SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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JOINT MEETING OF THE HABITAT AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ADVISORY PANEL AND CORAL ADVISORY PANEL
(November 7-8, 2007)

The Charleston Marriott Hotel
170 Lockwood Boulevard, Charleston, SC 29403

JOINT HABITAT AND CORAL AP FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Issues addressed and presentations made at this meeting included: 1) The Complexity of Habitats in the Proposed C-HAPCs presented by John Reed, Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution; 2) Research Cruise Updates; Understanding Species use of Deepwater Habitats presented by Steve Ross, UNCW; 3) Cooperative Multi-Platform Mapping Cruise June 07 presented by Greg McFall Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary (GRNMS); 4) Update on Mapping and Characterization on the Charleston Bump and Blake Plateau presented by George Sedberry, Superintendent, GRNMS; 5) Development of Rapid Assessment Tool (SEADESC) and Integration into Habitat and Ecosystem IMS presented by Steve Ross/UNCW and Tina Udouj/FWRI; 6) ESDIM Deepwater Habitat Completion Report presented by Tina Udouj; 7) Development of Deepwater Habitat GIS and Habitat and Ecosystem IMS in support of Deepwater C-HAPC designation presented by Tina Udouj; 8) Panel Recommendations on Proposed Deepwater Coral HAPCs for the Comprehensive Ecosystem Amendment; 9) Member Comments and Recommendations for Enhancing, Expanding and Refining the Fishery Ecosystem Plan for the South Atlantic Region; 10) State Sub-Panel Breakout Sessions – Priority State and EFH Conservation Recommendations; 11) Development of Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) Facility, EIS and Larval Fish Research and Ocean Turbine Development presented by Jocelyn Karazsia, NOAA Fisheries; 12) in the SA Region presented by Jocelyn Karazsia, NOOA Fisheries; 13) MMS Alternative Energy Report and Workshop presented by Roger Pugliese; 14) Energy Policy Revision; and 15) Research Area Development Process for Grays Reef National Marine Sanctuary presented by George Sedberry/GRNMS.

Proposed Deepwater Coral HAPCs:

• The Panel strongly supports the designation of the entire C-HAPC as proposed below (Figure 1.) as supported by the best available science, and does not support designating portions of the whole.

- The proposed deepwater coral HAPCs (C-HAPCs) should be adopted and implemented as soon as possible. Growing pressure for new and more intensive uses of the EEZ, including potential energy development, mariculture and emerging deepwater fisheries, requires rapid designation. The Panels recommend shifting other measures that may delay C-HAPC implementation into FEP Comprehensive Amendment 2.

- New information compiled for the Council and presented to the Panels by John Reed and Steve Ross and others constitutes the best available science, and continues to strengthen the case for protection of this world-class deepwater coral ecosystem. Additional important coral features and related habitats continue to be found within the areas previously identified, including low relief features, ridges, sinkholes, pinnacles and escarpments up to 500' tall (Figure 2).

- Research suggests potential for additional deepwater coral habitats in the following areas (Figure 3):
1) Some distance north of the current boundary of the Stetson/Savannah/Miami Complex, 2) Between the Miami Terrace and the Pourtales Terrace, and 3) to the southwest of the Pourtales Terrace. The Panel recommends additional characterization work on these sites, to be factored into future habitat protection amendments.

- Only one chemosynthetic ("methane seep") live-bottom community has so far been documented in the US South Atlantic EEZ, northeast of the boundary of the Stetson/Savannah/Miami Complex, on the Blake Ridge Diapir. It should be protected as a separate C-HAPC.

- The Panels reiterate the previous request to the Council to interact with the US and Bahamian governments to find ways to collaborate on research as well as protection measures for shared deepwater coral ecosystems. The Council could communicate with the Bahamian government directly through the U.S. Departments of Commerce and Department of State.

The Panels recommend the C-HAPC as previously configured (Figure 1).

Recommend establishing a C-HAPC (2 square mile) surrounding the Blake Ridge Diapir methane seep live-bottom area.

Regulations in the Proposed Deepwater Coral HAPCs:

The Panels recommend that the following management actions be taken inside the C-HAPCs:
Recommended management measures in all the deepwater coral HAPC sites include the following: 1) compile, characterize and track threats to deepwater coral ecosystems in the region; 2) as far as possible, limit damage from both fishing and non-fishing threats, using all available administrative tools; 3) prohibit all bottom-disturbing fishing gears;4) prohibit harvest of coral, coral reefs and live/hard bottom organisms(all taxa, including gorgonians and other soft corals) except as allowed through appropriately protective research protocols and procedures; 5) prohibit anchoring, grapples and chain, and 6) fully implement the Council's deepwater coral research and evaluation plans.

