

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

January 31, 2012 9am - noon
Marion Room, Renaissance Hotel, Seattle, WA

Committee: Stephanie Madsen, Dave Benton, Jon Kurland, John Iani, Jim Ayers, Diana Evans (staff)
Others present included: Chris Rooper, Bob Foy (teleconference), Sarah Melton, Gerald Hoff, John Olson, Matt Eagleton, Jon Warrenchuk, Steve MacLean, Heather Brandon, Jackie Dragon

C-4(b) Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) – Initial Review

The Committee received a presentation from Sarah Melton, Dr. Gerald Hoff, Matt Eagleton, and John Olson, on the initial review draft for designating areas of skate egg concentration as HAPC. Several elements of the analysis were discussed with the presenters, including what is known about the role of skates in local ecosystems, and the respective socioeconomic impact and skate production estimate (by individual species) for each site, which allow the reader to evaluate tradeoffs of HAPC protection measures. The presenters clarified that the analysis of VMS tracks to identify whether fishing is occurring in discrete areas has advanced since the development of the Aleutian Islands Habitat Conservation Area, and now provides a reliable tool for documenting where observed effort is occurring. The Committee noted that staff had addressed the Committee and Council's previous recommendations on the structure of the analysis in the initial review draft. **The Committee recommends that the analysis be released for public review.**

C-4(c) Bristol Bay Red King Crab EFH discussion paper

The Committee received a presentation on the revised discussion paper from Diana Evans and Dr Robert Foy, and discussed the two issues identified in the paper. The Committee commends staff for the work that has been presented in the discussion paper. With respect to the first issue, the methodology for evaluating the effects of fishing on crab EFH, the Committee expressed differing viewpoints. The Committee agreed with the Crab Plan Team that the fishing effects conclusions should probably be unknown across the board, rather than a "minimal, temporary, or no effect" conclusion in some instances, given what is unknown about the factors that influence crab life history. The discussion paper includes specific suggestions for improving the methodology for the evaluation of fishing effects on crab EFH, but the tools are not yet ready to implement such an analysis at this time. The Committee differed with respect to how the Council should move forward on this issue. While one member felt strongly that the FMP should be revised to formally acknowledge this change in understanding, others felt that the 2010 EFH 5-year review and the discussion paper provide sufficient documentation, and that the agency's efforts should instead be prioritized to continue developing the necessary tools to allow for an improved methodology for evaluating the effects of fishing on crab EFH as part of the next EFH 5-year review that will be ready for 2015.

The Committee also discussed the second issue in the discussion paper, namely the importance of protecting ovigerous female red king crab in southwestern Bristol Bay, particularly in the area southwest of Amak Island, in order to protect EFH for larvae drifting along the Alaska Peninsula. At the last meeting at which this discussion paper was presented, the Committee and Council also asked for a broader discussion of the efficacy of the red king crab closure areas to protect crab habitat and reduce bycatch. The discussion paper suggests that southwestern Bristol Bay is important to the crab population during cold years, when female crab are pushed out of the colder temperatures into this area. There is some evidence to support this theory, but it has not been conclusively proven. A nearshore survey in 2012 will provide some additional evidence, but in order to prove the hypothesis, a large scale survey would be needed, which is not foreseen within the current Federal budget. The Committee discussed what information would be useful for the Council to have, in order to consider whether to take action. The Committee discussed the original purpose of the existing red king crab closures, and whether the changing distribution in colder temperature regimes may make them less effective. The Committee noted that it may be useful to consider adaptive management measures that cater to

animals with a fluctuating range. An example on the east coast was cited, where protection measures for right whales vary based on their distribution from year to year.

The Committee recognizes that the issue of protecting red king crab habitat is important, including whether existing closures adequately protect that habitat. There is also, however, a broader issue of protecting adult and juvenile crab, and the efficacy of existing closures for minimizing bycatch, especially in cold versus warm years. **Consequently, the Committee recommends that the Council direct staff to expand the discussion paper to consider the efficacy of current closure areas considering new data regarding red king crab distribution, and not to limit it to the issue that was raised in the EFH 5-year review. The Committee recommends that the discussion paper include conceptual management approaches the Council might want to consider to address potential risks to crab recruitment in cold versus warm years. The paper should include options for dynamic management in response to projections of whether the coming year will be cold or warm, or other measures such as differential bycatch controls to protect female crab, or seasonal closures.**

Dr Foy informed the Committee that preliminary data from the 2012 nearshore survey should be available in the fall, and could be analyzed with respect to this particular issue for the December Council meeting. **The Committee therefore recommends that the expanded discussion paper be brought back to the Council in December as well,** so that this issue can be reevaluated by the Council.

C-4(d) NOAA's Deep Sea Coral Research Plan

The Committee received a report from Dr Chris Rooper, of the NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center, on the Alaska Coral and Sponge Initiative that was begun in FY2012. NOAA is sponsoring a three-year field research program in the Alaska region for deep sea coral and sponges, in order to better understand the location, distribution, ecosystem role, and status of deep sea coral and sponge habitats. Dr Rooper provided information on the eleven projects that are planned for the initiative, which include: developing a coral habitat map for the GOA and AI, and a geologically interpreted substrate map for Alaska; investigations of Primnoa corals in the Gulf of Alaska; estimation of the effects of commercial fixed gear fishing on coral and sponge using underwater cameras; and measurements of oxygen and pH and increased collections of coral and sponge specimens from the summer bottom trawl surveys. The Initiative is intended to result in management products that can be of utility to the Council, for example in the annual Ecosystem Assessment, the AI Fishery Ecosystem Plan, or the 2015 5-year EFH review.

The Committee discussed how these projects would interface with existing research in Alaska, and learned that the fieldwork is intended to build on existing efforts. The Committee also suggested some additional contact persons for further developing some of the research projects. **The Committee asked Dr Rooper to continue to update the Committee as fieldwork proceeds, and preliminary management products are developed.**

Other business

As has been raised at previous meetings, the Committee noted that comprehensive ecosystem-based management approaches are being developed and undertaken through the country, and the world. **The Committee would like to schedule a meeting to receive presentations and information relative to the practice of ecosystem-based management both in the US and internationally, in order to provide potential recommendations to the Council about any ecosystem approaches that might be applicable.** If the Council is amenable to this proposal, the Committee would consider scheduling this meeting sometime in the spring or summer.