



North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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Ecosystem Committee

REPORT

October 3, 2022, Hilton Hotel, Anchorage and via Zoom
<https://meetings.npfmc.org/Meeting/Details/2952>

Committee:

Bill Tweit (Chair)
Jim Ayers
Dave Benton
David Fluharty

Rose Fosdick
Gretchen Harrington
John Iani
Stephanie Madsen

Theresa Peterson
Jeremy Rusin
Diana Evans (staff)
Nicole Watson (staff)

Agency staff attending included: Kerim Aydin, Sara Cleaver, Bridget Ferriss, Kate Haapala, Kirstin Holsman, Seanbob Kelly, Megan Mackey, Alicia Miller, Clay McKean, Ivonne Ortiz, Jodi Pirtle, Sarah Rheinsmith, Elizabeth Siddon, Scott Smeltz (APU), Diana Stram, Molly Watson, Stephani Zador, Molly Zaleski

Public attending included: Brandon Ahmasuk, Qetun'aq Benjamin Charles, Ben Enticknap, John Gauvin, Mellisa Johnson, Mike Levine, Steve Marx, Paddy O'Donnell, Brenden Raymond-Yakoubian, Julie Raymond-Yakoubian, Becca Robbins-Gisclair, Rose Stanley, Jon Warrenchuk, Ernie Weiss, Kevin Whitworth, Megan Williams

The Chair opened the meeting with introductions and a discussion of the agenda, and acknowledgement of the cumulative impacts that western Alaska communities are currently experiencing, with the damage caused by Typhoon Merbok in western Alaska adding to the existing severe salmon shortages. Brandon Ahmasuk (Kawerak) provided public testimony on observations of tremendous, unprecedented ecosystem change in the region, ranging from massive amounts of krill washed up on the beach at Shishmaref following the storm, to starving marine mammals, seabird dieoffs, and lack of salmon. Committee members added comments about the importance of gathering observations up and down the coast to raise awareness of the magnitude of change and the effects of climate change on subsistence and commercial harvest.

Essential Fish Habitat

Sarah Rheinsmith, Jodi Pirtle, Molly Zaleski, and Scott Smeltz presented two components of the essential fish habitat (EFH) 5-year review report that is being prepared for Council review early in 2023. The team updated the Committee on changes to the EFH maps that the SSC reviewed in February, and focused on opportunities to identify research priorities for the next EFH review cycle. They also provided results from evaluating the effects of fishing on EFH for Council-managed species, which were analyzed by stock assessment authors and reviewed by the Crab and Groundfish Plan Teams. During the last 5-year review, the SSC identified a 10% threshold for considering whether increased disturbance to a species' core EFH area merited further investigation. The 2022 fishing effects evaluation found 16 species that exceeded this threshold, however only three of those species (shortspine thornyhead rockfish, shorttraker rockfish, and sablefish) were attributed to an increase in fishing effort in that area. The Crab Plan Team expressed concern about whether the fishing effects evaluation is at a scale relevant for crab species.

The Committee appreciated the distillation of information in the presentations as well as the comprehensive work evident in the reports, and asked clarifying questions. Committee members echoed concerns and observations from the January 2022 Ecosystem Committee [meeting](#) about the degree to which juvenile life history stages are represented in the fishing effects evaluation, the fishing effects model's assumption that long-lived corals only occur at depths greater than 300m (noting that potential damage to other corals in shallower areas is included), and that the 10% disturbance is not a conservation threshold; as well as new issues such as the need to update the cumulative effects analysis for EFH especially in light of climate change. There was one written public comment from Jon Warrenchuk (Oceana), and Ben Enticknap (Oceana) and Megan Williams (The Nature Conservancy) provided public testimony, both with interest in the Council developing additional conservation and management recommendations based on this new information, and highlighting similar concerns with the fishing effects evaluation as discussed by Committee members, as well as concern that the EFH review excludes non-FMP species such as halibut.

The Committee acknowledges that the advanced modeling used for mapping essential fish habitat for this 5-year review provides an excellent foundation, and with the fishing effects analysis, is ready to present to the Council in the EFH 5-year Review Summary Report. One member continued to express reservations about the fishing effects model based on previous Committee comments. The Summary Report will also include sections on the other EFH components, including conservation recommendations and research priorities. **The Committee recommends that in reviewing the Summary Report in February 2023, the Committee and the Council should actively discuss where next to focus habitat research and analysis, and consult Tribes and stakeholders as part of those discussions.** At a minimum, the Council should consider the holistic questions of cumulative impacts and the effects of climate change, and ways to improve the fishing effects model.

Climate Resilience Synthesis Report

Diana Stram and Kirstin Holsman, co-Chairs of the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan Climate Change Taskforce, provided an overview of the Taskforce's recent work product, a draft Climate Resilience Synthesis Report of fishery management in the Bering Sea. The report is divided into three sections, and provides a climate readiness ranking for the management system, SAFE reports and harvest specifications materials, and the integration of different knowledge bases (indigenous community, industry, agency, other) within management. The co-Chairs also presented a draft workplan for the next year, which includes finalizing the report, developing case studies, funding a dedicated person to advance Taskforce work between biannual meetings, and scenario-planning workshops with public involvement. The Committee asked many clarifying questions about how the Taskforce approached each section, and how the report could lead to future Council action. Members specifically touched on questions of regional and global food security, opportunities to incentivize reductions in the carbon footprint of the fisheries, and how to include community and subsistence impacts as part of the discussion regarding flexibility to trade among groups.

