

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As mandated by, and according to the changes in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (PL 94-265, as amended through October 11, 1996), it is necessary to identify essential fish habitat. The MSFCMA defines EFH and the EFH rule (EFH Provisions Interim Final Rule (62 FR 66531)) provides additional interpretations as follows:

“Essential fish habitat (EFH) means those waters and substrate necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity. For the purpose of interpreting the definition of essential fish habitat: **Waters** include aquatic areas and their associated physical, chemical, and biological properties that are used by fish and may include aquatic areas historically used by fish where appropriate; substrate includes sediment, hard bottom, structures underlying the waters, and associated biological communities; *necessary* means the habitat required to support a sustainable fishery and the managed species’ contribution to a healthy ecosystem; and “*spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity*” covers a species’ full life cycle.” (The MSFCMA defines fish to include finfish, mollusks, crustaceans, and all other forms of marine and plant life other than marine mammals and birds.)

The Caribbean Fishery Management Council has recognized the importance of habitat as related to fishery resources throughout the development of its various FMP’s. Amendment Number 1 to the Spiny lobster FMP included a complete section on the definition of habitats, not only of importance to the spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*) but also to other marine resources. The establishment of seasonal closures followed this effort for species-specific spawning aggregations that protected the very specific sites where these aggregations occur year after year. Finally, in 1995, the CFMC produced a Coral FMP in which the optimum yield (OY) for corals was set at zero and which prohibited all harvesting of corals and live-rock. The Queen Conch FMP (1996) includes the review of the literature available that offers some description of habitat for the various life stages of the species. However, most of the information available is for queen conch in other areas of the Caribbean, Florida, and from laboratory/hatchery experiments.

The US Caribbean is comprised of a number of inhabited and uninhabited islands grouped under Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands (USVI). The larger inhabited islands are: Puerto Rico, including the islands of Vieques and Culebra, and the Virgin Islands including St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix. In addition, other mayor uninhabited islands around Puerto Rico are Mona, Monito, Desecheo, Culebrita, and Caja de Muertos and several uninhabited smaller islands. The US Virgin Islands also include smaller islands such as Buck Island (St. Croix), Hans Lollik, Water Island, and Thatch Cay (St. Thomas), among others. The local governments, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and The Territory of the US Virgin Islands, have jurisdiction over the territorial waters from shore to the 3 NM boundary in the US Virgin Islands and from shore to the 9 NM boundary in Puerto Rico. The Caribbean Fishery Management Council’s jurisdiction extends from these territorial boundaries to the 200 NM boundary of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The EEZ of the Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands extends to the boundaries of Venezuela to the south, Dominican Republic to

the west, and the British Virgin Islands to the east.

The US Caribbean and the fishery resources of its waters need to be understood in the International context in which its geographic location is of importance since fish species do not recognize political boundaries. Additionally, fishery resources also need to be understood in local terms because of the unknowns regarding local recruitment and because the fisheries include sessile organisms (corals) which need to be afforded protection where these occur.

Due to the size and tropical location of the islands of Puerto Rico and the U. S. Virgin Islands, it is essential to consider the effect that these two factors have, on the condition of the essential (marine) fish habitat. These factors are the shorter distance to the marine waters and the shorter travel time of runoff.

The US Caribbean lies between 17°N and 19°N and 64°30'W and 68°W. Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, and St. John lie on the same geological platform and are part of the island arc volcanic chain created by subduction of one tectonic plate under another. St. Croix is located about 40 miles south of St. Thomas/St. John and is surrounded by deep water.

Puerto Rico

The island of Puerto Rico is approximately 100 miles long by 35 miles wide (160 km by 56 km or 8,960 squared kilometers) with a land area of approximately 3,421 square miles (CZMP-PR) and has about 380 miles of coastline. To the north of the island lie the Atlantic Ocean and the Puerto Rico trench (depths of 8,384 meters). The north coast has the narrowest insular shelf (less than one mile to depths over 200 fathoms).

The eastern side of Puerto Rico includes a chain of smaller islands known as La Cordillera (meaning mountain chain) and a continuous platform with the US Virgin Islands and the British Virgin Islands and with depths of less than 40 fathoms throughout.

US Virgin Islands

The Island of St. Croix is the largest of the three main islands and is separated from St. Thomas and St. John by depths greater than 2000 fathoms (1 fathom = 6 ft) and a distance, south of St. Thomas-St. John, of about 56 km south of Puerto Rico (EPA 1992. Characterization of use impairments of the US Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico). The USVI has a total of 136 sq. miles (Pico, 1980). One of the northern U. S. Virgin Islands, St. John has an area of 4,973 ha and a shoreline length of approximately 93 km.

An inventory of the products available can be found at:

<http://christensenmac.nos.noaa.gov/briefing.html>.

Appendix I (Volume I) includes the available information from the web site cited above. This appendix is the first step in the cooperative effort in mapping EFH in the US Caribbean.

Appendix II (Volume I) includes the Summary Minutes from the public hearings on EFH in the US Caribbean. Appendix II (Volume I) shows the written comments received at the Council's office during the public comment period. The Council has incorporated into this document the editorial changes and those comments which could be addressed at this time (e.g., the new wording for the definition of EFH). Other comments and suggestions (e.g., gear reduction programs) will be considered by the Council in the future.