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Mid-Atlantic Council Approves Deep Sea Corals Amendment

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA – This week the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council approved an amendment to protect deep sea corals from the impacts of bottom-tending fishing gear in the Mid-Atlantic. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, the amendment will create “deep sea coral zones” in areas where corals have been observed or where they are likely to occur. Within these zones, fishermen will not be allowed to use any type of bottom-tending fishing gear such as trawls, dredges, bottom longlines, and traps. In total, the areas proposed for deep sea coral zone designation encompass more than 38,000 square miles – an area nearly the size of Virginia.

Most deep sea corals are slow-growing and fragile, making them vulnerable to damage from certain types of fishing gear that come in contact with the sea floor. Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, regional fishery management councils have the authority to designate zones where, and periods when, fishing may be restricted in order to protect deep sea corals. This provision has been in place since 2007, but the Mid-Atlantic Council will be the first of the eight councils to exercise this authority to designate deep sea coral zones.

“This historic action by the Council was made possible by the cooperation of a broad group of fishermen, advisors, coral researchers, conservation groups, Council members, and staff,” said Council Chairman Rick Robins. “Many people deserve credit for their collaborative efforts to refine the coral protection areas in a way that protects deep sea corals in our region while accommodating current fishing practices.”

The measures approved by the Council on Wednesday include the designation of fifteen “discrete coral zones,” which are areas of known or highly likely coral presence. Most of these areas are located around underwater canyons or slope areas along the continental shelf edge. The boundaries for the discrete coral zones were developed cooperatively by members of the Council’s advisory panels, deep sea coral experts, industry members, and other stakeholders. In addition, the Council voted to establish a “broad coral zone” encompassing a much larger area beginning around the 450 meter depth contour and extending out to the 200-mile limit of the Exclusive Economic Zone.

The prohibition on all types of bottom-tending gear would apply in both the broad and discrete deep sea coral zones. The amendment includes a provision to allow vessels to transit through coral zones if fishing gear is stowed and not available for immediate use.

Although the amendment will modify the fishery management plan for Atlantic Mackerel, Squid, and Butterfish, the restrictions would apply to any federally regulated fishing activity occurring within the proposed areas in the Mid-Atlantic Council region.

During the meeting the Council considered potential exemptions for federally managed fisheries and voted to exempt the red crab fishery from the proposed gear restrictions. The fishery, which only includes two full-time vessels, would be exempt from gear restrictions in discrete coral zones for at least two years and in broad zones indefinitely.

Secretarial review of the amendment will involve a thorough review of the proposed measures by NOAA Fisheries, including further opportunities for public comment.

Additional information, updates, and background materials related to this amendment are available on the Deep Sea Corals Amendment page at <http://www.mafmc.org/actions/msb/am16>.