Common Acronyms:

- SAFMC – South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
- EFH – Essential Fish Habitat
- HAPC – Habitat Area of Particular Concern
- CHAPC – Coral Habitat Area of Particular Concern
- EBFM – Ecosystem-Based Fishery Management
- OHAPC -Oculina Habitat Area of particular concern
- NMFS – National Marine Fisheries Service
- FMP - Fishery Management Plan
- NOAA – National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

What is the difference between a habitat and an ecosystem?

Habitat is the environment in which the fish live, including everything that surrounds and affects their life, e.g., water quality, bottom, vegetation, and associated species (including prey).
An ecosystem is a community of living organisms interacting with each other and their non-living environment. This includes all plants, animals, and humans, along with non-living components such as air, water, sunlight, and sand.

What habitats are Essential Fish Habitat (EFH)?

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) refers to the waters and substrate, such as wetlands, coral reefs, sand, and seagrasses. This habitat is necessary for the spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth of federally managed fish species. EFH is defined for each species or group of species managed under each Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and is based on based on the best scientific information available to identify the habitat necessary for a species' life stage, regardless of management. For a detailed description of what constitutes EFH for managed species, refer to the SAFMC User Guide.

What is the EFH User Guide?

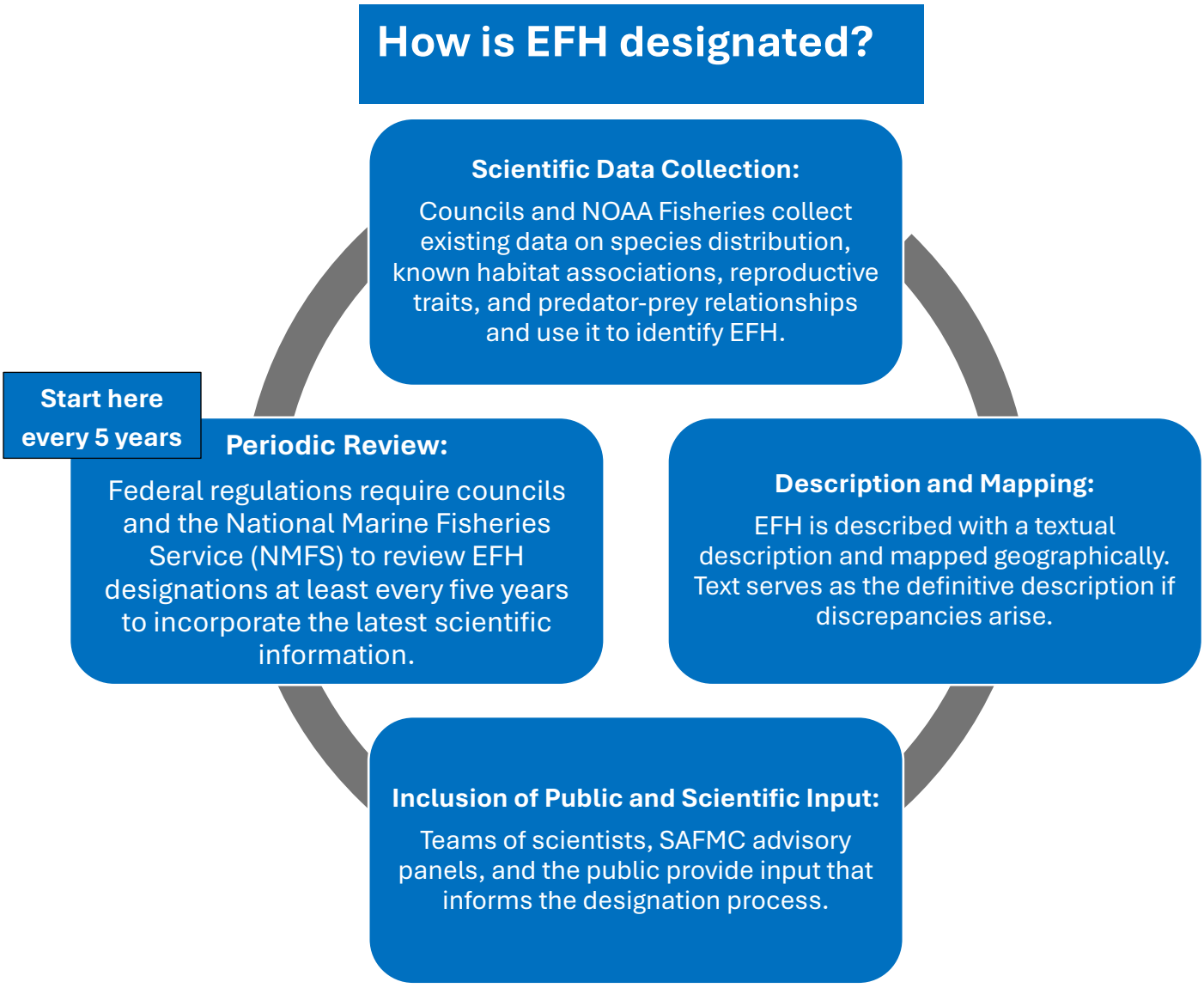
The SAFMC EFH User Guide is a document that provides a summary of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) EFH designations. It describes the habitats, explains where habitats are located, their importance for managed fish species, and provides information, like life stage information, to support the requirements of the Magnuson Stevens Act.

