

Fishing Impacts – Draft Council Policy

This policy applies to managing the impact of fishing on sensitive benthic habitat areas.

1. An ecosystem approach, which includes consideration of benthic communities and habitat, and their linkages within the ecosystem, is fundamental to the sustainable use of our marine resources.
2. To ensure healthy and productive marine ecosystems, it is imperative that the impacts of fishing in sensitive benthic habitats be considered in fisheries management decision making.
3. Sustainable use that safeguards ecological processes is a priority of fisheries management decision making.
4. Not all benthic areas require equal levels of protection, as not all areas are equally ecologically or biologically significant or vulnerable to particular stressors.

To support these overarching directives, the areas within the Council’s fisheries management jurisdiction are defined as two types:

A ***historically fished area*** is a marine ecosystem area where there is a history of fishing; this may include ongoing fishing activity.

A ***frontier fishing area*** is an area of the marine ecosystem where there is no history of fishing. In the Mid-Atlantic this includes deep areas of the Outer Continental Shelf.

There is a higher level of scientific uncertainty about benthic habitat and its associated communities in frontier fishing areas than within historical fishing areas. Within the Council’s “Deep sea coral zones”, areas where corals have been observed or where they are likely to occur, fishermen will be prohibited from using bottom-tending fishing gear such as trawls, dredges, bottom longlines, and traps. Large swaths of the area in these coral zones are frontier fishing areas.

Frontier Fishing Areas Policy

5. The Council will evaluate the expansion of existing or new fisheries or new fishing gears into frontier fishing areas for potential impacts to benthic habitats, and determine the sensitivity of these areas to the proposed fishing activity.

Historically Fished Areas Policy

6. The Council will identify benthic areas and high productivity areas that may be more at risk than others within historically fished areas, and prioritize the work and fisheries management actions that may be required to mitigate or avoid harm. This will include

consideration of the cumulative impacts of all fisheries and fisheries gears on Mid-Atlantic fish benthic habitat through fishing gear impact analyses.

7. Evaluate the effectiveness of existing fisheries management measure for minimizing fish habitat impacts, and determine whether changes are required.
8. Implement management measures across fishery management plans that may reduce impacts on benthic habitat. For example, efficiencies in the fisheries such as trip limits, or other existing measures impact the time gear may spend on the seabed.

Fishing Gear Use (applies to all fishing areas)

9. Measures which avoid or reduce the potential for lost gear, or “ghost gear”, should be considered in fishery management plans, where practicable.
10. Fishing gear modifications or substitutions which reduce the impacts on benthic habitats should be considered in fishery management plans, where practicable.