MEETING SUMMARY

Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT)
July 19, 2023
9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Agenda

The PDT met to discuss an outline for the range of Alternatives for the Northern Edge Habitat/Scallop Management Framework. The PDT also discussed principles and decision points for EFH designation revisions and preliminary habitat suitability model results for Atlantic sea scallops. The PDT identified next steps to prepare for their August meeting on these topics. The PDT will also help to prepare information to support a joint NEMFC-MAFMC SSC subpanel review of EFH methods.

Meeting attendance

PDT members included Michelle Bachman (Chair), Sharon Benjamin, Jessica Coakley, Jenny Couture, Fiona Hogan, Julia Livermore, David Packer, Sabrina Pereira, and Doug Potts. Additional Council staff attending included Jamie Cournane, Rachel Feeney, Angela Forristall, and Jonathon Peros. Invited participants included Tori Kentner (MAFMC) and Chris Haak (Monmouth University). Other attendees included Eric Reid (Council/Habitat Committee Chair), Eric Hansen (Council member), Gib Brogan (Habitat AP, Oceana), Erica Fuller (Conservation Law Foundation), Drew Minkiewicz (Habitat AP, Fisheries Survival Fund), Jenny Smith, and Sam Tolken (SBNMS).

Northern Edge Habitat-Scallop Framework

Ms. Bachman reviewed the agenda and noted upcoming meetings of the PDT (August 18), Advisory Panel (August 23), Committee (August 24), and joint SSC sub-panel (September 29).

She recapped the goal and objectives for the framework and reviewed an initial outline for the range of alternatives, which includes three actions with multiple alternatives under each:
• Action 1 – Spatial approaches to minimize impacts of fishing on vulnerable EFH
  o Alternative 1 – No action
  o Alternative 2 – Habitat protection zones within the existing habitat closure. The concept here is to identify areas with high complexity/vulnerability habitats where scallop dredging would not be authorized.
  o Alternative 3 – Buffers around habitat protection zones

• Action 2 – Define Northern Edge sea scallop rotational areas
  o Alternative 1 – No action
  o Alternative 2 – Rotational areas inside and outside CAII habitat closure
  o Alternative 3 – Rotational areas inside CAII habitat closure only

• Action 3 – Rotational program elements
  o Alternative 1 – No Action
  o Alternative 2 – Minimum Rotational Interval for Habitat Recovery
  o Alternative 3 – Fishing Mortality Targets and Carryover
  o Alternative 4 – Possession Limits
  o Alternative 5 – Seasonal Restrictions
  o Alternative 6 – Gear Restrictions
  o Alternative 7 – Target Observer Coverage Rate
  o Alternative 8 – Increase VMS Polling Rates

The group discussed that it might make more sense from an analysis standpoint to break up Action 3 into multiple actions, each with its own no action alternative. On the one hand, different program elements are naturally related to one another, but on the other, NEPA comparisons become complex when the No Action alternative involves many elements. It will be important to show how access program elements for the Northern Edge may differ compared to other rotational management areas. Jessica Coakley gave an example from the Surfclam/Ocean Quahog Excessive Shares Amendment of when MAFMC used multiple alternative suites with an impact analysis for each combined with a cumulative effects analysis for the entire program. Scallop Amendment 21 (Northern Gulf of Maine) is another good example of grouping alternatives under related but distinct actions. Council and GARFO NEPA staff will give this some more thought and will discuss next week with the Scallop PDT.

Staff explained that electronic monitoring (EM) is of interest to the Scallop AP and Committee, in multiple different contexts and to potentially address a range of issues. The Scallop PDT will be briefed on possible applications of EM to scallop fishing next week. At this time, EM approaches are not part of the alternatives outline for this action. Developing an EM program for the Northern Edge is not possible under the current timeline where final action is planned for April 2024.

Ms. Bachman noted that many of these alternatives are better developed by the Scallop PDT. The Habitat PDT will lead the development of habitat protection zones and buffers and the rotational interval. Habitat staff can also investigate seasonal issues that are not directly related to scallop yield, for example seasonality of fish and lobster habitat use and spawning, that might inform seasonal and gear restriction alternatives. In terms of habitat protection zones, we can draw from the 2008-2009 NEFSC cruise reports, BACI study reports and data, and other sources of substrate and terrain data when defining the zones. Alternatives that relate to the timing of fishing and scallop yield will have habitat implications, given that rotational access is managed...
by weight-based allocations and trip limits. This means that fishing when meat yields are better should reduce fishing effort and therefore impacts to habitat. The PDTs will work separately, with staff-to-staff collaboration, for the next couple of months, and likely will meet jointly again in early fall.

