



North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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Ecosystem Committee REPORT

18 January 2023 9am – 5pm (AKT); 19 January 2023 9am – 12pm (AKT)

Hybrid: In-person NPRB Conference Room, Anchorage; Virtual via Zoom

[eAgenda](#)

The Committee met over the course of two days with agenda items including: GOA FEP planning considerations, Groundfish PSEIS planning and discussion paper review, EFH 5-year review summary report, CCTF work plan update, LKTKS update, and Northern Fur Seal co-management.

Committee Members in attendance:

Bill Tweit, Chair (in-person)	Dave Benton (phone)	Dave Fluharty (virtual)
Gretchen Harrington (virtual)	Jim Ayers (virtual)	Rose Fosdick (virtual)
Stephanie Madsen (virtual)	Theresa Peterson (virtual)	Nicole Watson (NPFMC staff)

Members absent: Jeremy Rusin, John Iani

Agency and Council Staff attending included: David Witherell, Diana Evans, Diana Stram, Kate Haapala, Sara Cleaver, Sarah Rheinsmith, Jodi Pirtle, Kirstin Holsman, Molly Zaleski, Sarah Wise, Bridget Ferris, Charlene Felkley, Jeremy Sterling, Kelly Cates, Kerim Aydin, Megan Mackey, Tom Gelatt, Mike Williams

Public attending included: Anne Vanderhoeven, Becca Robbins Gisclair, Ben Enticknap, Brenden Raymond-Yakoubian, Brian Fadley, Chris Soderstrom, Chris Tran, Dan Hull, Ernie Weiss, Hanna Hellen, Jamie Musbach, John Olson, Jon Warrenchuk, Karen Gillis, Kate Glover, Lauren Divine, Linda Kozak, Lydia Kleine, Marissa Wilson, Megan Williams, Michael LeVine, Michelle Stratton, Nicole Kimball, Steve Marx, Terese Schomogyi

The Chair opened the meeting with a discussion of the agenda and adjustments for time constraints over the next two days for Committee members.

Gulf of Alaska Fishery Ecosystem Plan

The Committee received an update from staff in response to the Council motion from April 2022, tasking the Ecosystem Committee to begin collecting information to inform the initial steps for the potential development of a Gulf of Alaska Fishery Ecosystem Plan. Sara Cleaver [presented](#) the progress update which included lessons learned from the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan, considerations for next steps, and a discussion of action requested. A short [discussion paper](#) was included in the documents for this agenda item.

The Committee appreciated the information provided in the presentation as well as the work evident in the discussion paper and asked clarifying questions. Committee discussions focused on acknowledging the large amount of work required for a Fishery Ecosystem Plan, interest in lessons learned from the current Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan structure, and how timing might be affected by the intersections between ongoing initiatives such as the GOA CLIM research initiative and the groundfish PSEIS planning, and a GOA-focused plan. There was no written testimony for this agenda item. Jon Warrenchuk (Oceana) provided public testimony and acknowledged the usefulness of a Fishery Ecosystem Plan, how the information could be useful to inform the Council on many issues central to the Gulf of Alaska.

The Committee sees the value and need of developing a Gulf of Alaska Fishery Ecosystem Plan structured similarly to the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan, but recommends to the Council that it consider waiting until other ongoing initiatives reach a level of completion that would facilitate them informing a Gulf FEP prior to deciding whether to initiate an FEP. To balance the urgency of initiating work in the GOA with understanding the availability of staff and information, the Committee would like to revisit this discussion during the Autumn 2023 Committee meeting in order to not lose focus on the issue and also review progress on these other initiatives to look for efficiencies and synergies.

Groundfish PSEIS Planning

The EC discussed the October 2022 Council motion that initiated a discussion paper for a roadmap and timeline for reevaluating the Alaska Groundfish Programmatic Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (PSEIS) to better address the impacts of climate change on the marine ecosystems and on the people dependent on those ecosystems. The Committee received a [presentation](#) from Sara Cleaver and Nicole Watson on the draft [discussion paper](#) that included a request for clarification with respect to the intended purpose of new PSEIS, a primer of the 2004 PSEIS and 2015 PSEIS Supplemental Information Report, relevant information on changes in the groundfish fishery and ecosystem, and opportunities for public engagement. Staff noted that in addition to the formal scoping process that occurs in the NEPA process after the publication of a Notice of Intent, the Council process itself offers many additional opportunities for engagement as part of the public process (including EC meetings).

