



Testimony before the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
Lora Clarke, The Pew Charitable Trusts
June 12, 2024
Virtual Testimony

Good afternoon. My name is Lora Clarke, with The Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew is an independent, non-partisan organization that uses data to inform public policy. We have a long history of working on fisheries issues in the region. Thank you for the chance to comment today.

The Oculina Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern is home to dense thickets of ivory tree coral, *Oculina varicose*, which are found nowhere else in the world. This unique area contains both coral pinnacles and low-relief hard bottom that are essential fish habitat for many of the species managed under the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan. This includes gag grouper, snowy grouper, red porgy, red snapper, and others. Removing habitat protections while simultaneously trying to rebuild these stocks could have negative impacts.

The Coral Advisory Panel advised that reopening any part of the Oculina Bank HAPC would put these corals at risk from damage by direct contact with bottom gear and sediment that is stirred up when trawl gear interacts with the bottom. The area being proposed for reopening was designed to be a protective buffer against sedimentation. Studies show that silt and clay particles can be carried a significant distance from the source of disturbance. This can have detrimental effects on deep-sea corals because these sediments can clog the coral's feeding mechanism or even bury the reef communities causing stress and mortality.

The currents in the Oculina Bank HAPC are strong and unpredictable, making it almost certain that some of these fragile corals will be killed. The strength of these currents was demonstrated firsthand during the summer of 2022 when NOAA's own research crew had trouble deploying an underwater camera to observe this area.

We ask that the Council not resubmit Coral Amendment 10 unless there is strong scientific data available demonstrating that sedimentation will not put these fragile corals at risk. We also encourage the Council to seek input from both your Coral Advisory Panel and your Scientific and Statistical Committee on the possible impacts of sedimentation caused by bottom trawling. Reopening this area could have significant ecological consequences and thus we encourage the Council to consider the best science available and seek the input of your scientific advisors.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. We look forward to continuing to work with the Council community and stakeholders to protect valuable ocean habitat that is needed to sustain the region's fisheries.