

Habitat Protection and Restoration Committee Report
January 27, 2025
Mr. Michael McDermott, Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda (Tab P, No. 1) and approved the minutes (Tab P, No. 2) of the November 2024 meeting as written.

Update on Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Generic Amendment 5 (Tab P, No. 4)

Staff provided a progress update for EFH Generic Amendment 5 and reviewed the proposed timeline. A Committee member noted that previous EFH descriptions have been broadly inclusive and encouraged the progress for better describing EFH for the considered species. A Committee member noted that the Council often focuses on offshore activity when thinking about EFH consultations. He suggested that, throughout the EFH review process, the Council should provide a comprehensive review of the inshore and nearshore habitat, considering most National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) consultations focus on inshore and nearshore habitat. A Council member acknowledged the workload to create maps of 40 species across four different life stages and asked if enough data were available to update all possible EFH descriptions. Staff highlighted that there may be some species with habitat association data that do not exist across four different life stages. For those species, EFH maps and descriptions may remain the same as previous iterations. The Council will tentatively review a draft document in June 2025.

Proposed Aquaculture Opportunity Areas (AOA) Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) (Tab P, No 5)

Mr. Andrew Richard (NMFS) provided a presentation summarizing the draft Aquaculture Opportunity Areas (AOA) Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) document highlighting preferred alternatives (W-1, W-4, W-8, and C-3). The AOAs PEIS comment period is open until Thursday February 20, 2025. A Council member inquired whether there were any aquaculture operations expressing interest in the identified AOAs. Mr. Richard replied that there have not been any submitted applications within the identified preferred alternatives thus far.

A Council member inquired on the process for obtaining a permit to move forward with aquaculture operations, and whether NOAA is the primary agency to contact. Mr. Richard walked through the process of obtaining permits for aquaculture development which includes collaborating with NOAA and permitting agencies, an environmental assessment, and public outreach and engagement sessions. A Council member inquired about timeline and Mr. Richard replied that the process typically takes a few years before permitting is granted or denied.

Council staff requested an update on the ongoing aquaculture development off the Coast of Florida. Mr. Richard summarized two main aquaculture development projects in Florida: (1) The Vellella Epsilon Pilot project off the coast of Sarasota, and (2) the Manna Farms aquaculture development off the coast of Pensacola. Mr. Richard also noted that if the Council requests

additional information on the ongoing development of these projects, he could provide a presentation at a future Council meeting.

A Council member noted that terminal year of fisheries data utilized in the draft AOA PEIS ranged from 2016-2019 and suggested updating that with more recent data. Mr. Richard responded that the terminal year of data was used in the atlas, which was published in 2021, and the atlas was used as an informational tool in the AOA PEIS. A Council member stated that alternative C-13 may overlap with recreational fishing effort and satellite data should be utilized to look at vessel traffic. Mr. Richard replied that the vessel traffic in this area was part of the rationale in not including the alternative as preferred, given substantial overlap with vessel traffic in the area and proximity to commercial shrimp activity.

A Committee member highlighted that the site C-11, removed from alternatives considered, overlapped with high shrimping effort, as seen through the use of the shrimp Electronic Logbooks (ELB) effort monitoring data. He stated this spatial planning document highlighted the valuable insight shrimp ELB monitoring provided in identifying suitable aquaculture sites. Similarly, site C-13 was not selected as preferred given high vessel traffic and proximity to high shrimp activity, reiterating the importance of the shrimp ELB.

Lastly, staff summarized the draft comment letter. A Committee member suggested removing language surrounding the impacts of aquaculture infrastructure as this is a site-identification planning document.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, **to approve the draft Council comment letter with the revised language.**

The motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.