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December 2, 2014

Mr. Dan Hull, Chairman
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, AK 99501

RE: Agenda Item D-3, Pribilof Canyon Corals: Receive comments on range of alternatives

Dear Chairman Hull:

Please accept the following comments from the Freezer Longline Coalition (FLC) in regards to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (NPFMC) request for comments on a potential range of alternatives for measures to protect Pribilof Canyon corals. The FLC appreciates the opportunity to comment on this issue and looks forward to a continued dialogue with the NPFMC at the December Council meeting.

The FLC represents owners and operators of over 30 U.S.-flag vessels that participate in the freezer longline (or HAL CP) sector of the Pacific cod fishery. FLC member vessels range in size from approximately 110 to 185 feet with a gross tonnage of approximately 140 to 1400 tons. All members of the FLC are also members of the Freezer Longline Conservation Cooperative (FLCC), a voluntary cooperative established in 2010 by the participants in the HAL CP sector of the Pacific cod fishery the BSAI. FLCC and its members work collaboratively with NMFS to ensure the efficient and responsible harvest of the Pacific cod quota allocated annually to the sector through the NPFMC, including maximizing optimum yield in the fishery and minimizing bycatch of other species. Since its establishment, FLCC has been a leader in efforts to reduce bycatch and promote sustainable fishing practices in the BSAI.

It is the understanding of the FLC that the NPFMC is accepting comments on a conceptual range of alternatives for a prospective action to determine if deep-sea corals need protection or mitigation from the potential impacts from commercial fishing. It is also our understanding that the analysis of the data from the 2014 drop-camera survey will not be available until June 2015.

While it remains unclear at this stage that protections are necessary or warranted, the FLC requests that if the NPFMC considers closures in the range of the alternatives, that the NPFMC include alternatives and options that are gear-specific. In particular, if closures are to be considered, the FLC requests that an option be included that would exclude longline gear from the closure areas (and allow longline gear to continue to fish in these areas).

As the Council is aware, the reference to deep sea coral in MSA is under the “discretionary provisions” of fishery management plans (i.e. not mandatory). The MSA also provides that any closure for purposes of deep sea coral protection must ensure that the action have the following elements:

1. Be based on the best scientific information available;
2. Include criteria to assess the conservation benefit of the closed areas;
3. Have a timetable for review of the efficacy of the closure; and
4. Is based on the benefits and impacts of the closure as well as taking into account other management measures.

The FLC’s request for gear-specific options, including the exclusion of longline gear from potential closures, is based on the best available science, as highlighted in the following analyses:

Essential Fish Habitat: Long Term Effect Index: In the LEI analysis, fixed gear (pot and longline) have the lowest LEI values for all gear types for all habitats. The LEI value is the proportion of habitat reduced by a gear type. For the fishing effect on the Bering Sea slope, the LEI value for all gear is 10.9% - of which 7.2% = pelagic trawl; 3.7% = non-pelagic trawl; 0.0% = pot; and 0.0% = longline. The LEI value for longline gear on all hard substrates (all areas) = 0.1%.

NMFS Sablefish Longline Survey: The NMFS longline survey has rigid survey protocols and the catch on each and every hook is identified (i.e. there are no sub-samples or extrapolations). Between 1996 and 2013, there have been a total of nine NMFS sablefish longline surveys conducted on the thirteen stations¹ along the EBS slope with a total of 610,555 hooks run.

From 1996 to 2013 on the EBS slope, the longline survey had an aggregate total of **22 hooks with coral bycatch** (out of the 610,155 total hooks). This is an average of **2.46 hooks per year with coral bycatch** from the thirteen EBS slope stations.

The average encounter rate by hook for coral from the sablefish longline survey on the EBS slope stations is 0.000036. This is less than four thousandths of one percent (or one chance in 27,548). This may in fact overstate the potential impacts on hard corals from longline gear on the EBS slope. In the protocols of the NMFS longline survey, “coral” means both hard and soft corals and includes gorgonian corals; hydrocorals; black corals; bubble-gum corals; cup corals; and bamboo corals.

