

U.S. District Judge James Boasberg found Monday, however, that the rule passes muster.

“The service, aided by the council, considered the relevant factors of habitat protection and economic impact and reached a conclusion that protected habitat in Small Eastern Maine only,” the 63-page opinion says. “The ‘rational connection between the facts found and the choice made’ is evident.”

Boasberg noted that courts give agencies great deference when they make complex judgments requiring expert scientific input.

“When an agency talks scientific data, courts listen,” the opinion says. “As long as the ultimate decision is reasonable and reasonably explained, that decision will stand.”

The Conservation Law Foundation expressed disappointment in the ruling, saying it will hurt crucial fish habitats and deep-sea corals in New England.

“Our region continues to suffer from ineffective fishery management and several overfished stocks,” Peter Shelley, the foundation’s senior counsel, said in an email. “These controllable problems are now being compounded by the negative effects of climate change in the Gulf of Maine. Congress has specifically directed fishery managers to protect the habitats that are necessary for healthy fisheries, even if that protection causes some short-term economic impacts.”

The group had argued that the rule amounts to a “dereliction” of the National Marine Fisheries Service’s conservation duties. It also alleged violations of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, which directs the agency to protect essential fish habitat.

But Boasberg noted that directive is not absolute.

“The council is no doubt required to consider the impact of fishing on essential habitat,” he wrote. “It need not, however, exalt this objective over all others.”

The Conservation Law Foundation had argued that the agency’s effort fell short of the procedural demands of the National Environmental Protection Act, which it said required the agency to consider a range of alternatives. Here, too, Boasberg deferred to the agency.

“In the end, the decisions that CLF challenges entail the type of line-drawing exercises properly entrusted to the Agency’s discretion,” the opinion says, abbreviating the Conservation Law Foundation. “The court sees nothing unreasonable in the council’s analyses of alternatives. That dooms plaintiff’s claim here.”

The Marine Fisheries Service did not respond to an email seeking comment on the ruling.