

33<sup>rd</sup> ANNUAL MEETING – SEPTEMBER 2011**VME Indicator Species (Sponge Fields) Encounter Thresholds**

At the 2010 Annual Meeting, the Fisheries Commission, based upon the advice of the Working Group of Scientists and Managers on VMEs, tasked the Scientific Council to review the efficacy of Chapter 1bis, Article 5bis, Interim Encounter Provisions. Specifically, the Commission requested the Scientific Council to determine if the thresholds for encounters with indicator species of corals and sponges were set at acceptable levels. The Scientific Council referred the question to the WGEAFM, which responded as follows:

*“Based on the model results, the WGEAFM recommends that the encounter threshold for sponges fished with bottom trawl gear be reduced from 800 kg to between 30 and 50 kg per tow. This is unlikely to have a large effect on the commercial fishery within the fishing footprint and would serve as a more effective sponge conservation measure in unfished areas under an exploratory fishery.”*

The Scientific Council, while they did not include the 30-50kg values in their report, did note:

*“If the intension of the threshold is to accomplish protection of sponges outside the closed areas [the WGEAFM GIS] analysis therefore indicates that the threshold needs to be reduced. The [the WGEAFM GIS] analysis can serve as a guide for this exercise.”*

The sponge encounter threshold was adopted as an interim measure, reflecting the lack of information available to the Fishery Commission at the time of drafting -- and further indicating that levels should be changed as new information becomes available. As the SC advice stated that the threshold is too high to meet the purposes of the Chapter 1bis, but was unable to identify an appropriate threshold, the United States proposes lowering the threshold for sponge indicator species outside of the footprint to 200kg, and the threshold for sponge indicator species inside of the footprint to 400kg. These thresholds would be implemented on an interim basis until more specific advice can be provided by the SC. Moreover, the United States strongly supports additional reporting requirements to assist the SC in their efforts to refine the encounter provision. To that end, we propose the following edit to Chapter 1bis:

Chapter 1bis, Article 5bis, paragraph would read as follows:

*3) For both existing and new fishing areas, an encounter with primary VME indicator species is defined as a catch per set (e.g. trawl tow, longline set, or gillnet set) of more than 60kg of live coral. For new fishing areas, an encounter with primary VME indicator species is defined as a catch per set (e.g. trawl tow, longline set, or gillnet set) of more than 400kg of sponges. For existing fishing areas (the “footprint”), an encounter with primary VME indicator species is defined as a catch per set (e.g. trawl tow, longline set, or gillnet set) of more than 600kg of sponges. These thresholds are set on a provisional basis and may be adjusted as experience is gained in the application of this measure.*