The Committee appreciated the information provided in the presentation as well as the work evident in the discussion paper and asked clarifying questions. Committee discussions focused on acknowledging the large amount of work that would be required for a reevaluation of the PSEIS, and how to characterize why it would be of value to the Council. Committee members noted that changes occurring in the ecosystem and fisheries attributed to climate change require the Council to take a programmatic look to understand the impacts of Federal fisheries, and to include increased public engagement throughout the process including robust and meaningful engagement with Alaska Native communities.

The Committee also discussed ongoing initiatives that may be informative to the evaluating current fisheries management, their timeline, intersections of the tasks, and availability of both agency and Council staff. The Committee recognized the importance of the informative work of the Climate Change Task Force and the guidance it can provide in this process.

There was no written public testimony. Michael LeVine (Ocean Conservancy) and Steve Marx (Pew Charitable Trust) provided oral public testimony. Both described a need to move forward in this process and would like to see increased opportunity for robust and meaningful public engagement, especially with Alaska Native communities.

The Committee recommends the Council move forward with initiating a North Pacific PEIS¹ and begin the process for developing the purpose and need statement and a range of alternatives by tasking the Committee to draft a purpose and need statement for Council review at either the April or June meeting. The Committee reiterates its conclusion that the current PSEIS is outdated, and that the process to start a NEPA analysis that takes a programmatic look at fisheries management in the face of climate change and prepares the Council to make climate informed decisions and create climate resilient fisheries needs to move forward. The Committee recognizes the importance of acknowledging uncertainty and risk in management decisions in light of the environmental changes we are currently

¹ An EIS is a detailed statement that is used to inform decision-makers and the public of the effects of actions that may significantly impact the quality of the human environment. A PEIS is prepared for a major program, plan or policy with a step-wise approach to a broad analysis that supports smaller scale, specific actions. The PEIS is a form of EIS that is generalized to a particular program, in this case, fisheries management.

experiencing, the need to describe both uncertainty and risk clearly, and that the PEIS could describe how to make decisions in the face of each. The Committee recommends that the Council continue to be clear about its commitment to providing meaningful and robust public involvement, including Tribal, industry, and NGO participation in the process and acknowledges a need for additional opportunities for Alaska Native communities to engage in the process.

Essential Fish Habitat

Sarah Rheinsmith, Dr. Jodi Pirtle, and Molly Zaleski presented [Arctic species distribution models](#) and a summary of eight of the ten components of the [essential fish habitat \(EFH\)](#) 5-year review report that is being prepared for Council review in February 2023. The team updated the Committee on changes and updates that have occurred since their last presentation to the Committee in October 2022 and focused on opportunities to identify research priorities for the next EFH review cycle. Several supporting documents were provided to the committee and can be found in the [eAgenda](#) for this meeting.

The Committee appreciates the amount and quality of the work in the presentations as well as the comprehensive work evident in the reports and asked clarifying questions. There was no written comment. Jon Warrenchuk (Oceana), Marissa Wilson (Alaska Marine Conservation Council), and Megan Williams (Ocean Conservancy) provided oral testimony, recommended a public call for proposals to enhance and conserve EFH, reporting measures for habitat disturbance, the need for more research on stocks with insufficient information, and an appreciation for the work being done.

The Committee recommends that the Council initiate the process to amend the Fisheries Management Plans to incorporate the changes to EFH information identified in the EFH 5-year review. Committee members are also supportive of the habitat research plan and priorities identified in the EFH Summary Report (sections 10.1, p.106; 10.5, p.122; and 10.6, p.123) for the next 5-year period. There was robust discussion among Committee members, which did not reach consensus, as to whether the Council should initiate a call for proposals to enhance and conserve EFH, recognizing the report did not find that the effects of fishing on EFH were more than minimal and not temporary. Members agreed that the development of the EFH 5-year review report has already provided opportunities for the public to engage and provide input at Committee and SSC meetings, but some members would like to enable further opportunities for stakeholders to provide proposals on conserving and enhancing EFH now that all of the components of the review have been finalized in the summary report. Others noted concern that staffing and funding may limit how additional nominations of habitat areas of particular concern or EFH conservation proposals could be addressed.

