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FISHERIES**

SERO

Revising anchoring regulations in the Grammanik Bank, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

Discussion

Caribbean Fishery Management Council

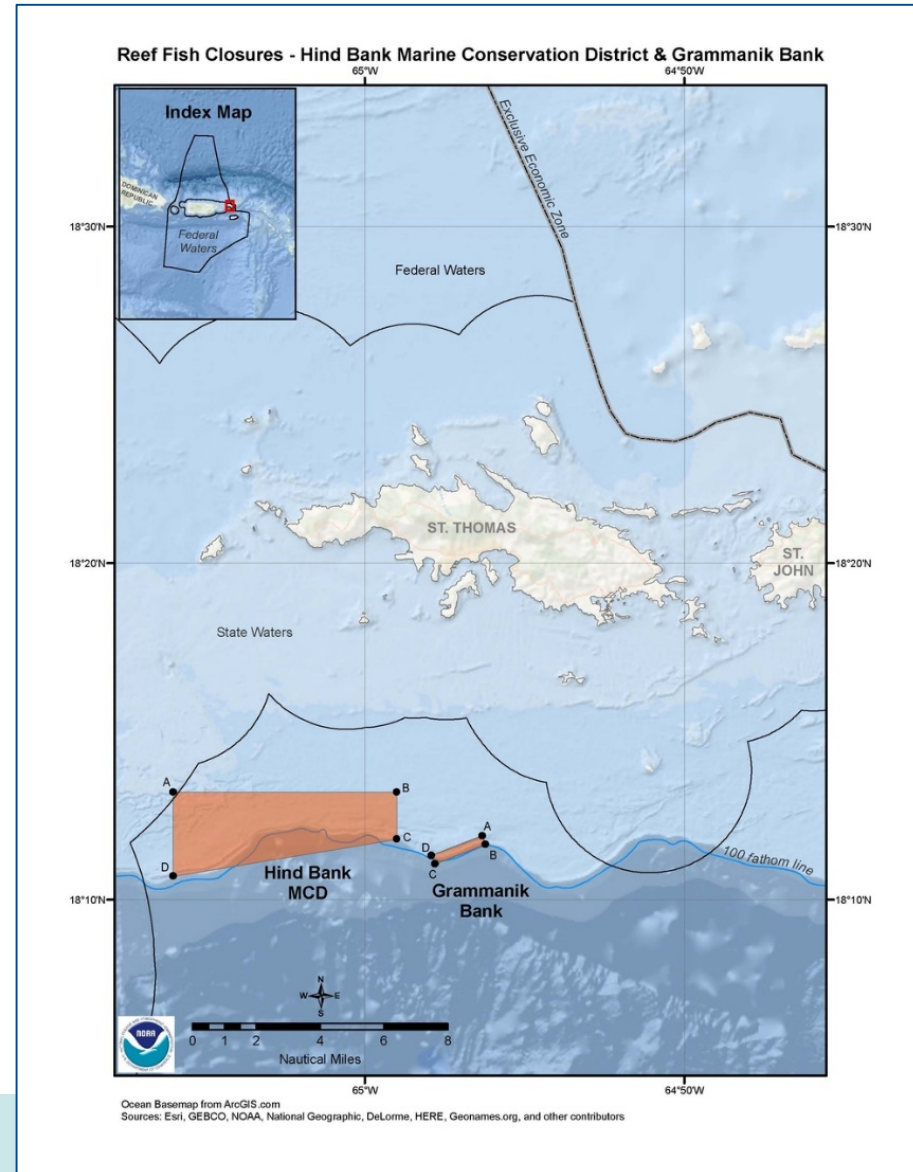
170th Regular Meeting

August 11-12, 2020

Issue: To evaluate and address detrimental effects from anchoring activities in the Grammanik Bank Area Closure affecting coral reef habitat.

- The Grammanik Bank lies on the shelf edge, approximately 14 miles south of St. Thomas, USVI.
- Deep coral reef bank (35-40 m), approximately 1.69 km long along shelf edge and 100 m wide at the widest point.
- Bordered to the east and west by shallower (25-30 m) hard-bottom ridges along the shelf edge.
- North bank with *Orbicella* reef (parallel), separated by a 20-30 m sand channel, drop off on the south edge with a deep *Agaricea* reef (~67 m).
- Located 4 km east of the Hind Bank MCD which was closed to all fishing and anchoring in 1999.
 - Closure shifted fishing pressure to the Grammanik Bank area

References: Nemeth, R.S. et al. GCFI:57 (2006); Rowell, T.J. et al. MEPS:518 (2015); Smith, T.B. et al. USVI CRMP (2015); Nemeth & Kadison CFMC 169th Meeting Presentation (2020).



