

HABITAT AREAS OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (HAPC) PROPOSAL

Date: January 9, 2004

Name of Proposer: Marine Conservation Alliance

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Please check applicable box (es):

- GOA Groundfish FMP
- BSAI Groundfish FMP
- Scallop FMP
- BSAI Crab FMP

Title of Proposal. Semisopochnoi and Bowers Ridge coral/rockfish HAPCs

HAPC Site Location. NOAA charts 16012. Proposed HAPC sites are delineated in Figure P4-1. These sites consist of the 10 mile sea lion rookery around Semisopochnoi Island and a second large site northeast of the first site comprising the upper depth strata on Bowers Ridge.

Habitat Type and Species Information. The sites for this proposal were selected by trawl skippers who have a wealth of experience and knowledge of Aleutian Islands (AI). Captains feel these sites meet the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (NPFMC) priority for high-relief hard coral stands likely to be good rockfish habitat. Trawl captains believe hard corals may be abundant in within the sea lion rookery around Semisopochnoi Island and in portions of delineated area at Bowers Ridge. In the case of Semisopochnoi, scientists from the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) Auke Bay Laboratory have conducted submersible dives on a small pinnacle within the 10 mile circle at the island and reportedly found abundant hard corals in high-relief areas. Captains also believe the extensive proposed area on Bowers Ridge has high abundance of juvenile rockfish and Atka mackerel. Trawling for rockfish in portions of these sites occurred during foreign and Joint Venture (JV) fishing, but the extent to which that fishing occurred within these areas is not known. These areas would not have been part of the "open area" under Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Alternative 5b for the Aleutian Islands because no significant trawling has occurred since 1990 (Figure P4-2). Data suggest that Bowers Ridge had high abundance of rockfish according to Fritz, *et al*'s. study of historical Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) (Figure P4-3), where the highest 25% of rockfish CPUEs were plotted for trawl and longline rockfish hauls. The Semisopochnoi area has only a few high CPUE blocks in the Fritz, *et al*. study, but this may result from the fact that most of the area is untrawlable and trawling was not attempted, even during the foreign and JV fishing era. Little is known about present rockfish abundance within the sites, as they do not fall within NMFS trawl or longline surveys. Rockfish catch data prepared by NMFS for Oceana's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request do not indicate much trawl rockfish catch from 1990-2002 with the exception of one block that appears to overlap with the northeastern portion of the Semisopochnoi site (see Figure P4-4).

Summary Statement of the Proposal. A set of HAPC sites is proposed for the 10 mile sea lion rookeries around Semisopochnoi and for most of the relatively shallow depth strata (fishable depths) on of Bowers Bank and Ridge. A set of steps is proposed to map the area and develop appropriate restrictions on bottom trawling while preserving fishing opportunities in portions of the area that are not high-relief hard coral areas used by rockfish. Any management measures should incorporate an experimental design to increase understanding of how rockfish use habitat.

Statement of Purpose and Need. The purpose of the proposal is to address the NPFMC's HAPC priority in its 2003 RFP. Trawlers with extensive experience in the Aleutian Islands believe these sites meet the NPFMC's HAPC priority. The purpose of the proposal is to 1) designate the area as HAPC in accordance with the Council's priorities; 2) prioritize mapping via submersible exploration and rockfish abundance evaluations to identify the exact locations of high-relief hard coral stands within the HAPC site; and 3) develop appropriate restrictions on bottom trawling to protect high-relief hard coral rockfish areas within

the AI HAPC sites while preserving fishing opportunities to the extent practicable, while at the same time designing and conducting applied research to increase understanding of how rockfish use habitat and how fishing affects the productivity of that habitat.

Objectives of the Proposal. The objective of this proposal is to address the NPFMC's HAPC priority. The proposed HAPC sites around the 10 mile rookery at Semisopchnoi and the delineated area at Bowers Ridge fit the NPFMC's 2003-04 HAPC priority based on available data because they are relatively unfished (Figure P4-2) and, based on trawl catches of rockfish before 1990, thought to be good habitat for adult rockfish, juvenile rockfish, and other managed demersal species. Once the sites are mapped to establish where the concentrations of hard corals and rockfish might occur within sites and the level of existing fishing and non-fishing effects within these sites is determined, they should be zoned for no bottom trawling at hard coral/rockfish sites and fishing areas. Research should be conducted within these HAPC sites to evaluate the effects of fishing as well as habitat associations of rockfish with fished and un-fished habitat.

Describe How the Proposal Addresses the each of the 4 HAPC Considerations (50CFR 600.815):

The **IMPORTANCE** of the ecological function provided by the habitat.