The intent of these recommendations is to eliminate any commercial harvest that might be presently permitted under the coral plan in any deepwater coral HAPC, but to allow controlled collection for research purposes consistent with the Council's Deepwater Coral Research Plan (i.e. as allowed by the Secretary). In addition, more work is needed to characterize potential damage associated with other bottom-impinging gears (e.g. damage that might occur with the use of weighted long-lines, planers and cannonball weights). The Council should clarify the types of allowable fishing activities, including transit through the C-HAPCs. Non-fishing impacts would be fully covered in the Fishery Ecosystem Plan and in future habitat policy statements.

Resources for Implementation

Despite the growing evidence that the deepwater coral ecosystems of the region constitute a world-class resource under rising threat, funds continue to be scarce for all aspects of management of these natural treasures. The Panels recommend that all possible sources be explored to obtain necessary funding for research and monitoring, outreach and education, and enforcement, once the C-HAPCs are emplaced. Funding must be found for high resolution mapping especially in areas of high probability.

JOINT HABITAT AND CORAL AP CONCENSUS RECOMMENDATIONS:
Panel members were requested to provide comments on the potential list of actions for consideration in a developing Comprehensive Ecosystem Amendment. Discussions revolved around the existing list of proposed measures for the Amendment and the following recommended modifications are:
Comprehensive Ecosystem Amendment 1 measures should:
- Establish and protect expanded deepwater Coral HAPCs;

Comprehensive Ecosystem Amendment 2 measures should:
- Establish a zero harvest for Sargassum;
- Address octocorals harvest and quota level while considering octocorals as EFH;
- Establish provisions to allow for the discovery of new octocorals species and new compounds (biomedical products), but not for mass exploitation and harvesting of species;

• Consider invasive species highlighting lionfish in FEP and proposed or future Ecosystem Amendment; and
• Establish Allowable Gear Areas (deepwater trawls and other gears as data allow)