IPHC Surveys: There is also a low incidence of coral bycatch on longline gear in the IPHC annual surveys along the EBS edge. From 2002-2012, the IPHC surveys on the EBS edge (Areas 4A and 4D) had a grand total of **7 hooks with coral bycatch** (both hard and soft corals combined). The IPHC survey identifies non-target catch on 20% (20 consecutive hooks) of the hooks in each skate of gear.

Given this information, it is clear that longline gear has very little impact on the coral habitats of the EBS slope. Accordingly, the FLC requests that if the NPFMC considers closures in the alternatives, that there should be options that exclude longline gear from the closure areas (and allow longline fishing to continue).

Thank you for your consideration. Please be in touch if you have any questions for other follow-up to these comments. Thanks.

¹ Stations 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, and 22 (see Figure 1)

Sincerely,

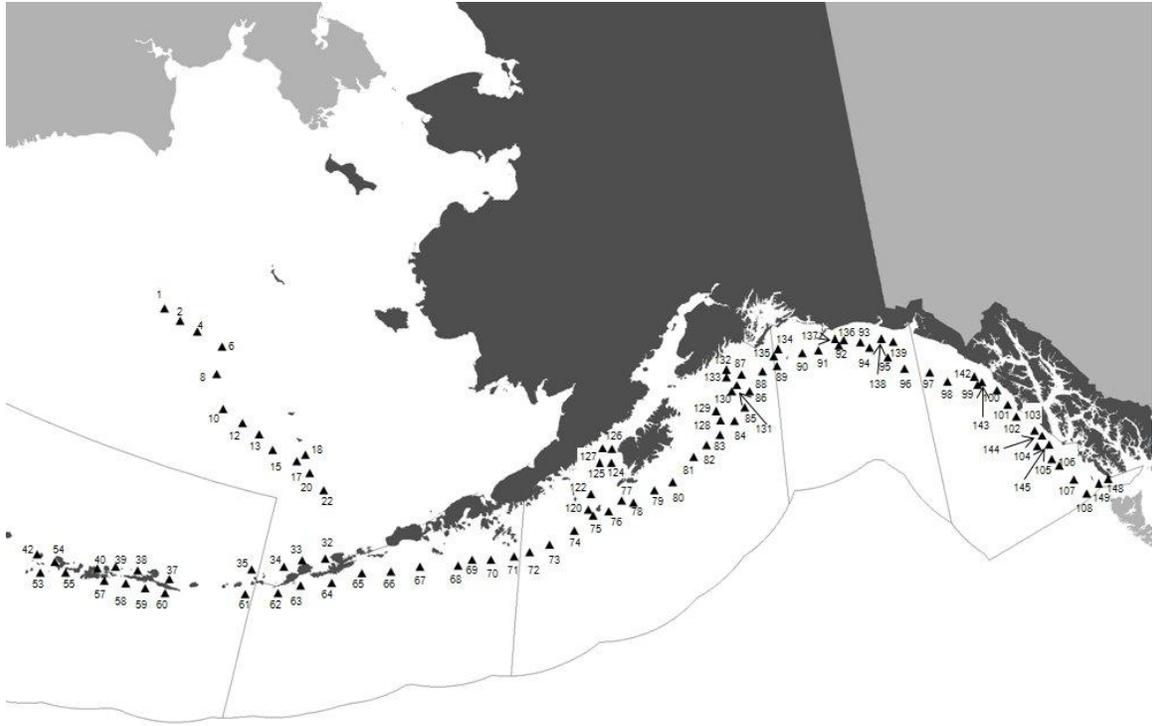


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Figure 1: NMFS sablefish longline survey stations



EBS slope stations = 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, and 22

BS non-slope stations = 32, 33, 34