

**November 2023**

# **DRAFT Plan Team Handbook**

*for members of the*

## **North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Fishery Management Plan Teams**

*This handbook will supersede the Terms of Reference for the BSAI & GOA Groundfish, BSAI Crab, and Scallop Plan Teams.*

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## 1 Introduction

This handbook has been written to provide a comprehensive reference manual for the Council-appointed Plan Teams for each of the major Fishery Management Plans (FMPs). As of October 2023, the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) and Gulf of Alaska (GOA) Groundfish, BSAI Crab, and Scallop FMPs have designated Plan Teams. This handbook is also intended to increase efficiency of Plan Team

meetings and to provide additional information for new Plan Team members. This handbook replaces the pre-existing Terms of Reference (dated 2014) and is excerpted from a combination of the Council's Standard Operating Policies and Procedures (SOPPs, dated April 2023) and other Plan Team reference materials. Sections 2, 3, and 4 provide additional details and guidance on the roles of the Plan Team, membership and meeting procedures. Section 5 provides guidance on Plan Team member compensation, travel rules, and reimbursement for travel expenses. Section 6 provides reference material on Council operations generally, as well as the Council's decision-making process and the types of actions that the Plan Team reviews.

Many of the documents referenced within are continuously being updated, just as management procedures must adapt to ecological, biological, and political changes. This handbook has been written with that in mind, and specific guidance or processes may change over time. Staff will attempt to update this handbook when major changes to these processes occur.

Some of the contents of this document are more relevant to certain plan teams than to others, for example, rules and procedures are more thoroughly developed and necessary to meet the needs of the Groundfish and Crab Plan Teams, which deal with multiple stocks, in contrast to the Scallop Plan Team which reviews assessments for one stock. Specific procedures for each Plan Team may vary, and any questions on process or procedure should be directed to the respective Council staff coordinator for each Plan Team. Contact information for Plan Team Coordinators can be found at <https://www.npfmc.org/about-the-council/plan-teams/>.

## 2 Scope of Duties

The Council appoints Plan Teams for each major fishery for which a fishery management plan (FMP) either is being developed or has been implemented. The primary function of the Plan Teams is to provide the Council with the best available scientific information and advice. The Plan Teams provide the Council with review and recommendations of Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) reports, as well as information on ecosystem and economic issues as they relate to the fisheries managed by the Council.

*From the Council SOPPs:*

*The Plan Teams shall review stock assessment information and assist in the preparation of the annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) documents including formulation of recommendations on annual Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) levels for groundfish, crab, and scallop species under jurisdiction of the Council. All Plan Teams may also prepare and/or review plans, amendments and supporting analytical documents for the Council, SSC and AP; aggregate and evaluate public/industry proposals and comments; summarize and evaluate data related to the biological, economic and social conditions of the fishery or fishery management topic; conduct and evaluate analyses pertaining to management of the fisheries; evaluate the effectiveness of management measures in achieving the Council's objectives; and recommend when and how management measures need to be changed.*

### SAFE Reports

The primary duty of the Plan Teams is to review stock assessments and develop the SAFE reports. SAFE reports provide the Council with the best available scientific information concerning the past, present, and possible future condition of stocks and fisheries, along with ecosystem concerns and the social and economic condition of the fishing and processing industries. The SAFE reports provide information to the Council for determining annual harvest specifications, documenting significant trends or changes in the stocks, marine ecosystem, and fisheries over time; and assessing the relative success of existing State and Federal fishery management programs.

The purpose of Plan Team review is to assess the scientific validity of the stock assessment, including any assumptions, methods, results and conclusions. Specific aspects of the review will vary, but may include: quality of the data collected or used for the assessment, appropriateness of the analyses, validity of the results and conclusions, and appropriateness of the scope of the assessment (e.g., were all relevant data and information considered).

The SAFE reports include specific recommendations on OFL and ABC for each stock or stock complex. As stated in the [National Standard 1 guidelines](#), *“The Acceptable biological catch (ABC) is defined as the level of a stock or stock complex’s annual catch that accounts for the scientific uncertainty in the estimate of OFL and any other scientific uncertainty, and should be specified based on the ABC control rule.*

Additionally, the Plan Teams also review ecosystem information through several different avenues (for example Ecosystem and Socioeconomic Profiles or ESPs and Ecosystem Status Reports or ESRs), and economic information through the Economic SAFE. All recommendations must be designed to prevent overfishing while achieving optimum yield (National Standard 1). All recommendations must also be scientifically based (National Standard 2) drawing upon the Plan Teams’ expertise in the areas of regulatory management, natural and social science, mathematics, and statistics. Finally, uncertainty must be taken into account whenever possible (National Standard 6).

SAFE reports (particularly for groundfish and crab) often include use of risk tables, another component of assessments that Plan Teams evaluate. Risk tables facilitate incorporation of additional information into the fisheries stock assessment and management process. The risk table is designed to evaluate unanticipated ecosystem and environmental impacts on marine resources that may require a rapid management response. The risk table is a standardized framework to transparently document concerns about the assessment model, population dynamics, and the ecosystem/environment that are not explicitly addressed within the stock assessment model. A scoring procedure is used to evaluate the severity of the concern. These concerns can then be evaluated in support for or against a reduction from the maximum ABC while providing reviewers and stakeholders transparent documentation of the concerns. The SSC has developed specific [guidance](#) for the Plan Teams in reviewing the use of risk tables.

The Plan Teams also assist in implementing the Council’s Spatial Management Policy. This policy established a process for determining spatial management (i.e., subarea allocations of annual harvest specifications (OFL, ABC, and/or TAC)) of stocks and stock assemblages for groundfish, crabs and scallops. The Plan Teams apply this policy by advising the Council of any findings of scientific information that indicates changes to groundfish, crab, or scallop stock structure and associated conservation concerns. This information may lead to changes within SAFE reports and harvest specifications.

