

October 2015 Council meeting – Chairman’s report

Task Force on Arctic Marine Cooperation

As a result of the March 9 letter to Ambassador Dave Balton and David regarding the Council’s interest in Arctic issues, we received an invitation to participate in an inter-agency process to support the US delegation to the Arctic Council’s Task Force on Marine Cooperation. The TFAMC is charged with assessing future needs for a regional seas program or other mechanism, as appropriate, for increased cooperation in Arctic marine areas. The first meeting was held in September and we were asked to comment on the priorities in the Arctic Marine Strategic Plan relative to the greatest needs for international cooperation in the arctic. In general, there are a number of questions about the geographical scope of the Arctic Council efforts, and coordination or integration with our federal management programs and FMPs in the Arctic, Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands. In addition, it’s my understanding that the Arctic Council will not address fisheries or defense issues, which would seem to complicate the task of the TFAMC. I drafted a preliminary comment letter, with help from Chris and staff, recognizing that because the Task Force is just beginning our views and input would evolve. I have not seen any reports from the first meeting or feedback from our comments. In my view, this is one of the main ‘arctic issues’ forums in which the Council should stay engaged.

North Pacific Research Board

The NPRB held its fall meeting recently and there were two main agenda items. The first was to finalize the annual research program RFP, which will be released to the public this week. Recall that the enabling legislation of NPRB “requires funds (Environmental Improvement and Restoration Fund) to be used to conduct research on or relating to the fisheries or marine ecosystems and that the Board must emphasize research designed to address pressing fishery management issues or marine ecosystem information needs”. The annual research program, guided by a Science Plan, is the core of NPRB’s work, and NPRB considers explicit research priorities of various agencies and institutions and also solicits input from the larger scientific community and the public. This includes the research priorities of the Council and AFSC. I’m highlighting the annual RFP in particular because I see many strong connections between the RFP and the pressing issues facing the Council, and the tentative deadline for proposals is Friday December 4th.

The other main agenda item, and an area of significant focus in the coming years was the review and approval of pre-proposals submitted for an Arctic IERP. The invitation for proposals will go out to those pre-proposals approved by the Board

around the end of October, and following a thorough review process, including review by NPRB's Science Panel and Advisory Panel the program will begin in 2017. Recall that separate multi-year BS and GOA IERPs have been conducted. The former has been completed and an excellent and very readable magazine constructed from the 'headline' briefing reports has been published. NPRB staff will bring copies to the Council, SSC and AP later this week. The field work for the GOA IERP has been completed, and the PIs are meeting to develop plans for synthesis of that work.

North Pacific Fisheries Commission

In late August I attended the 7th Prep Con and first official meeting of the NPFC, as the Council's representative. More detailed information about the NPFC can be found in under NMFS B2 report; thanks to Glenn Merrill for putting that overview together. And the NPFC website is <http://nwpbfo.nomaki.jp/>. In short, the NPFC is an RFMO composed of Canada, Russia, Japan, S. Korea, China and Chinese Taipei. The US was instrumental in its development over a 10 year period during the Preparatory Conventions, and the Senate has provided advice and consent on the convention, however until implementing legislation is approved we only have observer status in the Commission.

The main points I want to highlight about the NPFC are the need for implementing legislation, the importance of high seas boarding and inspection and other procedures, and implications of NPFC management measures for US fisheries within our federal management area. Mr. Oliver reported on the status of the NPFC implementing legislation, and in my view approval of legislation that incorporates Council and stakeholder participation is important to our specific Council interests (in addition to broad US interests across the Convention Area) that could overlap with or be affected by the actions of the NPFC in the future.

The second point is that provisions in the NPFC for High Seas Boarding and Inspection Procedures, Transshipment Procedures, and Vessel Information Requirements are issues of particular interest for the US, to enforce and monitor fishing activities of all nations in the Convention Area. Given our long history of experience and recognition of the need for enforcement and monitoring in the Bering Sea, for example to prevent IUU fishing, the extension of these kinds of programs into the area of the North Pacific below the Aleutians is well justified.

The third point relates to NPFC development of Conservation and Management Measures for VMEs in the Convention Area. There will be a UNGA Bottom Fisheries Review in 2016 to evaluate CMMs developed by RFMOs around the world, that

address VMEs and sustainable management of high seas bottom fisheries. They include encounter protocols to protect VMEs against Significant Adverse Impacts. The NPFC will submit CMMs for evaluation, and stakeholders in our domestic US fisheries management programs have expressed interest in the past in the consistency between our US domestic policies and those that under development by the NPFC. My observation from attending two NPFC meetings is that there generally is consistency between them.

Management Strategy Advisory Board

Last week, the IPHC's MSAB met to reassess the task of the group and progress to date in the MSE for halibut. I've reported on the MSE process at previous Council meetings when relevant, noting the potential interaction of the MSE with the Council's management of directed and bycatch fisheries for halibut, and this update highlights issues for Council consideration.

The objective of the MSAB is to develop a formal process in which to evaluate the performance of alternative management procedures (we might say measures instead) for the Pacific halibut fishery.

One of the challenges of the IPHC's MSE process, and one that I don't believe the Commission has fully acknowledged or resolved, is that the Commission does not have authority over all aspects of halibut management, particularly management of our groundfish fisheries that take halibut as bycatch. The mission of the IPHC does not include balancing the objectives of all halibut users, raising questions about how this MSE process is conducted. While the MSAB has identified some overarching objectives and procedures related to conservation and fisheries sustainability that are within the IPHC's authority alone, the main interest of the group is to reduce bycatch in the groundfish fisheries. The MSAB heard an abbreviated version of Steve Martell's MPR presentation. So, what kinds of objectives the MSAB develops around bycatch reduction, and how they are related to or inform the Council's management of groundfish fisheries, need further consideration by the MSAB and the Commissioners. Related to this is the fact that the MSAB does not include any representatives from US groundfish fisheries that take halibut as bycatch. The MSAB has discussed this and generally there is recognition that bycatch users should be included in some of the MSAB discussions, but that there isn't a need to include them as members of the group.

I want to highlight a few specific MSAB objectives that should be of particular interest to the Council. To be fair to the MSAB, the group is acting under the direction of the Commissioners, and Commission staff participate in meetings. One of the five main candidate management procedures identified by the MSAB is to explore the concept of national shares. In essence, this would replace the apportionment process and instead a regulatory area would receive a fixed share of the exploitable biomass. It's not clear how a fixed share would relate to the harvestable biomass in a regulatory area, and what the implications might be under a treaty with Canada that would require the US to change its management programs to guarantee that share is available to Canada.

In light of the way the MSE process intersects with the Council's management of halibut, and the direction of the MSAB, I recommend the Council ask the IPHC to give a presentation of the MSE process and guidance to the MSAB at a future Council meeting.