

In 2008, the Council convened a workgroup to review and recommend potential approaches to expand general communication and project-specific communication to rural Alaskan and Alaskan Native communities. One of the recommendations from the workgroup that was adopted by the Council was creation of a standing Rural Outreach Committee to provide input to the Council on ways to improve outreach to rural Alaskan communities and Alaskan Native entities. It was specifically noted by the workgroup that the standing committee would not provide the Council with community input on particular actions or conduct outreach, rather it would provide the Council with recommendations on how to improve its overall outreach efforts, and recommend which actions may need a more targeted outreach effort in rural Alaska. The committee was convened in June 2009, and was tasked by the Council with three objectives:

1. To advise the Council on how to provide opportunities for better understanding and participation from Alaska Native and rural communities;
2. To provide feedback on community impacts sections of specific analyses, if requested; and
3. To provide recommendations regarding which proposed Council actions need a specific outreach plan and prioritize multiple actions, when necessary.

Additional recommendations from the workgroup included establishing a running calendar of regional meetings that would allow efficient communications with a broad cross-section of stakeholders, and review of other potential outreach strategies by the committee with recommendations from the committee provided to the Council.

The Rural Outreach Committee met four times between August 2009 and September 2011. In August 2009, the ROC reiterated the role of the Committee and the differences between Council outreach and NOAA's responsibility for tribal consultation. The ROC made a number of recommendations to the Council, including: development of a three-tier approach to outreach that includes statewide, regional, and project specific tools; redesigning the Council website with rural communities issues identified separately; development of a targeted outreach plan for the chum salmon bycatch action before the Council at the time; developing regional partnerships with key contacts in each Alaskan region; and development of a calendar of regional meetings.

In November 2009, updates were provided on the recommended actions from the ROC, but most of the meeting was devoted to developing an outreach plan for the chum salmon bycatch action before the Council. The ROC supported an approach that was modeled after an outreach plan for the previously completed Chinook bycatch issue. The outreach plan consisted of three elements: direct mailings, regional outreach meetings, and documentation and presentation of results to the Council. The ROC advised the Council that staff and Council members should attend the Department of Interior, FWS Regional Advisory Council meetings in the Seward Peninsula, Eastern Interior, Western Interior, Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, and Bristol Bay, and should also attend the Association of Village Council Presidents, Tanana Chiefs Conference, and Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association annual meetings. The ROC also recommended that the Council schedule a statewide teleconference to inform stakeholders of the options, and present information at booths at the Alaska Federation of Natives annual meeting and press releases to media at regional hub communities.

In February 2010, the ROC again received updates on the recommended actions from the ROC. The ROC also discussed the roles of the Council and NMFS in tribal consultation. The ROC recommended that NMFS provide a report to the Council regarding tribal consultations, and that NMFS' tribal consultations occur early in any process to inform Council decisionmaking. The ROC again reviewed the draft chum salmon bycatch outreach plan, with most of the discussion focused on the statewide teleconference that was recommended by the ROC. The ROC agreed that the purpose of the call was informational, to provide information such that the public understood the purpose of the action and the alternatives proposed. The ROC also discussed the concept of regional partnerships, and recommended that the Council identify key contacts in each region to help facilitate communication in those regions.

The last meeting of the ROC occurred in September 2011, to address a request from the Council that the ROC determine whether and what type of additional outreach was recommended on the chum salmon bycatch action. The ROC recommended a second statewide teleconference to inform the public of revised alternatives. That call took place in February 2012. The ROC also recommended that the outreach plan developed for the chum salmon action would serve as a good model for Chinook salmon bycatch and the Northern Bering Sea Research Plan actions that were scheduled at the Council. The ROC also reiterated their recommendation that the Council coordinate communication efforts for halibut and other issues with the Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Councils in order to reach a broad array of stakeholders in each region.

Although the ROC has not met formally since September 2011, several projects have now benefitted from the ROC recommendations for coordinated outreach. Recently, an outreach action plan was completed for the 2015 Chinook salmon bycatch action. Council members and staff traveled to four communities (Nome, Naknek, Bethel, and Fairbanks) to attend public and Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council meetings, and hosted a statewide teleconference to present information about the alternatives that were considered by the Council; all actions that were recommended by the ROC. The Federal Regional Advisory Council coordinators reported that attendance by the Council members and staff at their local meetings was well received by the RACs, and reports were submitted by all RACs for inclusion in the outreach report presented to the Council in April 2015. The FWS Council Coordination Division Chief at the Office of Subsistence Management has, at the request of all Regional Advisory Councils, requested that representatives of the NPFMC attend a meeting in March 2016 of all the Regional Advisory Councils about Chinook salmon bycatch in the BSAI and GOA and other Council issues that may be of interest to rural stakeholders.

The recommendations from the ROC are still applied as new projects are initiated by the Council. Communications strategies are refined to better meet the needs of the Council and rural stakeholders; as an example, Council staff will present updates on Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska salmon bycatch reduction programs at the joint Regional Advisory Council meeting in March 2016. Regular contact with the RAC coordinators at the USFWS facilitates local meetings when specific actions are likely to affect stakeholders from a specific region.