

Habitat Protection and Restoration Committee Report
June 22, 2021
Mr. Patrick Banks, Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab P, No. 1**) as written and approved the minutes (**Tab P, No. 2**) of the April 2021 meeting as written.

Draft Options: Generic Essential Fish Habitat Amendment (Tab P, No. 4a-e)

Council staff provided a presentation to review the definition and concepts of essential fish habitat (EFH). After the completion of the Council’s 5-year review in 2016, the SERO Habitat Division provided several recommendations to the Council’s EFH policy including updating the identifications and descriptions of EFH using more contemporary data sources. EFH for all managed species has not been modified since 2006. Council staff reviewed the current method used to identify and describe EFH and introduced two other modeling approaches that could be used to describe EFH for species and life stages where sufficient data were available. Council staff also provided an overview of the proposed draft action and alternatives to update EFH for all managed species. Efforts to complete the amendment and fulfill the requirements for the 2021 5-year review will be combined with the goal of finalizing the document in late 2022.

A Committee member inquired as to what data sources would be used to generate the benthic habitat maps described in Alternative 2. Council staff indicated that those data sources had not been finalized yet and further discussion with the Interdisciplinary Planning Team and input from the Statistical and Scientific Committee (SSC) would be required before making a final determination. The Committee asked for clarification about considering establishing Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) in the document. Mr. David Dale stated that the Council has traditionally only considered HAPCs for coral. Mr. Andy Strelcheck inquired if exploration of more comprehensive modeling approaches for describing EFH could be completed within the proposed timeline. Dr. John Froeschke stated it would be helpful to have continued guidance from SERO regarding the proposed timeline for the document. He also stated that identifying appropriate habitat data sources and generating habitat maps would serve as a starting point for investigating the different approaches. The Committee instructed Council staff to present the proposed methodologies to the SSC at its next meeting and continue working with SERO and its Habitat Division on the document. Council staff will provide a progress report to the Committee at the August Council meeting.

Discussion Session of President Biden’s E.O. 14008: Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad (Tab P, No. 5a and 5b)

Mr. Sam Rauch gave a presentation providing an overview of a recently completed preliminary report addressing Executive Order (E.O.) 14008 titled “Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful”. The overarching goal of the initiative is to conserve 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. Mr. Rauch introduced the project’s core principles, areas of focus, collaborators, and reviewed the proposed next steps.

A Committee member commented that considerations for conserving lands is not directly analogous to conserving waters as human development on the water is considerably less relative to land. Ms. Bosarge suggested that considerations for conserving waters focus on access between land and waters. She reported that areas where large commercial vessels can dock is dwindling and that this access is important for supporting often underserved stakeholders in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Committee inquired as to why a conservation goal of 30% was set. Mr. Rauch stated that percentage was close to a previously published estimate of 40% from an international study of conservation needs. He also stated that the International Union for Conservation of Nature had reported that the U.S was currently conserving approximately 26% of U.S. waters. However, he stressed that 30% was not reflective of an idealized accomplishment but rather an actionable objective that will help spur progress towards conservation by engaging a variety of stakeholders. The Committee was interested in whether established and enhanced (i.e. artificial reefs) areas would be included in the calculation of the 30% goal. Mr. Rauch indicated that a definition for conservation had not yet been determined for the initiative. He stated it would be possible for previously identified and restored conservation areas to be included.

The Council Coordination Committee (CCC) has established an Area Based Management subcommittee to address the E.O. Dr. Froeschke provided an update on the subcommittee's first meeting. He stated that the subcommittee has begun developing terms of reference and compiling a list of conservation areas. This list would be used to generate a reference atlas and would mostly report areas within the Exclusive Economic Zone rather than state closures and migratory corridor areas. Mr. Rauch commented he was happy that the CCC would be involved in the process but he was not sure how the timing for the outcomes of the CCC subcommittee and the NMFS timeline would align.

Section 216 (c): Conserving our Nation's Lands and Waters (Tab P, No. 6a and 6b)

Council staff reviewed the results of solicited public comment on E.O. Section 216 (c) and presented a draft recommendation letter that will be submitted in response to the E.O. The draft letter highlighted recurring themes on conserving waters and considerations for socioeconomic factors from the previous Committee meeting, other fishery management regions, state agencies, and the general public. The Committee requested some time to evaluate the draft and provide feedback to staff before formal submission.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.