Climate Change Taskforce

Drs. Diana Stram and Kirstin Holsman, co-Chairs of the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan Climate Change Taskforce, [presented](#) a summary of the task force's recent work, the [Climate Resilience Synthesis Report](#) (largely unchanged since the Committee's review in October 2022), and an update on the work plan for next steps. The plans for moving forward with a workshop to solicit additional stakeholder feedback and scenario planning were briefly discussed. There was no public testimony for this agenda item.

The Committee appreciated the amount of time and effort that has been dedicated on this topic and the update provided at the meeting, while noting that the Science and Statistical Committee has not yet commented on this item. As in October 2022, **the Committee recommends that the Taskforce continue to lead the Council's consideration of adjustments to increase climate resiliency and supports Taskforce's development of a diverse climate adaptability and resiliency toolbox and the spring 2023 workshop.** The Committee highlighted its strong interest in the concept of public workshops to

develop recommendations, especially in a format that will allow for informal discussion between Taskforce members and the public, and where the process is structured to allow for extensive dialogue having a direct connection to the work of the Council. **The Committee recommends the Council continue to support the work of the Climate Change Task Force.**

Northern Fur Seal Updates

Dr. Lauren Divine and Mike Williams [presented](#) an update on the draft Conservation Plan and updates on the population status of the Eastern Pacific stock of Northern Fur Seals (Laaqudan). Please note that two slides were included as corrections to slides [10](#) and [11](#) of the original presentation to the Committee; oral corrections were provided during the presentation. Population updates included harvest management, entanglement and marine debris, and the VHF (Very High Frequency) tagging 5-year study. Conservation plan updates included a compilation of recent studies; reflection on long-term trends, marine ecosystem changes, fisheries, and fisheries interactions; and a revised timeline. There was no public testimony for this item.

The Committee appreciated and acknowledged the work and the progress of the Conservation Plan and ongoing population monitoring and is impressed by the co-management relationship between St. Paul and the Agency. The Committee was impressed with the increase in disentangling activity attributed to funding for dedicated observers, reporting, trained individuals, and youth interns, all contributing to an increase in response rates.

The Committee notes that the first public draft of the Conservation Plan will be available for review in the next few months, and suggests that Council review and comment is important, so timing is of critical importance. **The Committee recommends that the agency schedule the public comment period for the Conservation Plan to overlap with an upcoming Council meeting, and that the Council should receive a presentation and submit a comment letter.** The letter could describe the need for funding and other resources to accomplish the Plan's goals. The Committee supports the Conservation Plan's foundation identifying next steps and areas that should receive an increased level of focus. Further, the Committee recognizes the value of learning from the population trends of the Northern Fur Seals in the Bering Sea rookeries and the importance of understanding the overlap between Northern Fur Seals and the fishing industry. While opinions for the timing differed, the Committee agrees that updates should be provided to both the Committee and the Council as progress on the Conservation Plan continues and that the Council might consider the value of establishing a work group that has a specific focus on Northern Fur Seal issues.

Local Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, and Subsistence Taskforce

Drs. Kate Haapala and Sarah Wise [presented](#) a brief update of the task force's work, particularly the outcomes of the December 2022 meeting. Additional information was provided to the Committee included the [December 2022](#) and [January 2023](#) LKTKS reports and the [draft protocol](#).

The Committee acknowledged and appreciated presentation on the work of the task force, recognized that this work can be sensitive to some individuals and groups, and asked clarifying questions. There was no public testimony.

The range of discussions included protocol implementation and evaluation, the important value of the work, and sensitivity of the work noting that it is important for participants in the Council process to feel comfortable with sharing knowledge and to feel respected. Additionally, it was noted that appropriately incorporating LK, TK, and subsistence information is an iterative process that will take a longer period of time making it important to keep moving forward, showing respect. **The Committee recognizes the development and Council adoption of the protocol is a clear demonstration of respect for LKTKS**

and that the protocol's draft guideline language could be developed into a Council policy statement for the future. **The Committee recommends that both the Committee and Council reflect on how to craft a vision statement as an outcome of adopting the protocol.** Committee members also acknowledge the importance of stakeholders and participants to feel respected, welcomed, and valued in the Council process.

Scheduling

A brief closing discussion included scheduling an upcoming meeting for March, however member availability may require increased flexibility. Future meeting topics for 2023 may include the Groundfish PSEIS, review of the marine conservation area glossy brochure, ecosystem-based fishery management discussion with AFSC ESR team, revisiting the LKTKS draft protocol, and revisiting the Gulf of Alaska FEP.