The extent to which the habitat is **SENSITIVE** to human-induced degradation. Research has shown fishing can modify high-relief coral habitat but the implications of such modifications as they occur from the fishing gears used in Alaska and the low intensity of fishing effort as it occurs off Alaska are not known.

Whether, and to what extent, the activity **STRESSES** the habitat type. The sites in this proposal meet the 2003 HAPC priority because they are largely untrawled and the bottom appears to hold concentrations of hard corals and rockfish abundance. Some groundfish longline and pot fishing likely occurs within these sites, but the extent of this is not known at this time.

The **RARITY** of the habitat type. Fishermen believe these sites are unique because they have high-relief bathymetry, likely possess concentrations of hard corals in some portions of the area, and probably contain an abundance of juvenile rockfish and Atka mackerel.

Describe any Proposed Solutions to Achieve These Objectives. These sites should be prioritized for submersible mapping so any appropriate restrictions on bottom trawling may be developed to protect the high-relief coral habitat that may occur within these designated HAPC sites while preserving fishing opportunities in other portions of the HAPC that are not that type of habitat. Once these sites are mapped to identify any high-relief hard coral abundance areas used by rockfish, and once the level of existing fishing and non-fishing effects on the area are observed and categorized, no bottom trawling zones may be delineated to protect stands of hard coral rockfish habitat while preserving trawling and other fishing opportunities to the extent practicable. These sites should be used for research on habitat use by rockfish and effects of fishing studies. The site at Bowers Ridge is very extensive and would likely lend itself well to studies of fishing and non-fishing areas within the site so as to increase understanding of how fishing affects the productivity of managed species.

Describe any Proposed Management Measures for the HAPC. 1. Designation of HAPC meeting NPFMC's 2003 priority. 2. Prioritization for submersible mapping and rockfish abundance evaluation. 3. Eventual development of appropriate restrictions on bottom trawling to protect high-relief hard coral and juvenile rockfish areas within these proposed sites. 4. Development of controlled research to learn more about how rockfish and other managed demersal species associate with and use habitat, how fishing affects that use and productivity, how different levels of fishing intensity and gear effects influence productivity of high-relief hard coral habitats.

Identify any Expected Benefits to Habitat or FMP species. Sites within this proposal may be important hard coral abundance areas with rockfish habitat that have not been trawled extensively at least since 1990. If the steps outlined in this proposal are implemented, rockfish and other Fishery Management Plan (FMP) species could benefit with only minimal impacts on groundfish trawlers and communities dependent on trawling.

Identify Fishery, Stakeholders, and/or Communities, which may Benefit from the Proposed HAPC. Proposed sites may be important hard coral abundance areas with excellent rockfish habitat that has not been trawled in recent years. If the steps outlined in this proposal (mapping, zoning of appropriate fishing activities within HAPC, research on habitat use and how fishing affects productivity) are implemented, rockfish and other FMP species could benefit with only small direct impacts on groundfish trawl fishermen and communities that depend on trawling. The site at Semisopochnoi is presently closed to trawling for pollock, cod, and Atka mackerel, so the only known trawl activity that might be affected by future management measures is the Pacific Ocean Perch fishery. The extent of fishing by fixed gears in the proposed sites is not known, but could be potentially large (especially for Aleutian Islands crab fisheries at Semisopochnoi). Data (such as EFH EIS 5b analysis) are not available to evaluate effects on fixed gear fisheries if restrictions developed for these were eventually applied to fixed gear fisheries.

Support Data or Information Sources. NOAA charts 16012 and NMFS' Auke Bay submersible dive data indicating coral gardens. Additionally, this proposal is based upon knowledge and information volunteered at November and December 2003 meetings by trawl captains who target cod, Atka mackerel, and rockfish in the Aleutian Islands, portions of NMFS' analysis of AI proposal 5b in 2003 EFH EIS; Fritz, *et al.*'s CPUE study, 1998 (NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-AFSC-88); rockfish catch data prepared by NMFS for Oceana (2003 FOIA).

Figures P4-1 through P4-4 for Semisopochnoi Island and Bowers Ridge HAPC proposals

