

Council Coordination Committee - Habitat Workgroup

Achievements and Future Directions

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The Council Coordination Committee's Habitat Workgroup (CCC-HWG) was established in 2014 as a standing committee of the CCC, to provide a forum for Fishery Management Council and NMFS Regional Office staff to discuss habitat science needs and implementation strategies, to share regional updates and perspectives, and to address concerns benefiting from broad group experience. Priorities identified initially include the following topics:

- approaches, criteria, and authorities to designate Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs);
- aspects of conservation and management included in each Council/Region's EFH reviews;
- potential MSA reauthorization and implications;
- information needed to establish baseline and evaluate habitat and conditions;
- strategy for Council coordination with NMFS HQ and Regional Offices on EFH, as well as Fishery Science Centers and partners on habitat issues and research needs;
- discussion of methods to address issues beyond fishing gears (e.g., anchoring);
- how practicability analyses are addressed in each region; and
- how deep-sea coral protection is addressed in each region.

The CCC-HWG holds a 90-minute conference call, three or four times a year, to engage Council and NMFS staff in discussions that share expertise and compare regional issues. The Chairmanship of the CCC-HWG rotates among the Councils, in coordination with the Chairmanship of the CCC.

Accomplishments

The quarterly teleconference discussions are a major benefit to CCC-HWG members, which promote opportunities for collaboration and sharing of ideas. In addition, the workgroup has also been involved in the following projects and activities.

1. **EFH Summit:** In May 2016, in recognition of the 20-year anniversary of the Sustainable Fisheries Act that inserted EFH provisions in the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the NMFS Office of Habitat Conservation and Office of Science & Technology convened habitat experts to assess and identify opportunities, challenges, and successful approaches for effective implementation of Magnuson-Stevens Act EFH authorities. The CCC provided input, and the CCC-HWG supplied momentum, steering committee membership, and planning and logistical support for the EFH Summit. NOAA and the Councils have described EFH for multiple life stages of nearly 1,000 federally managed species, and designated more than 100 HAPCs over the past 20 years. Every five years, each Council evaluates EFH information within Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) and new habitat information is synthesized to determine whether changes to FMPs are warranted.

Workgroup members cite this event as an extremely productive forum for collaboration and communication, as well as an effective venue to assess the history of EFH implementation experience, ideas, and approaches across regions. It was also a critical step in furthering development of effective methods to minimize adverse effects and integrate habitat into ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM), as well as in considering how EFH authorities may respond to a changing environment. The Summit Report is available [here](#).

2. **Regional HAPC designation:** A [report](#) prepared by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (May 2016) provides information on current objectives and methods for identification of HAPCs and critical fish habitat areas in each region of the U.S. The report synthesizes regional experiences of implementing the HAPC provision, communicates habitat research and conservation priorities, and links habitat protection with fishery management objectives and ecosystem resilience. Case studies also describe the role of HAPCs in reducing adverse impacts from anthropogenic activities. The CCC-HWG facilitated report writing and editing since members provided content and reviewed the resulting report.
3. **Habitat science coordination:** The CCC-HWG provides a venue for Council and Regional Office staff to engage Science Center researchers on the latest science to support FMP development. The workgroup supports integration of habitat into EBFM, as habitat science is at the core of effective ecosystem management but may not always be fully integrated when the Science Centers, Councils, and Regions are not working closely together. The Workgroup provides a forum that reaches beyond regional boundaries, and allows researchers the opportunity to coordinate with others who are facing or have faced similar challenges, and to think about the broader context.
4. **Habitat management coordination:** The CCC-HWG quarterly meetings provide an opportunity for cross-regional connection on federal habitat initiatives, requirements, implementation tools/techniques, and opportunities for headquarters support. Topics of discussion are driven by Council staff workgroup members, with logistical assistance from the Office of Habitat Conservation.
5. **Sharing priorities:** The CCC-HWG maintains a comparison of regional research plans, priorities, and common themes and needs for EFH research among the Councils. The CCC-HWG creates a framework for managers and scientists to join sub-groups to focus on specific obstacles, opportunities, methods, and strategies across regions.
6. **Deep-sea coral protection:** The CCC-HWG is currently documenting the various authorities available to protect deep-sea coral, along with a comparison of approaches, considerations, benefits, and costs to the mechanisms used by each Council to manage these resources.

Future Directions

The CCC-HWG is set up as a standing committee of the CCC, and according to the CCC Terms of Reference, reports back to the CCC at each annual meeting. During the first years of its establishment, a primary focus of the CCC-HWG was to help with the development of the EFH Summit, which was realized in May 2016. Since that time, the Workgroup has discussed several important topics, and Council and Regional staff have benefitted from connecting with fellow habitat staff across the country.

In preparation for the 2018 report to the CCC, however, there has been discussion within the workgroup about how best to move forward. While there continues to be value in quarterly discussion on topics as they arise, there is also an opportunity to organize the collective efforts of staff around the country to address one or more specific habitat-related objectives. As with the EFH Summit, there is a momentum that comes from focusing on a specific topic area in order to prepare for a specified outcome. As such, the CCC-HWG is seeking feedback from the CCC regarding the following possible choices for its continuance.

- Option 1: Status Quo. Continue holding CCC-HWG teleconferences three to four times a year, with discussions focused on items raised ad-hoc by the workgroup members. Identify and develop opportunities for coordination and collaboration.

