

What is Essential Fish Habitat?

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) is defined as ‘**those waters and substrates necessary for spawning, breeding, feeding, and growth to maturity**’. The Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) has included provisions requiring fishery management plans (FMPs) to minimize the adverse effects of fishing on EFH since the 1996 reauthorization. Detailed guidance on implementation of these provisions was provided by NOAA in the EFH final rule (Federal Register Vol. 67 No 12, p 2343-2383).

EFH is designated on a species-by-species basis, and may be specific to the egg, larval, juvenile, and adult lifestages, as appropriate. The designations include a spatial component (map) and a descriptive component (text description). It is important to note that the text description takes precedence over the spatial representation in cases where conflicts arise. Specifically, an area that is mapped as EFH is only defined as EFH for consultation or other purposes if it meets the text description parameters, which may include depth, substrate, temperature, or other types of information.

In most cases, the spatial distribution of EFH on the maps is based largely on the spatial distribution of the species/lifestage to which the designation applies. Much of this information comes from fishery independent trawl surveys, although other data sources are also considered. Generally speaking, we do not have adequate information on how specific types of habitats or specific habitat locations contribute to the productivity of managed stocks (the final rule calls this ‘level 4’ data), so the EFH descriptions are often fairly general. As might be expected, there is a high degree of spatial overlap in the EFH designations of the various species managed by the Council.

Where can I find information about current EFH designations?

EFH designations for the following species were developed by the NEFMC:

American plaice, Atlantic cod, Atlantic halibut, Atlantic herring, Atlantic salmon, Atlantic sea scallops, Atlantic wolffish, barndoor skate, clearnose skate, haddock, little skate, monkfish, ocean pout, offshore hake, pollock, red hake, redfish, rosette skate, silver hake (whiting), smooth skate, thorny skate, white hake, windowpane flounder, winter flounder, winter skate, witch flounder, yellowtail flounder

Current EFH designations were implemented via various FMP actions, but mostly via EFH Omnibus Amendment 1, which was published in 1999. Other designations, such as those for skates and wolffish, were implemented via the Skate Complex FMP and Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP, respectively. Note that the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council develops the EFH designations for those species for which it maintains primary or sole management authority, and that the National Marine Fisheries Service develops EFH designations for highly migratory species (e.g. tunas, sharks). The EFH mapper

(<http://www.habitat.noaa.gov/protection/efh/habitatmapper.html>) is a useful tool for visualizing the different designations.

How are EFH designations used?

A primary use of the EFH designations is for consultation purposes, i.e. review of Federal agency projects that overlap with and might potentially impact designated EFH. Although the Council comments on specific projects on occasion, it generally delegates consultation authority to NMFS. More information about EFH consultations can be found here: <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/hcd/appguide1.html>. The adverse effects of various FMP actions on EFH are also reviewed regularly, and action is taken to minimize those effects as required.

Where can I find information about proposed updates to the current EFH designations?

The Council initiated EFH Omnibus Amendment 2 in 2005 with two main goals, the first of which was to review and update EFH designations for all managed species. NEFMC approved updated designations for many species in June 2007, but these new designations will not be implemented until development of the entire amendment has concluded and a final rule is published (2012 or 2013). During Fall 2010/Spring 2011, the Council's Habitat Plan Development Team and Habitat Oversight Committee reviewed these approved designations and suggested some modifications to the alternatives approved in 2007. The most current versions of the proposed designations (text and maps) will be posted to the Council's webpage during summer 2011.

For more information about EFH designations or the EFH Omnibus Amendment, visit the habitat section of www.nefmc.org, or contact:

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