

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

February 5, 2013 8:30am – 1pm
Parliament Room 3-4, Benson Hotel, Portland, OR

Committee: Stephanie Madsen, Jim Ayers, Dave Benton, David Fluharty, Steve Ignell, Jon Kurland, Diana Evans (staff)

Others attending included: Melanie Brown, Merrick Burden, Karla Busch, Nancy Dietz, Jackie Dragon, Matt Eagleton, Bob Foy, John Gauvin, John Hendershedt, John Hocevar, Tony Keene, Linda Kozak, Steve MacLean, Sarah Melton, Corey Niles, Chris Oliver, John Olson, Donna Parker, Chris Rooper, Julie Spiegel, Fan Tsao, Bill Tweit, Jon Warrenchuk, Ed Weiss, Stephani Zador

C-1(b) Bristol Bay Red King Crab Discussion Paper

The Committee received a presentation on the current draft of the discussion paper from Diana Evans and Dr Robert Foy. The paper provides an update on research that has been initiated to evaluate the importance of the area southwest of Amak Island as habitat for red king crab. The proposed research will yield results in 2014 to 2015, which will be reported to the Council when available. The Committee noted that one project, to develop models that predict post-larval settlement sites, is as yet, unfunded (it has been submitted to NPRB) and encourages Council support for this proposal. The other issue addressed in the discussion paper reports on the Council's request for staff to evaluate the efficacy of existing red king crab protection measures, given the changing distribution of the population. The Committee recognizes that the scope of this evaluation is larger than originally anticipated, and needs to involve input from additional AFSC and NOAA scientists with different types of expertise.

The Committee remains convinced that closure efficacy evaluation continues to be important, and **the Committee recommends that the Council task the evaluation of protection measures for red king crab as a comprehensive package.** The Committee supports the habitat research and model development that is being undertaken to address the Amak issue, and **recommends that the Council maintain the linkage between this work and the evaluation of the efficacy of existing closures,** as well as the reconsideration of red king crab PSC limits if that moves forward (currently tasked as a separate action). The Committee understands that this may mean some delay of the closure and PSC limit evaluations, given that the research is not expected to produce results until 2014 or 2015. To date, however, no conservation issues have been identified with respect to these evaluations that require immediate urgency. This longer timeframe may accommodate the ability of Council and agency staff to address the larger analytical scope involved in evaluating the closures, as described in the paper. Certainly, if the Crab Plan Team identifies a pressing conservation issue for red king crab, the timing of this analysis could be reconsidered by the Council.

One reason that the Committee supports further work on evaluating all aspects of red king crab protection measures is the opportunity this provides as a case study for developing adaptive management tools in the North Pacific. Given the changing distribution of crab in warm versus cold years, the habitat research and the re-evaluation of closures offer progressive opportunities to consider how environmental triggers can be incorporated directly into management. The Committee suggests that analytical work should proceed on multiple fronts, for example, investigating both climatic or other predictions that might form the basis of a trigger for additional regulatory action, as well as economic aspects of the best mechanism to change the behavior of the fleet, for the protection of red king crab.

EFH Consultation on Norton Sound Gold Mining

The Committee received a briefing on NMFS' EFH consultations with the Corps of Engineers Regulatory Division (COE) on Norton Sound mining activity, from Matt Eagleton and Dr Robert Foy. There are two issues that NMFS is concerned about. First, an exploratory permit has been issued for a large scale

commercial dredging operation in deeper (60 ft) water in Norton Sound, close to the 3nm State water boundary, and NMFS considers it likely that a follow-up permit will be at some point be requested to begin commercial dredging in this area. Second, the popularity of smaller scale, 'recreational' dredging has increased substantially, with many new permits being requested and issued by the COE. In the past, the COE has followed NMFS' and ADFG's advice, and included an EFH stipulation on these permits, which prevented dredging in waters deeper than 20 feet. A couple of years ago NMFS modified its advice and began recommending that the COE prohibit dredging in waters deeper than 30 feet. This stipulation was based on research indicating that while there is some evidence of structure forming organisms in shallower waters, natural disturbance in shallow habitats due to storms and ice scour is common and the scale of dredging operations was not considered to be sufficient to affect red king crab at the population level, although individual habitat areas could be damaged. In deeper waters (e.g., over 50 feet), the increase in presence and diversity of such benthic organisms presents more serious risks for damaging biogenic habitat for crab. The COE has, however, rejected NMFS' advice and determined that the EFH stipulation was based on assessing the impact of large scale dredging operations, and is not applicable to smaller, 'recreational' dredging gear. The COE has also not responded to NMFS' concerns for the agency to consider the cumulative impacts of the increase in the scale of mining activity resulting from the number of recreational permits that are being issued.

The Committee recommends that the Council take two actions to address these concerns. **First, the Council could task the Crab Plan Team with reviewing this issue at their next meeting**, and providing further input on the implications of mining activity for Norton Sound red king crab. **Secondly, the Committee recommends that the Council exercise its authority, under Section 305 of the MSA, to comment directly to the COE on its concerns with respect to the permitting of commercial mining operations in waters deeper than 30 feet in Norton Sound, as well as the cumulative impacts of the increasing scale of recreational mining activity in the area.** The letter could recommend to the COE that both of these issues be fully scoped out by the agency, as and when it considers permitting the commercial dredging operation further offshore, and that this scoping process should factor in to the decision of whether the appropriate analysis to support such a permit is an EA or an EIS. The Council could include a recommendation that the COE engage actively with communities around Norton Sound in their scoping, and also involve the Council. The Committee additionally recognizes the role of ADFG in these considerations, as partners in managing the crab fisheries. The Committee understands that ADFG biologists participated in a recent meeting organized by NMFS on this subject, supporting NMFS' concerns about disturbance in habitats deeper than 30 feet.

