

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management

Date: April 25, 2018

Subject: Consent Agenda: West Bay (Bay County) Oyster Harvesting Restrictions – Draft Rule

Purpose:

To obtain approval of a draft rule to modify oyster regulations within the West Bay Estuarine Habitat Restoration Project boundary in West Bay, Bay County.

Summary:

In 2015, FWC Aquatic Habitat Conservation and Restoration Section began constructing subtidal oyster reef units along the western shoreline of West Bay (within the St. Andrews Bay estuary) as part of a multi-phase restoration project funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund. The primary goal of the project is creating oyster reef habitat. Secondary benefits include reduced shoreline erosion, improved water quality, promotion of seagrass growth, and expansion of nursery habitat for both recreationally and commercially important fish.

Although oyster reefs have not historically occurred along this shoreline because of a lack of suitable substrate, this area acts as a "sink" for oyster larvae that naturally drift into this region. The site was chosen for this restoration project because areas that are larval sinks have a higher chance of rapid population recovery and restoration, and because of the growth potential of seagrass, which historically grew along this shoreline. Since the restoration project began, nearly 4.25 acres of new oyster reef habitat, covering 2.25 miles of shoreline, have been built.

In July 2016, with the support of the Bay County Oystermen's Association (BCOA), the harvest and possession of oysters within the restoration site was prohibited for a period of two years via Executive Order. To continue protection of the restoration site, and with support from BCOA, staff recommends incorporating the prohibition of harvest and possession of oysters at the restoration site into FWC's oyster rule to facilitate long-term habitat and seagrass restoration. The closed area will be identified with marked buoys and signage. The closure does not restrict access to the site by boaters, anglers, or other users. Staff would review the provisions of the rule in 10 years to evaluate the progress of the project and the benefit of the closure.

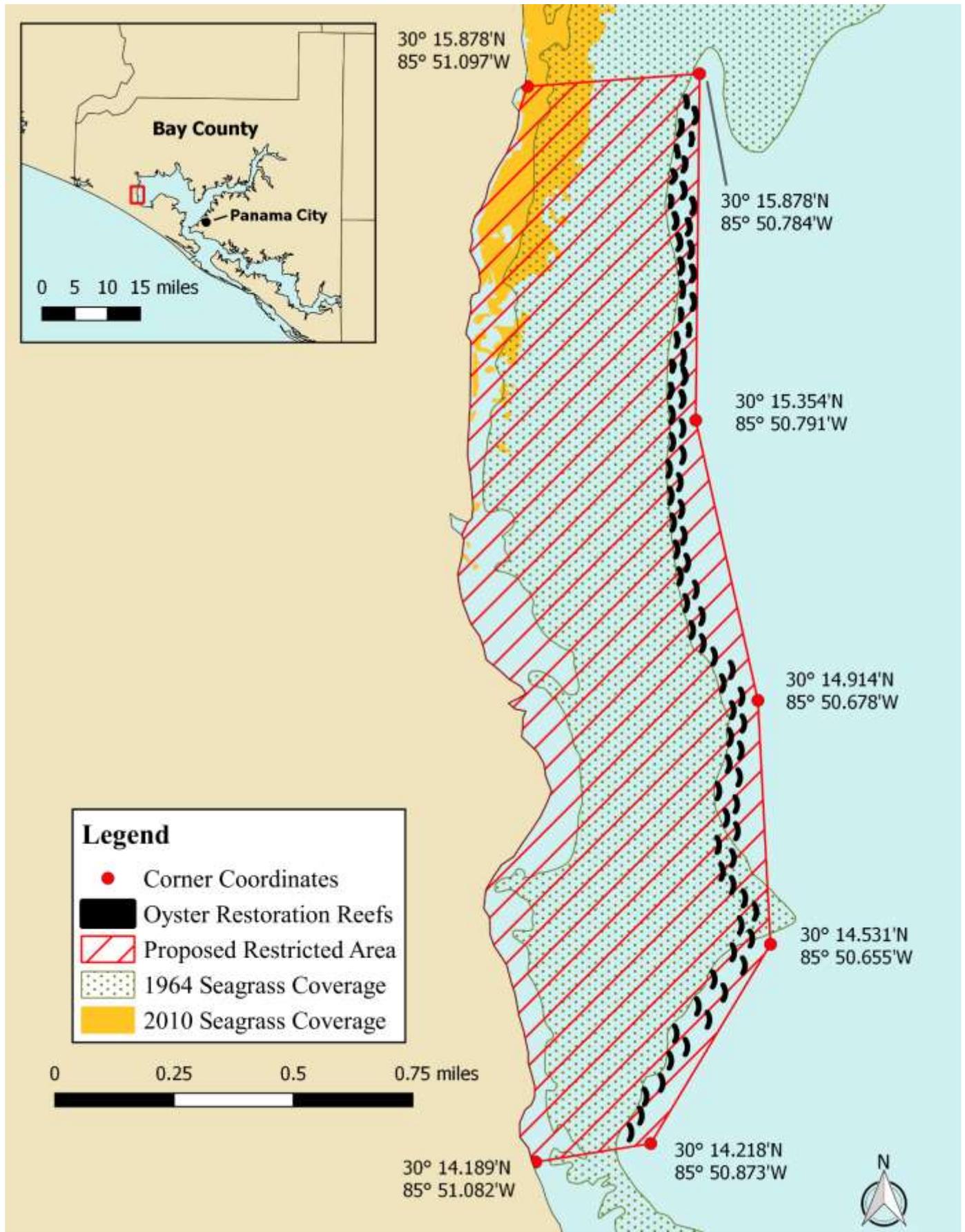
Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends prohibiting all harvest from or possession of oysters within the West Bay Estuarine Habitat Restoration Project. See map for detailed site boundaries. Staff also recommend the rule be advertised and filed for adoption without further hearing unless requested by a member of the public.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Melissa Recks, Division of Marine Fisheries Management

West Bay Estuarine Habitat Restoration Project – Proposed Restricted Areas



Signs and buoys marking the closed area:

