

Options for changes to Council annual meeting cycle

PROGRESS REPORT, May 2023

In the last couple of years, the Council has been considering opportunities to adjust Council operations in order to best meet its mission. Initially, the Council's efforts focused on providing remote accessibility for Council and advisory group meetings, including broadcasting meetings and opportunities for remote testimony and participation. A paper in [February 2022](#) identified other ways to adjust Council procedures for meeting schedule/agenda timing, and Council advisory bodies. At the Council's request in April 2022, staff initially prioritized several of these issues¹ for a more in-depth discussion, which were resolved in [June 2022](#) and [October 2022](#).

This staff paper addresses a remaining interest of the Council, namely to consider the implications of reducing the number of annual Council meetings from five to four, or to consider making some meetings virtual-only. Any changes regarding the annual meeting cycle (timing or location) would likely take effect beginning in 2025, due to the necessary planning horizon for securing meeting venues and accommodations.

The Council's original interest in considering changes to the meeting cycle was because of workload concerns and agenda efficiency – as there is insufficient time between December and February for staff to produce the work to populate a normal-length Council agenda. Since then, the Council has added a second interest in cost savings, as the Council's operating costs have increased significantly, affecting the backfilling of staff positions. **The primary purpose of this paper is to get Council feedback on either dropping the February meeting, or converting it to a virtual meeting;** Sections 1 and 2 below explore these options.

1. Drop the February meeting entirely
2. Convert the February meeting to a virtual meeting
 - Variation: SSC meets in-person in February, AP/Council meet virtually
 - Variation: Convert Dec meeting to address only groundfish specs and charter halibut, with SSC in-person and AP/Council virtual; and keep the February meeting

Additionally, **staff are also looking for public and Council input on how to weigh other options related to selecting the timing and location of meeting venues.** We routinely consider cost, accessibility to the public, and logistical needs when assessing potential venues for Council meetings. Sections 3-5 highlight input that may allow us to have a better understanding about potential tradeoffs or priorities that should affect our planning for meetings in 2025 and beyond.

3. If we change February, should we also change the timing of the April meeting? and June?
4. When should we hold the Pacific Northwest meeting? Where? How often?
5. Consider alternatives for June Council meetings
 - Variation: Council alone meets in-person in June, and advisory bodies are virtual

Background information

[Current meeting schedule](#)

Pre-pandemic, we would typically have signed hotel contracts in place for the next two-three years of meetings. The meeting planning world is still transitioning post-COVID, and we are facing increased uncertainty for our planning horizon. Coastal Alaska venues are reluctant to give government-rate room blocks in June when they can fill rooms with high-dollar tourists; and internet and other costs (e.g.,

¹ AP/SSC nominations, B reports, tradeoffs between accommodating remote testimony and meeting in remote communities, timing of crab and groundfish harvest specifications

catering, room nights) have increased dramatically everywhere. With input from the Council, we are hoping to more firmly establish our proposed meeting schedule and footprint.

We have tentative dates booked with the Hilton in Anchorage for the remainder of 2023, and our June meetings venue is confirmed in Kodiak (2024), and in Seattle for the February 2024 meeting. We have not yet booked any venues in Anchorage for 2024. Our current Council practice is to hold one meeting a year in the Pacific Northwest, and one meeting a year in an Alaska location other than Anchorage, ideally in reach of fishery constituents. The remainder of our meetings occur in Anchorage, which is the most central location for the majority of stakeholders interested in Council-managed fisheries.

