

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON DEEPWATER CORAL INFORMATION

The Habitat Committee (HC) heard an informational report on the NOAA Fisheries' Deep-Sea Coral Research and Technology Program (DSCRTP) from Ms. Fan Tsao, a deep-sea coral information specialist with the NMFS Office of Habitat Conservation. Ms. Tsao gave a Powerpoint presentation on the program's West Coast expert workshop on research priorities (held January 2010 in Portland), and a summary of the first field season of West Coast deep sea coral research during the summer of 2010 (the same presentation that the Council received from Dr. Elizabeth Clarke). The Council's Habitat Committee received a briefing on this topic in October 2009, and Council staff attended the DSCRTP's January 2010 workshop and provided input to the development of research priorities.

As the Council heard in Dr. Clarke's presentation, this research is aimed at improving understanding of the distribution, density, abundance, and biology of corals and sponges; and ultimately will help to inform management decisions in West Coast waters. Under Magnuson-Stevens Act Section 303(b)(2), the Council has new discretionary authority to protect deep-sea coral areas identified by the DSCRTP through fishing gear interactions.

During the presentation, the HC learned that the DSCRTP needs input on field work priorities by mid-December. The HC discussed a few ideas for focusing the 2011 and 2012 field research efforts:

- Characterize deep-sea corals and sponges in essential fish habitat (EFH) closed areas placing a priority on multibeam surveyed areas.
- Examine associations among deep-sea corals and sponges, groundfish, and substrata in EFH closed areas.
- Resurvey priority areas that were under sampled in 2010.
- Work in other areas that have multibeam surveys to further develop data that will contribute to habitat suitability models.
- Work in areas where trawl survey work and observer data show high coral bycatch or coral interactions.

The HC suggests a priority on currently unfunded research mandates, i.e., evaluation of EFH closed areas.