Why is EFH identified?

Fishery Management Councils are required to define EFH to meet mandates under the 1996 reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, which aims to protect the specific habitats necessary for fish spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity. Identifying EFH ensures that these areas are considered in federal agency actions, reducing or preventing adverse impacts from fishing, development, and pollution to maintain sustainable, productive fisheries.

What can Councils do to protect EFH?

Regional fishery management councils protect Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) by identifying and mapping these areas, implementing fishing gear restrictions, establishing time/area closures, and providing recommendations on non-fishing projects that may impact habitat. Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, councils must minimize to the extent practicable the adverse effects of fishing on EFH.



How does an EFH designation protect habitat?

The EFH designation allows the eight Regional Fishery Management Councils and NOAA Fisheries to identify and conserve waters and substrate necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity. EFH protects critical marine ecosystems by requiring federal agencies to consult with NOAA Fisheries on any actions—such as development or dredging—that may adversely affect these areas. This mandate under the Magnuson-Stevens Act also enables the restriction of harmful fishing gear, and promotes habitat restoration and mitigation of environmental impacts.

What is an EFH consultation or an EFH assessment?

An Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Assessment is a mandatory document prepared by federal agencies to evaluate the impact of a proposed project on habitats crucial for managed fish species' spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth. It is required under the Magnuson-Stevens Act to initiate consultations with NOAA Fisheries to avoid, minimize, or offset adverse effects on these habitats.

Key Components of an EFH Assessment

- **Description of the Proposed Action/development:** A detailed outline of the project.
- **Analysis of Effects:** An assessment of both direct and indirect, individual, and cumulative effects of the project on EFH and managed species.
- **Agency Views:** The federal agency's conclusion on how the action affects EFH.
- **Proposed Mitigation:** Proposed measures to reduce or offset potential damage

When EFH is identified, and regulations are enacted, who do the regulations impact?

EFH designation ensures that federal agencies that authorize, fund, or undertake actions that could harm habitats consult with NOAA Fisheries before a project begins. Regulations to protect EFH may also impact stakeholders involved in activities that may adversely affect these habitats, such as developments or dredging.

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Key parties affected by regulations to protect EFH include:

- **Federal Action Agencies:** Agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers (for Clean Water Act permits) or Bureau of Ocean Energy Management must consult on projects that may damage EFH.
- **Permit Applicants:** Private or public entities seeking federal permits for projects (e.g., coastal construction, dredging) must often provide information for EFH assessments.

- **Commercial and Recreational Fishing Industries:** Specific fishing gear or practices may be restricted in designated EFH or Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs).
- **Regional Fishery Management Councils:** Responsible for identifying EFH and recommending management measures related to fishing to protect it.