SAFE reports are reviewed by the respective Plan Team, followed by the SSC, AP, and Council. The review by the SSC constitutes the official scientific review for purposes of the Information Quality Act. Upon review and acceptance by the SSC, the SAFE report and any associated SSC comments constitute the best scientific information available for purposes of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. SAFE reports are not updated to reflect Plan Team or SSC ABC/OFL recommendations, therefore do not always reflect the final harvest specifications for a given year coming out of the Council. Further information on what is included in each SAFE report is included in the FMP for each Plan Team, and the process for developing OFL and ABC recommendations is included in Section 4.5 of this document.

For more information on Alaska’s groundfish and shellfish stock assessments, explore the links on the [NMFS Alaska Stock Assessments](#) page.

### Other Plan Team duties

The second portion of the Council SOPPs statement above reflects the secondary role of the Plan Teams. Section 6.3 of this document describes some of the different types of items Plan Teams may see on their agendas beyond SAFE reports and the actions the Plan Team may take at the direction of the Council.

The roles of the Plan Team can also be seen in its relation to the SSC, insofar as the Plan Team makes recommendations to the SSC to assist the SSC in carrying out its objectives. The objectives and goals of the SSC are the following:

- 1) Provide ongoing scientific advice for fishery management decisions, including recommendations for acceptable biological catch, overfishing limits, maximum sustainable yield, and achieving rebuilding targets, and report on stock status and health, bycatch, habitat status, social and economic impacts of management measures, and sustainability of fishing practices.
- 2) Provide expert scientific and technical advice to the Council on the development of fishery management policy, fishery management plans and amendments, their goals and objectives, proposed regulations, and criteria for judging plan effectiveness.
- 3) Assist the Council's planning and execution of fishery management by determining the best scientific data available, as required by [National Standard 2](#).
- 4) Advise the Council by providing comments on any relevant fishery management plan or amendment prepared by the Secretary or Secretary's delegate pursuant to Section 304(c) of the MSA.
- 5) Submit to the Council reports deemed appropriate by the Committee or requested by the Council.
- 6) Serve as the Council's peer review body for influential scientific information pursuant to requirements of the Information Quality Act (Section 515 of Public Law 106-554) and NOAA information quality guidelines.
- 7) Perform other appropriate duties as may be required by the Council to carry out its functions under the Act.

## **3 Plan Team Membership**

### **3.1 Membership Criteria and Nominations**

As described in the Council SOPPs, each Plan Team should be small enough to work efficiently and effectively but sufficiently large to provide the diverse experience and knowledge needed to cover all aspects of a particular fishery or fishery management issue.

Plan Team members will be appointed from government agencies and academic institutions having expertise relating to specific fisheries. Normally, each Plan Team will include at least one member from the Council staff, the regional office at the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), NMFS' Alaska Fishery Science Center, and the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G), academia/universities, and other institutions as appropriate (e.g. the Washington Department of Fisheries (WDFW), International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC)).

Members of each team will be selected from state and Federal agencies as well as other organizations that have a role in research and/or management of fisheries managed by the Council. Appointments should reflect the Plan Teams' responsibility to provide advice in the areas of regulatory management, natural and social science, mathematics, and statistics. All prospective Plan Team members must have consent of the sponsoring agency or institution. Prospective Plan Team members must submit a letter of interest and a curriculum vitae to the SSC/Council. The SSC and Council will review prospective members and appoint them as appropriate, with the Council retaining final appointment authority. There will be no limit on the length of time that Plan Team members may serve.

If any Plan Team member has a change in affiliation (i.e., they move from ADF&G to AFSC), they will need to be nominated and re-appointed in their new role. Plan Team members serve at the pleasure of the Council and cause for removal may include, but is not limited to, change in affiliation or status or poor attendance. At the discretion of the Chair(s), alternate members may be assigned to participate in case a member cannot attend a meeting.

[The Council Plan Team website](#) identifies the current members of the Plan Teams and their affiliation under each Team's linked page.

Selection of Plan Team Chair(s) should occur at a meeting in advance of the upcoming calendar year to facilitate smooth transition of leadership and agenda planning. The Plan Team Chair(s) will be selected for two-year terms. There will be no limit on the number of consecutive terms that chairs or co-chairs may serve.

Plan Teams may also divide responsibilities among work groups organized according to subject matter. A work group may include members from more than one Plan Team. Each work group will be directed by a work group leader.

### **3.2 Standards of Conduct**

Plan Team members are expected to maintain a high standard of conduct and act in a professional and courteous manner during Plan Team meetings. Plan Team members are prohibited from misusing government resources, Council information, or their affiliation with the Council. In other words, while it is acceptable to note your experience on the Plan Team on your resume, you are prohibited from mentioning your Plan Team affiliation on business cards, letters to the editor, etc. See pages 6 and 7 of the Department of Commerce/ NOAA's [Rules of Conduct for Staff and Advisors of Fishery Management Councils](#).

*From the Council's SOPPs:*

*No member of a Council advisory group shall use or allow the use, for other than official purposes, of information obtained through or in connection with his or her Council employment which has not been made available to the general public.*

*The Council will not tolerate harassment, or retaliation against those who report harassment. For purposes of this policy, harassment includes unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy), national origin, older age (beginning at age 40), disability, or genetic information (including family medical history). This policy does not cover allegations of incivility not based on a protected characteristic. However, this policy is not intended to limit in any way the Council's ability to address incivility, inappropriate behavior, or other issues in an appropriate manner for the context. Any Council process participant who observes or receives a report of harassment of a Council process participant must report the incident to the Executive Director, Deputy Director, or Chair or Vice Chair of the Council as soon as possible.*

For more information, see the Council's policies on addressing allegations of harassment of Council [process participants](#) and [staff](#) in the Council [Statement of Operations, Practices, and Procedures](#).

Additionally, political campaigning or showing outward support for a political party or candidate for any election (e.g., wearing badges, buttons, pins, signs) is prohibited while the Plan Team is in session<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In session means the time when the Plan Team starts each morning until it adjourns in the evening (normally 8am-5pm daily), for the duration of the Plan Team meeting.