Historical Information about Federal Management in the Area

- Grammanik Bank (GB) area is a multi-species aggregation area (e.g., groupers and snappers, other species):
 - Yellowfin grouper aggregates in GB from February through April each year, with peak spawning occurring around the full moon in March.
 - Nassau grouper also aggregates to spawn in the area (re-establishing aggregation in GB). Overfished species and harvest is prohibited.
 - Fishing pressure on GB may also result in bycatch mortality of Nassau.
- In 2004 an Interim Rule closed the Grammanik Bank area from Feb 1, 2005, through Apr 30, 2005 to protect the spawning population of yellowfin grouper (undergoing overfishing and overfished) and prohibited fishing or possessing any species of fish, except Highly Migratory Species (HMS), within the closed area.
- Long-term protection of the spawning aggregation was addressed in the 2005 Caribbean Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA) Amendment (at the time of the interim rule, it was under development)

Historical Information about Federal Management in the Area (Cont.)

- The 2005 Caribbean SFA Amendment also implemented a seasonal closure for black, red, tiger, yellowedge, and yellowfin groupers also from Feb 1-Apr 30, which were considered overfished. These species were put in a rebuilding plan until 2015.
- **To minimize adverse effects to Essential Fish Habitat (EFH), the 2005 Caribbean SFA Amendment:**
 - established modifications to anchoring techniques:
 - Anchor retrieval system required to prevent the anchor from dragging along the bottom during recovery applicable to all commercial and recreational fishing vessels that fish for or possess Caribbean reef fish species in or from the EEZ.
 - banned the use of bottom tending gear in seasonally closed areas

Management in the Grammanik Bank since 2005

- The Grammanik Bank closed area is 1.5 km² (0.44 nm²).
 - All fishing and possession of any species of fish, except for HMS species, in or from the GB, is prohibited from February 1 through April 30, each year.
 - Anchor retrieval system required when fishing for reef fish species
 - The use of pots/traps, gill/trammel nets, and bottom longlines is prohibited.
 - Closure protects other spawning species such as the Nassau grouper and also provides benefits to protected resources in the closed area, such as corals, considered EFH for reef fish.
- **ALL MEASURES WILL BE CARRIED INTO THE STT/STJ FMP**

From Discussion in the 2005 Caribbean SFA Amendment

- Area closed was the smallest in size when compared to other alternatives presented in the 2005 SFA amendment. It was noted in the alternatives' analyses that area may not provide enough of a buffer around Grammanik Bank and the spawning aggregations, in turn potentially complicating enforcement.
 - Comment during Council meetings indicated that if a larger closed area was selected, there would be significant economic impact to other fisheries (e.g., yellowtail snapper) that were conducted near Grammanik Bank.
 - yellowtail snapper fishers anchor to fish and requested to continue to be able to anchor but with the anchor retrieval system to fish during the GB open season.
- Discussion at Council meetings considered the proximity of the bank to the MCD, which was closed to all fishing and anchoring year-round since 1999.

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Researchers documented anchoring damage in the *Agaricia* deep-reef.

Current uses of Grammanik Bank and Questions

Commercial and Recreational Fishing

- Minimal commercial fishing activity (yellowtail fishing)
- Recreational fishing (headboat, others?)
 - What species are targeted and how? (reef fish, pelagics, HMS, lobster?) (Gear types, anchoring y/n)
 - What part of the bank is used for fishing activities? How deep?
 - How many fishers use the area?

Other

- Illegal fishing
- Foreign fishing boats (legal)

Current uses of GB and Questions

Research Activities

- Coral reef habitat in GB is important to support spawning aggregations
- Spawning aggregations assist in population recoveries and rebuilding stocks.
- The GB has resulted in an initial recovery of spawning stocks of yellowfin and Nassau groupers.
- Researchers documented anchoring damage in the *Agaricia* deep-reef and decline in coral cover (Kadison et al. CFMC June 2020).
 - Area with anchor damage is actively used by Nassau grouper (ESA-listed species) and others for spawning activities
 - How much anchoring damage has been documented? Depths? Is it recent? Is the anchoring damage in areas not included in the reserve or both?
 - What area research recommends be added to the closed area to protect spawning habitat (depth and extension)?

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How to address issues in Grammanik Bank? (From June 2020 CFMC Meeting, others)

- Should anchoring by fishing vessels be prohibited within the bank to protect spawning habitat?
- Should the closed area boundaries be modified to encompass all habitat supporting the aggregations? To what level any additional protection should be done?
 - What are the expected effects on USVI commercial fishers?
 - What are the expected effects on USVI recreational fishers?
 - What are the expected effects on spawning fish and habitat?
 - Will this action protect the habitat from other non-fishing uses?
 - Is enforcing an anchoring regulation feasible with current enforcement capacity?
 - Other issues to evaluate

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How to address issues in Grammanik Bank? (From June 2020 CFMC Meeting, others)

- Develop Outreach and Education activities specific to the Grammanik Bank to inform stakeholders about allowed/prohibited uses?
- Create special management areas such as anchor prohibition by fishing vessels in select coordinates over the reef to protect EFH coupled with Outreach/Education? Will this be enforceable?
- Address the development of federal fishing permits
- Evaluate the performance of the seasonally closed area
- Any combination of these? Other recommendations?

Next Steps:

Council request discussion paper for 2021?