


MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC and AP Members  
FROM: Chris Oliver   
Executive Director  
DATE: September 28, 2005  
SUBJECT: Bering Sea Habitat Conservation

ESTIMATED TIME 1 HOUR
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**ACTION REQUIRED:**

Discuss alternatives and problem statement for Bering Sea habitat conservation.

**BACKGROUND:**

In February 2005 the Council took action to conserve essential fish habitat (EFH) from potential adverse effects of fishing. EFH is defined as those waters used by fish for spawning, breeding, feeding, and growth to maturity. The EFH EIS concluded that fisheries do have long term effects on habitat; however these impacts were considered minimal and would not have detrimental effects on fish populations or their habitats. Nevertheless, the Council adopted several new measures to minimize the effects of fishing on EFH in the Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska. The Council's motion is attached as Item D-1(e)(1).

As part of its February action, the Council moved to initiate an expanded analysis of alternatives to minimize the effects of fishing on EFH in the Bering Sea, and conduct an assessment of gear modification, that tiers off of the EFH EIS. The analysis will include the existing preferred alternative in the document (attached as Item D-1(e)(2)), an alternative to leave the rolling closure area open, and options to the closed areas south of Nunivak Island and north of the Bogoslof Area, as well as other potential alternatives to be developed.

Towards that end, the staff has prepared the following draft "strawman" problem statement for consideration by the Council.

*Draft problem statement:* The Council intends to evaluate potential new fishery management measures to protect Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) in the Bering Sea. The analysis will tier off of the 2005 EFH Environmental Impact Statement and will consider a range of alternative measures such as open and closed areas and gear modifications. The purpose of the analysis

is to consider practicable and precautionary management measures to reduce the potential adverse effects of fishing on EFH and to support the continued productivity of managed species.

At this meeting, the Council will discuss a process to develop and finalize alternatives, as well as a timeline to prepare the analysis.

**EFH Final Action NPFMC February 10, 2005**  
**Council Motion**  
**(M/S Krygier/Rasmuson 1:20 pm)**  
**Passed Unanimously at 2:45 pm**

**Action 1: Describe and Identify EFH**

Adopt Alternative 3—Revised General Distribution (The Council's Preliminary Preferred Alternative) as described on page ES-2 of the Preliminary Final EFH EIS – January 2005.

**Action 2: Adopt an Approach for Identifying HAPCs**

Adopt Alternative 3—Site based Concept (The Council's Preliminary Preferred Alternative) as described on pages ES-4.

**Action 3: Minimize Adverse Effects of Fishing on EFH.**

Adopt a Modified 5B to expand Bottom Trawl Closures in the GOA and Aleutian Islands Management Areas to protect Sponge, Coral and other important habitat for managed species.

Bering Sea: Initiate an expanded analysis for the Bering Sea, **as well as an assessment of gear modifications** that tiers off of this EFH EIS analysis to further explore possible mitigation measures in the Bering Sea. The analysis should include the existing alternative, an alternative to leave the rolling closure area open, and options to open the "red hatched" closed area south of Nunivak Island and north of the Bogoslof area, **with other alternatives to be developed.**

Aleutian Islands: Allow bottom trawling to continue in AI areas that have supported the highest catches in the past, and prohibits bottom trawling in all other portions of the AI management region to prevent future impacts to undisturbed habitats in those areas as described in a modified Option 3, as described in the attached Figure (modified ES-12) and including six Aleutian Islands Coral Gardens (as identified in Figure ES-11). The six coral gardens are closed to all bottom **contact tending** gear. Pelagic trawls could be used outside of the designated open areas, but only in an off-bottom mode. The existing observer program will be utilized, and a vessel monitoring system (VMS) for **all fishing vessels is fishing groundfish** is required. A comprehensive plan for research and monitoring will be developed. Option 3 opens designated areas based on areas of higher effort distribution from 1990 through 2001 as modified through input from trawl fisherman and public testimony.

Gulf of Alaska: Prohibit the use of bottom trawl for all groundfish in 10 designated areas (Figure ES-7 in the Executive Summary of the January 2005 Preliminary Final EFH EIS). At the time of the Council's five year review period, the Council will review available research information regarding the two GOA closed areas (one west [area 610] and one east [area 620] of Sanak HAPC closure to determine the efficacy of continued closure.

The Council will review these actions in five years to consider new information from on-going and future research.