**The Plan Teams are committed to providing all participants a safe, productive, inclusive, and welcoming environment. Harassment, intimidation, or discrimination of any kind will not be tolerated at Plan Team meetings. Anyone who violates the standards of professional and respectful conduct may be asked to leave.**

### ***Expected Behavior***

- Be considerate, respectful, and collaborative
- Encourage and value diverse viewpoints and opinions
- Communicate openly and with kindness, critique ideas rather than individuals, and gracefully accept feedback
- Use language that is inclusive and welcoming regardless of background, title, or experience level
- Be direct but professional when sharing disagreements or criticisms
- Acknowledge the contributions of others
- Be mindful of your surroundings and proactive in your inclusion of fellow participants
- Respect meeting organizers and session chairs by helping to keep the meeting organized and on schedule

### ***Unacceptable Behavior***

- Harassment or discrimination in any form including but not limited to those related to age, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, religion or other elements of social identity
- Physical or verbal abuse, bullying, intimidation, stalking, or shaming
- Personal attacks directed at other guests, members, participants, etc.
- Unwelcome sexual attention or advances
- Retaliation for reporting harassment
- Reporting an incident in bad faith
- ‘Talking over’ or ‘heckling’ speakers
- Other conduct which could reasonably be considered inappropriate in a professional setting

### ***Consequences***

Anyone requested to stop unacceptable behavior is expected to comply immediately. Meeting organizers may take action deemed necessary and appropriate, including immediate removal from the meeting. Notification of an infraction may be made to the offender’s supervisory chain when appropriate.

### ***Reporting***

If you are the subject of unacceptable behavior or have witnessed any such behavior, please immediately notify Plan Team coordinators.

## **3.3 Financial disclosure / Conflict of interest/ Associations**

In general, the Council has followed the 2003 [Policy of the National Academies](#) with respect to Plan Team composition and balance, and conflicts of interest for developing reports. In brief, the policy calls for appointing members who are highly qualified and capable individuals, and stipulates that the composition of the Plan Teams take into account the balance of individuals’ knowledge, experience, and perspective. The work of the Plan Teams should not be compromised by issues of bias and lack of objectivity, but some level of bias is not necessarily a disqualifying factor as long as it is taken into account in balancing the committee. The policy provides very specific guidance about conflict of interest, defining the term as “any financial or other interest which conflicts with the service of the individual



because it (1) could significantly impair the individual's objectivity or (2) could create an unfair competitive advantage for any person or organization.” Statements of financial interest and potential conflicts of interest are not required of Plan Team members, but members typically disclose if they have worked on an assessment or other document being reviewed by the Plan Team. Plan Team members who are also primary authors of assessments should not review their own assessments, but may answer questions or provide clarifications during the Plan Team discussions.

The Council SOPPs note that an independent expert on the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) cannot be employed by an interest group or advocacy group. It is acceptable, however, for SSC members to conduct research with funds that were provided by industry or interest groups, often handled through a separate board that makes funding decisions (for example, the Bering Sea Fisheries Research Foundation). This does not constitute “employment” for the purposes of qualifying for SSC membership. The same policy applies to Plan Team members.

### **3.4 Duties of Plan Team Leadership**

Each Plan Team will be directed by a Chair and Vice Chair or co-Chairs. For the Groundfish Plan Teams, having a chair from AFSC is particularly important due to logistics of developing the SAFE Reports, however for the other Plan Teams, chairs do not need to be AFSC staff. The Plan Team Chairs are elected from among members. The Plan Team Chair or Co-Chairs’ duties and responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following:

#### **Prior to Plan Team meetings**

- Develop the draft agenda and member assignments in advance with PT Coordinators and formally adopt and adjust in-meeting as needed.
- Chairs have latitude to choose which items should be included on a Team’s agenda, however, if a specific agenda item has been requested by the SSC or Council, it is the role of the Plan Team coordinator to ensure it is included on the agenda.

#### **Facilitate the Plan Team meetings**

- Chair the meeting with focus on balancing time while promoting team discussion and deliberations.
- Highlight and summarize action items clearly
- Manage public comment on agenda items. It is at the discretion of the Chair how public comment is considered in-meeting (see Section 4.4).
- Communicate meeting expectations to all Plan Team members.
- The Chair should plan to stay through the last day of the meeting at which they are chairing. In the extenuating circumstance that the Chair or co-chair is not able to stay through the end of the meeting, they should work with the Plan Team Coordinator (Council staff) to identify a designee or an alternative.
- Provide final approval for Plan Team meeting report

#### **Report to Council: SAFE report, Plan Team Report, Tables**

- Present SAFE report and PT Report at the subsequent Council meeting, separately to the SSC, the Advisory Panel, and the Council. Coordinators may cover meetings when appropriate, particularly if there are no controversial agenda items or when no new models are being presented.
- One of the Chairs must be able to commit to attending the Council/SSC meeting for these presentations.
  - CPT Council reports will follow CPT meetings aligning with the assessment cycle timing of the FMP stocks. As of 2023, this is February, June, and October.
  - GFPT Council reports are October, December meetings



- Scallop PT Council report is in April and a full scallop SAFE will be presented to the SSC/Council every other year.

Co-chairs may divide the duties between themselves at their discretion, within a given Plan Team or Council meeting. Chairs and co-chairs should communicate with the Plan Team Coordinator(s) regularly to highlight items and activities that arise throughout the year to help with prioritizing PT topics (see Section 4.3 for development of agendas).

