

Coral Amendment 7
Scoping Workshop Comment Summary

Brownsville, Texas
February 19, 2017

Council/Staff

Greg Stunz
Emily Muehlstein
Camilla Shireman

6 members of the public attended.

1 member of the public spoke.

- The Shrimp Advisory Panel met with the coral scientists to discuss these potential closed areas. A lot of people were concerned with how that meeting would work out because having coral biologist and shrimpers in the same room could have been contentious, but the meeting went really well.
- There are electronic logbooks on the shrimp vessels and initially, there was skepticism about giving data on shrimping locations, but this is the 3rd time the effort data has been used to the advantage of the shrimpers. In the two proposed closures off of Texas there is no shrimping effort. The boats are already avoiding these areas, so there is no bottom being given up with the closure of the Harte bank and the southern bank. Gary was most concerned with an area in the Flower Gardens expansion that was inshore and possessed shrimping effort. It's only about a mile or so, but it's very productive shrimping ground. When you're looking at the electronic log book data and you see areas with not effort, however, once in a while you'll see a dot or two indicating that they might be dragging, he wants to warn that those vessels may not be dragging, they may be having some difficulty rather than shrimping. Enforcement should not be based solely on ELB data for this reason.

Galveston, Texas
February 21, 2017

Council/Staff

Doug Boyd
Emily Muehlstein
Camilla Shireman

4 members of the public attended.

4 members of the public spoke.

- The Gulf Council should reincorporate octocorals into the Fishery Management Unit. Octocoral management was given to the State of

- Florida because the fishery is in Florida, however, the Council should have jurisdiction over octocorals because they are an integrated component of the habitat. They are important for more than harvest purposes.
- The state of Florida shouldn't manage the corals across the Gulf of Mexico.
- The deep water protections should be supported. The correlation between habitat and healthy fisheries is very important and it's a key part of managing the fisheries.
- Anchoring should not be allowed in the proposed areas.
- A lot of these areas aren't being fished, but the rapid decline of the corals on a global scale should prod the Council into action.
- The proposed areas that have been fished, have historically been fished by commercial fishermen. Fishing effort in these areas is a lot less now than it was historically because new technology in electronics ensures that fishermen avoid these areas so they don't lose gear. There must be a way to protect the corals without harming the fishermen's historical use of the areas.
- Reversing damage to these corals is difficult. These corals are thousands of years old and if they become overfished it would be impossible to conceive of a rebuilding plan for such a long lived species.
- If the Council is trying to preemptively protect these corals, he wonders if there is a way to limit new exploitation rather than limit the current participation in the fishery.
- There is concern that if the Council reincorporates octocorals into fishery management units, the corals will be subject to the same overfishing/overfished limitations as our finfish species. If so, this may open the doorway to create punitive measures for an overfished coral species that are experiencing overfishing to no fault of the fishing activity.
- If there are prohibitions on fishing activity there should be targeted outreach effort to help historical fishermen understand the areas and the new regulations.
- All 47 are important and, arguably, in need of protection but these 15 are the crème de la crème.
- The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary used the existing HAPC boundaries in their expansion and they're currently looking at

modifying the boundaries. The Council should work in concert with the Sanctuary if it plans to redefine the current boundaries.

**Key West, Florida
February 21, 2017**

Council/Staff

John Sanchez
Doug Gregory
Bryan Schoonard

7 members of the public attended.
0 members of the public spoke.

**Madeira Beach, FL
February 23, 2017**

Council/Staff:

Tom Frazer
Morgan Kilgour
Bryan Schoonard
Claire Roberts

15 Members of the public attended
7 Members of the public commented

- Many vessel owners were unable to attend and testify at this meeting because they were out fishing.
- There is concern on expanding Pulley Ridge. These are historical fishing grounds and closure would have serious economic impacts on the fleet and infrastructure. Why does this area need to be expanded? The data says that this is a pristine area, and given that, the industry should be commended as it has been fishing in that area for years. The industry is regulated enough. There are area closures, closed seasons, turtle regulations and gear closures to name a few.
- Pulley Ridge extension and the recommended sites off the West Florida Shelf are where long-liners fish all summer. Closing those two areas would push fishermen to the north and the West Florida Shelf fishermen to the south, concentrating all that effort on the area between those two closure zones, effectively eliminating their summer season.

- Regarding Pulley Ridge, the current closed area is the ridge and to the west of the area is only flat bottom. The only thing being pulled up west of the closed area is 'cabbage' (seaweed) so there doesn't need to be an expansion.
- Research conducted by Harbour Branch and NOAA says that the Pulley Ridge extension area has the highest concentration of coral cover that the researchers have seen to date. This area has been heavily fished but still has extensive coral cover.
- The Council/NOAA are building a funding mechanism by drawing an inaccurate box to close an area, so that when fishermen accidentally have gear move into one of these boxes because of the prevailing current, they are given a \$11k-\$30k fine.
- Why should a penalty box should exist when the fishermen aren't hurting anything? Fishermen knew they were damaging essential fish habitat, so why would Council want to close an area when fishermen want to continue to have access to those fish. The Council should be determining what they are trying to protect these corals from, and create regulations that accomplish that goal rather than just creating blanket regulations.
- It is important to evaluate the effectiveness of closed areas.
- Longliners have been fishing these areas their whole lives, and despite the minimal damage they've caused, various areas keep getting shut down and regulated. If areas keep getting closed, new fishermen won't be able to make a living.
- Why is the Council trying to protect the western expansion of Pulley Ridge if it's already in pristine condition?
- The sites on the West Florida Shelf are historical fishing grounds. There might be some gear out there but it's from the early '80s. The fishermen are taking care of these sites because if they fished the sites wrong, they would lose their gear which hurts environment and themselves. Either guys don't mess with fishing the areas because they can't fish them properly or those who do are professional enough to do it properly.
- Fishermen are being regulated out of the industry.
- Fishermen are aware of where most of the coral exists, but aren't inclined to share that information with scientists for fear of more areas being closed off.

