



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA TO DEVELOP NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR STUDYING, PROTECTING DEEP-SEA CORALS AND SPONGES

NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, announced plans to develop a comprehensive, national strategy for long-term research and conservation of deep-ocean coral and sponge habitat. This plan will be complimented by the continued cooperative efforts of NOAA Fisheries Service and the nation's regional fishery management councils to evaluate and take action to protect where appropriate, deep-sea corals and sponges. These efforts respond to a petition received from Oceana, a non-governmental organization, which requested emergency regulations to protect this habitat from mobile bottom-tending fishing gear.

“We agree with Oceana that deep-sea corals and sponges are a critical part of marine ecosystems and must be protected,” said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service. “After careful consideration of their petition and public comment we believe this comprehensive approach will allow us to inventory deep-sea coral and sponge habitats and take necessary action to protect them, if measures aren’t already in place.”

While the comprehensive national strategy is under development, NOAA will continue to map deep-sea coral and sponge habitats and conduct research to increase our understanding of them. A variety of NOAA programs support research and monitoring of deep-sea coral and sponge habitats including Ocean Exploration and the National Undersea Research Program. NOAA Fisheries Service will work with the regional fishery management councils and through NOAA’s National Marine Sanctuary Program to take near-term steps to protect these important marine habitats while developing the broader strategy.

Certain fishing practices, especially mobile bottom-tending gear (including dredges, beam and otter trawls, and other mobile fishing gear that is dragged along the ocean floor), can damage deep-sea corals and sponges, and the marine wildlife that depends upon them for habitat.

Though the issues outlined in the petition do not meet the criteria as an “emergency” as defined in the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, they are important issues that already are being addressed by NOAA Fisheries Service and the regional fishery management councils. This year several councils took groundbreaking action to protect deep-sea coral and sponge habitats:

- In February 2005, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council adopted closures to protect deep coral and other habitats in 280,000 square nautical miles in the Aleutian Islands. This amendment allows bottom trawling to continue in the Aleutian Islands in areas that have supported the highest catches in the past, and prohibits bottom trawling in all other portions of the Aleutian Islands management region to prevent future impacts to undisturbed habitats in those areas.
- In April 2005, NOAA Fisheries Service approved the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council closures of Oceanographer and Lydonia Canyons to bottom trawling for Monkfish, which will also protect important deep-sea coral habitat.
- In June 2005, the Pacific Fishery Management Council adopted closures to commercial bottom trawl fishing for Pacific Groundfish in approximately 200,000 square nautical miles of benthic habitat on the West Coast between the Canadian and Mexican borders. These regulations will take effect upon approval by NOAA Fisheries Service.

The public will have an opportunity to comment on the deep-sea coral and sponge conservation and management strategy at a later date.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with our federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global Earth observation network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:

NOAA: www.noaa.gov

NOAA Fisheries Service: www.nmfs.noaa.gov

Cold Water Corals: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/ead/coldwatercorals.htm

Petition and Decision: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/habitatconservation/DSC_petition