

Regional EFH Profile: South Atlantic

This document was prepared by the Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum with input from council and NOAA Fisheries staff as briefing material for the National Essential Fish Habitat Summit, May 17-19, 2016.

Summary

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) first identified EFH through a 1998 Habitat Plan and Comprehensive Amendment to all FMPs. EFH is described using Level 1 and 2 data, and descriptions are aggregated by species and life history stage for the region's multispecies FMPs. The Habitat Plan later evolved into a Fishery Ecosystem Plan. Amendments to this plan are the vehicle through which the council updates and refines EFH and HAPC designations. The Council maintains a standing Habitat Protection and Ecosystem Based Management Committee and a Habitat Protection and Ecosystem Based Management Advisory Panel, which provide input on the Council's habitat and ecosystem-related activities. The Council also maintains a set of Habitat Policies and Policy Statements that include recommendations for minimizing adverse impacts to EFH from non-fishing activities.

EFH Timeline

Year	Action
1998	Habitat Plan and Comprehensive Amendment; EFH identified for all species and FMPs, first Habitat Policies developed
2004	Dolphin Wahoo FMP implemented, EFH designated for wahoo
2009	Habitat Plan integrated into a Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP); Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 1 (CE-BA 1) provides spatial representation of EFH, establishes Deepwater Coral HAPCs and spatial fishing gear management measures
2011	EFH identified for Sargassum through Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 2 (CE-BA 2)
2014-15	Habitat Policies updated
2016	Fishery Ecosystem Plan 2 (FEP2) under development

EFH identification and review

Habitat Plan

The Council first designated EFH for all managed species in 1998 through a Habitat Plan, paired with a Comprehensive Amendment that amended all of the council's current FMPs¹. The Habitat Plan was developed through a collaborative process and series of workshops involving the Council's Coral Advisory Panel, Habitat and Environmental Protection Advisory Panels, and

¹ In 1998, dolphin were included in the Coastal Migratory Pelagics FMP; in 2004 the Council implemented a separate Dolphin Wahoo FMP and designated EFH for wahoo to include the same areas identified as EFH for dolphin. EFH was also initially identified for red drum which is no longer federally managed.

additional technical experts. These partners helped the council identify and compile information, and assess information quality and data gaps. The Habitat Plan was intended as a source document and provides an ecological characterization of the interconnected habitat types that support ecosystem function in the South Atlantic region.

The Council's EFH descriptions are primarily based on Level 1 and 2 data and include concise definitions of important EFH components for each species and/or complex, paired with more detailed descriptions. EFH definitions are based on habitat types, features, and/or depth contours, and include all life history stages. EFH definitions for the council's multispecies fisheries (snapper grouper and coastal migratory pelagics) are aggregated across species. For example, one component of EFH for the snapper grouper complex is defined as:

"...coral reefs, life/hard bottom, submerged aquatic vegetation, artificial reefs and medium to high profile outcroppings on and around the shelf break zone from shore to at least 600 feet where the annual water temperature range is sufficiently warm."
(SAFMC 1998)

Additional habitat types and features may be identified as components of EFH for specific species and/or life history stages. For example, high salinity bays, estuaries, and seagrass habitat is identified as EFH specifically for cobia, part of the CMP complex. A habitat type or feature may be identified as EFH for multiple FMPs; for example the Gulf Stream is identified as EFH for all South Atlantic FMPs due to its role in larval dispersion. The Habitat Plan also includes more comprehensive descriptions of habitat types, along with information about habitat use and species distribution where available.

The Council administers two habitat-related FMPs, the Coral, Coral Reef, and Live/Hardbottom Habitat FMP (Coral FMP) and the Sargassum FMP. Harvest of these species is prohibited or restricted. The species managed under these FMPs are identified as EFH for other species. For example, coral reefs are EFH for species in the snapper-grouper complex. EFH is also identified for the coral and Sargassum species in these FMPs. For example, EFH for coral includes

"...rough, hard, exposed, stable substrate in subtidal to outer shelf depths, subtropical (15-30°), within a wide range of salinity and turbidity levels sufficiently low enough to provide algal symbionts adequate sunlight penetration for photosynthesis."(SAFMC 1998)

Fishery Ecosystem Plan

The Council's original Habitat Plan evolved into the Council's 2009 Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP), developed as a comprehensive source document for information about the South Atlantic ecosystem. The FEP integrates and updates the detailed habitat information presented in the Habitat Plan and specifies the original 1998 EFH descriptions. Updates and changes to EFH and HAPCs are implemented through Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendments (CE-BAs) or individual FMPs.