NOAA's Deep Sea Coral Strategic Plan

Fan Tsao provided a briefing on the NOAA Deep Sea Coral Strategic Plan, and the Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program based at headquarters. The plan highlights the MSA authorities that are available to Councils interested in protecting deep sea corals, and also models recommendations about managing bottom-tending gear impacts on the Council's 2005 closure areas established in the Aleutian Islands. The Committee was interested in the Program's project to develop a database of all known coral location records, and discussed the process for how external data, such as the recent Greenpeace data on the Bering Sea canyons, would be incorporated into the database alongside NOAA data. The Program also funds rotating fieldwork in the regions, currently including Alaska (see below).

Alaska Coral and Sponge Initiative – Report on first year of fieldwork

The Committee received a report from Dr Chris Rooper, of the NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center, on the Alaska Coral and Sponge Initiative (AKCSI) that was begun in FY2012. Fieldwork was conducted last year as part of NOAA's three-year field research program in the Alaska region for deep sea coral and sponges. Dr Rooper provided an update on the fieldwork that has occurred with respect to the ten projects that are included in 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 AKCSI 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.

In discussion with the Committee, Dr Rooper also provided some information on NMFS' parallel project to develop a discussion paper on Bering Sea canyons, responsive to the Council's request. While some AKCSI and other NMFS fieldwork has occurred in parts of the canyons, the AKCSI effort itself is not specifically focused on the canyons. The Committee asked whether the MSA authority is specific to deep sea corals (not sponges), although the Alaska research project focuses on both. Dr Rooper and Ms Tsao noted that this is correct, but due to the co-occurrence of sponges with corals, and the fact that they frequently serve a similar habitat function for fish species, it is expedient to include both groups in research efforts. The Committee thanked Dr Rooper for his continued updates, and looks forward to the results of the research.

Status of Petition to List 43 Coral Species under the ESA

Jon Kurland provided an update on the status of NMFS' response to the petition to list coral species under the ESA, and whether there is enough information to initiate a status review. The response has been prepared by the Alaska Region, and is currently in review at headquarters. Mr Kurland noted that he expects the response to be released fairly soon.

Aleutian Islands Risk Assessment

Lt Tony Kenne provided a brief overview of the Aleutian Islands risk assessment report as well as the current phase of the process, to identify practical measures to mitigate identified risks. The report focuses on traffic on the great circle route, which primarily transits through Unimak Pass. The Committee discussed how preparedness and response capability is being considered in the current phase, to address the vulnerability of AI fisheries and communities, and noted that there are fishery representatives on the risk assessment advisory panel. The Committee also noted that increases in shipping activity, a trend noted in the report, has been identified as a concern in the Council's AI FEP, and noted that it is important to continue tracking these issues.

Report on Ecosystem SAFE

The Committee received a presentation from Dr Stephani Zador on AFSC ecosystem efforts, now captured within the NOAA Integrated Ecosystem Assessment approach. Dr Zador reported on the Ecosystem SAFE, and specifically the development of the Aleutian Islands ecosystem assessment as part of the annual SAFE. The Committee was particularly interested in how the AI ecosystem assessment builds on work in the Council's AI FEP with respect to refining indicators and issues of concern, and discussed the considerable difference in the availability of information for the AI compared to the Bering Sea. The Committee appreciated the presentation, and intends to request more regular updates from Dr Zador in the future.

Ecosystem-based Management Planning

The Committee continued its discussions from previous meetings about how best to engage in a broader discussion about other ecosystem-based management approaches that may be applicable in the North Pacific. It was noted that the planned Committee workshop, to review best practices nationally or internationally, had been delayed. In part, this was because of two ongoing proceedings from which the Committee hopes to benefit, namely the national ecosystem discussions planned as part of the Managing Our Nation's Fisheries 3 conference in May 2013, and a report being developed by the NOAA Ecosystem Science and Management

Working Group on ecosystem-based fishery management best practices within NMFS. The Committee was scheduled to receive a briefing on the latter issue at this meeting, but due to technical difficulties with teleconferencing, Dr Fluharty was unable to provide this briefing to the Committee.

The Committee reflected on the Council's history of leadership with respect to ecosystem-based management, noting that many of the items discussed on their agenda at this meeting (e.g., coral protection, AI FEP) are representative of pioneering action taken by the Council, which has since been modeled in other parts of the nation. The Committee's discussion focused on the need to identify other available opportunities for the Council to continue that leadership in the future. The Committee sees the need to consider both advances in the concept of ecosystem-based management, and challenges to its implementation. Integrating ecosystem-based management with science needs, in a way that is relevant to overall management, is an ongoing issue of importance. There are also national-level discussions on EBM, to which the Council may want to react.

Some specific, strategic opportunities for the Council may be available through further refinement of the AI FEP, or continued work with respect to the Arctic FMP, and changing conditions in the Arctic. With respect to the Council's immediate workload, the Committee may also be of use as the Council considers action on Bering Sea canyons, or the implications of fishing interactions with deep sea corals (especially if the agency determines that a status review is merited) and perhaps other emerging ESA conflicts. As discussed above, the issue of red king crab protection, and consideration of adaptive management tools, is also a potential case study for linking developing environmental science with management action.

The Committee suggests that these types of discussions could feed into a long-term, strategic planning exercise for the Council. The Council might engage in this type of strategic planning through revisions to the PSEIS, depending on the outcome of the planned Supplemental Information Report, or through another mechanism. Either way, **the Committee suggests that the Council task the Committee with developing a draft workplan of next steps for moving forward with these ecosystem issues, for consideration at the Council's October Council meeting.**