

**Habitat Protection and Restoration Committee Report  
October 24, 2022  
Mr. Bob Gill, Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab P, No. 1**) and approved the minutes (**Tab P, No. 2**) of the June 2022 meeting as written.

***Essential Fish Habitat Generic Amendment (Tab P, No. 4a and b; Tab B, No. 10a)***

Council staff has been developing a webtool to support comparison analysis of alternatives proposed in a Generic Amendment to update the Council's EFH descriptions for finfish and shrimp. During this process, a number of complications have been identified by Council staff, Southeast Regional Office staff, and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). These complications affect the visual accuracy of EFH descriptions and require further investigation. Council staff has determined that further engagement with state and regional habitat division offices is required to improve the spatial habitat data layers being incorporated in the webtool. Dr. Sean Powers (SSC representative) reported that the SSC was supportive of exploring novel approaches to describing EFH in the Gulf and the development of an EFH webtool. However, the SSC agreed that further investigation of the available spatial habitat feature layers, to address identified informational gaps, was warranted before finalization of the webtool.

The Committee inquired about the feasibility of updating the EFH descriptions in the tool as new data are made available. Council staff replied that the webtool would be updated as 5-year EFH reviews were completed. Staff continued that textual descriptions would continue to function as the formalized description of EFH and could be updated as required. A Committee member pointed out that an area off of Texas had incorrectly been identified as hard bottom in 2005 and was visualized in the webtool; however, more contemporary habitat data layers for hard bottom had been updated to remove this area in 2010. Council staff expressed appreciation for the comment and reiterated that this example justified the need to engage partners with habitat expertise to help improve the tool. Next steps will require obtaining more accurate habitat information and updating both the SSC and Council as work on the webtool continues.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.