### **3.5 Council staff roles specific to Plan Team coordination**

#### **Coordinate effective Plan Team meeting logistics**

- Work with Plan Team Chairs to plan agenda, assignments and communicate with Chairs, and Plan Team members
- Update Plan Team member lists before each meeting
- Communicate meeting expectations to all Plan Team members
- Work with admin staff and authors to facilitate documentation, ppts, meeting materials and online agenda platform
- Facilitate meetings by setting up (in advance and during meeting) teleconference or virtual (Zoom) with AFSC/ADFG counterparts
- In-meeting logistics including room set up and take down, coffee, snacks, sign in sheets and other logistics as needed

#### **Facilitate effective meetings**

- Understand the objective of each agenda item (as listed in annotated agenda/list of action items) and communicate with the Chairs to ensure the meeting is progressing as needed.
- Be prepared to step in and facilitate discussion as necessary.
- Be prepared to back-fill anyone that is either not present or has not done their writing assignment
- Encourage productive effective working relationships within the Team

#### **Participate as a Plan Team member**

- See Section 3.7

#### **Ensure final documents completed**

- Coordinate, consolidate and finalize (with Chairs and admin) final assessment submissions, final summaries, tables and Plan Team report following the meeting.

#### **Report to Council and advisory bodies: SAFE report, Plan Team report, Harvest Specification Tables**

- SAFE report and PT Report:
  - Coordinate with Plan Team Chair/presenter and SSC chair to determine timing of oral presentation and what to focus on in the oral presentation of the Plan Team report.
  - Work with Chairs to prepare ppt in advance of SSC
  - Assist in note taking during presentation to help revise ppt for AP/Council and assist in reporting out as needed to AP/Council on discussions from the SSC
  - Be prepared to present as needed
  - Coordinate with SSC on who will present
- Tables/motions
  - Check all numbers and tables throughout Plan Team (final SAFE prep) meetings as well as after. Coordinate with NMFS/ADFG counter-parts
  - Prepare template of motions for Council members on specs
  - Coordinate with SSC Chairs on tables and numbers
  - Work with admin staff to post all documentation and correct numbers throughout Plan Team meeting, Council meeting and all motions
- Communicate meeting results via email to Teams

- Acknowledge Team member participation and effort periodically via letters or other means (cups, certificates etc.)

### 3.6 Duties of all Plan Team members

The duties and responsibilities of **all Plan Team members** include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Attend all Plan Team meetings, stay until the Plan Team meeting adjourns insofar as possible, and participate fully at these meetings. Generally, acceptable absences will be the result of or involve personal emergencies or unavoidable conflicts related to the member’s area of expertise or employment. Plan Team members wishing to be excused from a meeting should contact the Plan Team Chair and Coordinator. Alternate members may be assigned to participate in case a member cannot attend a meeting. This will be conducted on a case-by-case basis.
- Arrive at the Plan Team meeting prepared. Be familiar with all the documents in advance to understand the issues and be sufficiently informed to effectively participate in discussions. For issues for which you are assigned as lead, become familiar with the topic and be prepared to ask insightful questions and provide expert guidance to the analysts to assure that the documents represent the best available science, to the extent practicable for the situation.
- Act professionally during the meetings. Keep the discussions civil and respect others’ viewpoints.
- State whether you are reviewing a document as a Plan Team member for which you are also an assessment author (this provides transparency in conflicts of interest)
- Write summaries and PT report as assigned.
- Specific responsibilities of Plan Team members in preparation of, during, and post-meeting (preparation of the Plan Team and SAFE reports) will be sent out by the chairs and/or coordinators as needed.

## 4 Plan Team Meeting Procedures

### 4.1 Rules of order

In general, rules of order will be informal. Plan Team decisions will be reached by consensus, whenever possible. If a decision is required and consensus cannot be reached, the opinion of the majority will prevail. In representing either Plan Team publicly, the spokesperson will take care to relate Plan Team opinions accurately, noting points of concern where consensus could not be reached.

### 4.2 Annual Cycle of Meetings

Groundfish Plan Team meetings will generally be held in September and November, prior to Council’s October and December meetings. Crab Plan Team meetings will generally be held in January, May, and September, and Scallop Plan Team meetings will generally be held in March.<sup>2</sup> Groundfish and Crab Plan Team meetings are generally 4-5 days, and Scallop Plan Team meetings are generally one day. The Plan Team Chair(s) may call other meetings as necessary. Out of cycle meetings (such as those for developing research priorities or EFH models) may be done virtually. The Groundfish Plan Teams may meet either separately or jointly.

Dates for the following year’s meeting(s) will be set in September for groundfish, March for scallop, and projected out two meetings in advance following each CPT meeting for crab.

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<sup>2</sup> Final crab assessment CPT timing: January: NSRKC; May: PIGKC, AIGKC, WAIRKC; September: EBS snow, BBRKC, EBS tanner, SMBKC, PIBKC, PIRKC

### 4.3 Agenda Items

A draft agenda will be prepared in advance of each meeting by the Council staff in consultation with the respective Chair(s), and timing of agenda items may be revised by the Plan Team(s) during the meeting. For descriptions of the types of topics that may end up on Plan Team agendas, see Section 6.3. Each agenda will include an opportunity for public comment (see Section 4.4). Minutes (the Plan Team Reports) of each meeting will be prepared by Plan Team members and Council staff, distributed to Plan Team members, and revised as necessary before the subsequent SSC and Council meeting. If a member of the public would like to inquire about receiving Plan Team review of relevant documents (e.g. reports from industry, collaborative research projects or proposals), they should get in touch with the Plan Team coordinator and/or the Plan Team Chair(s) at least 6 weeks prior to the meeting for which they would like a time slot. Specific time on the agenda for members of the public will be up to the discretion of the Plan Team coordinator and Chair(s) and is dependent upon available timing.

