

DRAFT 2/18/15- Coral Request for Information
South Atlantic Protected Resources Committee
March 2015

This letter is submitted on behalf of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (South Atlantic Council) in response to the advanced notice of rulemaking and request for information on the five new species of corals listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that are found in South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction.

The South Atlantic Council is very active in the protection of coral in the region:

Management Actions

The South Atlantic Council has long recognized the importance of coral and coral habitats, and took over management of coral in 1982 when a court decision removed past protections through the Bureau of Land Management. The South Atlantic Council has actively managed and protected corals through its Coral, Coral Reef and Live Bottom Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and most recently amended the plan in 2014. The harvest of coral in the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction is restricted to south of Cape Canaveral, FL; the harvest of wild live rock is prohibited; and chipping is not allowed in the South Atlantic (SAFMC 1994; SAFMC 1995). Species of coral with an allowable harvest have been defined since 1994 (combined 50,000 colonies). The plan further prohibits the harvest of stony corals, black corals, fire coral, hydrocorals and two species of seafans (*Gorgonia ventalina* and *G. flabellum*). Individuals harvesting octocorals or growing hard bottom through aquaculture in the South Atlantic region must have a federal permit (SAFMC 1998).

Additionally, the South Atlantic Council has taken action to protect corals through the FMP for spiny lobster in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic, a joint plan with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. In 1992 and in coordination with the state of Florida, the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils approved a regulatory amendment (GMFMC/SAFMC 1992) to implement the trap certificate program, which has reduced the number of spiny lobster traps in Florida waters from over 900,000 to about 485,000 traps (personal comm., Tom Matthews, Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute). Amendment 11 to the Spiny Lobster FMP selected 60 new closed areas specifically designed to reduce negative impacts by spiny lobster trap gear on two species listed as Threatened at the time (elkhorn coral (*Acropora palmata*) and staghorn coral (*A. cervicornis*)). Criteria for site selection focused on areas that would likely be most beneficial to protection of elkhorn and staghorn corals, but also included consideration of areas in which the five newly listed species of coral were also found (GMFMC/SAFMC 2011).

Habitat protection

The South Atlantic Council also contributes to coral protection through its Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and Essential Fish Habitat-Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (EFH-HAPC) activities. The South Atlantic Council has designated EFH and EFH-HAPC for coral (SAFMC 1998) and any projects that will impact the area are reviewed and commented on by resource agencies. South Atlantic Council policy on submitting comments on the impact to coral and coral habitats for aquaculture, oil and gas projects, beach renourishment, and dredging/fill projects were updated in the Habitat Plan (SAFMC 2009a). Additionally, the South Atlantic Council bans the use of toxic chemicals in coral and live bottom areas to harvest fish (including octocorals) (SAFMC 1998). In addition to protecting shallow water corals, the council has designated over 23,000 square miles of bottom as Coral HAPC (CHAPC). All bottom-damaging gear is prohibited including anchors, chains, bottom longlines, trawls, dredges, pots, and traps (SAFMC 2009b).

Outreach and Education

Information on coral and coral EFH are available on South Atlantic Council's website. The Coral FMP and associated amendments are available at South Atlantic Council's website (<http://www.safmc.net/Library/>

Coral). Maps of coral EFH are accessible to the public through the South Atlantic Council EFH Webviewer (http://ocean.floridamarine.org/sa_efh/). The South Atlantic Council supported the development of an identification key for octocorals that harvesters can use to identify octocoral species (Miller et al. 2014). The South Atlantic Council recommends that the National Marine Fisheries Service consider all existing protection measures in the South Atlantic region when evaluating potential regulatory actions pertaining to fishing and management of ESA-listed corals. It is the South Atlantic Council's conclusion that the fisheries management measures and conservation actions taken by the South Atlantic Council should be considered as sufficient in minimizing impacts from fishing activities on the threatened species found in the South Atlantic region.

References Cited

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