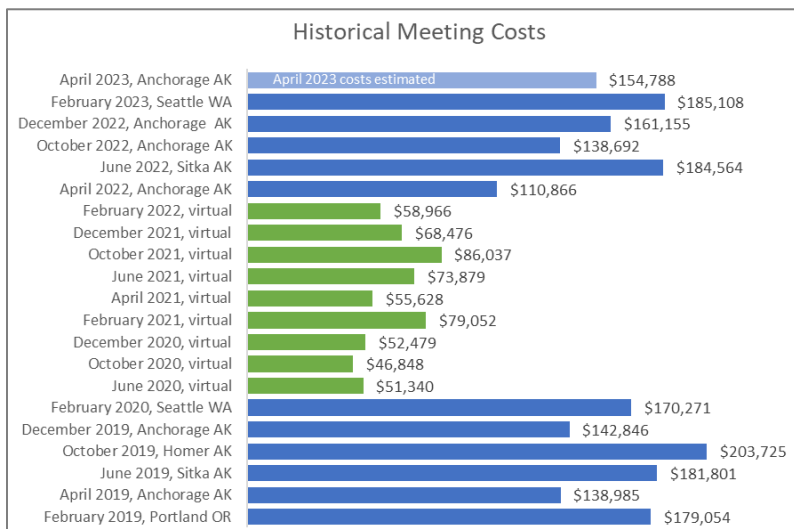
Meetings with signed contracts or dates held are in **RED**, unconfirmed meetings are in **GREEN**:

	Feb	Apr	Jun	Oct	Dec
2023	Seattle - Renaissance Hotel	Anchorage Hilton Hotel	Sitka – Centennial Hall/ several hotels	Anchorage – Hilton Hotel	Anchorage - Hilton Hotel (SMALL FOOTPRINT)
2024	Seattle - Renaissance Hotel	Anchorage	Kodiak – new Convention Ctr/ Best Western & Compass	Anchorage	Anchorage

Historical meeting costs, 4-year review

The graph below reflects the total cost to host each Council meeting, by location and date, from 2019 to current. Total cost includes travel, Council/SSC/AP member stipends, meeting space, internet, AV contracts, catering, etc. While meeting costs were reduced during COVID due to cancelled meetings and the change to a virtual platform, with the return in April 2022 to a hybrid format including virtual and in-person components, meeting costs are back at pre-pandemic levels. In some cases, our hybrid meetings are more expensive due to the increased requirements for internet and administrative services to host hybrid meetings, although this may be slightly offset by travel savings from some AP and SSC members participating remotely. Anchorage meetings are generally less costly due a combination of no shipping costs for equipment, the discounted rates for room and meeting space provided in the past by the Anchorage Hilton, and savings on staff travel. A big driver of cost is the total number of days for which the meeting is scheduled.

Note this graph only reflects cumulative costs to the Council; meeting attendees who are not Council, AP, or SSC members are responsible for their own travel costs. **This is also a graph of historical costs; current indications are that the cost of meetings will continue to increase**, due to travel costs and as we negotiate new contracts with meeting venues. As one example, we know that for October and December 2023, we will be charged a 35% increase on Anchorage Hilton costs, with potential other increases in out-years.



1. Drop the February meeting entirely

The Council's [process paper](#) in early 2022 included the possibility of dropping the February Council meeting, and it was identified as a [priority](#) to explore further by the Executive Committee. As described in the original staff paper, the short working time between the end of December and the deadline for materials to be posted for February, spanning the holidays, makes it challenging for staff to prepare timely work products for the Council, and gives less time for the public to review materials in advance. It was also noted that reducing a meeting might result in cost savings for the Council and public.

We were beholden to contracts with the Seattle Renaissance hotel for 2023 and 2024, and so the first year available to make a change to the February meeting schedule is 2025. In the coming month or so, we need to secure a venue for the 2025 Oregon meeting, which makes a decision on the February 2025 meeting time-sensitive for the June 2023 Council meeting.

One of the concerns about dropping the meeting entirely is how to reschedule recurring February issues, of which the primary concern is the Norton Sound red king crab (NSRKC) specifications agenda item. We have had initial conversations about this with ADFG and the Crab Plan Team, and changing the crab specifications timing might still be possible, but it is not a quick pivot, and crab managers are dealing with higher priority issues at present. The NSRKC stock assessment is dependent on BS trawl survey data that sometimes is not available until November, so preparing the assessment by December might be challenging, although industry supports an earlier process that would enable the fishery to open on February 1st. Without reprioritization, however, it may not be easy to completely eliminate the need for NSRKC action at a January or early February meeting before 2025.

