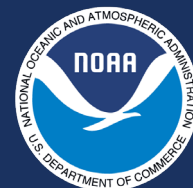


ANNUAL ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT REPORT

April 2025

Cathy Coon, Assistant Regional Administrator
Sean McDermott, Anchorage Branch Chief
Dr. Jodi Pirtle, Juneau Branch Chief

HABITAT CONSERVATION DIVISION, NMFS ALASKA REGION



COUNCIL'S ROLE IN EFH CONSULTATIONS

- Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) provides a role for Councils in commenting on federal or state agency actions that would affect fish habitat.
- Section 305(b)(3)(A): Councils may comment on and make recommendations to the Secretary and any federal or state agency concerning any activity or proposed activity authorized, funded, or undertaken by the agency that, in the view of the Council, may affect the habitat, including EFH, of a fishery resource under its authority.
- Section 305(b)(3)(B): Councils must provide such comments and recommendations concerning any activity that, in the view of the Council, is likely to substantially affect the habitat, including EFH, of an anadromous fishery resource under Council authority.
- EFH regulations at 50 CFR 600.930(a) state that each Council should establish procedures for reviewing federal or state actions that may adversely affect the habitat, including EFH, of a species under its authority.



B2 NMFS EFH Report, section 1, pages 1-2



COUNCIL'S EFH CONSULTATION POLICY

The Council identified the following criteria to guide NMFS in determining whether an activity is likely to be of particular interest to the Council:

- The extent to which the activity would adversely affect EFH;
- The extent to which the activity would adversely affect Habitat Areas of Particular Concern or other areas established by the Council to protect sensitive habitat features;
- The extent to which the activity would be inconsistent with measures taken by the Council to minimize potential adverse effects of fishing on EFH; and
- The extent to which the activity would conflict with Council-managed fishing operations.



137 early coordination and EFH CONSULTATIONS

- **Aquaculture:** Reviewed 32 permit applications, lease amendment requests, NWP notices and early coordination.
- **Coastal Development:** Coordinated or consulted on 36 coastal development projects.
- **DOT Projects:** Coordinated or consulted on 9 projects.
- **Dredging and Harbor Improvement:** Coordinated or consulted on 20 harbor development projects.
- **Hydropower:** Primary projects we focused on since April 2024:
 - Eklutna mitigation plan development, Nuyakuk licensing, Igiugig hydrokinetic monitoring, and Bradley Lake, Pelican Hydro- habitat mitigation
- **Mines:** Coordinated or consulted on 12 mining projects within Alaska.
- **Restoration:** Coordinated or consulted on 10 restoration projects.
- **Oil and Gas Development- none**
- **Military:** Conducted an EFH consultation with U.S. Army At JBER, leading to artillery training changes to protect Pacific Salmon in Eagle River Flats, including ongoing monitoring



B2 NMFS EFH Report, section 2, page 2-4



2028 EFH 5-Year Review Launch

- The objective of an EFH 5-year Review is to review the ten EFH components of Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) and revise or amend EFH components as warranted based on available information (50 CFR 600.815(a)(10)).
- We will launch the next 5-year Review at the June 2025 Council meeting and are preparing the Council's roadmap to identify priorities for updates in the six FMPs.
 - Federal regulations at 50 CFR 600.815 require that each FMP contains the following 10 EFH components:
 1. EFH descriptions and identification
 2. Fishing activities that may adversely affect EFH
 3. Non-Magnuson-Stevens Act fishing activities that may adversely affect EFH
 4. Non-fishing activities that may adversely affect EFH
 5. Cumulative impacts analysis
 6. EFH conservation and enhancement recommendations
 7. Prey species list and locations
 8. Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) identification
 9. Research and information needs
 10. Review EFH every 5 years

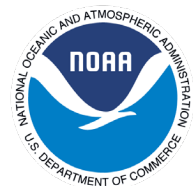


2025 Alaska EFH Research Plan

- EFH research recommendations were informed during the 2023 EFH 5-year Review by contributing researchers, stock assessment scientists, and Council advisory bodies.
- These recommendations were summarized as three objectives for the revised [2024 Alaska EFH Research Plan](#):
 - Objective 1: Improve EFH information for targeted species and life stages
 - Objective 2: Improve fishing effects assessment, and
 - Objective 3: Improve understanding of nearshore habitat and forage species.
- The timely objectives provide guidance for recommended habitat science advancements leading up to the next and future EFH 5-year Reviews and supporting EBFM in the Council process.
- The Alaska EFH Research Plans have also included five long term research goals that remain consistent with minor, meaningful updates since 2005.



