

Coral Committee Report
October 22, 2018
Dr. Tom Frazer, Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda and added one item under other business and approved the minutes.

Analysis of VMS and ELB Information for Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Expansion

Staff presented the Committee with an analysis of the fishing activity within the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Expansion areas that it requested at the August 2018 meeting. Staff also highlighted that the Council's previous recommendations were a tiered approach for fishing regulations, an endorsement to fish in the Sanctuary, and mooring buoys on the banks. If the FGBNMS chooses the Sanctuary Advisory Council's (SAC) recommended boundaries, the tiered approach no longer makes sense as the no activity zones outlined in the Council's recommendations are mostly less than one mile different from the new proposed boundaries. Historically, bandit rig gear has been used on every bank, but activity with other fishing gear appears limited. Bright Bank had several spearfishing points.

Mr. Schmahl clarified that the Final Environmental Impact Statement is still in progress but that it is anticipated a proposed rule would publish in May 2019. Mr. Schmahl also clarified that bandit rig gear would still be an allowable gear type. Staff will prepare a letter outlining the Council's support for the new SAC boundary recommendations as well as the fishing regulations within these areas that would allow spearfishing in the expanded area.

Other Business

The Committee requested an update on the Golden Crab EFP that was reviewed at the April, 2018 Council meeting. NMFS stated that the fishing area described in the Federal Register for this EFP is different than the area described in the original proposal because of concern about potential interactions with sperm whales in the original proposed area. NMFS also stated that the current proposed fishing area encompasses some coral HAPCs, but the golden crab fishery would be required to avoid these areas as part of the EFP.

This concludes my report.