A second concern that has been voiced is that by reducing our overall number of meetings, we instead make the remaining meetings longer. One way to address this is for the Council to engage in efforts to plan Council workload and agenda time. The Council's choice to prioritize tasking has been noticeable this year, since the agency's announcement of staffing constraints in October 2022. The Council could also consider other strategic planning tools to address how workload priorities spread out across meetings for the upcoming year(s).

Additionally, specific to February, that meeting generally has a short agenda, because of the lack of time to get work done between the December and February meetings as well as concerns about making decisions outside of Alaska. As a result, we frequently schedule fewer actionable items for the February Council meeting. It is often an opportunity for the Council and especially the SSC to catch up on informational reports, and non-time sensitive agenda items that could not fit into the October or December meetings. Additionally, the SSC has typically held a workshop during the February meeting.

The cost savings from dropping the February meeting would be approximately the same as the cost of an Anchorage meeting, approximately \$140,000 at present rates, as we would still need to travel to the Pacific Northwest during a different time of year. The cost savings could be applied to other Council priorities, for example backfilling a staff position that is currently being kept vacant as a result of escalating operating costs.

The Council could consider dropping the February meeting either as a pilot, periodically (e.g., every other year), or for the indefinite future (noting that hotel contracts likely need to be signed two years beforehand in order to secure availability).

2. Convert the February meeting to a virtual meeting

Converting the February meeting to a virtual meeting would not address the workload concern that there is insufficient time to prepare a full agenda worth of material between December and February, however it would provide significant cost savings to the Council. The cost of a virtual meeting is in the neighborhood of \$60,000, so would represent a savings of at least \$80,000 compared to an Anchorage meeting.

Many of the Council's typical agenda items in February might lend themselves well to a virtual meeting. Previous discussions have highlighted that in-person meetings are better if possible for actions that are not usually scheduled in February, namely those actions that affect a large and disparate number of stakeholders, communities, and/or sectors, in order to allow more opportunity for informal dialogue (e.g., controversial final actions, some initial reviews). The most time-sensitive issue for the Council in February, the NSRKC harvest specifications, is generally a short and straightforward agenda item. On the other hand, we have heard some concern from the SSC about taking up informational reports in the virtual format, as they may get more out of the in-person dialogue. A different downside of a virtual Council meeting is that Council members are less accessible to stakeholders than when meetings are in-person.

Variation: SSC meets in-person in February, AP/Council meet virtually

A variation on this option could be to have the SSC meet in person in February (especially if they are planning an SSC workshop as they often do in February), and have the AP and Council meet virtually, perhaps the week following, to allow the SSC ample time to prepare their report. This might also provide some additional flexibility regarding where the meeting occurs: if the SSC is intending to hold a workshop, for example, there may be some advantage to holding the meeting in Anchorage, Seattle, or Juneau, depending on where presenters or interest parties who might be involved are located.

While we certainly appreciate that there are benefits from meeting in person that are not replicable virtually, we know that we can still do the business of the Council in a virtual mode. The cost savings that we can achieve through converting even one of our five annual meetings to a virtual format, whether in its entirety or split out for the different groups over different meetings (e.g. the Council and AP virtual in February, the SSC virtual in April or June), are not insignificant in the face of rising costs and likely flat funding into the future.

Variation: Convert Dec meeting to address only groundfish specs and charter halibut; SSC in-person and AP/Council virtual, and keep the February meeting

Another variation on this theme would be to consider changes to the December meeting instead of the February meeting. The primary "must do" items in December are groundfish final harvest specifications, and charter halibut annual management measures. Under this variation, the SSC would meet in-person to discuss groundfish specifications, and the AP and Council would meet the following week virtually on groundfish harvest specifications and charter halibut annual management measures. While this wouldn't entirely alleviate workload issues for the December-February time period, reducing the scope of which Council and agency staff need to attend the December Council meeting would free up some additional analytical time for staff preparing for February agenda items. This would also address SSC workload concerns in December, by removing the need to add additional Council agenda items to an already full workload. December is also a competitive time for meeting venues, due to holiday parties, and so we are more likely to be able to secure the preferred larger meeting space footprint in February than December.

