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**New England Fishery Management Council
Habitat/MPA/Ecosystems Committee
July 10, 2008
Mansfield, MA**

Committee Members: Mr. David Preble (Chair), Mr. David Goethel (Vice Chair), Mr. Dennis Spitsbergen, Mr. Jim Salisbury, Mr. Lou Chiarella and Mr. Doug Grout

Council Staff: Mr. Chad Demarest (PDT Chair)

NMFS Staff: None

Others: Approximately 10 audience members

The Habitat/MPA/Ecosystems Committee met in Mansfield, MA on July 10, 2008 to discuss issues related to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS) for Phase II of the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Omnibus Amendment 2, and to discuss Council comments on both the NOAA Deep-Sea Coral and Sponge Research and Management Strategic Plan and the Stellwagon Bank National Marine Sanctuary Draft Management Plan.

Phase II Development

The PDT Chair provided an overview of the most recent PDT meeting summary and ongoing development of the Phase II Vulnerability Assessment (VA). Specifically, the categories to be used in the VA for gear type, geological structure class and biological structure class were discussed. The development of VA matrices and the relationship between these and the subsequent spatial modeling was explained as well. The PDT also requested input from the Committee on the use of a temporal baseline in the analysis, noting that separating temporal changes in fishing effects is nearly impossible due to data limitations and the prevalence of fishing throughout our data time series'.

Brad Harris of UMass/SMASST provided the Committee with an overview of the data and methods underlying the geological and biological structure data fields and their applicability in the spatial model, as well as the initial work going in to determining natural disturbance using critical shear stress calculations.

Committee discussion

One Committee member asked about the PDT's distinction between the slicing, flattening and crushing components of gear impacts and how their impacts may be calculated. The PDT Chair stated that primary literature would be used to determine the magnitude/direction of the impact, and observer data would be used to approximate the types and sizes of the gear components responsible for these impacts. Another Committee member expressed reservations with using target species to determine which trawl gear was utilized. He stated that, for example, flatfish nets may be employed on soft bottom to target cod and haddock...an activity that could be missed using the approach alluded to in the June 11, 2008 PDT report. The type of sweep employed is the driving factor in determining the impact of that particular gear, and is more specific to area than target species. The Committee Chair asked if there would be an assessment of uncertainty as a component of the VA, and the PDT Chair confirmed that there would be. The Committee briefly discussed the temporal baseline, supporting the PDT's use of the 2003 (groundfish Amendment 13 and scallop Amendment 10) as the baseline time for estimating changes in habitat impacts from fishing with the caveat that the VA would be conducted using a static and non-time-specific baseline, while fishing effort would vary over time. Therefore, the inclusion of a baseline time period is specific to the temporal variation of fishing effort and is not expected to show changes in assessment endpoints (biological structure, geological structure, prey and deep sea corals) over time or relative to this baseline.

Audience discussion

Mr. Smolowitz (Fisheries Survival Fund) reiterated the comment that the sweep was what mattered in determining gear impact for trawl gears. Also that re-suspending substrate and bottom mixing should be added to slicing, flattening and crushing as components of gear impact. Mr. Smolowitz recommended that the positive effects of the increase in shell hash be included as well.

Deep Sea Coral and Sponge Research and Management Strategic Plan

The Committee Chair summarized the Deep Sea Coral and Sponge Research and Management Strategic Plan, and took comments from the Committee and the audience to assist Staff in preparing a comments letter. Many concerns and questions were raised, all of which will be included in a comments letter being drafted by Staff prior to the July 18 2008 comments deadline and available on the Council's Habitat website after that date.

Stellwagon Bank National Marine Sanctuary Draft Management Plan

The Committee was informed that the comment period for the Draft Management Plan would most likely be extended until October 3, 2008, and noted that the Council would be preparing a formal comments letter. No further comments were made.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:45PM.