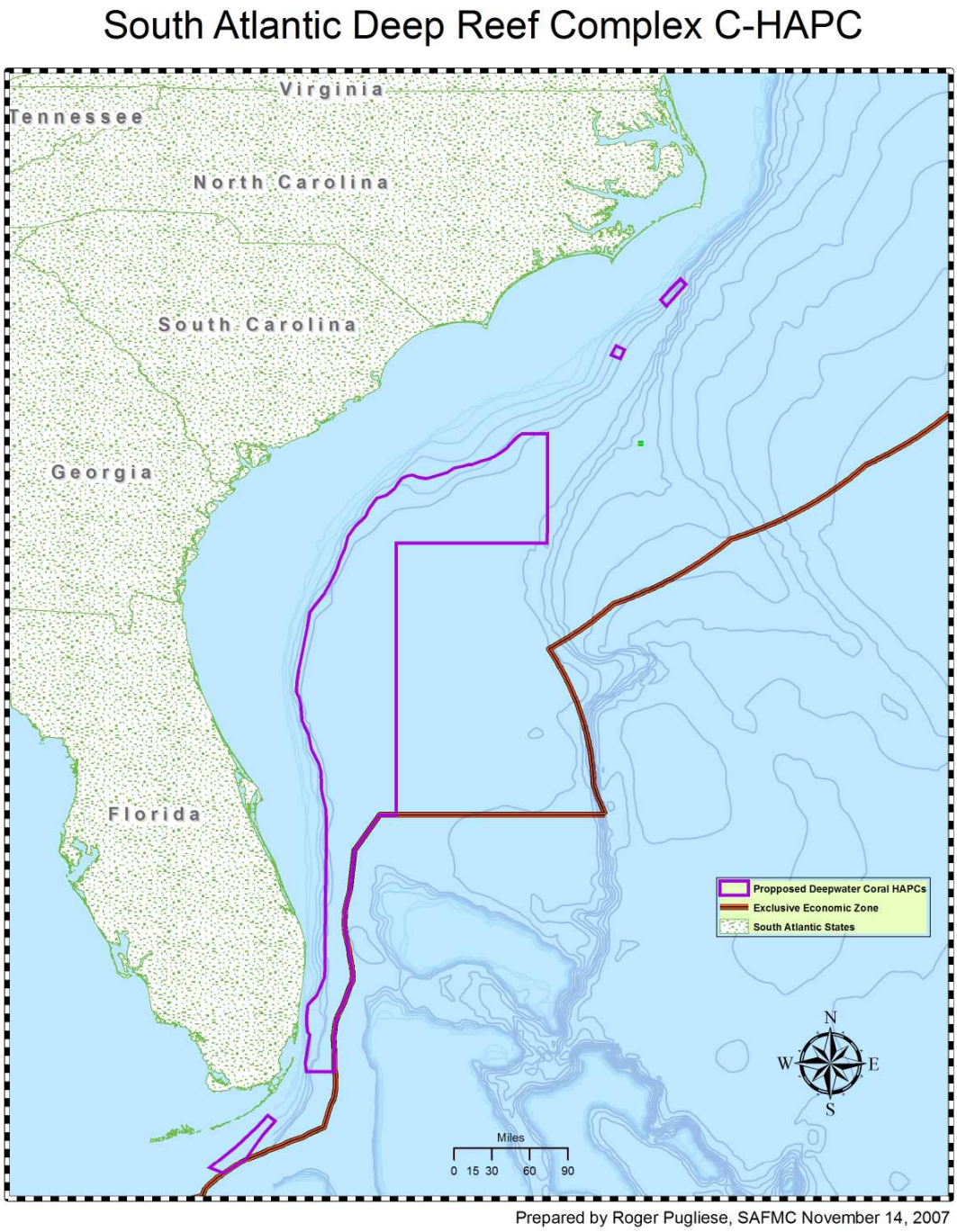

Figure 1. Proposed Deepwater Coral HAPCs "South Atlantic Deep Reef Complex*"
*New name proposed by Clark Alexander, Coral AP Member