Each Plan Team may have specific policies regarding documentation of agenda items and deadlines. In general, the Teams will take action only on items that have been placed on the agenda, and for which sufficient documentation has been received, well ahead of time; specifically:

- If possible, each potential action item should be on the preliminary agenda distributed to the Teams ahead of the meeting, and in all cases must (at least) be on the final agenda as adopted by the Teams at the beginning of the meeting.
- For SAFE report chapters, “sufficient documentation” means a stock assessment that has been certified by the AFSC/ ADF&G as complying with the SAFE chapter guidelines. For all other potential action items, “sufficient documentation” means a reasonably detailed Word or PowerPoint file.
- The Teams expect that sufficient documentation for any potential action item will be provided at least 7 days prior to the start of the meeting. If exceptional circumstances make it impossible to meet this deadline, the Teams expect such documentation to be provided as soon as possible, and in no case later than 5:00 p.m. on the day before the presentation is to be given.
- In the event that a document is revised prior to its presentation at the meeting, the author must provide the Team(s) with an efficient means of identifying which tables, figures, or pieces of text have been revised (e.g., use of redline/strikeout format, or a written description or list of changes).

#### Groundfish

In June, supervisors at AFSC confirm assessment author needs for Groundfish Plan Team review in September. Plan Team coordinators communicate to Chairs any other requests of the Council for Plan Team review. Throughout the year, chairs should email coordinators if any potential topics for Plan Team review come up and coordinators will keep track of those topics for agenda planning. Chairs and coordinators will email a survey to assessment authors and presenters by early July to see who may have updates for the September Plan Team meeting, and chairs and coordinators will meet to draft the September agenda based on survey responses. The agenda will be finalized in August and posted to the Council website. The September Plan Team meeting is generally when detailed examination of any new stock assessment models occurs, and the November meeting includes presentation of the assessments for that year and setting of ABCs and OFLs. New models must be presented and reviewed at the September in order to be considered in November. Topics for the November meeting are discussed at the September meeting, and draft agenda is circulated to authors and Plan Team members shortly thereafter. The November agenda is finalized in October after the Council meeting.

## **Crab**

For crab, the model scenarios are generally presented the meeting before final review of stock assessments (ex: for EBS snow crab, model review may occur at the May CPT meeting, with review of the final assessment at the September CPT meeting). More scrutiny should be given at this stage to methods of model construction, fitting, and new data sources used. Stock assessments are reviewed for setting ABC and OFLs for respective crab stocks at the January, May, or September meetings. At the end of every meeting, the Crab Plan Team compiles a list of agenda topics for the next meeting, and selects meeting dates projected out for two meetings. In the weeks prior to the meeting, the draft agenda is prepared and feedback is solicited from Plan Team members. The agenda is posted leading up to the meeting, approximately 2 weeks prior.

## **Scallop**

The agenda for the annual Scallop Plan Team meeting is drafted approximately 4 weeks prior to the meeting in March. Harvest specifications are set on a biennial cycle.

Additional workshops or reviews may be recommended to resolve any outstanding technical questions in a proposed new assessment prior to implementation. CIE (Center for Independent Experts) reviews are also conducted on a rotating or as-needed basis on stock assessments at the request of NMFS, and authors will typically also provide a review of the findings of the CIE panel within their Plan Team presentation.

## **4.4 Public testimony**

Public testimony is taken at the discretion of the Chair(s) at each meeting. In some cases, testifiers may be asked to wait until the end of an agenda item, or their feedback may be solicited more informally during Plan Team discussions. The Chair(s) should be clear and consistent on the procedure at each meeting. The Chair(s) may choose to remind the public that testimony should focus on the issues on scientific evaluation of the issue or analysis, rather than advocating for a particular policy outcome. The Chair(s) may also choose to impose a time limit for everyone providing public testimony, often in the range of 5 minutes.

## **4.5 Process for developing recommendations on OFL and ABC**

### Staff report

For each agenda item, assessment authors or staff will provide an overview of the issue, and identify the key points for scientific evaluation with respect to that agenda item. Plan Team members should ask assessment authors questions of clarification as needed, particularly as related to any recommendations from the Plan Team. Raise all major points to appear in the Plan Team report or summary in the SAFE intro with the Team and author(s) during questioning.

### Public testimony

See Section 4.4.

### Plan Team deliberations

Following any public comment, the Plan Team will discuss and deliberate a recommendation. The Chair(s) will look to the assigned leads to begin the discussion, before opening it up to the Plan Team as a whole. The Chair(s) will ensure that every Plan Team member be given the opportunity to provide discussion, to ensure all points of view are provided. The Plan Team report cannot include substantive comments that are not verbalized during the deliberation, so it is important to introduce all potential recommendations. Ideally, the Plan Team will develop a consensus recommendation; if there is disagreement, the Chair(s) will work to find common ground and identify conclusions that can inform the SSC and Council with respect to the action or assessment at hand. Once the discussion is complete, the

assigned lead will summarize the major recommendations and points of discussion to be included in the Plan Team report.

After reviewing the stock assessment document from the authors, the Plan Team shall make an initial determination regarding the tier level of the assessment and will recommend ABC and OFL limits for each assessed stock or complex. Alternate (e.g., staircase) procedures may be recommended to arrive at ABC recommendations, at the Plan Team's discretion. Such procedures have been used in the past as precautionary measures to avoid large fluctuations in ABC recommendations across years. In its report, Plan Team recommendations regarding future research priorities and direction may also be made.

At its October 2018 meeting, the Council clarified its policy on the basis for ABC setting vs TAC setting. Specifically: *“The Council clarifies its policy is that the planning team develop and recommend ABC's which are based on biological and environmental scientific information through the stock assessment and Tier process. Socio-economic factors should be considered during the TAC setting process at the Council and not incorporated into the ABC recommendations.”*

Typically, one to two Plan Team members will be assigned as the lead reviewers for each stock or stock complex. The lead reviewer(s) will draft the portion of the Plan Team report dealing with that species. Recommendations may be made to the stock assessment author, SSC, or Council and the report shall clearly explain to whom the Plan Team's recommendations are directed.

The ABC recommendations are reviewed by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), which may confirm the Plan Team recommendations, or develop its own. ABC recommendations, together with social and economic factors, are then considered by the Council in determining total allowable catches (TACs) and other management strategies for the fisheries.

