NPFC-2024-SSC BFME05-WP18

**U.S. Delegation Paper on Bottom Fishing and Emperor Seamounts**

**5th SSC BF-ME and 9th Commission Meeting**

The United States and Canada submitted a proposal to revise CMM 2023-05 at the 8th Meeting of the North Pacific Fisheries Commission in 2024. The United States appreciates the Commission’s adoption of a revised version of that proposal that strengthened the measure’s management framework, clarified its drafting, established binding catch limits, and extended the seasonal fisheries closure by one month.

The Commission did not reach consensus on at least one significant aspect of that proposal: precautionary temporary closures of fisheries targeting certain deep-sea stocks or at risk of interacting with benthic habitats with vulnerable marine ecosystems, while additional scientific work is undertaken to ensure that fishing is conducted in a sustainable manner. Some Members stated they did not have adequate time to consider the U.S. proposal at the 8th Meeting of the Scientific Committee in 2023 or a mandate to agree to it at the Commission in 2024. Members and stakeholders have now had another full year to consider additional closures and the rationale for them as articulated at the last annual meeting.

The SC and the Commission should consider additional temporal and spatial closures to ensure that additional scientific work is completed before authorizing continued bottom fishing activities that pose the greatest risk to VMEs or the long-term sustainability of stocks. The United States believes this is justified for several reasons:

* Impact assessments of Members’ bottom fishing activities on VMEs have not been updated to consider cumulative impacts or more recent scientific information and management considerations such as updated definitions of VME indicator taxa and encounter thresholds.
* NPFC lacks stock assessments and any scientific advice on sustainable levels of fishing activities for two stocks that are believed to be overfished, North Pacific armorhead and splendid alfonsino. The Small Working Group on the North Pacific armorhead and splendid alfonsino reviewed the results of some initial exploratory assessment approaches for splendid alfonsino in 2024. The SWG considered it likely the stock was experiencing growth overfishing due to excess capture of juvenile fish in the trawl fishery and may also be experiencing recruitment overfishing due to a reduction in spawning potential to perhaps as low as 5% of unfished levels. Further assessment work on splendid alfonsino is likely to be conducted in 2025 using an integrated assessment approach with augmented fisheries data sets.
* Scientific literature highlights through direct observation or modeling the likely presence of VMEs in areas subject to current or potential fishing effort on the Emperor Seamounts. Areas should be closed until we have clearer criteria for VMEs and can be confident that significant adverse impacts on VMEs will not occur, rather than putting the burden of proof on Members or observers to prove their presence before considering discrete area closures.

The United States maintains that any one of these factors – let alone them in combination – should be sufficient to consider additional closures to bottom fishing consistent with the international guidance adopted through the United Nations General Assembly, as well as the precautionary approach enshrined in NPFC’s own Convention (Article 3(c)).

**Proposed recommendations**:

* The SC should recommend the Commission request Members that conduct or seek to conduct bottom fishing in the Convention Area to provide updated assessments on bottom fishing activities’ significant adverse impacts on vulnerable marine ecosystems (following CMM-05 Annex 2) and submit them for review by the Scientific Committee and its subsidiary bodies by no later than the 10th Scientific Committee meeting. The SC will review updated impact assessments following CMM-05 Annex 3 and may recommend whether additional management measures will be required to prevent SAIs on VMEs.
* The SC recommends the Commission consider additional area-based closures that would limit the risk of bottom fishing activities to deep-sea ecosystems while impact assessments are updated and reviewed by the SC, additional information is gathered to increase confidence on VME distribution, and stock assessments are completed. SC should consider providing advice on options for discrete area closures that would protect areas that are most likely to contain VMEs – reducing risks to deep-sea ecosystems even if fishing occurs in other areas – in addition to the Commission considering broader temporary closures consistent with the precautionary approach.

**Attachments**:

1. USA and Canada rev1 proposal to amend CMM 2023-05 – NPFC-2024-COM08-WP09 Rev.1 CMM 2023-05
2. List of papers consulted to support the scientific basis for the U.S. proposal