

Justification of the Bottom Trawling and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act of 2005



Summary of the Bottom Trawling and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act of 2005

The purpose of the Bottom Trawling and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act of 2005 is to “permit access to bottom trawl fishermen to traditionally fished bottom trawl areas that do not contain deep sea coral and sponge ecosystems and to provide protection for deep sea coral and sponge ecosystems, particularly in areas that have not been traditionally fished with bottom trawls.” Bottom trawlers fishing in coral and sponge habitat areas have profound negative consequences on marine ecosystems. This Act would protect deep sea coral and sponge habitats, as well as the commercial and recreational fish species that rely on these habitats, while also setting aside areas where commercial fishermen may continue to use bottom trawls.

Bottom Trawling is Incompatible with Intact Deep Sea Coral and Sponge Habitats

Deep sea corals and sponges are long-lived and slow-growing species that are integral to many marine ecosystems. When fishing gears such as bottom trawls, which are dragged along the sea floor, are used in deep sea coral and sponge habitats, they uproot and destroy these fragile benthic fauna. Deep sea corals and sponges can take centuries to recover, if at all. Few legal protections are currently afforded to these organisms. Areas where corals were once found are now often barren, and many of the species that relied on them for habitat are suffering population declines.

Other species depend on deep sea corals and sponges for habitat. Research has shown that a variety of species use corals and sponges in the deep sea as protection from predators, areas of plentiful food, hatcheries for eggs, and nurseries for young fish. Surveys of Northeast Atlantic seamounts have recorded over 1,300 species of invertebrates and over 850 other species of marine animals in deep sea coral habitats.

“Human activities pose the most significant threat to deep-sea corals. Slow growing coral species may live for centuries, yet be destroyed in seconds by human activities such as trawling... Destructive fishing practices have been shown to remove coral forests, and leave rubble behind which has far less value as essential fish habitat.” - NOAA

Bottom trawls do not distinguish between target and non-target species. Although deep sea corals and sponges are not target species, when bottom trawl nets are retrieved, non-target fish, structure-forming species such as sponges and corals, and physical debris are all discarded in large quantities. The physical and biological damage done to the sea floor by trawling can be extensive and long-lasting. For example, a single pass of a research bottom trawl off Alaska dragged up 2200 lbs of coral. NOAA Fisheries data show that bottom trawling is responsible for 97 percent of observed coral and sponge bycatch in Alaska. NOAA Fisheries also estimates based on observer data that **more than 1,000,000 pounds of corals and sponges are caught and discarded by bottom trawlers each year off Alaska.** Repeated bottom trawling of the same area flattens habitat and can cause permanent changes to the ecosystem.

Until the early 1980s, bottom trawls were used primarily on sand, mud or gravel bottoms which lacked high-relief structures that could snag nets such as corals or boulders. However, with the decline of key fish stocks like cod and rockfish, new trawling technologies and more powerful engines have been developed to increase trawl access to structurally complex habitats that had previously been too difficult to trawl. Protection is now necessary to ensure the continued existence of these species and habitats.

“Those who own or work on small fishing boats are being put out of business, in part because the big trawlers are destroying the reefs.”

- Washington Times (4/21/03) quoting a USGS biologist

Existing Protections of Deep Sea Corals and Sponges

In his Ocean Action Plan of 2004, the President included provisions to ‘research, survey, and protect deep-sea coral communities’ and encouraged each regional fishery management council to ‘protect deep-sea corals when developing and implementing regional fishery management plans.’ Yet, only the Western Pacific Council has acted comprehensively to ban bottom trawling in all fisheries. Most councils have only protected small areas or have only regulated

bottom trawls that are fishing for one type of fish, leaving deep sea corals vulnerable to bottom trawls targeting other types of fish. The North Pacific and Pacific Councils’ approach has been to freeze the existing bottom trawl footprint to those areas of ocean floor that have already been trawled and then give greater protection to areas that have high concentrations of corals and sponges.

The Solution: Restrict the Use of Mobile Bottom-Tending Fishing Gear to Areas without Deep Sea Corals

The Bottom Trawling and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act of 2005 is modeled after the action taken in the North Pacific. It would prevent trawling in areas where deep sea corals and sponges have been found (designated Coral Habitat Conservation Zones), while designating historically trawled areas as Bottom Trawl Zones open to bottom trawls. When new evidence indicates the presence of deep sea coral and sponge ecosystems in a trawled area, the area will become a Coral Habitat Conservation Zone. Specifically, the Act will:

- Provide greater appropriations to explore, identify, research, and map deep sea coral and deep sea sponge ecosystems;
- Immediately protect several areas known to contain coral concentrations by designating them as Coral Conservation Zones and allowing only non-bottom trawl fishing gears to fish there;
- **Restrict the footprint of bottom trawls to its current size by allowing use of this gears only if research shows that there are not significant amounts of deep sea corals;**
- Protect areas currently being fished where bycatch records indicate the presence of a deep sea coral and sponge ecosystem;
- Promote international cooperation on deep sea coral conservation; and
- Provide enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with the restriction of bottom trawls to Bottom Trawl Zones.