Deepwater Shrimp Advisory Panel and

Coral Advisory Panel Meeting

Via Webinar

November 10, 2020

The Coral AP approved the minutes from May 2018. The Coral AP and Deepwater Shrimp AP approved the agenda.

1. Coral Amendment 10

The AP was provided an overview of the draft options for scoping to get the APs suggestions for options to include. During the March 2018 Council meeting, the Council requested staff begin development of an amendment to address requests from Golden Crab Advisory Panel for additional access areas in the Northern Zone and from Deep-water Shrimp fishermen to revise the eastern edge of the Oculina Bank expanded in Coral Amendment 8, add an option to require VMS on golden crab vessels, and review transit provision for shrimp trawlers.

The Deep Water Shrimp AP addressed the issue first and had discussed their recommendation made previously to the Council regarding the location and now incorporated into the draft scoping document. They reiterated the area includes an area they have historically fished. The AP indicated that since they are using VMS, the buffer could be reduced to given them access to this area.

Deep Water Shrimp AP Comments/Discussion:

Mike Merrifield indicated the reason that that third alternative came up was because there was a number of the points that were provided after Amendment 8 was completed. There were several fishermen that came back and said this is an important area and rock shrimp show up in different areas, different times a year. The eastern side of the bank will be important and you just never know from year to year, which one is going to show up.

It's an extremely variable as to what's going to happen from year to year and that's why it's hard to put a value. In the past, we've tried to put a monetary value or productivity value on a specific area, and that's really hard to do.

Marylyn wanted to make sure that it's on the record that they support re-opening the access area.

It's very difficult to get everybody's input at a time when everyone is working and he missed some input, and that's why we're back here.

Deep Water Shrimp Advisory Panel Motion:

Motion #1: Alternatives for consideration for scoping:
To adopt the 2014 coordinates Eastern boundary of the northern extension of the OHAPC developed by industry and staff as proposed boundary move.

To adopt the 2014 coordinates Eastern boundary of the northern extension of the OHAPC developed by industry and staff as a Shrimp Fishery Access Area as represented in Alternative 2a.

Approved by AP

Coral AP Summary Comments/Discussion:
Members shared their thoughts and perspectives on the question about how far fishing activities occur from important deepwater habitats without impacting them.

Jocelyn noted that this particular item is fairly well articulated in the public comments that John Reed had provided to us before the meeting. And with that, you know, there's a concern about a need to have a sufficient protective buffer in place to protect the corals from sediments that become suspended in the water column as a result of the fishing gear interaction with the mud buttons in particular.

Presumably the muds are composed of clays and very small particles that can become suspended in the water column for considerable distances. I am aware of studies where the sediment plumes can travel up to 20 kilometers and, you know, allowing fishing gear interactions within 100 to 2000 meters would be putting these corals at risk in my opinion.

I also wanted to know that in looking at the maps there is a lot of yellow and green hues which could indicate the presence of low relief like less than one meter which could include hard bottom communities that are providing EFH for deepwater species managed under the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan.

It was recommended that the protective buffer that we identify would be protective of the coral Pinnacles and also this lower relief hard bottom as well.

Sandra had some comments about the sediment plumes in these very high current areas and I'm sure these guys know what they're doing considering they have been fishing there for a long time. I think if you're only 100 meters away in 100 meters deep There's a margin of error that is a bit close to comfort from my perspective.

And that 300 meters in my mind is, is too close. I would be, not be comfortable with anything less than one thousand meters, but the work has not been done out there so we actually don't know, but given that we should err on the side of caution.

OK, but the thing is, you don't know, ahead of time exactly where your gear is going to go, and exactly where that sediment plume is gonna go so, this is why we need a margin of error if you get off. The current might not be running the way you think or stronger than you think it is. We have an upwelling or any number of things go wrong and it's hard working out and you know, since you have been working out there.

Mapping is limited and it's really hard to get money to go out there and map those banks but this is as good as we have got.

The thousand meter buffer was kind of arbitrary, we just don't know. And so using the precautionary principle, that's in the Magnuson Stevens Act to account for the unknowns. And so, I would not want to put a number on it because it's just, just don't know what number that would be. Being this close just makes me personally a little nervous because we don't have all the information we need to tighten those boundaries. Without that, still keep a margin of error. I think we have a margin of error at the moment, especially in those northern areas. The boundary seem pretty close already it already looks a little bit tight.

