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## 2024 AFSC Seminar Series

### **Christina Conrath, RACE, AFSC**

Tuesday, April 9<sup>th</sup> @ 10 am Pacific

#### **The Alaska Coral and Sponge Initiative: past, present, and future**



The NOAA Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program was established under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 2007 to support deep-sea coral ecosystem research and aid resource managers in the conservation and management of deep-sea coral and sponge habitats. This program rotates funds through the NMFS regions and has supported research in Alaska from 2012-2014 and 2020-2023. Objectives of the first Alaska initiative included mapping the distribution and abundance of sponge and coral, producing habitat and substrate maps, examining the contribution of coral and sponge habitats to fisheries production, examining the impacts of fishing gear on this habitat, and researching recovery and recruitment rates. Accomplishment of the first initiative include the completion of 11 research cruises, 216 camera transects in the Aleutian Islands, 250 camera transects in the eastern Bering Sea, 21,910 in-situ measurements of height for corals and sponges, collecting over 500,000 images, and 853 records of coral locations from visual surveys added to the NCEI database. One important accomplishment of the first initiative was the development of coral and sponge habitat models for the Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Eastern Bering Sea and the validation of these models in the Aleutian Islands and Eastern Bering Sea canyons. These data have been used to inform Essential Fish Habitat and fishing effects models. The research accomplished by this initiative formed a baseline to support the development of the science plan for the second initiative in 2020. Funding for this initiative has supported four successful large field expeditions throughout the Gulf of Alaska and Aleutian Islands as well as several smaller research projects. In addition, during this initiative a new coral and sponge field guide has been developed, new sponge species have been identified, and national and international partnerships have been developed. Accomplishments of the second initiative include 6 research cruises, 302 camera transects in the Gulf of Alaska (76 in offshore waters), 102 camera transects in the Aleutian islands, 6 ARMS plates deployed, 395 eDNA collections and multiple species of sponges and corals collected for taxonomic and other studies. Research between initiative years will focus on data recovery, providing data to support ecosystem based management and EFH programs, continuing to increase our understanding coral and sponge communities throughout Alaska and how they support commercial fishery resources, and continuing to develop national and international partnerships within and beyond NOAA.

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