CE-BA 1 in 2009 provides spatial representations of EFH and HAPCs designated in 1998. Maps are based on information compiled from multiple sources, including the Southeast Fisheries Science Center and state partners, and vary in resolution and level of coverage. CE-BA 1 also establishes Deepwater Coral HAPCs, and implements spatial management measures for the

shrimp and golden crab fisheries to minimize adverse habitat impacts. CE-BA 2 in 2011 identifies EFH for the Sargassum FMP, defined as the top 10 meters of the water column in the South Atlantic Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) bounded by the Gulf Stream.²

Adverse fishing impacts

The Council has addressed adverse impacts to habitat from fishing through multiple pathways. The 1998 Habitat Plan and Comprehensive Amendment does not include any measures to minimize adverse impacts from fishing, stating that the “the Council has already prevented, mitigated, or minimized most adverse effects from most fisheries prosecuted in the South Atlantic EEZ.” In the snapper grouper fishery bottom-tending gear types are prohibited (fish traps, trawls, entanglement gear) or restricted (bottom longlines). Coral, coral reef, and live/hardbottom habitats are protected through the establishment of HAPCs accompanied by gear restrictions and spatial management of the shrimp and golden crab fisheries. Coral and Sargassum are further protected through their respective FMPs, which prohibit or strictly limit harvest of managed species.

Council bodies

The Council’s standing Habitat Protection and Ecosystem Based Management Advisory Panel (Habitat Ecosystem AP) provides a mechanism for collaborating with state and federal agencies in support of habitat conservation. The Habitat Ecosystem AP is structured as four state sub-panels, each including membership by state marine fisheries agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state coastal zone management, conservation organizations, and commercial and recreational stakeholders. The Habitat Ecosystem AP provides input on the council’s habitat and ecosystem-related work. The Council also maintains a standing Habitat Protection and Ecosystem Based Management Council Committee.

EFH consultations and habitat policies

EFH consultations are conducted by the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office. As part of the original Habitat Plan in 1998 the Council approved a series of habitat policies that support the MSA mandate to identify actions to encourage the conservation and enhancement of EFH. These policies were developed with guidance from the Habitat AP and address oil and gas exploration, development and transportation, dredging and dredge material disposal, submerged aquatic vegetation, and ocean dumping. Policies may include recommendations for minimizing adverse impacts from development activities, and statements supporting or opposing specific practices associated with development activities.

As part of the FEP II development process, the Council recently developed an updated series of habitat policy statements, which address marine aquaculture, submerged aquatic vegetation, beach dredging and filling, beach renourishment and large scale coastal engineering; energy exploration, development, transportation and hydropower re-licensing; alterations to riverine, estuarine and nearshore flows; and non-native and invasive species. In addition, future policies will address artificial reefs, food webs and connectivity, and climate variability and fisheries.

² The Sargassum FMP was first submitted to NMFS in 1999 but disapproved due to lack of an estimate for MSY and justification for setting OY = 0. The plan was approved in 2003 but EFH designations were disapproved.

Looking ahead

The Council is currently in the process of developing an updated Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEPII), and updating information supporting EFH designations and refining spatial information where available. The Council developed a Habitat and Ecosystem Atlas, which allows users to view multiple mapping services and information sources through a single portal, including EFH and HAPC designations and habitat information. In addition, a SAFMC Digital Dashboard was developed and is being further refined to better provide access to individual services (including the SAFMC EFH Service) as well as the overall Atlas, a Data Catalogue to download select spatial layers, regional partner and project links, and developing ArcGIS Online products.