

NEW ENGLAND FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Habitat/Marine Protected Areas/Ecosystems

I. STATUS

Meetings:

Plan Development Team: The Plan Development Team continues work on a tool that will allow the Council to evaluate the impacts of fishing on EFH (i.e. the methods for Phase II of the EFH Omnibus Amendment). Please note that the name of this tool has been changed from the 'Fishing Gear Seabed Impact (FiGSI) model' to the 'Swept Area Seabed Impact (SASI) model'. Previously, including during the SSC review in March, SASI referred only to the portion of the analysis that converted all bottom-tending fishing effort data to a common area swept currency.

The PDT met on May 28-29 in Woods Hole, MA to discuss progress towards completing all three components of SASI: the swept area estimates, the spatial model, and the vulnerability assessment. The team continues to refine the spatial model and work is ongoing to convert all fishing effort to area swept. A particular focus of the meeting was to summarize and discuss model assumptions.

The team is also working to finalize the methods for and then complete the matrix-based vulnerability assessment. Each matrix in the vulnerability assessment evaluates susceptibility to and recovery from gear impacts at a feature level, is specified by gear type and substrate, and allows for separate estimates of recovery by energy environment. Habitat features are grouped into geological, biological (structure forming), and prey habitat components. In the coming weeks the team will be finishing individual evaluations of the vulnerability of geological and biological habitat features to all gear types, and starting individual evaluations of the vulnerability of the prey habitat features to all gear types. At the next PDT meeting, the team will finalize these values and determine overall susceptibility and recovery for each habitat component for each gear type/substrate/energy combination. The results of the matrix assessments will then be used to scale fishing effort according to the vulnerability of geological and biological seabed habitat components.

Committee: The Habitat Committee met on April 23 in Portsmouth, NH to discuss (1) the SSC's review of SASI, (2) the integration of geological and biological habitat components in the vulnerability assessment, (3) the timeline for completion of Phase II. The committee also reviewed some preliminary model results. The Committee would like to meet next after the PDT completes work on the SASI model. At this next meeting, the Committee plans to review results for the complete analysis and begin discussing alternatives to minimize the effects of fishing on EFH.

In addition to discussing SASI, the committee briefly discussed winter flounder egg/larval EFH, and also the FEIS for the Cape Wind Energy project. The PDT Chair reported a meeting with the inspector general overseeing the review of the Cape Wind EIS. The inspector was investigating the extent to which Minerals Management Service had responded to comments made between the draft and final EIS. The FEIS adequately addressed some of the Council's concerns (i.e. stipulating the scour control method), but did an inadequate job of addressing others (i.e. concluding fisheries impact significance absent data, some document structure issues, long-term monitoring for cable exposure). One new piece of information gained from the meeting of particular interest was the use of portable repair rigs for routine maintenance of the turbines – it seems that these could potentially have a large impact on habitat and that these impacts were not addressed in the EIS. There was consensus among the committee that this and other energy siting issues will be ongoing.

Scientific and Statistical Committee: The SSC has not met to discuss habitat-related issues since the last Council meeting. The SSC will review the SASI model once it is completed.

Advisory Panel: The Advisory Panel has not met since the last Council meeting and the next meeting has not been scheduled.

II. COUNCIL ACTION

The PDT Chair will present an overview of the Omnibus Phase II analysis (i.e. the SASI model) during the Habitat agenda item on Monday, June 22. This overview will include a summary of the methods and a discussion of how the Council might use model results to develop management alternatives. The Committee Chair will present a template letter from the Council to offshore energy project proponents.

III. INFORMATION

1. Committee meeting summary dated April 23, 2009
2. PDT meeting summary dated May 28-29, 2009 (*will be provided prior to the meeting*)
3. Template letter to offshore energy project proponents from the Council outlining concerns about impacts of projects on EFH and fishing operations (*will be provided prior to the meeting*)