B2 NMFS EFH Report, section 4, page 5-6; and Alaska EFH Research Plan



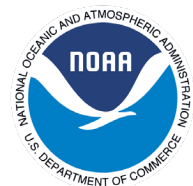
FY25 Recommended Funding

NOAA Fisheries prioritizes the following projects:

- Developing a network of nearshore sentinel sites to enhance our understanding of environmental change effects on EFH for federally managed species and their prey in partnership with tribes and coastal communities. (OHC EFH I&A; year 1 of a 1 year proposal).
- Habitat utilization of juvenile snow crab in a warming Bering Sea: The interactive effects of ontogeny and temperature on juvenile snow crab energetic condition, metabolic scope, and survival. (Alaska EFH RFP; year 2 of a 3 year proposal).
- Identifying EFH for walleye pollock early life stages: the influence of environmental conditions and food availability on density and early growth of larval and juveniles in the Gulf of Alaska. (Alaska EFH RFP; year 1 of a 3 year proposal).
- Leveraging a unique winter survey opportunity to improve the understanding of EFH for red king crab in Bristol Bay. (Alaska EFH RFP; year 1 of a 3 year proposal).



B2 NMFS EFH Report, section 4, page 6.



NOAA's Restoration Center in Alaska

Approximately \$30 million dollars in projects were funded to improve fish passage, coastal resilience and capacity building for communities.

- Trout Unlimited will support 15 fish passage barrier removal projects in various phases of survey, design, and construction throughout the Tongass National Forest, in Southeast Alaska (\$4.2 million)
- Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission will increase their capacity to assess and mitigate flood, implement stream restoration initiatives, and ensure the sustainability of salmon populations through hiring a stream restoration biologist (\$497,000)
- Chickaloon Native Village will continue facilitating the Alaska Tribal Fish Passage Working Group and remove three fish passage barriers and complete survey and designs for an additional barrier in the Matanuska Susitna region of Alaska (\$6.2 million)
- Organized Village of Kasaan will design and remove/replace eight fish passage barriers (culverts) on Prince of Wales Island, Alaska (\$5 million)
- Qawalangin Tribe of Unalaska will remove a fish passage barrier in Unalaska, Alaska consisting of three culverts (\$2.7 million*)



B2 NMFS EFH Report, section 5, pages 6-8.



NOAA's Restoration Center in Alaska

(cont.)

- Tyonek Tribal Conservation District will support seven fish passage barrier removal projects in various phases of survey, design, and construction near Tyonek, Alaska (\$3.8 million) and will & conduct actionable science to support salmon on the Chuitna River Alaska (\$1.1 million)
- Southeast Alaska Watershed Coalition will work with the community and local collaborators to design nature based restoration projects on the Mendenhall River which experiences recurring high water releases from glacial lake outburst floods in Juneau, Alaska (\$1.5 million*)
- Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska will build capacity to implement coastal restoration work and strategies to support fisheries, food security, youth stewardship, and communications (\$3 million)
- Chugach Regional Resources Commission will create a network of catalysts to increase capacity to identify and implement restoration projects across the South Coast of Alaska (\$2.9 million)



B2 NMFS EFH Report, section 5, pages 7-8.



Aquaculture Opportunity Areas Siting Process

- The Alaska Region and Alaska Fisheries Science Center has a cross-divisional Aquaculture Team that works together to bring our different mission goals to successful aquaculture operations.
- The Aquaculture Program has been working with NCCOS for spatial planning of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas (in response to EO 13921).
- HCD staff actively assisted by providing habitat information and data resources to ensure habitat impacts and concerns were considered in identifying potential aquaculture locations.
- HCD prepared a list of best practice [conservation recommendations](#) made available for potential permit applicants.
- Ultimately, this synergistic collaboration on the Alaska AOA process should lead to better outcomes for habitat conservation.



