149th Regular CFMC Meeting Highlights

The 149th CFMC Regular Meeting was held at the Divi Carina Hotel in St. Croix, USVI on April 22-23, 2014. The following notes summarize the issues discussed by the Council and the public present.

Issues discussed at the meeting:

- Discussed and approved a new strategy for stock assessment, presented by the South East Fisheries Science Center, that will involve wider stakeholder participation in all phases of the process.
- Approved the establishment of three Advisory Panels, one from each Island area, to address the independent fishery management plans.
- Discussed and approved several motions related to the need for consistency in the federal and state regulations in the managed areas of Abrir la Sierra, El Bajo de Sico and Tourmaline Bank in the western coast of Puerto Rico. These will be presented to the public in Public Hearings in August 2014.
- Approved Scoping Meetings in June 2014 to look for alternatives for closed seasons for those species going over the annual catch limit.
New Lobster Traps

Florida fisherman, Anthony Iarocci, is collaborating with commercial fishermen from the east and west coast of Puerto Rico on a pilot project involving lobster traps. These traps are smaller than the traditional traps used in the island, are easier to handle and relatively stable in ruff currents and weather conditions. Also, unlike traditional traps which have a high by-catch rate, the design of these new traps significantly reduce by-catch. Traps open from the top (figure 1), making unloading easier.

Different prototypes are being tested but models are either all wood or wood/wire combination (figure 2). The traps are put together by the fishermen using preassembled molds. All materials were shipped to Puerto Rico and the study is being done at two sites on the east and west coast of the island. Hector Benitez and a group of trap fishermen from Rincon are running the project in the west while Carlos Velazquez is heading the project in the east with a group of trap fishermen from the Naguabo Fishing Association Pescadores Unidos de Playa Hucares. Over one-hundred (100) traps were built in each site and catch assessment data will be collected and reported.

New look at the mesophotic benthic habitats and associated reef communities at Lang Bank, St. Croix.

An impressive and extensive coral reef system is found within mesophotic (30-50m) depths at Lang Bank, St. Croix. This research was presented by Dr. Jorge (Reny) Garcia-Sàis to the Council. The predominant coral reef formation is a bank reef constructed by Orbicella franksi distributed throughout a deep outer shelf terrace before the shelf-edge. The reef top at the shelf-edge is an important habitat for spiny lobster and red hind. The colonized rhodolith reef habitat has limited extension, but where found it sustains dense populations of queen conch. The shelf-edge and slope are mostly featureless and dominated by lightly colonized pavement.
Programa de Educación de Pesca Comercial del Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales de Puerto Rico (PEPCO)

The Commercial Fisher’s Education Program (Programa de Educación a Pescadores Comerciales), commonly known as PEPCO, is a new outreach and education program developed by the DNER and the CFMC in collaboration with the Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture and The Nature Conservancy. The program consists of various short courses that cover a broad range of topics regarding commercial fishing regulations, license and permit requirements, data entry and landing reports. Also, in collaboration with the Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture, a section of the program is dedicated to counseling fishers on various government programs and incentives.

This is DNER’s first official commercial fishers education program where fishers have the opportunity to clarify inconsistencies in information, understand the reason behind regulations and be walked through the whole license application process (delays in license and permit issuing have been due mostly to incomplete applications). The program also provides an opportunity to help increase awareness on the importance of data reporting and it’s implication in fisheries management.

A total of six regional workshops were offered around the island, plus two initial pilot workshops were conducted with a test group who provided feedback and recommendations back in November 2013. A total of 179 participants completed the course, and evaluated the program between excellent - good. A new program schedule will be set by mid-summer.

Marine Resources Education Program in Puerto Rico (MREPPR)

By the end of this year, the Council will sponsor the first MREP Workshop in Puerto Rico. In May 9, 2014 a very enthusiastic group of fishers and other people interested in fisheries conservation met in Puerto Rico with Alexa Dayton (Gulf of Maine Research Institute) and Kim Amendola (NMFS, Southeast Regional Office) to identify the possible issues to be included in the Puerto Rico Workshop.

For more information you may contact Helena Antoun at: hantoun.cfmc@gmail.com
US Virgin Islands Outreach activities updated

The grand finale for the Marine Outreach and Education Virgin Island Style (MOEVI) coordinated by Lia Ortiz will present a public event Don’t Stop Talking Fish (DSTF), June, 28 in St. Croix. People will enjoy exhibits, competitions, great food and best of all will share their compromise with the protection and wise use of the marine resources of the USVI.

Restaurants and consumers are participating of the Reef Responsible Sustainable Seafood Initiative that was designed to help create a sustainable seafood industry in the US Virgin Islands. Partner organizations worked to develop a suite of outreach materials and have provided training to local restaurants on St. Croix. These restaurants received information on seasonal closures, size restrictions, and the “Good Choice, Go Slow, and Don’t Eat” seafood list, which were all developed based on current fishery regulations and the best available science. Restaurants that have participated in Reef Responsible training are then invited to become members of the Reef Responsible Initiative, are branded as a Reef Responsible Certified Restaurant, and are celebrated for their commitment towards supporting and helping to improve the local fishery.

For more information on USVI Outreach & Education activities, contact: Lia Ortiz lia.ortiz@noaa.gov

NOAA Habitat Blueprint-Focus Area Selection Southeast and Caribbean Region

With the objective of strengthening the collaboration with the CFMC, Dr. Howard Schnabolk, from NOAA, Fisheries Restoration Center, explained the Habitat Blueprint Focus Project explained (SEC FAST) and the Guiding principles to the Council. These are: 1) Prioritize resources and activities across NOAA to improve habitat conditions, 2) Make decisions in an ecosystem context and consider competing priorities, 3) Leverage partnerships and 4) Improve delivery of habitat science to facilitate decision making.