

Conservation Working Group (CWG) Statement to the MBNMS SAC  
August 14, 2012  
CWG Co-Chairs: Geoff Shester and Lauren Dockendorf

The Conservation Working Group (CWG) met at the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute (MBARI) in Moss Landing on August 6, 2012. The CWG has 10 official members, each serving renewable 2-year terms and has updated its description and membership on the Sanctuary website.

The CWG is glad and appreciative to see that the “Working Group Updates” have moved to immediately after the “Open Public Comment” agenda item at the beginning of the meeting so that the SAC can hear the updates before addressing all other substantive agenda items.

As an overarching trend, the CWG is concerned with an apparent lowering of priority of the Sanctuary’s resource protection goals, as indicated by the dissolving of the Ecosystem-Based Management Initiative and the loss of Resource Protection staff positions that have yet to be filled. While the CWG wholeheartedly supports the other activities of the Sanctuary (i.e., education, outreach, Exploration Center, etc.), resource protection is the core foundation of the Sanctuary on which these other activities are built. The current deficit makes the role of the Conservation Working Group that much more important, and we take this role very seriously.

As noted in prior CWG statements, the Channel Islands NMS CWG is widely considered to be an effective model working group based on its generation of multiple “white papers” on topics of interest to their Sanctuary. The MBNMS CWG is attempting to emulate this model. To this end, the CWG completed a revised version of its Forage Species white paper which was distributed to the SAC for review on August 10, 2012. This version incorporated five reviews provided by the Research Activities Panel, input received at the July 13, 2012 RAP meeting in which the white paper was discussed, and three subsequent reviews submitted in early August 2012 by RAP members. The CWG appreciates the significant time and attention the RAP members provided in their reviews. Along with the revised white paper, the CWG provided the SAC with a detailed document describing the respective changes made to the revised document in light of the review comments, to aid in transparency, while maintaining the confidential nature of the scientific peer review process.

It is our understanding that to date, the RAP does not have a clear process for providing actual endorsements or conclusions regarding the scientific validity of documents. We recognize that there have not been white papers generated by working groups in this Sanctuary in recent years. However, we see the RAP as an important body that can help the full SAC determine the scientific merits of white papers. To this end, the CWG suggests that the RAP clarify its role, criteria, and process for reviewing and endorsing white papers produced by other working groups.

The CWG reiterates that the Forage Species white paper is a product of the CWG, fully owned and endorsed unanimously by the CWG. We hope to receive additional input on the

content of the white paper by all interested SAC members by September 10, 2012 (as indicated by Superintendent Paul Michel), so that the CWG can incorporate that input and produce a final draft that can be owned and endorsed by the full SAC, as a foundation for any future Sanctuary engagement in these issues. The CWG is glad to see the informational presentation on forage species management on the current SAC agenda and hopes that the presentations, dialogue, and white paper can together serve as a basis for a future SAC resolution providing the Sanctuary with guidance on how to appropriately engage in this important issue.

The CWG also continued its discussion of potential Sanctuary engagement in the Pacific Fishery Management Council's five-year review of Groundfish Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). While the CWG recognizes that the process has been extended and updated data is not yet available from NMFS, the CWG is encouraged by the Sanctuary's efforts to identify "Ecologically Significant Areas" of benthic habitats within the Sanctuary.

The CWG strongly suggests that the Sanctuary publicly release a draft list of these "Ecologically Significant Areas" as soon as possible, including maps and documentation, for review by the public, the SAC, and its working groups. Such an effort will help the Sanctuary systematically determine the appropriate ways to be engaged in this process of utmost importance to Sanctuary resources.

Regarding the issue of Sanctuary boundary modification, MBNMS staff indicated that the focus of this agenda item is the potential inclusion of the "donut hole" in the MBNMS off San Francisco.

The CWG strongly supports adding this area to the Sanctuary, as none of the initial reasons for excluding this area from Sanctuary designation currently apply (e.g., sewage outfall, shipping lanes, etc.).

The CWG reiterates that it hopes to work closely with the SAC and other working groups so that its work can be of timely use in SAC endeavors.