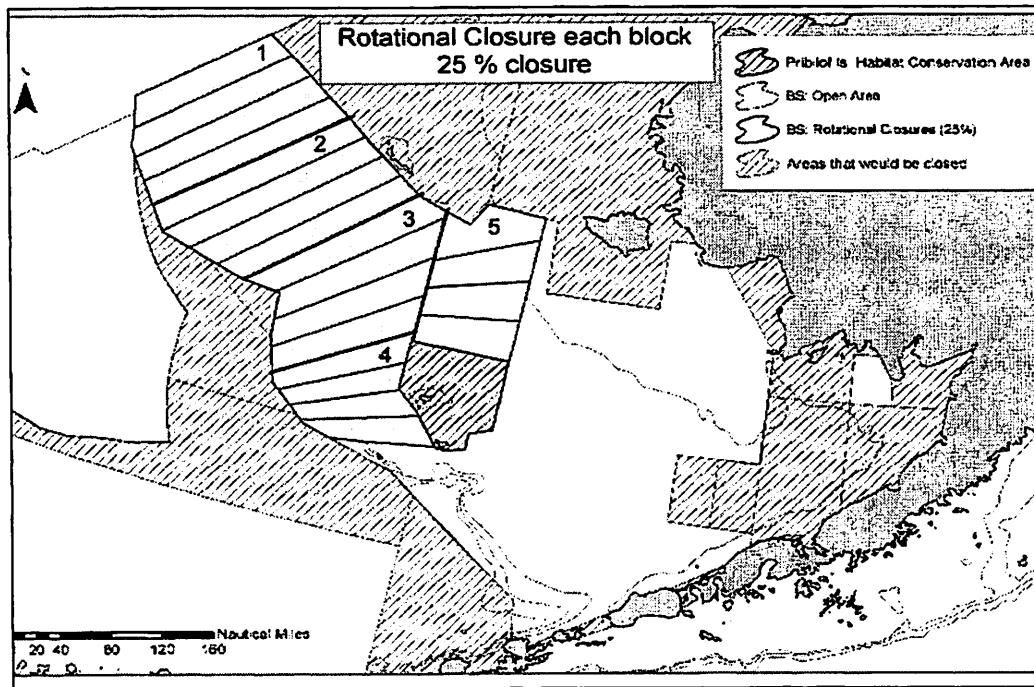
### Bering Sea Habitat Conservation

In February 2005, the Council took action to initiate an expanded analysis of alternatives to minimize the effects of fishing on EFH in the Bering Sea, and conduct an assessment of gear modification, those tiers off of the EFH EIS. At that time it was suggested that an analysis would include the existing alternatives in the EIS, an alternative to leave the rolling closure area open, and options to the closed areas south of Nunivak Island and north of the Bogoslof Area, as well as other possible alternatives.

A description of Alternative 5 that was analyzed in the EFH EIS is provided below

Alternative 5 (Expanded Bottom Trawl Closures in All Management Areas): Alternative 5 would prohibit the use of bottom trawls in larger designated areas of the EBS and would require trawl gear modifications in the EBS area.

Bering Sea: Prohibit the use of bottom trawls for all groundfish fisheries except within a designated "open" area, based on historic bottom trawl effort. Within the open area, there would be rotating closures to bottom trawls in five areas to the west, north, and northwest of the Pribilof Islands (Figure 1). Each of the five areas would be divided into three blocks, and one block in each area would be closed for 5 years. After 5 years, the closed block would reopen, and a different block would close for 5 years, and so forth. In addition, bottom trawls used in the remaining open areas would be required to have sweeps and footropes equipped with disks/bobbins to reduce contact area and proximity to the seafloor.





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September 28, 2005

DELIVERED VIA facsimile (907)-271-2817

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RECEIVED  
SEP 28 2005  
N.P.F.M.C.

RE: Agenda Item D-1(e): **Bering Sea Habitat**

Dear Madame Chair:

While the Council recently enacted impressive seafloor habitat protection measures in the Aleutian Islands and for some regions in the Gulf of Alaska via the Essential Fish Habitat Environmental Impact Statement, the Bering Sea remains unaddressed and unprotected. The seafloor habitat of the Bering Sea region is vast and varied, and has been heavily trawled.

According to the National Research Council (2002) bottom trawling is the biggest threat to seafloor habitat. To ensure the long-term sustainability of our most productive and biodiverse ocean eco-region in Alaska we must develop a plan to protect Bering Sea seafloor habitat while still allowing for continued fishing opportunities.

We look forward to working with the Council to develop an adequate range of alternatives to address Bering Sea habitat conservation.

Sincerely,

Jim Ayers  
Director, Pacific



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