

## HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON CURRENT HABITAT ISSUES

### **NOAA Habitat Blueprint**

The Habitat Committee (HC) received an update on National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Habitat Blueprint activities from Eric Chavez, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southwest Region. This internal NOAA effort is intended to build on existing programs and partnerships, prioritize activities, and guide future actions to protect and restore habitat during a challenging budget climate. The Habitat Blueprint has a three-pronged approach that includes: 1) establishing NOAA habitat focus areas for long-term habitat science and conservation; 2) implementing a systematic and strategic approach to habitat science to inform effective decision-making; and 3) strengthening policy and legislation to enhance NOAA's ability to achieve meaningful habitat conservation. California was chosen as the pilot location for both the habitat focus area and the habitat assessment prioritization process, which supports #2 above. Both processes are underway and have aggressive timelines, expecting completion by the end of this year.

NOAA agencies (i.e., NMFS, National Ocean Service, National Weather Service, Office of Atmospheric Research) have worked together to establish candidate habitat focus areas. Information on these candidate areas was circulated to stakeholders, including the Council, and feedback was requested earlier this month. After reviewing stakeholder input, a proposed focus area will be identified.

The habitat assessment prioritization process is evaluating stocks that would benefit the most from a habitat assessment in terms of either being able to refine essential fish habitat (EFH) designations or improve stock assessments. Details on how the final selections will be made and reported back to stakeholders are still being developed.

### ***NOAA Regional Initiatives***

In addition, as a first step toward implementing the Habitat Blueprint, NOAA launched regional initiatives to focus efforts in discrete places and link science to management. There are several initiatives of interest to the Council. In the north, the regional initiative focuses on restoration of salmon habitat in Puget Sound. The San Francisco Bay Area Sentinel Site focuses on sea level rise impacts on ecosystem and infrastructure. In the south, the Southern California Bight Habitat Assessment regional initiative is aimed at evaluating changes in biodiversity, abundance and size composition of demersal fish stocks and their habitats following the closure of selected areas to bottom-contact fishing gear in southern California. As a first part of this assessment, the Southwest Fisheries Science Center plans to survey cowcod habitats throughout southern California between October and December. This survey, the first large-scale fishery-independent survey of cowcod since 2002, is a key activity under this regional initiative.

To learn more about the Habitat Blueprint, see <http://www.habitat.noaa.gov/habitatblueprint/>.

## **Research and Data Needs**

The HC will be developing comments on the Research and Data Needs Report following a review of the 2012 Integrated Ecosystem Assessment Implementation Report scheduled for release in December 2012. The HC will provide comments on the Research and Data Needs Report in the March 2013 briefing book, striving for consistency in identifying research needs for habitat across the Research and Data Needs Report, the Fishery Ecosystem Plan and the Essential Fish Habitat reviews.

## **Seismic Surveys**

The HC heard about two seismic survey projects proposed in state and Federal waters off California to study active faults offshore of two coastal nuclear power plants: San Onofre in southern California, and Diablo Canyon in central California. Potential impacts to Council-managed species would come from high energy acoustic pulses created by air guns. The San Onofre project has been postponed until 2013 or later, while the Diablo Canyon proposed project is scheduled for November - December 2012.

Concerns voiced by the state and Federal resource agencies and the public regarding the proposed Diablo Canyon project have resulted in the project being split into two phases. Phase One, during 2012, would be focused off of Morro Bay. Impacts will be monitored to inform Phase Two survey design and conditions. California Department of Fish and Game and NOAA have required the following to identify potential impacts: 1) fish and marine mammal monitoring with on-board observers, aerial flights, and sea otter telemetry; 2) remotely operated vehicle (ROV) surveys of fish and benthic habitat; and 3) a catch per unit of effort (CPUE) fishing study. The ROV and CPUE monitoring will occur prior to, during, and after the seismic surveys. If the California Coastal Commission approves this project, the intensive biological monitoring will provide information on potential impacts from high energy seismic surveys.

## **Pacific Marine and Estuarine Fish Habitat Partnership**

Dr. Correigh Greene provided an informational update of the Pacific Marine and Estuarine Fish Habitat Partnership (PMEP) to the HC. Three HC members are involved in this partnership. The PMEP is one of 18 such partnerships across the nation. Other habitat partnerships along the Pacific are focused on salmon, while the PMEP is focused on habitat for rearing juvenile fish in estuarine and nearshore marine habitats. The PMEP is planning to conduct and evaluate existing regional assessments to determine the scope and number of potential actions needed to address habitat needs for juvenile fish.

The PMEP was recognized by the National Fish Habitat Partnership Board in January 2012, and finalized its strategic plan in July 2012. The PMEP received initial seed funding to support restoration work in September. A larger coordinated funding opportunity is coming up through NOAA's Restoration Center's Community Restoration Program.

More information on PMEP's final strategic plan is available at [pacificfishhabitat.org](http://pacificfishhabitat.org).