



Report of the Habitat Working Group

Council Coordination Committee Meeting

May 27-28, 2020

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Background on the HWG

- Created in May 2014 as an “informal working group” with habitat specialists from each Council and NMFS personnel
- What has the HWG done to date?
 - EFH Habitat Summit (2016)
 - EFH Consultation and Regional Innovations Workshop (2019)
- What do we continue to work on?
 - Continued coordination on habitat between habitat POCs in Council, ROs, and FSCs
 - Completing tasks from 2019 Workshop



2019 Workshop Suggestions

- **Possible Future CCC Actions Suggested by Workshop Participants**
 - The CCC could support coordinated outreach to action agencies to remind them of the important role that Councils play as fishery management partners, and Congressional mandates to address impacts on EFH designated by the Councils. While NOAA Fisheries conducts EFH consultations, action agencies are encouraged to coordinate around actions that will impact EFH designated by the Councils.
 - The CCC could identify habitat science priorities that are shared across regions and Councils and communicate them to NOAA Fisheries Leadership at both the ROs and FSCs. Shared science and research objectives can provide a foundation for work that could be done across FSCs and would benefit multiple Councils and their habitat conservation initiatives.



CCC Action Item from Nov 2019

- The CCC requested the Habitat Work Group come back with more detail about Council and staff workload related to their suggested possible future CCC actions at the May CCC 2020 meeting.
- Response:
 - Habitat Partner Engagement
 - Fisheries Science Center Engagement



Habitat Partner Engagement

- Letter To the CCC
 - Explains Councils' role in EFH designation
 - Requests fostering productive relationships
 - Encourages participation in Council process
 - Provides a list of EFH-related contact for each Council
- HWG requests approval to send to habitat partners/action agencies

Letter For the CCC regarding partnerships

The Council Coordination Committee (CCC) represents the shared interests of the U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils (referred to hereafter as Councils). With this letter, we seek to explain how the Councils collaborate with NOAA Fisheries and other federal agencies in the designation and conservation of essential fish habitat (EFH). As an agency that undertakes EFH consultations, you are undoubtedly aware of the process and your responsibilities. However, you may be less aware of the role Councils play in EFH designation and in guiding habitat conservation in our respective regions. We hope that your agency will see Councils as a partner in habitat conservation, and that we can foster productive relationships to cooperatively improve protection and conservation of EFH across all regions.

Under the federal fisheries management system, Councils are responsible for developing fishery management plans that minimize impacts of fishing on fish habitats to the extent practicable. To support this effort, Councils are mandated to identify and designate EFH for all managed species. EFH designation is required by Section 303 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and defined at 50 CFR 600, Subpart J as "waters and substrate necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity." Councils base EFH designations on the best available scientific information. The purpose of designations is not only to aid our fishery management work, but also to serve as a robust foundation for the consultation process, which seeks to minimize impacts to EFH from fishing and non-fishing activities alike. EFH regulations (600 CFR Subpart K) require federal agencies to consult with NOAA Fisheries on any actions authorized, funded, or undertaken by the agency that may adversely affect EFH.

The CCC encourages federal partners to participate in the Councils' public meetings and the EFH identification process. During this process, Councils work closely with NOAA Fisheries Regional Offices and Science Centers. The core scientific data to support designations is often collected by the Science Centers and by state fishery management agencies, but the Councils also rely on information from additional sources. Council responsibilities include convening technical working groups to review habitat information, and ensuring the continued scientific validity of EFH designations, which are reviewed periodically, ideally every five years. Regional Offices convey how changes in designations may affect consultations. Federal partners may have valuable data to inform designations, and can convey how changes to designations might affect consultation activities, given knowledge about specific types of projects and the environments in which they occur.

Beyond developing EFH designations, Councils consider the impacts of non-fishing activities on EFH during development of fishery management plans. As such, they are authorized to make recommendations to any federal or state agency concerning activities that, in the view of the Council, may affect the habitat of a fishery resource under its authority (MSA Sec. 305(b)(3)). While NOAA Fisheries Regional Offices are responsible for conducting EFH consultations, Councils often partner with NOAA Fisheries colleagues as they coordinate with regional partners to minimize such impacts.



Fisheries Science Center Engagement

- **Goal:** Promote understanding and discussion between CCC and NOAA Fisheries Science Centers to enhance coordination around EFH
- **Focus:** Climate-based management and applicable research and/or tools available for habitat management
- **Participants:** CCC-HWGW, FSC and RO representatives



Fisheries Science Center Engagement

- **Objectives**

- Communicate Council management needs and how FSCs can support those needs
- Get a better understanding of available tools and research that can aid habitat management

- **Potential Outcomes**

- Increased dialogue with FSCs
- National comparison of FSC research approaches and potential applicability to regional management needs
- Utilizing research presented for EFH designation or review



Fisheries Science Center Engagement

- **Tentative Plan:**

- (1) Two-hour webinar

- Receive updates of regional progress on climate science research and capability development
- Hear how managers are using such research and tools
- Begin discussions on how FSC research can better inform EFH designations and reviews

- Develop an engagement plan for national and regional level discussions

- Identify methods that are being used already in one or more regions and how it could be applied in others



CCC HWG Workload Concerns

- Looks like more work, but...
 - Refines coordination with partner agencies
 - Provides for increased communication with Fisheries Science Centers on habitat science to support management
 - Enhances the staff and the Council's abilities to address habitat mandates





*Wish We
Were There!!!*