Assessment authors should take care to respond to SSC comments on proposed assessment models.

#### Preparation of Plan Team report and SAFE reports

Preparation of the Plan Team report and SAFE report is one of the most important duties of Plan Team members. The Plan Team report should reflect the discussions and deliberations of the Plan Team, as a body, during the Plan Team meeting. The Plan Team report and SAFEs will be made available to the public after the Plan Team meetings. The report serves multiple purposes: (1) a record of what transpired at the meeting; (2) scientific advice to the SSC and Council and to the public; and (3) the “institutional memory” of the development of Plan Team guidance regarding various issues. As such, it is important that the Plan Team report be clearly written, accurate, and transparent. Each Plan Team may have specific guidelines meant to assist in achieving these goals, which are distributed in separate documents to Plan Team members. In general, the process is as follows:

#### Before the meeting

1. Before the meeting, the Plan Team Chair(s) and/or Plan Team Coordinator will assign individuals to lead and assist with review of each agenda item or stock assessment chapter. The Chair will attempt to distribute the workload evenly among attending Plan Team members, while still ensuring that each agenda topic receives scientific review by someone with the appropriate expertise.
2. Each Plan Team member should read the documents pertaining to their assigned agenda item(s) particularly carefully. Look for the key issues involved and research previous Plan Team comments on the item.

### During the agenda item

3. Members assigned to an agenda item should be prepared to take the lead at the meeting in asking questions of staff. Members assigned to an agenda item should be sure to write down summary points on Plan Team advice.
4. If you have detailed edits on the document that are not substantive, it is appropriate to give these directly to the author to address.
5. In some cases, the Plan Team's recommendations may differ from the author's. In these cases, members assigned to the agenda item should be sure to include a detailed explanation of why the Plan Team made the recommendation/why their recommendation differed from the author's.

### Writing up the Plan Team discussion

6. Plan Team members will be assigned a role in writing the report for some agenda items. The lead should send the draft section to the Plan Team-Chair or coordinator.
7. The start of the Plan Team agenda topic write up should contain a title and a list of authors, staff members, or public who presented for that item. After that, address key issues being discussed by the Plan Team.
8. The Plan Team report should provide an accurate description of the scientific discussion. Therefore, sufficient detail should be provided to reflect the range of opinions that were expressed.
9. Use bold font to highlight key statements that should be emphasized by the Chair when presenting the report to the SSC or Council. Try to write the report with this aspect in mind. For example, detailed criticisms of methodology or results meant for the authors or staff analyst should appear in separate paragraphs, so that the Chair can easily navigate through the reading of the report.
10. Avoid recommending changes of a substantive nature that were not discussed at the meeting. You may come up with a brilliant idea that should have been considered at the meeting but was not. The idea does not belong in the Plan Team report. Reconsiderations by individual Plan Team members should be brought to the attention of the entire Plan Team and, if warranted, included in a subsequent Plan Team report.
11. Any discussion of public comment will be summarized in the Plan Team report.

### Compiling and finalizing the report

12. All Plan Team members are encouraged to read the draft sections of all agenda items as the report is being compiled and provide comments to the leader of that agenda item in a timely manner. Please make your comments constructive and clear. If you have suggested changes, please write these out legibly. Avoid ambiguous advice such as "Put something in about ...", "This is not clear to me", "This needs work..."
13. After the meeting, the Plan Team Chair or Co-chairs will send the draft report out to all members, and/or post it on Google Docs, and members are encouraged to recommend final changes in a timely manner.
14. The Plan Team Chair or Co-chairs have final responsibility for approving the Plan Team report, but they will work with each other and the Plan Team Coordinator to ensure the report includes Plan Team member edits. The Chair/Co-chairs may change or delete language from the report for clarity, style, scientific logic, and accuracy.

## **4.6 Reporting of Plan Team Report**

The Plan Team Chair (or designee) is responsible for presenting the Plan Team report to the SSC and as applicable to the Advisory Panel and the Council.

In giving the oral report, the Chair will present the key points of Plan Team recommendations on each agenda topic taken up by the Plan Team. Preparing these key points in a PowerPoint presentation format may be a useful way to convey the Plan Team's recommendations to the Council.

Reporting to the SSC and Council can be challenging, particularly on complex and contentious issues. The Chair will be asked to capture the essence of the Plan Team discussions when requested, and provide responses to Council and SSC member's questions that justify the Plan Team's recommendations and conclusions. The oral report on the Plan Team deliberations is critical to the SSC's decision-making for ABC recommendations. The report is important not only to Council and SSC members, who are relying on the Plan Team to evaluate the stock assessments and inform decision-making, but also to the public who are trying to understand the assessments and decisions for harvest specifications.

Plan Team Coordinators should work with Plan Team and SSC Chairs in advance of the SSC meeting to determine time constraints and focus of oral presentations of the Plan Team report.

The SSC then provides an additional peer review process for scientific information used to advise the Council about the conservation and management of the fisheries.

## **5 Travel expenses and per diem**

Members of the Plan Teams serve without compensation. Non-federal employees may be paid their actual expenses for travel and per diem incurred in the performance of their duties during the days in which the Plan Team is in session. The Plan Team Chair(s) or Plan Team member designated to report to the Council may be paid expenses when necessary and approved by the Executive Director.

### **5.1 Travel**

Plan Team members will be reimbursed for travel expenses when attending Plan Team meetings in accordance with applicable law and Council policy. The Council reimburses travel expenses based on the per diem limits as described below. The Council is not authorized to reimburse expenses for members of the committee who are employed by the Federal government. Our expense protocols are designed to streamline our reimbursement process and remain consistent with 2CFR-200 federal travel rules. We use the GSA straight per diem basis for meal and incidental expenses (MIE). Following the GSA per diem allowance provides the greatest flexibility and claimant benefit, and ease of processing for our staff.

Below are bullet points for NPFMC Plan Team travelers.