3. If we change February, should we also change the timing of the April meeting? and June?

Another consideration if we drop February would be whether we should shift other meetings to a different time to ‘even out’ the break between meetings. In order to avoid overlap with PFMC meetings, we have limited leeway. We could perhaps accommodate a schedule of **moving the April Council meeting earlier, to occur during the last week of February**, which would provide three extra weeks of work time between December and February, and a longer break until the next Council meeting. With respect to items routinely taken up in April, there may be a need to move scallop specifications and salmon genetics and salmon bycatch incentive plan reports to a later meeting.



As an additional decision under this option, we could also then consider whether to move the June meeting earlier. Because of the Memorial Day holiday on the last Monday in May, the only option would be to **begin the “June” meeting in mid-May**, on the Monday two weeks to the holiday. This may create some challenges for time-sensitive crab and observer program issues. The Crab Plan team May meeting recommends specifications for the AIGKC fishery, and the fishing year for that fishery does not end until late April. Moving the Plan Team earlier to accommodate a mid-May Council meeting would mean assessing the stock based on incomplete fishing year data. Less acute, but it may also be a challenge for the Observer Program to prepare the Annual Report for FMAC review before a mid-May Council meeting. With respect to overlap with other organizations, changing the meeting date to mid-May may require the Council Coordination Committee to reschedule their annual meeting that typically occurs during this time period time. Moving our June meeting earlier would, however, alleviate PFMC and NPFMC meetings overlapping, which has the potential to occur every other year in early June due to the timing required for PFMC groundfish specifications. A downside of making this change would be a slightly longer break between the start of the now mid-May meeting and the October Council meeting, 4.5 months instead of the current 4 months.

4. When should we hold the Pacific Northwest meeting? Where? How often?

Under our SOPP, we are required to meet in the constituent states of the Council (Alaska, Washington, and Oregon). Meetings are typically held in Alaska, with the exception that one meeting each year may be held in the constituent state of Washington or Oregon, normally at a ratio of two meetings in Washington for every one meeting in Oregon. The Council’s recent practice has been to hold the Pacific Northwest meeting in February, in downtown Seattle and Portland, although in the past we have also held meetings there in June and October.

If we decide to drop the February 2025 meeting, we will need to identify a different time to hold the meeting in Oregon. More generally, there may be other cost or access reasons to change when we hold the Pacific Northwest meetings in future. For example, as discussed below, we are encountering increased difficulties competing with tourism for holding our June meeting in coastal Alaska. As we scope out venues for available dates and cost, it would be helpful to hear from the Council and the public if there are **factors for deciding which meetings to hold/not to hold in the Pacific Northwest (April, June, October, December)**. For example, if the intent to hold the meeting in the Pacific Northwest is to provide an access opportunity for fishery participants or scientists living in the area, are there times when people are more/less likely to be available?

Another consideration is whether we should consider changes in where we hold the Pacific Northwest meetings. Through 2024 we are locked into Seattle hotel contracts that have been carried over from meetings scheduled to occur during the virtual COVID years. As we explore new contracts for future meetings, we have expanded our reach to ensure that we continue to find venues that are cost-effective, especially for our increased internet needs. For 2025, when we are scheduled to meet in Oregon, we have explored four different Oregon-based options with respect to the hotel and meeting space, transportation options, costs including internet, and whether they can accommodate our dates. These include hotels around Portland, including Vancouver, WA (which although in the state of Washington is part of the Portland metropolitan area); and holding a meeting in Newport, OR, which would connect the Council more directly with an Oregon fishing community. Ultimately the cumulative costs to the Council are not that dissimilar among venues in Oregon (higher internet/AV costs around Portland versus more expensive transportation to get to Newport). It would be helpful to hear from the Council and the public about relative tradeoffs of **meeting locations in downtown Portland or Seattle, versus in a place with close proximity to either the airport or (with a longer commute) a fishing community.**