Drew Minkiewicz asked if the boundaries for the complex habitat area shown on charts presented to the PDTs and Council were firmly established. Ms. Bachman noted that it will be important for the PDT to review the boundaries given any available data, but that there is good correspondence between that boundary, based on 2008-2009 cruises, and the epifaunal contours that resulted from the BACI study (initial substrate and epifauna data collected in 2016).

Gib Brogan asked whether a long recovery interval could be considered under that alternative/action, i.e., something around 10 years (recovery occurred in ~6 years per the BACI study). Other intervals we might consider include 2-3 years, or 5-6 years. There was some agreement that this was worth considering. He also raised the issue of whether mitigation for rotational fishing impacts would be required, such that measures might need to be considered outside of the Northern Edge region. At this time, such measures are not part of the range of alternatives. Staff will continue to check in with GARFO as to approvability of the measures in the framework. It will be important to know well before final action if such mitigation measures need to be included in the action.

Overall, a challenge for this action will be to clearly describe the multiple tradeoffs and their relationships to one another so that the Council can make well-reasoned decisions on whether to allow access and what the parameters of the program should be. Staff have planned frequent check-ins with the Council to allow opportunities for feedback and avoid the need to add new alternatives and program elements late in the action’s development process.

**Essential Fish Habitat Review**

Ms. Bachman explained that PDT would continue to coordinate with MAFMC’s EFH Fishery Management Action Team (FMAT) to develop EFH designation approaches and prepare for the joint SSC sub-panel’s review of those approaches. She identified a list of EFH designation principles, which MAFMC and NEFMC staff drafted collaboratively based on discussions at a May FMAT meeting. Habitat PDT members Jenny Couture, Peter Auster, Dave Packer, and Fiona Hogan attended that meeting. The general principles are:

- Consider EFH consultation needs,
- Apply model-based approaches to maps and text,
- Consider climate change and shifting distributions,
- Focus on bounding spatial extent of EFH,
- Provide habitat use details, by lifestages,
- Emphasize connectivity between lifestages, and
- Be mindful of continuity of sampling (spatial and temporal).

The PDT suggested that developing designations that are replicable over time, and easy to explain, is another general principle.
The PDT discussed some details of offshore, model-based designations and inshore, survey-CPUE-based designations. Offshore, we can rely on the Community Basis Function Model (CBFM) results. Chris Haak noted that there are a range of approaches to evaluate model fit/performance and uncertainty, within and across models. In addition to using model outputs as a foundation for EFH maps, influential predictor variables could also be noted in the text description for EFH.

Inshore, there are multiple state and regional surveys we can consider. Some amount of standardization has been done to allow for comparison of catch per unit effort (CPUE) across surveys. The primary use of these data is to estimate the northern/southern extent of EFH inshore. Tori Kentner noted that for the inshore summaries, salinity was determined for each tow (binned according to tidal fresh, mixing, and seawater strength), and then survey CPUE was averaged across tows in that salinity category. Within a location (e.g., Delaware Bay) multiple surveys can be combined and averaged in the Data Explorer, or results from a single survey can be viewed on their own. While the salinity data are informative in understanding the species habitat associations, it likely makes sense to map an entire estuary or embayment irrespective of salinity zones, especially since we aren’t certain that salinity zone spatial distributions are constant, horizontally or vertically. Overall, communicating uncertainties and gaps in the data in space and time will be important.

Chris Haak shared preliminary habitat suitability model runs for sea scallops. Bottom stress and grain size appear to be important predictors. Staff will follow up to ensure that VIMS survey tows are included in the dataset Chris is using, since these data constitute a large portion of recent survey effort in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Scallop model outputs were produced on a 1x1 km grid. Chris noted that the model results for other species have not yet been gridded (they are currently showing predictions at each survey point location) since he is waiting on continuous optical predictor layers. In the interim, he can run depth-based models to produce pilot EFH designation maps for SSC review.

Staff will work with the MAFMC FMAT to revise the overall principles document and develop pilot red hake and monkfish designations for further discussion at next month’s PDT meeting.

**Other business**

None was discussed. The PDT adjourned at approximately 11:40 a.m.

**Follow up items**

- Revise outline for Northern Edge alternatives
- Draft background and rationale to support Action 1 and Action 3 Alternative 2 (rotational interval)
- Draft EFH designations for monkfish and red hake
- Revise EFH principles document