### **5.2 Travel Form**

- Daily per diem is based upon location and time of year. Per diem rates are updated on the travel form by the Finance Officer and emailed prior to the meeting. If you do not receive a travel form for a meeting, email your request to the Finance Officer with the meeting location and date(s).
- Travel forms will be sent in pdf format and can be completed and signed digitally. The forms with scanned receipts can be submitted via email to [Nicole.Schmidt@noaa.gov](mailto:Nicole.Schmidt@noaa.gov).
- The form is changeable, so our State, University, and other agency travelers can adhere to their respective agency reimbursement rule(s).

### **5.3 Per Diem Rates**

- The form will list the approved GSA per diem rate for the meeting location and season. The daily MIE will be broken into five categories: Travel Day, Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, and Incidentals. Having the breakdown across breakfast/lunch/dinner/incidentals may



seem counterintuitive to the whole approach of straight per diem, but we have it broken down thusly in order to (1) accommodate State, University, or other travelers who may be subject to their own reimbursement rules/limits, and (2) be able to account for, and deduct, provided meals.

- Travel days will be reimbursed according to the GSA regulations, which allow 75% of the daily MIE rate. (For example, if the daily MIE for Anchorage is \$99, an Anchorage travel day would be \$74, based on the formula  $\$99 \times .75$ .)
- The daily incidental expense allowance is only available to those travelers reimbursed for lodging and is not applicable for travel days. The allowance is intended to cover tips for hotel staff, bellhops, and concierges, and any other incidentals.
- Provided meals must be adjusted from the daily MIE rate. Please indicate provided meals by leaving blank the cell for the appropriate day/meal. For example, on those days on which lunch is provided for Council members and staff, you will receive a reduced per diem to cover all other expenses for that day, rather than the full MIE rate. We are required to make this deduction when meals are provided by the Council, whether you eat the provided meal or eat elsewhere (with medical exceptions where necessary).
- Under the daily per diem method, it is no longer possible for you to pay for another person's meal and be reimbursed. Please settle the bill amongst yourselves.
- Hotel and Airfare receipts are required on all travel claims, no matter the value.
- Other expense items such as baggage fees and taxi are to be itemized as indicated on the form. Individual items \$75 or greater require a receipt.

#### **5.4 Virtual Meeting**

- A rate of \$15 per meeting day is allowable to compensate for use of personal internet and phone for participation in virtual Plan Team meetings.

#### **5.5 Airfare**

- All airfares must be booked as coach class, and economy fares are encouraged when available. There are many coach airfare options, please practice prudence in booking your airfare resulting in the best economic value. We understand that flexibility is necessary to engage effectively in the Council process, including the necessity to have somewhat flexible tickets and avoid expensive change fees. There are no change or cancellation fees with Alaska Airlines MAIN coach fares, so we ask that you avoid any SAVER fares due to the restrictions placed on those discount fare types. We intend to remain as flexible as possible in this regard, as long as overall travel costs remain within our budget.
- Purchase of first-class airfare is not allowed except in extenuating circumstances, and always needs prior approval from the Council Executive Director, in writing. If you purchase a first class fare you will only be reimbursed for the coach fare equivalent.
- The Council can provide user accounts for our frequent travelers through our Alaska Airlines EasyBiz program. EasyBiz allows for airfare to be booked at the Council's expense, thus avoiding the need for reimbursement. The program operates the same as other Alaska Airlines purchases, you will still be eligible to earn miles, mileage program upgrades, and any other perks you may have associated with your flyer status. You must still submit flight itinerary copies with your travel claim regardless of the use of the EasyBiz program. Email [npfmc.admin@noaa.gov](mailto:npfmc.admin@noaa.gov) for EasyBiz enrollment information.
- In order to get the best rate possible, travelers should use the available discount codes and book flights once the meeting schedule is released, generally ~30 days prior. A written explanation for any last-minute bookings should be provided to justify the increased fare cost.

- In extenuating circumstances, which must necessarily be related to your fishing or processing activities and with advance notice, the Executive Director may authorize travel reimbursement to and from locales other than your normal home location.

## 5.6 Hotel

- The Council strongly encourages staying at the hotel where the meeting is located, when possible. Plan Team members are requested to reserve rooms under the Council's room block, if applicable. Ask the Plan Team coordinator for details if needed.
- Generally, we ask that you stick to the federal per diem lodging rate for the meeting location and please use your best judgment and prudence when making your hotel arrangements. Please utilize the Council negotiated room block when applicable/available.
- If you have questions or need assistance with hotel arrangements, contact [Npfmc.admin@noaa.gov](mailto:Npfmc.admin@noaa.gov).

## 5.7 Personal Travel

- Personal travel combined with Council travel is generally allowed, with hotel, airfare, and rental car expenses prorated for your personal travel days. For airfare, provide documentation as to what travel would have cost for work alone at the time you booked your ticket. You are responsible for the difference between that and the actual cost for personal airfare. You are not eligible for per diem on personal travel days. Contact the Finance Officer if you have personal travel questions.

## 5.8 Rental Car

- If car rentals are necessary, they need to be approved by the Plan Team Coordinator and the Council Finance Officer. We encourage members to carpool as possible to reduce rental cars.
- Typically, we do not reimburse for rental cars for Anchorage meetings. If a rental car is pre-approved for your travel, the receipt is required for reimbursement.

## 5.9 Form Submission

- Scanned claims with receipts and digital signature are acceptable for reimbursement. Please send to [nicole.schmidt@noaa.gov](mailto:nicole.schmidt@noaa.gov) or mail to 1007 West 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave Suite 400, Anchorage AK 99501
- Travel Claim forms are due within 30 days of travel completion, late claims may be denied.

# 6 Reference materials

The following sections provide some general information about Council and Plan Team operations and guiding principles, and Plan Team actions.

