New England Fishery Management Council
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John F. Quinn, J.D., Ph.D., *Chairman* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 20, 2018

TO: Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) sub-panel

FROM: Tom Nies, Executive Director

SUBJECT: **Terms of Reference – Clam Dredge Survey Reports**

Terms of Reference

1. Comment on the appropriateness of the survey gear (hydraulic dredge) for:
    a. characterization of habitat complexity and distribution within the survey areas, and
    b. data collection and characterization of surfclam distribution and abundance within the survey areas.
2. Identify any sources of uncertainty and important considerations in using this information.
3. Are there better or more informative ways to compile and present the spatial data provided?
4. Are the data collected and author's conclusions from the surveys informative for use to identify areas where clam dredges could operate without impacting complex habitat within the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area? If yes, which data and which conclusions?

Background

The Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) will be designated via Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat Amendment 2 (OHA2). The area will go into effect when the final regulations for OHA2 become effective, as early as April 2018. The purpose of this and other HMAs designated via OHA2 is to minimize the adverse effects of fishing on essential fish habitats to the extent practicable. The GSC HMA is going to be designated as a closure to mobile bottom-tending gears. Mobile bottom-tending gears include all bottom trawls and dredges. The GSC HMA is an important fishing ground for surfclams, one of two species harvested with hydraulic dredges in the northeast region. In most of the HMA, except for the northeast corner, there will be a short-term exemption allowing the continued use of hydraulic dredges in the HMA. The Council has initiated a trailing framework adjustment to OHA2 that is considering a longer-term exemption for this gear type.

The Council approved the following statement of work for the framework: "*The SC/OQ [surfclam/ocean quahog] fishery will be granted a one-year exemption for the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (HMA) following implementation of OHA2, which will allow NEFMC to consider development of an access program for this fishery. The Council intends*

through this action to identify areas within the HMAs that are currently fished or contain high energy sand and gravel that could be suitable for a hydraulic clam dredging exemption that balances achieving optimum yield for the SC/OQ fishery with the requirement to minimize adverse fishing effects on habitat to the extent practicable and is consistent with the underlying objectives of OHA2."

The alternatives considered will encompass a range of spatial management approaches. Under the no action alternative, the exemption provided in OHA2 would sunset one year after the amendment is implemented (~April 2019), and hydraulic dredges would be prohibited from operating in the entire GSC HMA after that date. As the no action alternative this option will be considered by the Council and analyzed in the NEPA document. At the other extreme, the Council may choose to consider and analyze allowing hydraulic dredges to be used throughout the area, except for the northeast corner. Intermediate to these options, the Council intends to identify other sub-sections of the GSC HMA where hydraulic dredges can be used. None of these sub-area alternatives have been identified yet.

The Science Center for Marine Fisheries has completed two studies relevant to this action. The first (document 1.2) explores ancillary data associated with the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's hydraulic dredge survey. This study examines the magnitude and spatial distribution of sediments and epibenthos (epifauna) in the catch. The study also compares the distribution of these substrate features to the distribution of tow tracks obtained from clam dredge vessel plotters. The second study (document 1.3) is a hydraulic dredge survey of the GSC HMA specifically, including areas immediately adjacent. This survey fills a known data gap in that the survey footprint is important to commercial fishermen but rarely if at all visited by the NEFSC dredge survey. Data from this project include relative abundance and distribution of surfclams, in addition to the same ancillary substrate data assembled for the earlier report.

The Habitat Plan Development Team discussed these surveys and their associated reports during three meetings in July 2016, September 2017, and March 2018. The Council is seeking guidance from the SSC sub-panel on the use of the data and conclusions from these two reports in the development of the clam dredge framework.

Documents

1.1 Terms of Reference – Clam Dredge Survey Reports

1.2 Report 1: Powell, Eric N., Kelsey Kuykendall, and Paula Moreno. Analysis of ancillary survey data and surfclam fishery tow data for the Georges Shoals Habitat Management Area on Georges Bank and the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area. Science Center for Marine Fisheries, August 2016. 29p.

1.3 Report 2: Powell, Eric N., Roger Mann, Kelsey M. Kuykendall, M. Chase Long, and Jeremy Timbs. The "East of Nantucket" Survey. Science Center for Marine Fisheries, February 2018. 33p.

Background

1.4 Habitat PDT Meeting Summaries

a. July 2016
b. September 2017
c. March 2018