

DRAFT
Development of a Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan
Preliminary Discussions for the Ecosystem Committee
March 2015¹

4 FEP as a planning document

In September 2014, the Committee began to consider what format the FEP could take, and whether the goal should be a traditional FEP document, or more of a strategic planning process. The Committee was convinced by the PFMC mantra that an FEP should “inform but not overwhelm”, and so the goal should not be a huge compilation of material. The Committee began to explore a concept of the FEP as a strategic planning document, which forms the umbrella framework for initiating specific analyses or tasks that move forward as and when the Council has the staff resources available to prioritize them.

The SSC provided feedback on the development of the FEP in October 2014, and also supported approaching the FEP as developing a process for improving management and achieving identified goals, rather than as an encyclopedic report on all that is known about the Bering Sea. They noted that the FEP could provide a framework for strategic planning that would guide and prioritize research and modeling. The SSC agreed with the Ecosystem Committee that tactical actions would still be vetted through the existing Council process and incorporated into the FMPs.

So what would a strategic Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Planning document look like, and how would the process work? At a minimum, the FEP would need to set out the Council’s goals and objectives for the FEP, and how the framework process of the FEP works. But a helpful first step would be to define the Council’s operational definition of ecosystem-based fishery management. This would then be the benchmark against which to evaluate the Council’s current management, and evaluate where there are gaps, and opportunities for improvement.

A possible option could be for the strategic document to contain the following material:

- Scope of the FEP (geographical boundaries, fisheries and FMPs encompassed)
- Description of the FEP as a framework for providing transparent guideline of the Council’s management principles and direction of future work
- Council’s operational EBFM definition
- Goals for the ecosystem (healthy ecosystem, sustainable species levels, etc.)
- Goals (strategic objectives?) for management to achieve those ecosystem goals (vision for where we would like to be in future with respect to information we have, how we manage?)
- Tactical objectives for achieving management goals
- Priority list of research and task modules to achieve objectives

The document would then include a list of action modules that represent specific tasks. The development and outcome of the tasks would not be formally part of the FEP strategic document, but they would be described, and individually initiated, based on the Council’s priorities and available resources. The modules would also be a fluid part of the FEP, and could be changed as new information or issues dictate a change in direction. At a minimum, however, the framework of the FEP would require that for each module, the following components should be identified:

1. Synopsis of the task, including how it will be accomplished
2. Estimate of time and staff resources required to achieve it

¹ Prepared by Diana Evans, Council staff.

3. Purpose it will achieve (relationship to the FEP's tactical objectives)
4. How it will affect the Council's decisionmaking and management
5. How it will be effected in the Council process

If the Ecosystem Committee agrees with the concept of the FEP as a strategic planning document with action modules, as described above, the next steps will be to begin to flesh out what might be the Council's operational definition of EBFM, the FEP's goals and objectives, and possible priorities for action modules. While final decisions as to these components should wait until the Council has formally initiated the BS FEP as a Council project, it will help the Council to understand what is intended by the FEP if there is some draft language with respect to these components as part of the next Council discussion.

With respect to the Council's operational definition of EBFM, the Ecosystem Committee has already favored the NOAA Science's Advisory Board's 15 criteria as a starting point for defining operational EBFM. For ecosystem and management goals, the Council's recently adopted Ecosystem Vision Statement provides direction. Tactical objectives will likely be based on the Ecosystem Committee's assessment of the initial priorities for action modules for the EBFM framework. For example, it seems that a high priority for an action module would be an assessment of the Council's current management against the operational definition of EBFM adopted in the FEP strategic document. This assessment would serve both as an internal assessment of the Council's state of EBFM practice, and a gap analysis of areas where there may be opportunity for further action. Such a gap analysis would help to prioritize areas of future work for other action modules. Other action modules might focus on some of the other tasks that have been suggested in public comment, or by AFSC staff.

For example, one of the metrics of EBFM might be a comprehensive description of the Bering Sea ecosystem. An assessment might find that while the BSIERP project provides a comprehensive description of some aspects of ecosystem processes, the Council might benefit from having the material synthesized from a fishery management perspective, or that there is new information about subsistence practices that could be described and synthesized for use in Council management. One of the advantages of the strategic FEP/action module process is that it requires the Council to consider the utility of a project's outcome, its staffing requirements, and how it will be implemented, before it is initiated. By requiring the Council to specify at the outset how the workproduct will be used in Council decisionmaking, the Council ensures that there is a constant connection between the FEP and direct management action.

It is likely that some modules will be run concurrently, while others are more likely to be sequential, as they build on another's outcomes. By identifying the staffing resources required for completing each module, this will also help with staff tasking. Some modules will be largely synthetic exercises, pulling together information from disparate sources to create an evaluation for the Council (e.g., a compilation of information available about climate change impacts, to inform Council NEPA analyses). Others will require more specialist knowledge, and be projects of longer duration. For example, there has been suggestion of developing management strategy evaluations to address the impacts of climate change, with a view to identifying which species are most resilient or vulnerable. These exercises would require AFSC expertise. In fact, each action module will invoke a different cast of stakeholders and agency personnel. Different from the AI Ecosystem Team model, where a single FEP team wrote the entire AI FEP, it is envisioned that there would be a different cast of authors for the different FEP modules. This has the advantage of providing an opportunity for broader participation in the FEP process, and also presents opportunities to involve other stakeholders beside agency personnel in the development of FEP products.

Developing the proposal of individual modules would need to wait until the Council has initiated the BS FEP, but it would likely help the Council to understand the potential value added of an FEP if the

Ecosystem Committee could identify a plausible list of FEP modules that might be further elaborated as part of the FEP framework. The list of tasks from public comment represent a good starting point for the Ecosystem Committee's discussion of possible action modules to include in the BS FEP.

5 Next steps

The Council asked the Ecosystem Committee to come back to the Council with a fully fleshed proposal for a Bering Sea FEP. While the concepts discussed here represent some initial thinking about what a Bering Sea FEP might look like, and what kind of ideas it might represent, it needs to be further developed before it is ready to be presented to the Council as a proposal. Staff recommends that this preliminary discussion paper be expanded to reflect discussions at the March Ecosystem Committee meeting with respect to the purpose and format of a BS FEP. The expanded paper can be presented at a subsequent Committee meeting, at which the Committee may be in a position to recommend draft goals and objectives for the FEP, and preliminary possibilities for action modules to include in the FEP framework. These specifics will help the Council to envision what the FEP might offer the Council (which should also be articulated in the discussion paper).