

HABITAT WORKGROUP REPORT TO THE COUNCIL COORDINATION COMMITTEE MAY 2021

The Habitat Workgroup's (HWG) purpose is to provide a forum for habitat-focused staff of regional fishery management councils and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) regional offices to address national habitat issues, policies, and needs at the request of the Council Coordination Committee (CCC). The HWG has met twice thus far in 2021 to identify priorities, and smaller subgroups have met to focus on specific topics. This report briefly summarizes 2020 HWG activities and provides recommendations for 2021 priorities.

Summary of past accomplishments and mission

Efforts in 2020 were focused on engagement with partners involved in essential fish habitat (EFH) consultations and habitat science. The HWG developed a template letter, tailored for regional distribution to Federal and state agencies, tribes, local entities, and other organizations. The letter described the role of councils and NMFS in EFH consultations and provided contact information.

The HWG also facilitated an October 19, 2020 national webinar on habitat science and research at the NMFS regional fisheries science centers. Science center representatives presented information on current and future habitat science research, including climate science, species shifts, habitat suitability models, habitat vulnerability analysis, and deep-sea corals and coral reef science. The webinar provided an excellent forum for program staff from councils and NMFS to engage with habitat scientists at the regional science centers.

Priorities for 2021

Members of the HWG agree that effective Council engagement in offshore development should be a priority, particularly in light of recent Executive Orders and the Administration's priority for increasing renewable energy development. Offshore development also includes aquaculture, telecommunications cables, electricity transmission cables, and other activities that have habitat and fisheries impacts requiring careful consultation and planning. The HWG seeks CCC feedback on the following activities and work products that would support Council engagement in marine planning and habitat consultations related to offshore development. Efforts would be focused on one or more of the following:

- Offshore development best practices. The HWG would identify best practices for habitat consultations, engaging with stakeholders, informing cable routes, sharing fishery and habitat data sources, etc. We would build on lessons learned from previous offshore wind (OSW) projects and from the HWG's knowledge base regarding marine planning and EFH consultations, including discussions at the 2019 HWG workshop. This could result in a written report, and/or a Power Point presentation, and/or tailored presentations to different council and NMFS regions.
 - Although the primary focus would be on wind energy, the lessons could be applied to other types of offshore development activities.
 - Specific subtopics could include the ability to commercially or recreationally fish within wind farms, installation and routing of transmission cables, etc.

- The HWG could provide information and links to data sources, BOEM call area information, updated leasing info, etc., developing a clearinghouse for offshore development, similar to NEFMC/MAFMC's [website](#) and PFMC's [website](#).
- Continue engagement with fishery science centers. The HWG would work with the NMFS Office of Science and Technology to host a forum for sharing habitat science and research at the fisheries science centers, similar to the October 19, 2020 webinar. This year's webinar could focus on specific topics related to the effects of offshore development in general, or a more specific topic (wind energy, cables, aquaculture, etc.).

The HWG plans to continue working on these priorities, with the CCC's concurrence and guidance, and can coordinate with the CCC Legislative Committee as necessary. The HWG would present work products and a report at the October CCC meeting.