



Southern Shrimp Alliance

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David Cupka
Chairman,
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
North Charleston, SC 29405

Dear Chairman Cupka:

The Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA) is pleased to present the following comments and recommendations regarding the Council's Scoping Document concerning Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 3 (CEBA-3). Our comments focus specifically on the first section that includes proposals to expand three Coral Habitat Areas of Concern (HAPC) including the *Oculina* Bank HAPC, Stetson-Miami Terrace HAPC and the Cape Lookout HAPC.

Please recall that during the development of CEBA-1, SSA made clear its support for the protection of deepwater corals, and that the designation of HAPCs was the correct management tool to accomplish this objective. SSA also stressed, however, that any HAPC designation must be based on sound scientific documentation regarding the presence of deepwater coral habitat as well as precise information for delineating traditional fisheries that may be affected by the designation. There is no place for personal conjecture in a process that can have such a direct impact on jobs and the economy of fishing communities throughout this region.

As you will further recall, the CEBA-1 process did entail a very intensive and collaborative review and analysis of scientific information concerning both coral habitat and fishing effort. This was a remarkably inclusive and cooperative process involving Council members and staff, NMFS, coral scientists, individual fishermen and representatives of the Southern Shrimp Alliance, and the environmental community, among others. Although requiring a major investment of time and effort, the investment concluded in a win-win-win for all interests

involved. Extensive coral habitat was protected and the traditional Royal Red shrimp fishery was preserved.

The Southern Shrimp Alliance is very proud of the result and the role it played in CEBA-1. SSA is also very proud of the manner in which the Council chose to conduct that process and that a fundamental premise was to respect and accommodate traditional fisheries in the area including the Royal Red shrimp fishery.

For these reasons, SSA is extremely disappointed and discouraged that the Council has chosen this time to initiate a scoping process on very specific proposals affecting the shrimp fisheries prior to the shrimp industry having received the scientific information on which the proposed actions are based - much less having an opportunity to collaboratively discuss, analyze, understand and perhaps make recommendations on that information. It is not possible for the SSA to prepare and submit sufficient commentary or recommendations on the proposed HAPC expansions without the benefit of a detailed presentation and discussion of the underlying science on coral habitat and fishing effort.

The Scoping Document clearly indicates that the Coral AP received presentations from unnamed coral scientists involved in research conducted under NOAA's Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program during 2009-2011. The Deepwater Shrimp AP did not receive any briefing on this research. It is not clear if the Habitat AP received the briefing.

The Scoping Document further indicates that each of the three proposed HAPC expansions in the Scoping Document are actually recommendations made solely by the Coral AP. SSA is unaware of any effort by the Coral AP or the Council to consult or collaborate with the shrimp industry prior to making these recommendations. This is particularly disturbing given that the Coral AP's recommended expansions of the Stetson-Miami Terrace HAPC and especially the *Oculina* Bank HAPC include areas of significant shrimp fishing activity. It is not clear if the proposed expansion of the Cape Lookout HAPC includes areas of shrimp fishing activity because no shrimp VMS data is presented in the Scoping Document for this area.

Finally, the Scoping Document does not provide any citations of peer reviewed science used as the basis for the Coral AP's recommendations, so again, there is no way for SSA to evaluate the substantive basis for these recommendations. In fact, according to the formal recommendations presented in a separate document by the Coral AP to the Council, a final report of the NOAA Deep-Sea Coral Team Working Group is not due until summer 2012.

Once again, as anyone familiar with the CEBA-1 process knows, SSA takes very seriously its responsibilities to minimize the impact of shrimp fishing on ecologically sensitive and valuable habitat. First and foremost, shrimp fishermen want to protect such habitat because it's the right thing to do. Of course, shrimp fishermen also avoid coral habitat because they pay a substantial price in lost or damaged gear and personal safety if they don't. As with CEBA-1, our industry is clearly motivated to address legitimate problems with scientifically-based solutions. However, SSA will always insist on a rigorous, in-depth review of the scientific basis for any proposed

regulatory action that may impact shrimp fishing operations and economics in the South Atlantic and Gulf regions.

We anticipate there will be many questions regarding the scientific basis for the proposals. For example, on face value it appears counterintuitive that after decades of intensive effort, traditional rock shrimp fishing grounds could today host large areas of “high-relief” living *Oculina* coral formations. The proposed northern expansion illustrated on Figure 3 of the Scoping Document appears to include areas of intensive shrimp fishing effort (VMS data).

Similarly, the proposed expansion of the Stetson-Miami Terrace HAPC illustrated on Figure 4 of the Scoping Document also appears to include areas of significant Royal Red shrimp fishing effort (VMS data). As discussed at great length in the CEBA-1 process, very deep-water Royal Red shrimp fishing effort simply does not and cannot take place on high-relief coral habitat. These and many other questions will need to be addressed through an open and objective presentation and discussion of the underlying science on coral habitat and fishing effort before we can make a meaningful contribution to this process.

With that said, SSA requests the Council to immediately engage the Deepwater Shrimp AP and others in the shrimp industry including representatives of SSA in this process in a much more comprehensive and meaningful way. This should follow the excellent example set by the CEBA-1 process. A comprehensive briefing on the science would be a good starting point.

Further, we believe a truly proper process would involve suspending the scoping process until after the Deepwater Shrimp AP (and Habitat AP?) has received the scientific presentation, and until after the Council has coordinated a joint meeting of the Coral, Deepwater Shrimp and Habitat APs to discuss the science and its implications. Recommendations generated from a collaborative process reflecting the expertise and interests of each of these core communities should become the basis for the initial scoping document, and would be most likely to yield the most constructive final result. In this respect the current scoping process is premature and flawed. A quick course correction toward a much more collaborative process should be relatively easy to achieve this early in the process. Failure to do so would be highly counterproductive by needlessly alienating the shrimp industry.

Thank you for your consideration. As always, SSA appreciates the opportunity to provide our views. More importantly, we look forward to the opportunity to participate and contribute to this process in the most meaningful way. Please contact myself or Glenn Delaney (202-434- 8220, grdelaney@aol.com) if you have any questions or need additional information.

Sincerely,



John Williams,
Executive Director