Council Coordination Committee Habitat Work Group

HCD's Management Team participates on the Council Coordination Committee's Habitat Work Group. This fiscal year the group continues to emphasize coordinating on—

- Federal habitat initiatives,
- Implementing habitat requirements,
- and sharing knowledge to address fish habitat issues across regions.

NPFMC's Katie Latinich and Anita Kroska and HCD's Cathy Coon and Jodi Pirtle shared highlights in February on NPFMC's Climate Resilience Planning, including habitat conservation conversations at the Council's June 2024 Climate Workshop, uptake and application of science products for climate-ready fisheries management, crafting climate-ready habitat goals for fishery management plans, and upcoming habitat-focused work such as the next EFH 5-year Review.



B2 NMFS EFH Report, section 7 page 9.





National Marine Fisheries Service

Accomplishments Report

Alaska Region's Habitat Conservation Division

Fiscal Year 2024

Our Mission: The Alaska Region's mission is science-based stewardship of living marine resources and their habitat in the waters of the North Pacific and Arctic Oceans off Alaska. Responsibilities include supporting sustainable fisheries, restoring and conserving protected species, and promoting healthy ecosystems and resilient coastal communities. The Habitat Conservation Division (HCD) in NOAA Fisheries' Alaska Region (AKR) supports the mission and carries out the agency's statutory responsibilities for habitat conservation under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Federal Power Act, and other laws. Habitat conservation, protection, and restoration are the foundation for sustaining the nation's fisheries. To prioritize our activities, make decisions in an ecosystem context, and strengthen the science behind our decision-making, HCD works closely with the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC), other NOAA line offices, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council), other federal and state agencies, Tribes, nongovernmental organizations, local governments, and a variety of industry and conservation groups.

The HCD Team...

... embodies scientific curiosity regarding underwater habitats and exemplifies the expertise within this division.

Cathy Coon, M.S......Assistant Regional Administrator
Sean McDermott, M.S......Anchorage Supervisor
Charlene Felkley, M.S......EFH Consultations & Coordination
Doug Limpinsel, M.S......Oil & Gas, Mining, Aquatic Ecosystems
Seannob Kelly, M.S......ECO Coordinator, Dredging, Oil Spills
Luke Byker, M.S......Marine Habitat Resource Specialist
Julianne Rosset, M.S......Hydropower Coordinator
Jodi Pirtle, Ph.D......Juneau Supervisor, Deputy ARA
Meggie Stogner, B.A......Administrative Assistant
Skylar Bayer, Ph.D......Nearshore Habitat, Scallop Plan Team
Linda Shaw, M.S......Invasive Species Coordinator, Mitigation
Mason Smith, Ph.D......Marine Habitat Resource Specialist
Mallarie Yeager, Ph.D......Marine Habitat Resource Specialist
Molly Zaleski, M.S......Fishing Effects, Aquaculture, Mining
Erika Ammann, M.S......NMFS Restoration Center
Emily Mailmen, B.S......Marine Habitat Resource Specialist
Alyssa Sanchez, M.S......Sea Grant Fellow

A Message from Cathy Coon, ARA HCD

U.S. fisheries are a mainstay of income into the U.S. economy. Alaska alone accounts for over half of the fish caught in U.S. waters. Sustainable economic growth ties closely with healthy fisheries and it is paramount that we effectively manage our ecosystems such that they produce healthy fish stocks. Healthy habitats form the foundation for these vital fisheries which support a broad range of marine life along our coasts. From the sands and sediments on the ocean floor to the kelp forests and seagrasses in the nearshore coastal areas, these habitats provide everything marine species need to survive and thrive.

As we deepen our understanding of the complexities of these coastal and marine ecosystems, it is clear that a healthy economy is linked to a greater comprehension of natural environmental changes and the impacts of human activities on marine species. This growing understanding calls for an increased focus on habitat science, which plays a crucial role in improving stock assessments and promoting an ecosystem-based management approach.