- Fishermen do no damage to the bottom, especially compared to the lobster pots that used to be allowed in that area.

**Houma, LA
March 6, 2017**

Council/Staff:

Myron Fischer
Morgan Kilgour
Bryan Schoonard

25 Members of the public attended.
0 Members of the public commented.

**Gulfport, MS
March 7, 2017**

Council/Staff:

Traci Floyd- DMR representative
Morgan Kilgour
Bryan Schoonard

15 Members of the public attended.
0 Members of the public commented.

**Mobile, AL
March 8, 2017**

Council/Staff:

Johnny Greene
Morgan Kilgour
Bryan Schoonard

10 Members of the public attended
3 Members of law enforcement attended
5 Members of the public commented

- Fishing rights should not be taken away in areas where corals are not present. The prohibition to bottom tending gear makes sense in areas with coral, but more and more restrictions will likely be placed on these areas. There should be a guarantee to protect his rights to fish as long as he doesn't harm the coral.
- There is concern with expanding on these areas indefinitely. In the South Atlantic, they lost a lot of rock shrimp bottom. The South Atlantic took a

designated area and ran it bigger and bigger with buffers. What is the guarantee that these coral areas are not going to grow inside of 50 fathoms where they conduct their fisheries?

- Last year, 60% of his boats had observers on board. They are not catching corals, and there are no records showing that they are catching corals. The advisory board should review all of the records to see if they have ever caught coral on those boats.
- There is concern for the future of the fishery as management closes all bottom, and therefore, closes the rock shrimp fishery. The east coast rock shrimp fishery would equate to about 5% of shrimp production on his boat; the Gulf coast shrimp is much higher. Analysis should be conducted on the value of the closed areas on the east coast over the course of the years.
- These areas should be monitored to make sure that the closed areas are still necessary and have corals.
- There is concern that once coral areas gets started, they will expand like a cancer and drive everyone out.
- There is concern with the proximity of the boundaries in the northern Gulf to the 50 fathom line and for royal red shrimping grounds. No one that is from the shrimp fishery is targeting these areas.
- Analysis in Coral Amendment 7 should include the historical data on the progression of the closed areas in the South Atlantic and how those have changed over time.

**Panama City, FL
March 9, 2017**

Council/Staff:

Pam Dana
Morgan Kilgour
Bryan Schoonard

1 member of the public attended.
0 members of the public commented.

**Webinar
March 20, 2017**

Council/Staff:

Emily Muehlstein
Bernadine Roy

6 members of the public attended.
0 member of the public commented.

**Summary of Written Comments Received
March 29, 2017**

15 members of the public submitted comment.

- The Council should establish strong protections for deep water corals and essential fish habitat because deep water corals are a national treasure essential to a sustainable, healthy Gulf.
- We lose too many of these fragile deep water corals so, damaging fishing practices should be restricted in those areas.
- Protecting coral will benefit fishermen in the long run.
- Deep water corals are sensitive and take years to recover from damage. Policies should safeguard these fragile areas by prohibiting anchoring or the use of deep-fishing gear.
- Coral reefs should be protected to allow for continued enjoyment of the ecosystem.
- Designating new Habitat Areas of Particular Concern will lessen human impact on coral growth. The Council should focus on protecting corals that are impacted most by human activities.
- Limiting commercial fishing can improve the ecosystems and allow fish and invertebrates to thrive.
- Reincorporating octocorals into the Fisheries Management Unit would benefit the ecosystem.
- The Gulf Council should move forward by restricting the use of bottom trawls, bottom longlines, dredges, traps, pots, bottom-set nets, and fixed longlines in the 15 identified areas.
- The 8 additional HAPC's suggested in the document should include consideration of fishing regulations.
- More HAPC's should be created with specific attention paid to bottom trawling.
- Existing HAPC's should be redefined using new research technology and information that wasn't available when designation was made initially.
- The draft scoping document does not offer an adequate number of options for consideration. The document should include a "no action" alternative

and the creation of “deep-sea coral zones” as specified under §303(b)(2) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

- To avoid unnecessary confusion or potential conflicts with other regulatory agencies, the Council should consider how the proposed actions integrate or overlap with existing regulations of other federal agencies.
- The scoping document lacks economic analysis that would ensure the balance of all concerns related to the Gulf.
- The document should include an alternative that manages deep sea corals using the discretionary deep sea coral authority described in NOAA’s 2017 Strategic Plan.
- Amendment 7 should include a pathway for areas to be considered and managed if and when new science becomes available.
- The amendment should be organized to group sites location and by depth. The Council’s corals expert working group divided the Gulf into three depth zones (50-200m, 200-1000 m, >1000m or 164-656 ft., 656-3,280 ft., > 3,280 ft.), and by geographical regions (Florida, Northeast, Northwest, and South Texas).
- A separate action should be included to address the very deep coral sites (e.g., > 1000m or 3,280 ft.) predominantly in the northeastern and northwestern regions, where little occurs. This approach both corresponds with the distinct physical and biological characteristics of the various coral communities, and may make it easier for stakeholders to assess and comment on potential impacts.
- The Council should work with the state of Florida to reinstate deep-water octocorals in the Coral Fishery Management Plan to protect them in federal waters.
- The sites identified by the Council’s corals expert work group that do not ultimately get included in the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (FGBNMS) expansion should be included in this amendment.