

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON CURRENT HABITAT ISSUES

Bureau of Reclamation Letter

The Habitat Committee (HC) discussed the letter to the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) (Agenda Item E.1.a, Attachment 1) regarding water allocations in California's Central Valley. The letter is meant to allow the BOR adequate time to prepare responses to questions the HC plans to ask when the BOR presents to the HC next spring. Since it has taken a long time to arrange this meeting, the HC wants the BOR to know where to focus their attention during their presentation. The BOR is expecting this response letter, and it is timely, given how BOR operations will affect 2010/2011 Central Valley salmon spawners and emigrants. The HC did not make any edits to the letter in the briefing book.

Salmon Essential Fish Habitat

In September, the HC requested another opportunity to comment on the Pacific coast salmon essential fish habitat (EFH) five-year review process at this meeting. The HC discussed the need to augment the water quality information in the report, and the potential revision of the impassable barrier list based on the proposed implementation of fish passage projects. The Pacific coast salmon EFH five-year review Oversight Panel is accepting comments through December 3, 2010, and members of the HC will likely follow up on these issues and provide more specific information prior to that deadline.

In addition, it is unclear at this point to what extent EFH conservation recommendations will be addressed during this review process. However, it will be important to solicit assistance from agency and tribal representatives with expertise in salmon habitat whenever EFH conservation recommendations are revised or developed.

Groundfish Essential Fish Habitat

The HC received an update on the groundfish EFH five-year review from representatives from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Northwest Fisheries Science Center, Northwest Region, and Council staff. Representatives from the two science centers, the regions and Council staff worked together to develop a proposal to the NMFS Office of Habitat Conservation to fund a position for a person to identify, gather, summarize, and develop a report on data that are relevant to the five-year review. The resulting report would focus on information that has become available since initial EFH designation in 2006, and would be made available prior to the Council soliciting proposals for additional EFH designations. If the funding proposal is successful, the schedule for awarding the grant would depend on the FY2011 Federal funding cycle, which is currently operating under a continuing resolution. NMFS expects to hear about the grant award early in 2011. In September, the HC and others asked the Council to consider postponing the request for groundfish EFH proposals until relevant and available new data are summarized, which would occur near the end of 2011.

The Groundfish EFH Review Committee is scheduled to meet on December 20th.

The HC recommends the two Science Centers actively ask agencies, tribes, academia and members of the public for data and references on groundfish EFH and hold this data in an online repository until, and if, a contractor is hired. The data could be used to refine descriptions of groundfish EFH, include descriptions of larval and juvenile distribution, seafloor mapping, etc. Creating a repository for this data would require minimal staff labor, as the data would not be processed or summarized at this stage.

The HC suggests that the potential contractor's report summarizing this data be submitted before the EFH process begins, so that it can be used to inform EFH proposals by individuals and organizations.

Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary Management Plan Review

The HC heard a presentation from Dr. Lisa Wooninck of the West Coast regional office of the National Marine Sanctuaries, and Mr. Joel Kawahara, Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary (OCNMS) Advisory Council, on the status of the OCNMS Management Plan Review. The OCNMS plans to issue a Federal Register notice of the draft management plan and draft National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) analysis in mid-January 2011, with a 60-day comment period. The HC developed a process to generate a draft comment letter for Council consideration at the March 2011 meeting, allowing for comments on the draft documents to occur within one Council meeting.

The HC believes the draft documents will contain no regulatory changes or other plans that will immediately affect Council-managed fisheries. If this is the case, the Council may consider forwarding their comments within the 60-day review period. OCNMS is well aware of the request to allow for the 60-day comment period to cover a week past the March 2011 meeting to allow for Council staff to incorporate any changes to the draft comment letter developed by the HC.

Ecosystem Based Management

A discussion between some members of the Ecosystem Plan Development Team (EPDT) and HC occurred in October to explore how the HC could help the EPDT with their ecosystem management plan development.

As part of its approach, the EPDT plans to review each Fishery Management Plan (FMP) to determine where the plans already encompass ecosystem management measures. Because the HC looks at EFH across multiple plans, the HC can help by identifying overlapping EFH issues among the various FMPs, such as food web interactions, forage species, EFH threats, designated and potential HAPCs, and information gaps. The HC will begin cataloguing these items.

Mapping Trawl Activity off California

The HC received a presentation from Ms. Janet Mason of the Southwest Fisheries Science Center entitled “Mapping trawl activity off California.” The analysis focused on mapping and characterizing trawl effort and locations of deep sea corals and sponges, and compared trawl activity during 1997-1999 with activity during 2006-2009. Main conclusion of the presentation was that the trawl footprint has not changed significantly in the time period, though trawl effort has decreased.

The HC found the presentation informational for purposes of the groundfish EFH five-year review and the deep sea coral and sponge research program. A broader coast-wide analysis of trawl effort beyond California is in its draft stages, and finalizing that analysis would be useful for the purposes of the EFH review.

PFMC
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