Our habitat science initiatives—ranging from species distribution modeling, assessing climate change, coordinating research and management activities, and conducting Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) consultations—are integral to the health of fish populations. These efforts have significant economic implications, supporting the commercial and recreational fishing industries while positively impacting sectors such as tourism, seafood processing, and the communities that depend on fishing-related activities. Ultimately, the long-term benefits of maintaining healthy habitats translate into sustained economic activity, job security, and culturally important resources.

Our team, with its rich expertise, is dedicated to advancing the agency's mission and achieving our goals. This accomplishments report showcases the breadth of activities and the collaborations that support our objectives. However, these highlights only represent a portion of the broader efforts, commitment, and teamwork that drive our success. We hope you enjoy reading about our work and that it inspires you to learn more about how we are evolving and contributing to a sustainable future.



HCD Accomplishments Report, Fiscal Year 2024

Looking Ahead to 2025:

Strengthening Partnerships and Advancing Our Work

As we move into 2025, we are building on key themes of collaboration and innovation. One of our central goals for the upcoming year is to strengthen both internal and external partnerships. Within NOAA, we are prioritizing organizational agility, fostering cross-division collaboration to better support regional efforts. Already, we are working closely with divisions such as the Protected Resources Division, Sustainable Fisheries, and the Operations and Management Division on projects like tidal energy development in Cook Inlet, bycatch reduction strategies for chum salmon, and evaluating new fishing gear technologies. We are also working on NOAA's Climate Ecosystems and Fisheries Initiative with AFSC and Partners to develop climate-informed science tools for sustainable fisheries management and improved implementation of EBFM. Following a series of workshops and conferences focused on relationship-building, respectful research, and integrating Indigenous knowledge into federal decision-making, HCD is committed to deepening our connections with local and Alaska Native communities on projects of local interest that will inform and enhance our work.

To improve our internal relationships, leadership has established cross-divisional monthly all-staff meetings in Anchorage, aimed at fostering greater understanding among teams and enhancing collaboration across divisions. These meetings will help us strengthen connections, share knowledge, and provide mutual support in areas of overlap. Additionally, we are broadening our outreach efforts through interagency training and evaluating a new interactive database to support consultations. We are committed to improving relationships with our Federal partners, particularly in enhancing regulatory efficiencies. As part of this, we will offer a series *EFH 101*, as an introduction, by way of focused sessions for our action agencies to better equip their staff with the knowledge of regulatory processes related to habitat work. This training will include key topics such as EFH components, consultation processes, non-fishing effects, and conservation recommendations. A key resource in this effort is the newly developed EFH Handbook, which provides essential guidance for EFH consultation biologists and will help ensure more consistent, high-quality consultations across regions. The Handbook will continue to be updated and may eventually serve as the foundation for national level EFH training.

We are also excited to expand our collaborations in habitat science. In 2025, HCD, Kachemak Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, and the NOAA Kasitsna Bay Laboratory will launch a Nearshore Sentinel Sites Program in Kachemak Bay to update Alaska's Nearshore Fish Atlas. This initiative will help improve our EFH definitions and consultation processes by enhancing our understanding of nearshore fish habitats. We look forward to expanding this work to other areas of Alaska in collaboration with new partners.

Looking forward, we are preparing for the next EFH 5-year Review, set to launch at the June 2025 Council meeting. This review will address important recommendations and innovative approaches from the Council and SSC, including expanding life-stage and maturity models for crab species, enhancing salmon ocean life-stage models, and developing dynamic models for species affected by shifting distribution patterns. Additionally, we will focus on expanding survey data for deepwater species and incorporating prey base considerations into our modeling efforts.

These efforts, along with our ongoing collaborations, will help us incorporate innovative approaches, regional priorities, and our broad expertise into a more open and transparent organizational culture. We are eager to build on these collaborations in 2025, enhancing our ability to manage and protect vital fish habitats while supporting a more agile and unified approach to the challenges ahead.