

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC, and AP Members
FROM: Chris Oliver *CO*
Executive Director
DATE: January 31, 2011
SUBJECT: Essential Fish Habitat

ESTIMATED TIME
2 HOURS

ACTION REQUIRED:

- (a) Review proposed HAPC skate nursery sites and refine alternatives for analysis.
- (b) Initial review of EA for EFH Amendments.

BACKGROUND:

- (a) Review proposed HAPC skate nursery sites and refine alternatives for analysis.

Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) are geographic sites of special importance within the distribution of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) for the Council's managed species, which may require additional protection from adverse fishing effects. The Council has a formalized process within its Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) for selecting HAPCs. The Council periodically considers whether to set habitat priority types and issues a call for proposals. The sites proposed are reviewed by the Plan Teams to determine ecological merit. Sites are also reviewed for socioeconomic and management and enforcement impacts. This combined information is presented to the Council, which may choose to select HAPC sites for full analysis and implementation. The Council may also modify proposed HAPC sites and management and conservation measures during its review, and request additional stakeholder input and technical review.

In April 2010, the Council set a habitat priority type—skate nurseries—and issued a call for proposals in conjunction with completion of the EFH five-year review. Council staff initially screened proposals to determine consistency with the habitat priority type, HAPC criteria (rarity is required), and for general adequacy and completeness. At their fall 2011 meeting, the Groundfish Plan Teams reviewed the HAPC proposals for ecological merit. In October 2010, the Council selected a proposal from the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) to forward on for further analysis. Council and agency staff have reviewed the proposal for socioeconomic and management and enforcement considerations. A discussion paper was mailed to the Council in mid-January, and is attached as Item C-4(a). At this meeting, the Council may wish to initiate an amendment analysis for identifying skate nursery sites as HAPCs, discuss alternatives to include in an amendment analysis, including HAPC sites and management measures.

The Ecosystem and Enforcement Committees are scheduled to take up the initial evaluation of HAPC sites and management and conservation measures during the February 2011 meeting, and will provide recommendations to the Council under this agenda item.

(b) Initial review of EA for EFH Amendments

In mid-January 2011, the Council received an initial review draft of an Environmental Assessment to amend all of the Council's FMPs to update EFH information. The amendment analysis is based on the most recent 5-year EFH review, which was presented to the Council in April 2010, and documented in the Final EFH 5-year Review Summary Report (April 2010). The report reviewed EFH descriptions in five of the Council's six FMPs (all except the Arctic FMP¹), evaluated new information on EFH, assessed information gaps and research needs, and identified whether any revisions to EFH are needed or suggested.

Based on the 5-year review and the summary report, the Council identified elements of the EFH descriptions in the FMPs that should be updated and revised. Accordingly, the Council initiated an amendment analysis to update the FMPs with these revisions. The first two chapters of the EA are attached as Item C-4(b). There are eight actions included in this omnibus EFH amendment package, which correspond with the Council's recommendations from April 2010. The proposed actions are FMP amendments only; there are no regulations that will be changed as a result of these amendments.

The Council did not adopt a specific problem statement for this amendment package. Staff has used language from the EFH 5-year review summary report to draft a problem statement, which the Council may wish to revise or adopt at this meeting.

Additionally, the Council's action in April 2010 initiated these amendments specifically for the five Council FMPs evaluated in the 2010 EFH 5-year review. Two of these actions, however, are also relevant for the Arctic FMP. The conservation recommendations for nonfishing threats to EFH have been refined and updated, and as this language is also included in the Arctic FMP, it would be appropriate to update it there as well. Also, the default timing for considering HAPCs in the Arctic FMP is identified as 3 years, and given that the default timing cycle is to be changed to 5 years in the other Council FMPs, a similar rationale exists for extending that amendment to the Arctic FMP. At this meeting, it would be helpful for the Council to indicate whether amendments to the Arctic FMP should be included in this package.

Finally, as reported in the EFH 5-year review summary report, NMFS AFSC has been working on a methodology to refine the geographic scope of EFH for Pacific salmon in marine waters off Alaska. Currently, EFH is designated for all salmon species as all marine waters in the entire EEZ. The AFSC has developed a methodology that identifies associations between environmental conditions (e.g., salinity, temperature, bottom depth) and the distributions of Pacific salmon in marine waters. Preliminary findings appear to indicate that the methodology will be very useful to refine EFH for the different life stages of each Pacific salmon. The work on the methodology has been completed, however it has not yet undergone peer review, which is scheduled for 2011, after which it will be published as a NOAA Technical Memorandum. Given the timing of the salmon methodology, the draft EA does not include substantive revisions to salmon EFH; instead, it is anticipated that these changes would be analyzed in a subsequent amendment. The Council may wish to comment on whether this is the appropriate way to proceed.

¹ A thorough assessment of EFH in the Arctic was evaluated when the Arctic FMP was adopted, in August 2009.