I agree with Jocelyn and Sandra and think, we need it a substantial buffer there. I'm not as concerned about the actual impact on the coral, I'm unconcerned about the impact of the fishery activity on the coral ecosystem. And it is an ecosystem we're trying to protect not just, the coral itself and ecosystem consists of fish and possibly other critters that graze there. And so, it's so important to protect the whole ecosystem and having a buffer, a substantial buffer around the ecosystem we're trying to protect would ensure that it's being protected.

One of the mistakes we've made here, and in the Florida Keys and elsewhere, when we try to create these marine protected areas, is they are too small so everybody is fishing right up to the edge, and the result is that the fish populations inside the protected areas are no different than the fish populations outside the protected areas. And the result is that you've not accomplish anything other than maybe reducing some impacts from fishing gear.

Concerned more about the impacts to the ecosystem than I am to the impacts from fishing gear or from sediment.

First thing is that whenever we're starting to talk about what's relative, high relief and low relief, like in figures 1.5 and 1.6 put numbers on those to provide greater context and more information.

Number two, when the distances were measured today between the new proposed fisheries access area boundary and where the reef resources were, those horizontal lines were being drawn between the pinnacles and those proposed boundaries of the fisheries access area. Really, we shouldn't be drawing those lines from the bases in that area where we know they're still living habitat that's really important for snowy grouper another other important fishery species in that area, not just from the pinnacles so not just the distance of the boundary but for a buffer. But where we're drawing that buffer line from, I think, needs to shift.

Suspended sediments are particularly a problem in in high current areas because those currents tend to parallel the reef structure, that means that the spatial impact of those sediments may be much greater than you would you would anticipate.

There is uncertainty about the location of the rig on the bottom. National Marine Fisheries Service data indicates that the ratio of scope to depth for shrimp trawlers is, typically somewhere between 3 to 4.3 ratio in these kind of depths and these kind of currents. So, taking a conservative estimate means that the horizontal distance between the boat and the rig can be anywhere from about 230 meters to 510 meters.

So, in addition to two other uncertainty, we're talking about that distance between the points and the location of the boat versus the rig is something that I think we should, we should keep in mind as well and if we had track points on the rigs at all times, they could be identified and the precision would be increased.

Fishermen: We know where this stuff exactly precisely is because it said it's a day to day, month, or month to month, you know, year to year. We use a couple of months at a time. We know where we're going with this and where we're putting things down and we're just trying to get a little more working area and we're not there to destroy any habitat because we definitely need it as well. If you're in 300 foot, you would have one thousand foot cable going out, but you would not be, you've gotta realize that, the distance of the boat. The rigs are going to be approximately 500 feet behind the boat and they go straight down behind the boat so we know where those rigs are going down, where we put him down. I mean, we drag very closed to lots of obstructions and things and we know we're keeping our equipment safe and don't want to damage the habitat or the bottom at all. We're just asking to get a little area back that we know where there's no coral.

Essentially, our current is going parallel to the area and the draggers are dragging east of the pinnacles in the sediment and stay away from the pinnacles. It's going to drop back down onto the onto the bottom so I don't see why how the sediment problem in mid water is going to be a problem.

Based on hydrodynamic drag, if you had the prominent direction of the current exactly parallel to the high relief feature, the fact that the reef feature is there causes drag which is going to create eddies that would spin off on the left or western side. If any plume, that would cause entrainment of particles up onto the reef even if you were dragging off in the soft bottom east of the reef.

Fishermen: Didn’t dispute that, but they set up to have as little contact with the bottom as possible.

I just wanted to say that we respect everything the coral people do and the bottom that's there and all the work that's involved and we want that coral protected as well. My question is it takes or how long does it take for that coral to regrow back?

What we've seen on the banks is that the recruitment is very spotty and very low.
One project deployed a whole bunch of reef balls and patio stones and we seeded them with transplants of living Oculina. Went back but don't actually know what the outcome of that experiment was because we didn't see many of the reef balls but the ones seen had fish associated with them.

But what we do know from dives that we've done since then is the area that was damaged, is not coming back very quickly, and when it does come back, it tends to come back on these little marginal areas around the main Pinnacles. This is why we want to protect the base of the pinnacles. That seems to be where the coral starts coming back.

When you knock a species down to the extent that the Oculina Banks have been knocked down, you don't have the population then to produce the larvae to bring it back quickly. So, it's, going to take time.

Coral Advisory Panel Motion:
The Panel indicated the present boundary provided a buffer and approved a motion supporting the no action alternative.
Motion #1: Consider option 1 status quo.
Approved by AP

Other Business:
Members wanted to go on record as some of the industry support operator cards. With an operator card, and it carries a history of, of that person's actions and, or violations or whatever, and we think that it's a good thing.