While private landowners who are looking to develop their property with EFH on it and state agencies are not directly required to consult with NOAA Fisheries, projects that require federal permits may face delays or modifications if they affect EFH.

What are managed areas?

Managed areas are designated geographic zones in federal waters (3 to 200 nautical miles off the coast) from North Carolina through east Florida to conserve marine resources and fisheries. These areas include marine protected areas (MPAs), special management zones, and gear-managed areas that restrict fishing gear types to protect specific habitats.

What is the difference between EFH, HAPC, CHAPC, and OHAPC?

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) is all the waters and substrate necessary for fish spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity.

A Habitat Area of Particular Concern (HAPC) is a subset of EFH designated as high-priority for conservation based on criteria such as ecological importance, rarity, sensitivity to degradation, or stress from development.

Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (CHAPCs) are a specific type of HAPC designated for coral reefs and related habitats.

The Oculina Habitat Area of Particular Concern (OHAPC) is a specific example of a CHAPC, referring to the Oculina Bank off Florida's coast. These deep-water reefs have received special protection due to their unique, sensitive, and ecologically important nature.

EFH and HAPC Visualizer

Can EFH designations extend across Council jurisdictions?

Yes, fishery management councils may identify EFH across council boundaries. While councils have jurisdiction over specific geographic regions, the management of mobile species and ecosystem-based approaches often requires cross-jurisdictional collaboration with other councils and the NOAA.

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Key cross-boundary EFH identification includes:

- **Highly Migratory Species (HMS):** NMFS directly manages species like tuna, sharks, and billfish, identifying EFH across council boundaries.
- **Inter-Council Coordination:** Councils often collaborate on EFH reviews; for example, the New England (NEFMC) and Mid-Atlantic (MAFMC) Fishery Management Councils have worked together on Omnibus EFH Amendments.
- **Cross-FMP Initiatives:** Regional councils, such as the Pacific Fishery Management Council, have established initiatives to identify EFH commonalities across different FMPs.
- **Joint Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC):** Councils may designate HAPC that span boundaries or, in cases like shared seagrass habitats, cooperate on protecting similar habitats in adjacent regions.

Does EFH extend beyond "federal waters"?

Yes, Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) extends beyond federal waters (typically 3–200 nautical miles) into state-managed coastal waters, estuaries, and rivers. While federal fishery management councils operate primarily in federal waters, the Magnuson-Stevens Act allows them to designate EFH in any area necessary for a fish's life cycle, including state and nearshore waters

Are there seasonal EFH designations?

Yes, Councils can define EFH during particular times of the year. These seasonal designations allow for targeted protection, such as restricting construction to seasons where species are not migrating or spawning in the project area. There are no seasonal designations currently in the South Atlantic.

Is EFH only designated for fish?

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) is not designated exclusively for fish; it encompasses the aquatic habitat (waters and substrate) necessary for federally managed fish and invertebrate species (such as shrimp, crabs, and corals) to spawn, breed, feed, or grow to maturity. Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, EFH is identified for species managed under federal Fishery Management Plans. Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), "fish" is broadly defined to include finfish, mollusks, crustaceans, and all other forms of marine animal and plant life other than marine mammals and birds [16 U.S.C. 1802(12)]

What is Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management (EBFM)?

SAFMC is striving to reach an ecosystem-based fisheries management approach. The EBFM approach manages fisheries holistically by focusing on the entire ecosystem to ensure the long-term health, resilience, and sustainability of marine resources. Traditional management focus on single species outcomes. EBFM tools like Management strategy evaluation and integrated

ecosystem assessments can help integrate the human and environmental components into management decisions.

Why are there FMPs for habitats like Coral and Sargassum?

FMPs are meant to ensure long-term health sustainability and productivity for fish stocks while supporting the fishing industry. Coral and Sargassum are both habitats that have historically been harvested and that provide shelter and support fish population health. By creating targeted management measures through the Coral and Sargassum FMPs, the Council helps ensure that the fish dependent on these habitats continue to thrive.