The *Deepwater Horizon* Bycatch Hotspots Project

Evaluating the feasibility of bycatch hotspot communication networks to reduce fish bycatch

BACKGROUND

In 2019, the *Deepwater Horizon* Open Ocean Trustees released a final Open Ocean Restoration Plan. They selected 18 projects to help restore fish, sea turtles, marine mammals, and deep-sea coral habitats injured by the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The Communications Networks and Mapping Tools to Reduce Bycatch Project, aka the Bycatch Hotspots Project, is one of the 18 projects. The five-year, $4.4 million project is being managed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Commercial fishing fleets have successfully used communication programs to reduce bycatch in different regions of the United States. In Alaska, trawl fisheries have partnered with a private company (Sea State, Inc.) to establish and manage a fleet communication program designed to reduce bycatch including chum and Chinook salmon, halibut, crab, and rockfish.

On the East Coast, the Cornell Cooperative Extension Marine Program has worked with commercial fishermen to help identify hotspots of bycatch for nine species, including butterfish and windowpane flounder.

PROJECT DETAILS

The goal of the project is to evaluate the feasibility of fisheries bycatch hotspot communication networks to reduce fish bycatch in and around the Gulf of Mexico. For the initial phase of the project, we are working to identify and engage with stakeholders from fisheries, fleets, and fishing organizations that may benefit from a bycatch hotspot management system and would be willing to discuss coordination, logistics, and data needs. Later in the project, we will work with commercial and recreational fishery stakeholders to identify fisheries, regions, fleets, and/or ports that would benefit from bycatch hotspot communication networks, as well as determine what data and technologies are needed to

support these networks. If bycatch hotspot communication networks seem feasible, NOAA will seek resources to implement them through a subsequent *Deepwater Horizon* Open Ocean Restoration Plan.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Who can participate?

We want to talk to potential participants and stakeholders from a wide array of fishing communities in and around the Gulf of Mexico, including commercial, charter, and recreational fishermen. Anyone at all interested in the use of bycatch hotspot communication networks to reduce bycatch should consider participating.

Is this voluntary?

Yes. Bycatch hotspots will be identified by fishermen and fishery stakeholders who voluntarily contribute information and data to a third-party provider. The information and data will be combined with other environmental and species/fisheries distribution data to create real-time, regularly updated spatial management guidance that will allow the avoidance of areas with high likelihood of bycatch risk.

Why should I participate?

Sharing bycatch information with your fellow fishermen or anglers through a bycatch hotspot communication network will support healthier fish populations in and around the Gulf of Mexico for generations to come. Avoiding bycatch will allow more fish to grow and reproduce, restoring natural resources that were affected by the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill and improving commercial and recreational fishing experiences through less sorting time and fewer dead discards.

WHAT IS A BYCATCH HOTSPOT?

Bycatch can be defined as incidentally caught marine life that is then discarded. “Bycatch hotspots” are geographical areas with elevated risks of high levels of discards or bycatch during recreational or commercial fishing activities. Hotspots may be influenced by habitat, oceanographic features, spatio-temporal distribution patterns of target and non-target species, and/or the fishing practices employed, such as gear choice.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Sharon Niemczyk at sharon.niemczyk@cardno.com or 561-703-1526 to participate.

nfwf.org/programs/Bycatch-Hotspots

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