

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Magnuson-Stevens Act defines Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) as “those waters and substrate necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding or growth to maturity.” Additionally, fish is defined as “finfish, mollusks, crustaceans, and all other forms of marine animal and plant life other than marine mammals and birds.” The Act has a mandate for the consideration of Essential Fish Habitat of all areas within the jurisdiction of the United States. The Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Generic Amendment to the Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) of the US Caribbean Including an Environmental Assessment addresses the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act regarding EFH.

The Generic Amendment includes the required information on what are considered important factors in the relationship between species in the fishery management units (FMUs) and their habitat during each of the species life stages. These are defined as eggs, larvae, juveniles, adults, and spawning adults. The available information is not sufficient to provide for the identification of EFH for each species in the FMPs given the large numbers involved. For example, there are more than 1149 species of fish and over 1170 of mollusks reported for Puerto Rico and US Virgin Islands ecosystems. Therefore, the Council’s approach has been to identify, as much as possible, the environmental characteristics and the trophic and biological characteristics of species in the fishery management unit of each fishery management plan (FMP) prepared by the Council. Emphasis was given to the species under management and for a number of selected species which in the absence of habitat information have been used as “indicators” of such habitats.

The description and identification of EFH is mandated by section 305 (b) the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). This Generic Amendment addresses EFH and amends all of the Council’s FMPs. The following is a summary of the Generic Amendment:

1. EFH is identified and described based on areas where various life stages of the 17 selected managed species and the coral complex commonly occur. The selected species are: Nassau grouper, *Epinephelus striatus*, red hind, *Epinephelus guttatus*, coney, *Epinephelus fulvus*, yellowtail snapper, *Ocyurus chrysurus*, mutton snapper, *Lutjanus analis*, schoolmaster, *Lutjanus apodus*, grey snapper, *Lutjanus griseus*, silk snapper, *Lutjanus vivanus*, butterfly fish, *Chaetodon striatus*, squirrel fish, *Holocentrus ascensionis*, white grunt, *Haemulon plumieri*, queen triggerfish, *Balistes vetula*, sandtilefish, *Malacanthus plumieri*, redbtail parrotfish, *Sparisoma chrysopterum*, trunkfish, *Lactophrys quadricornis*, spiny lobster, *Panulirus argus*, queen conch, *Strombus gigas*.

2. The selected species represent some of the key species under management by the Council. Collectively, these species commonly occur throughout all the marine and estuarine waters of the US Caribbean. EFH for the remaining managed species will be addressed in future FMP amendments, as appropriate.

3. EFH is defined as everywhere that the above managed species commonly occur. Because these species collectively occur in all habitats of the US Caribbean, the EFH includes all waters and substrates (mud, sand, shell, rock, and associated biological communities), including coral habitats

(coral reefs, coral hardbottoms, and octocoral reefs), sub-tidal vegetation (seagrasses and algae) and adjacent intertidal vegetation (wetland and mangroves). Therefore, EFH includes virtually all marine waters and substrates (mud, shell, rock, coral reefs, and associated biological communities) from the shoreline to the seaward limit of the EEZ.

4. Threats to EFH from fishing and non-fishing activities are identified.

5. Whenever possible, options to conserve and enhance EFH are provided and research needs are identified.

6. No management measures and, therefore, no regulations are proposed at this time. Fishing-related management measures to minimize any identified impacts are deferred to future amendments when the Council has the information necessary to decide if the measures are practicable.