Finally, through the SOPP, the Council is committed to holding regular meetings in the Pacific Northwest. However, a planning factor that is frequently raised is a concern about making significant decisions (initial review, final action) while the Council is outside of Alaska, particularly on issues where Alaskan stakeholders may wish to have substantives input. If this continues to be a concern that constrains the Council's planning, it would be helpful to know **whether the Council is still committed to holding one meeting every year in the Pacific Northwest**, or particularly if the Council is dropping down to 4 meetings a year, whether the Council should consider some other schedule. For example, the Council might choose to meet in the Pacific Northwest in two years out of three. Note that with remote testimony, we now have more access opportunities for participants, regardless of their physical location, to provide testimony and access SSC, AP, and Council discussions.

5. Consider alternatives for June Council meetings

Under our SOPP, we try to hold one meeting per year in an Alaska location other than Anchorage, in order to extend our reach to fishery constituents. There are logistical considerations (described on the Council [website](#)) that determine where the Council can meet, such as available meeting space and accommodations, internet capacity, etc. In June 2022, the Council [affirmed](#) its commitment to providing remote testimony at all Council meetings, which requires a minimum internet bandwidth commitment in our meeting venues, although also leaving open the option to occasionally consider meeting in-person in smaller remote and rural communities that do not have the bandwidth to support remote participation.

One concern that we are increasingly encountering is difficulty with reasonable access to the June Council meeting. Due to a dramatic increase in tourism in southeast Alaska coastal communities, the cost and availability of hotel accommodations at the June meeting is proving difficult in both Sitka and Juneau, which are regular locations for June Council meetings. This affects both the Council's ability to reserve sufficient rooms for members as well as additional rooms for attendees. We generally meet outside of Anchorage in June because downtown Anchorage hotel rooms are difficult to reserve and cost-prohibitive during that time period. Kodiak still looks to be fairly reliable for us, as long as construction on the convention center is completed as planned this year. We have met in Homer in October, but Homer cannot accommodate us in June. There is also meeting space, accommodations, and internet sufficient for us to meet in Dutch Harbor, but at present the cost of airfare is prohibitive for a full Council/SSC/AP meeting. While we have met in Nome in the past, it is not a viable option again until sufficient hotel accommodations are again available.

We can consider keeping southeast Alaska cities (Sitka, Juneau) in the rotation for non-June meetings, but that leaves us with the question of where to hold our June meeting. We can evaluate adding Fairbanks into the rotation, although as with Anchorage, Fairbanks is busy during the summer months. Another option is more regularly to meet in the Pacific Northwest in June.

It would be helpful to hear from the Council and the public about how to weigh the **tradeoffs of meeting in June in some of the more familiar fishing ports versus cost and accessibility issues.**

Variation: Council alone meets in-person in June, and advisory bodies are virtual

Another option that would increase opportunities for holding Council meetings in Alaska communities would be to shrink the footprint of the main Council meeting by periodically holding advisory meetings virtually. Following the structure of all-virtual meetings, the advisory bodies (the SSC and/or the AP) would meet virtually the week prior, and only the Council would convene in person. Particularly if we are interested in meeting in Dutch Harbor, Nome, Petersburg, or other smaller communities that we have not yet evaluated in detail, this might be a way to have the Council engage directly with more Alaska communities without airfare costs and/or insufficient hotel room space that is needed for the full three meetings to occur. In our investigations, we would prioritize communities that can offer sufficient internet to allow remote testimony. **Input from the Council and the public will be helpful in evaluating whether there is interest in occasionally holding Council alone in-person meetings, to expand in-person access to the Council process.**