## 6.1 General information on Council operations

Regional fishery management councils were established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (also known as the Magnuson-Stevens Act, or MSA). Title III of the [Magnuson-Stevens Act](#) (beginning on page 58) sets the national standards, applicable requirements for councils, requirements for fishery management plans, and other requirements and authorities. You can find out more about the regional councils on the all-councils website ([www.fisherycouncils.org/](http://www.fisherycouncils.org/)).

The Council's website, [www.npfmc.org](http://www.npfmc.org), also provides useful information about the Council process, current issues, and upcoming meetings. The SSC generally meets five times each year, in conjunction with the Council and Advisory Panel (AP). The "[Three-Meeting Outlook](#)" provides our best estimate of issues to be addressed at upcoming meetings, as well as a list of meeting dates for the next two years. The SSC meets for the first three days (almost always Monday-Wednesday) of the listed date range.

The Council's [Statement of Organization, Practices, and Procedures](#) (SOPP) provides details on the Council's function, organization, procedures for Council meetings, standards of conduct, and information about the employment practices for the staff.

We also post a list of commonly used [acronyms and abbreviations](#) on our website. We use quite a few acronyms and abbreviations in our documents and discussion, so you might find this a useful reference.

Complete meeting materials since 2013, and some earlier documents, are available on the [e-Agenda](#) on the website, along with the Council [newsletter](#) that reports on Council actions at each meeting. There is also a specific archive of all meeting reports, including [SSC reports](#).

Our website also provides information about the current composition of the [Council](#), [AP](#), and [SSC](#), together with a list of [NPFMC Committees](#) and membership and a list of Council [staff](#).

## **6.2 The Council's Decision-making Process**

The procedure for changing Federal fishing regulations follows a standardized process, set forth by a combination of laws, regulations, operational guidelines, policies, as well as adjustments and adaptations developed by the Council to increase efficiency, provide public participation, and produce quality outcomes.

There are several key steps in the process for Council actions. The SSC and Plan Team play a very important role in the development of fishery regulations by: 1) ensuring that the environmental and economic analyses used for decision making by the Council are scientifically adequate; and 2) establishing scientifically-based annual catch limits as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act and detailed in the [National Standard 1 guidelines](#). Specifics on the components of the Council's decision-making process and information on how to navigate the process are included on the Council's [website](#).

## **6.3 Types of Plan Team actions**

### Plan Amendments or other Program reviews

At the direction of the Council, the Plan Team may also play a role in the development and evaluation of amendments to the fishery management plan, as well as evaluate amendments to other management plans that may affect the conservation and management of fishery resources. Once an amendment proposal has been accepted for consideration by the Council, an analytical team may be assembled by the responsible agencies. Generally, Council staff will solicit Plan Team feedback on certain parts of their analyses or provide opportunity for critique on the methodology or adequacy of the analysis. Generally, recommendations by the Plan Team on non-assessment items should be appropriate to the scope, timeline, and feasibility of the Council action; that is, the Council is not looking for a perfect analysis, but one that will allow for an informed decision based on the best scientific information available. The Plan Team may also identify additional information that is relevant to the decision and should be included in the analysis. Plan Team review, in this sense, is different from peer-review of a journal manuscript, to the extent that Plan Team members have a collegial relationship with Council staff allowing for interactions before, during, and after review to improve the analyses and their documentation. The Plan Teams' comments are then included in the Plan Team's report to the SSC, AP, and Council, unless staff determine it can go under the agenda item for the analyses.

### Research priorities

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's research priorities cover a wide range of topics and are organized and managed within a publicly accessible [database](#). Ranking of research topics is done using four priority categories: *Critical ongoing monitoring*, *Urgent*, *Important (near term)*, and *Strategic (future needs)*. These priority categories have specific [definitions](#) that emphasize the correspondence of research to the Council's time horizon of management concerns. In accordance with Council procedures, the SSC and Council review research priorities every three years at the Council's June meeting. Prior to Council review, the Council's Plan Teams review existing research priorities and make recommendations for modifications or additions, as needed. Following the June meeting, the updated five-year research priorities are provided to NMFS as well as research and funding entities.

### Fishery Ecosystem Plans

The Council has also adopted Fishery Ecosystem Plans (FEPs) for some of its ecosystem areas. These are Council documents that are not actionable, like a Fishery Management Plan, but rather are used to inform Council policy options and associated opportunities, risks, and tradeoffs affecting FMP species, communities, and the broader ecosystem in a systematic manner. Under the overarching guidance of the Council's Ecosystem Approach policy, the Council's FEP sets goals and objectives for the ecosystem that direct the process by which the Council should manage fisheries, monitor the ecosystem, and prioritize new research projects. The Council has established a Bering Sea FEP [team](#) to provide advice about how the Council should use the Bering Sea FEP framework to achieve objectives.

The Plan Teams occasionally provide scientific review of the FEP documents and reports, the recommendations of the FEP team, and analytical methods for projects (action modules) proposed under the FEP framework.

### Marine mammal, seabird, habitat status reports

Periodically, the Plan Team will request to hear status reports on marine mammals and seabirds that interact with the Council-managed fisheries, or habitat research. These reports may not always have a nexus to a specific Council decision, but are an important opportunity for the Plan Teams to stay apprised of the status of populations and ongoing research that is relevant to the Plan Teams' broad objective to provide scientific and technical advice to the SSC and the Council. Plan Team review of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) analyses or reports typically comes at the request of the SSC/Council.

### Exempted fishing permits

An exempted fishing permit is a permit issued by the NMFS Alaska Region to allow groundfish fishing activities that would otherwise be prohibited under regulations for groundfish fishing. These permits are issued for limited experimental purposes to support projects that could benefit the groundfish fisheries and the environment. Examples of past projects supported by an EFP include the development of new gear types for an underutilized fishery and development of devices that reduce prohibited species bycatch.

The Regional Administrator is required to consult with the North Pacific Fishery Management Council before issuing an EFP. Plan Teams, and the SSC may be asked to provide comments about the utility of the proposed experiment.