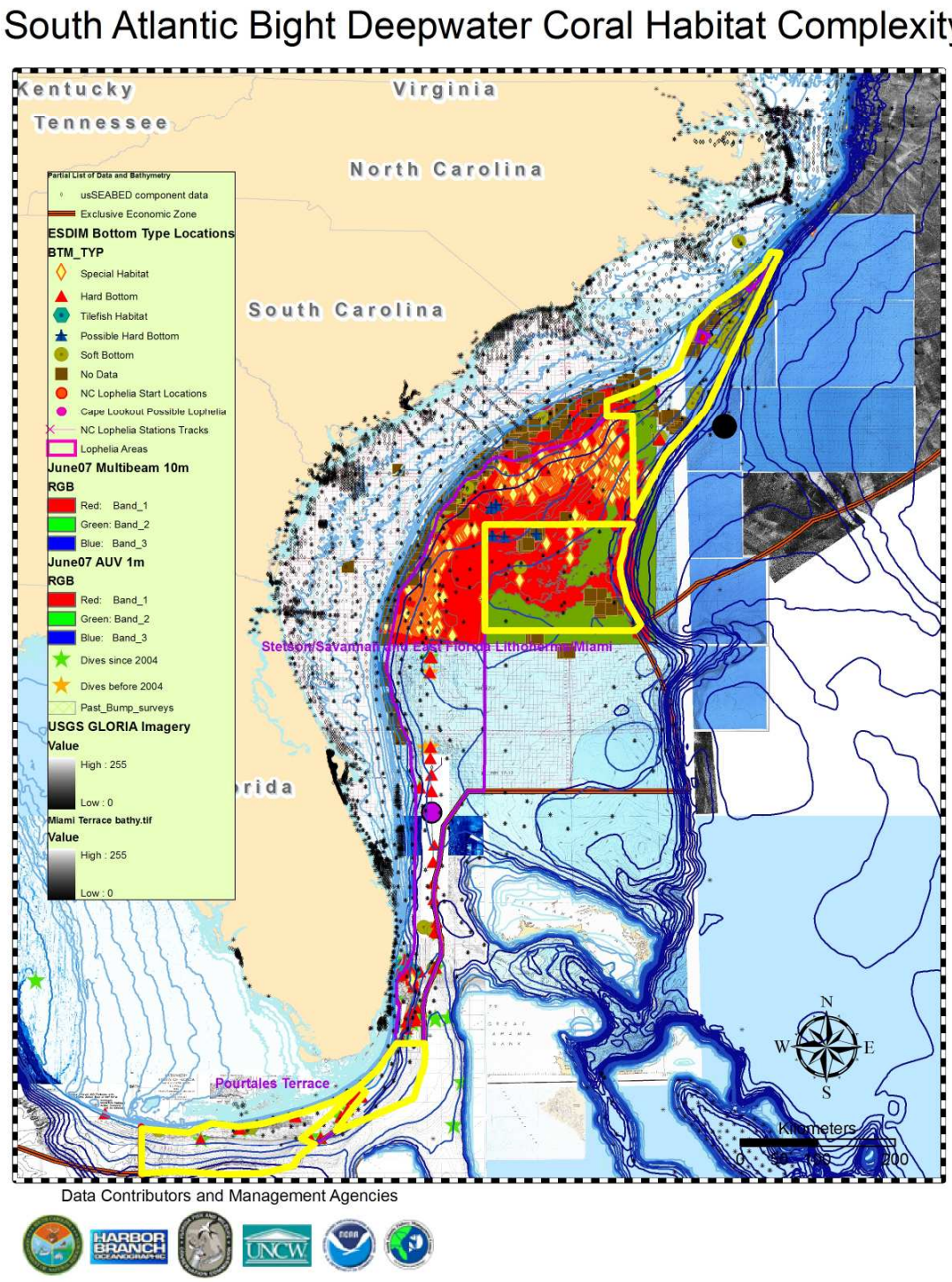

Figure 2. Deepwater Habitat associated with the proposed "South Atlantic Deep Reef Complex".

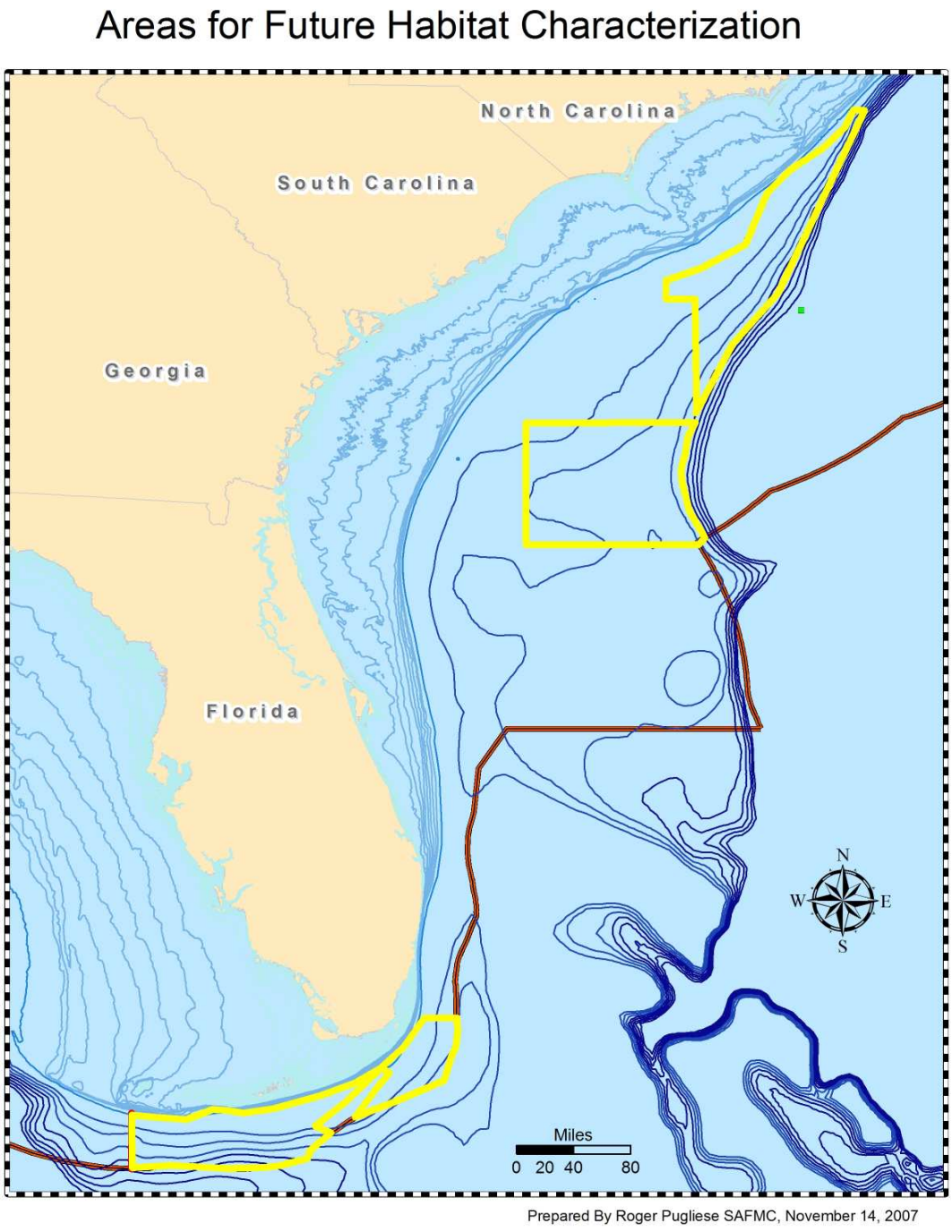

Figure 3. Areas Recommended for Future Research and Mapping of Potential Deepwater Coral Habitat.