceana, Natural Resources Defense Council, Ocean Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy, and Environmental Defense Fund. The MBNMS collaborative approach used local stakeholder input combined with newly collected benthic habitat and fisheries data, since amendment 19, with local fishermen knowledge, to develop a collaborative proposal for modifying EFHCA boundaries. The proposal uniquely considered new protections for groundfish EFH coupled with opportunities for fishermen to access valuable fishing grounds, by opening portions of existing EFHCAs. The group discussions were always limited to use of bottom trawl gear only and did not consider other bottom contact gear use. The MBNMS proposal served as a model for the Coastwide Collaborative, which incorporated all the MBNMS proposed modifications to groundfish EFHCAs into their proposal (alternative 1a). The MBNMS proposed modifications are also incorporated into alternative 1b.

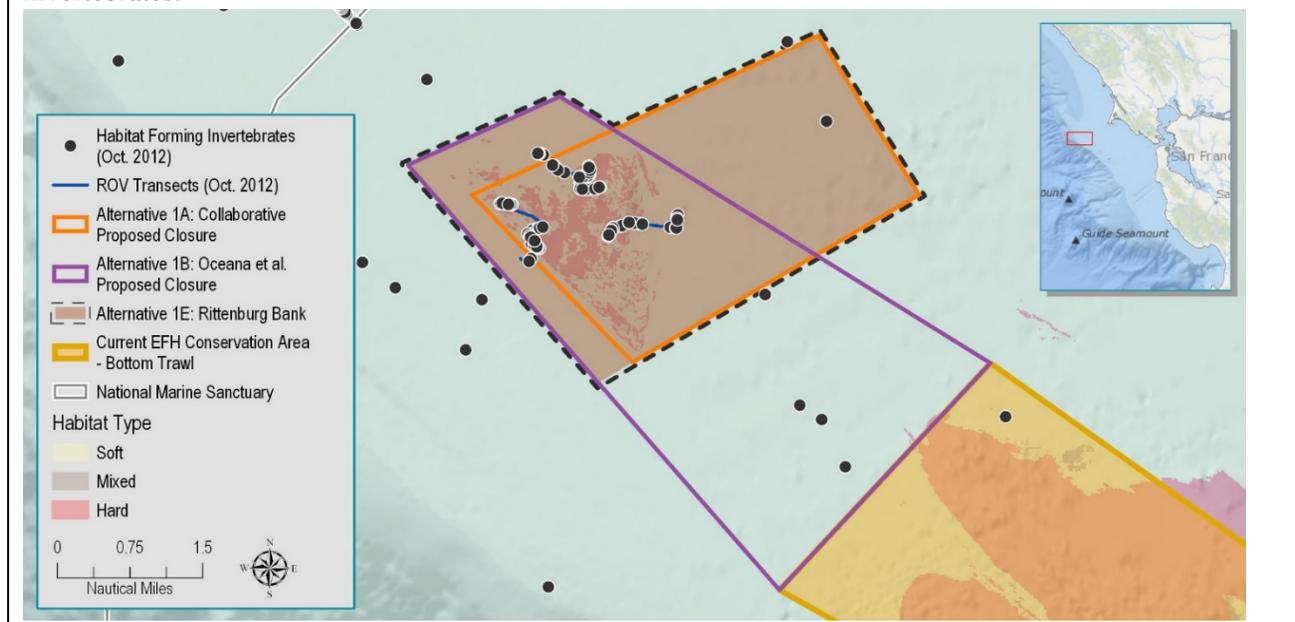
In addition, the MBNMS proposal identified two voluntary management areas (VMAs), suggested by local trawlers, as areas to be avoided because of sensitive habitats. These non-regulatory VMAs are part of a pilot program to test the concept of voluntary management areas

for benthic habitat protection. In 2017, MBNMS in partnership with the NWFSC, visually surveyed the benthic habitat within VMAs and areas within EFHCAs proposed for closures and openings. The research is part of a long-term monitoring plan by MBNMS, including collection of baseline data to be followed by monitoring changes over time in the EFHCAs and VMAs.

## GFNMS

GFNMS, using best available data and input from local stakeholders, including fishermen, proposed options in 2013 to create new EFHCAs at Rittenburg Bank to Fanny Shoals, Cochrane Bank and the Farallones Escarpment. Alternatives 1a and 1b incorporated the options proposed by GFNMS at Cochrane Bank and the Farallones Escarpment. In 2016 the Council accepted as alternative 1e, a subsequent design proposed by GFNMS for Rittenburg Bank, which slightly modifies the EFHCA design proposed by the Coastwide Collaborative (Figure 1). GFNMS believes alternative 1e fulfills fishermen’s need to keep the area open between Rittenburg Bank and the Farallon Islands/Fanny Shoal EFHCA, while protecting a majority of the high relief, hard bottom and biogenic habitat on and near Rittenburg Bank.

Figure 1: The proposed Rittenburg Bank modification, Alternative 1e, including habitat-forming invertebrates.



## Amendment 28 and research and data needs

National marine sanctuaries on the west coast have developed research plans for long-term monitoring of benthic habitat, and associated fishes and invertebrates, inside and outside of the EFHCAs (and VMAs). The research plans include opportunities for partnerships with fishermen, NMFS, and other experts. The information collected from these efforts may inform any future processes to modify groundfish EFH. We encourage the Council to incorporate the research and data needs of groundfish EFH into amendment 28 (action item 7) to evaluate the effects of EFHCAs to productivity of groundfish species, and the role of deep sea corals and sponges as groundfish EFH, to mention just a few of the many research questions. It would be beneficial to establish research sites within EFHCAs as outlined in Appendix 1 of amendment 19. In closing, we offer our support in finalizing amendment 28 as expeditiously as possible.