

Regulators vote to protect more corals in Atlantic Ocean

January 31 2018, by Patrick Whittle



Staghorn coral (*Acropora cervicornis*). Credit: Wikipedia, CC BY 2.5

Federal fishing regulators on Tuesday approved a compromise they said would expand the amount of coral habitat preserved in the Atlantic Ocean while also protecting fishing interests.

The New England Fishery Management Council voted on coral

protections in an area south of Georges Bank, one of the most important commercial fishing areas in the Northeast. The decision came about seven months after the council approved protections in another key New England fishing area, the Gulf of Maine, in June.

Environmentalists, regulators and harvesters of species including squid, scallops and lobster have debated the proposal for years. The new protections mean 100,000 square miles (259,000 square kilometers) of deep-sea coral habitat would be protected from the Canadian border to Florida, pro-conservation Pew Charitable Trusts said.

The council had a chance to approve a broader [coral protection](#) plan but backed off after numerous fishing groups said it was unfairly punitive to the industry. Peter Auster, marine science research professor emeritus at the University of Connecticut, said the council "took action where none was required" but may have missed a chance at more dramatic protection for corals.

"In all these kind of things, getting some is better than getting none," he said. "Future actions could still take place."

Preservation of New England's slow-growing, canyon-dwelling corals has long been a subject of debate, and interest in it accelerated a few years ago when then-President Barack Obama planned a national marine monument dedicated to saving corals and preserving ocean biodiversity. Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument, created in 2016, protected about 5,000 square miles (13,000 square kilometers) off New England, but its future is uncertain because of legal challenges and a review by President Donald Trump's administration. Obama is a Democrat, Trump a Republican.

On Tuesday, conservation group Oceana said the newly approved protections are a step in the right direction but the council could have

done more to keep fishing gear that dredges the ocean floor away from corals.

"Protecting deep-sea corals is a win-win for both fishermen and healthy oceans," said Gib Brogan, Oceana's fisheries campaign manager.

Fishing groups at Tuesday's meeting said they were glad the council backed off protections that would have displaced more fishermen from the area.

"We need room to maneuver," said Meghan Lapp, a representative for North Kingstown, Rhode Island-based fishing company Seafreeze.

The U.S. Department of Commerce must still implement the changes approved by the council.

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