Option 2: Targeted objective. Building on next step opportunities raised at the EFH Summit, identify a key focus area to work on for the next 1-2 years to bring together habitat scientists and managers at the Councils and NMFS. Such a topic could be the foundation of an in-person workshop of habitat-related Council and NMFS staff (and others), and a workshop report. The CCC-HWG has discussed two different objectives that may be relevant to pursue:

- Improving the integration of habitat science into stock assessment
- Making EFH designations effective for non-fishing impacts consultations

Option 3: Disband the CCC-HWG. If the CCC believes that the main function of the Workgroup was to prepare for the EFH Summit, the CCC-HWG would be disbanded. Collaboration could still, of course, occur among individuals within the habitat network.

The CCC-HWG membership continues to find the Workgroup quarterly discussions to be useful, but also sees the benefit of having a targeted objective around which to organize its efforts. As such, **the CCC-HWG recommends Option 2 as the preferred way forward, if supported by the CCC.** A specific focus, leading to a workshop, would provide the opportunity for managers and scientists to “roll up the sleeves” and actively address opportunities and recommendations identified at the 2016 EFH Summit. Council and NMFS staff would be able to identify efficiencies and opportunities for synergies to provide the best available data for Councils to make management policy decisions.

The workshop is envisioned as a working opportunity for a smaller number of attendees, rather than the higher-level policy discussion that occurred at the EFH Summit. The EFH Summit identified opportunities and priorities; the workshop will identify methods and recommendations for application. If the workshop model proves successful, the CCC-HWG could identify other objectives that could be considered for future workshop agendas.

A short, initial outline of two different CCC-HWG targeted objectives follows. If the CCC endorses this option at the May meeting, the CCC-HWG would develop a specific workplan and goals and objectives to culminate in the workshop.

Idea: Improving the integration of habitat science into stock assessment

Although habitat and fish stocks are inextricably linked, there has remained a certain disconnect between habitat science and other aspects of fisheries management. In stock assessments, habitat-mediated factors including catchability and species distribution can strongly influence estimates of population dynamics and the efficacy of fisheries management decisions, but habitat is not explicitly accounted for in most assessment models. Ultimately, stock assessment science and management can inform habitat science and management (and vice-versa).

As discussed at the EFH Summit, there have been recent advances in habitat science to support EFH designations. NMFS is implementing a strategy (the Habitat Assessment Improvement Plan (HAIP)), which includes developing more robust assessments from scientifically sound management of marine fisheries and their associated habitats. The HAIP established goals to: 1) reduce habitat-related uncertainty in stock assessments, and 2) create a scientific framework for improving the identification of EFH. Since publication of the HAIP, habitat assessments have been developed for several species, and National Habitat Assessment Workshops (NHAWs) have been convened to identify priorities and develop a community of habitat scientists and managers. NOAA's habitat scientists have also focused on improving EFH information so as to base EFH designation not just on presence/absence data, but rather on an understanding of species density, vital rates, and/or productivity.

To support the application of recent advances in habitat science, the CCC-HWG is proposing an objective to improve integration of habitat science and stock assessment. This would involve an effort to reach out to stock assessment scientists and improve communication to facilitate joint data sharing and an understanding of how the data may fit together. The effort could include prioritizing resources, and identifying data gaps and ways to address them. This would build on discussions from the EFH summit about how to integrate habitat with ecosystem-based fisheries management, and understanding EFH within a changing environment.

Potential objectives of the CCC-HWG effort and ultimate workshop:

- Identify habitat-related data and data products that could enhance NMFS' assessment science.
- Identify mechanisms to make data and data products available to assessment scientists.
- Discuss the use of ecosystem models to inform decision making at multiple scales and in a changing environment.
- Develop standards, as appropriate, for collection, analysis, and distribution of habitat-related data as they relate to assessment science.

Idea: Designing EFH designations that are effective for use in non-fishing consultations

The offshore environment is an increasingly busy space, with numerous activities and stakeholders besides commercial and recreational fishing. These include: (1) renewable and non-renewable energy development, including surveys, offshore installations, transmission lines and terminals; (2) sand and gravel mining and associated shoreline engineering projects; (3) shipping, including necessary port development, dredging, and infrastructure upgrades; (4) military training and testing activities; and (5) coastal development in general.

The Councils and NMFS comment on federally-permitted activities in these spheres, in part because of Magnuson-Stevens Act EFH consultation provisions. The EFH Summit emphasized the importance of EFH consultations as a mechanism for strengthening relationships among Federal partners, and advancing habitat conservation interests. However, EFH designations might not be designed with these types of consultations in mind, or at least could be better tailored to these needs. For example, designations based primarily on federal fishery independent surveys may not capture critical nearshore habitats, where non-fishing vs. fishing impacts are of greater concern. Or, given their regional spatial scale, EFH designations may not have adequate spatial resolution along the coast, where non-fishing project footprints are likely on the scales of meters or kilometers.

A targeted objective to evaluate EFH designation as it relates to consultations on non-fishing impacts could help to implement the EFH Summit conclusion that EFH practitioners should seek collaborations between the regions and action agencies through better communication of key interests, and identify opportunities to share conservation approaches across regions.

Potential objectives of the CCC-HWG effort and ultimate workshop:

- Explore what the challenges have been in using EFH designations for consultations on non-fishing projects.
- Identify common data formats and data management best practices to help improve interstate data synthesis by state and federal management agencies.
- Identify ways to improve upon designations of both EFH and HAPC to better underscore the locations and characteristics of important habitats in a non-fishing impacts context, particularly at a finer spatial scale. For example, explore map designation methods for inshore areas in particular to better identify important coastal habitats.