Figure P4-1 Semisopochnoi
and Bowers Ridge proposed
HAPC sites

Proposed HAPC sites
overlaid on NOAA charts
16012

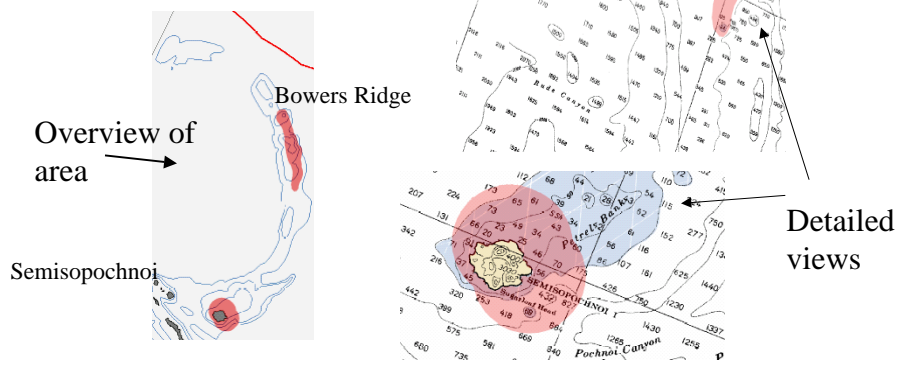
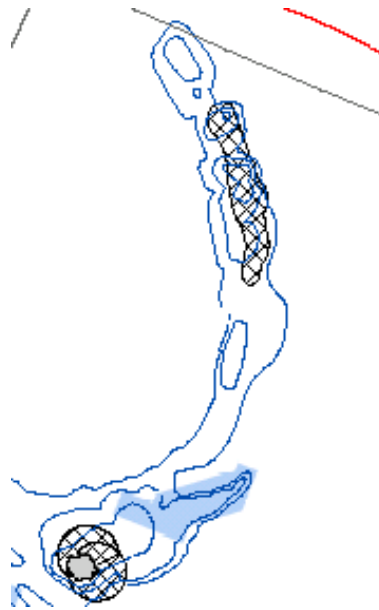


Figure P4-2: EFH EIS 5b Aleutian Islands analysis for Semisopochnoi and Bowers Ridge

Note that neither area would have been “open” under the 5b analysis because significant trawling has not occurred in these areas since 1990.



Bowers Ridge

Figure P4-3: Highest quartile rockfish CPUE data from Fritz et al. CPUE study

Semisopochnoi Island

- Rougheye - trawl
- Shortraker - longline
- Shortraker - trawl
- Rougheye - longline
- Northern rockfish - trawl
- POP - trawl
- HAPC sites

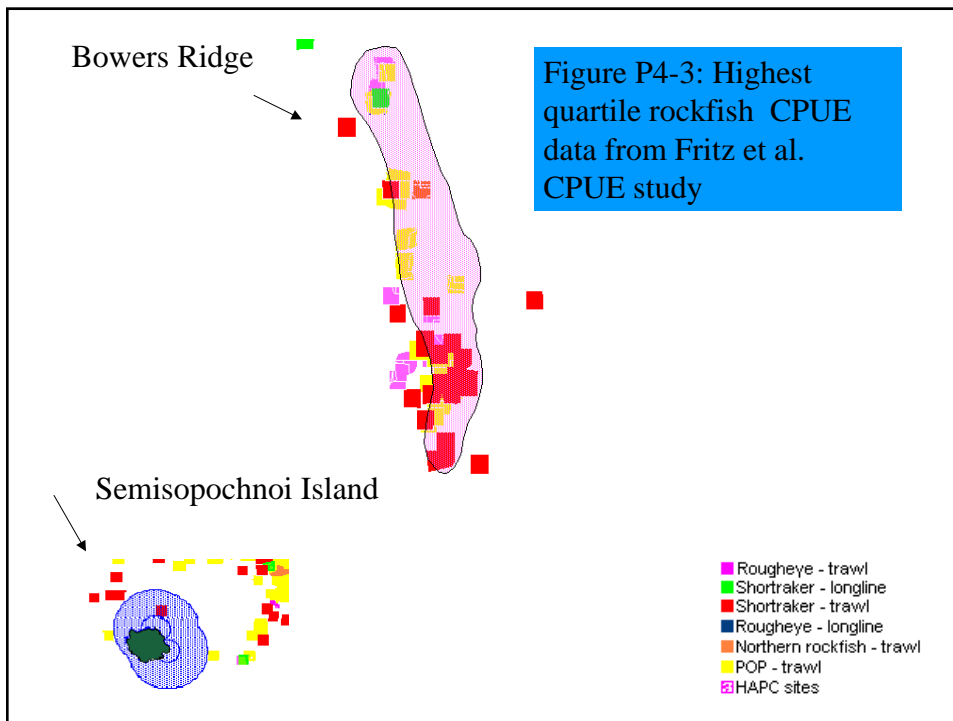


Figure P4-4: Rockfish catch rates (annual average 1990-2002 for 10x 10 kilometer blocks) based on Oceana's FOIA request data

Note: These areas have not been trawled for rockfish since 1990.

POP_SRRE Catch 1990-2002

0 - 56281
56282 - 218215
218216 - 506557
506558 - 1955959