Julie Raymond-Yakoubian (Kawerak), Steve Marx (Pew Charitable Trusts), and Mike Levine (The Ocean Conservancy) provided public comment, supporting the work of the Taskforce and its continued role in developing content rather than just reviewing staff work, as well as an opportunity for further engaging Tribes and stakeholders. Steve also advanced ideas for how to develop the climate-ready toolbox, especially linking to products being developed through ACLIM.

The Committee appreciates the report as a baseline for assessing where we are now, and is eager for work to begin to implement the near-term recommendations identified in each section.

Regarding the workplan, Committee members had mixed feelings on the utility of funding a post-doc or contractor to work on Taskforce work. While the value of someone with dedicated attention to the project was acknowledged, the Committee has a strong interest in continuing to have the work generated directly by the Taskforce that includes both staff as well as external members with a diversity of expertise. **The Committee recommends that the Taskforce continue to lead the Council's consideration of**

adjustments to increase climate resiliency, and supports the Taskforce developing a diverse climate adaptability and resiliency toolbox. 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 so as to allow for extensive dialogue which has a direct connection to the work of the Council. Members agreed the proposed climate adaptation workshops could substitute for the Council-hosted ecosystem workshop that was under development by a subgroup of the Ecosystem Committee and then derailed during the pandemic. In making this recommendation, the Committee noted that the Ecosystem Committee's plans were intended to have a primary focus of integrating western and traditional knowledge, which would be different from the climate adaptation scenario-planning workshops of the Taskforce, but that there are other forums to still prioritize knowledge integration in the Council process.

Programmatic Groundfish SEIS Reconsideration

The Committee discussed its March 2022 recommendation, for the Council to commit now to begin an update of the PSEIS, and the Council's response to proceed by first developing a Supplemental Information Report (SIR) that compiles and evaluates new information relevant to the conclusions in the PSEIS. Members cited the unprecedented and increasing rate of change in the North Pacific environment, the severity of which was not recognized even in 2015 when the last SIR on the PSEIS was prepared, as the catalyst for revisiting that analysis now. Diana Evans updated the Committee on staff plans to begin compiling information for a SIR in the coming months, and noted that it might be synergistic with the timing of other Council initiatives to provide a report back to the Council in June 2023.

Diana Stram provided a briefing on the key findings of the August 2022 national SSC workshop (SCS 7), "Adapting fisheries management to a changing ecosystem," calling for Councils to begin preparing for increasingly complex management decisions due to climate change. The Committee also received an announcement about the upcoming SSC workshop in February 2023 and its intent to identify management questions relevant to rapid environmental change. The Committee suggested these initiatives and the work of the Climate Change Taskforce should be incorporated in development of a revised PSEIS.

The Committee discussion was wide-ranging. Some members highlighted the advantage of a NEPA process to ensure an opportunity for meaningful public engagement beyond simply testifying to the Council. Others were considering the use of the Climate Change Taskforce to assist with PSEIS development and scoping, because the Taskforce includes members from diverse perspectives that are already tasked with considering tools for climate adaptability. The results of the scenario-planning workshops should contribute to PSEIS scoping. Concern was raised about overloading the Taskforce, and also the different scope of Taskforce's current Bering Sea-centric work compared to developing programmatic BSAI and GOA groundfish policy alternatives, while noting the Taskforce products would definitely inform the PSEIS. There was a lack of clarity among members as to scoping, and the general use of the term as opportunities for public engagement versus the specific process defined under NEPA. Similarly, some members objected to proceeding first with a SIR because it may imply a process whereby the agency determines a binary finding on the adequacy of the PSEIS without sufficient public input. At the same time, some components of the preparation for a SIR are useful, such as revisiting what were the PSEIS alternatives, and what type of new information is available to set the stage for public engagement on new alternatives. All Committee members preferred a different approach for a revised PSEIS than the encyclopedic tomes of the 2004 document.

Five persons provided public comment on this issue, all in alignment with the Ecosystem Committee's March recommendation to reopen in the PSEIS. Steve Marx (Pew Charitable Trusts) highlighted that the rationale from 2015 for not needing a new PSEIS would no longer apply in current conditions, and pointed to alternative management scenarios from the ACLIM project to include in a revised PSEIS. Kevin Whitworth (Kuskokwim River Inter Tribal Fish Commission) spoke to the effects of salmon closures affecting his region, and the need to involve Tribes in Federal management. Jon Warrenchuk

(Oceana) cited the PSEIS as an opportunity to evaluate issues holistically rather than piecemeal, and Mike Levine (The Ocean Conservancy) expressed concern that development of a SIR does not include a role for the public. Brenden Raymond-Yakoubian (Kawerak) testified for high public engagement in a PSEIS process, including opportunities for using traditional knowledge.

The Committee recommends that the Council start now with requesting a discussion paper that provides the basis for informal scoping for revising the PSEIS, to better address the impacts of climate change with respect to groundfish fisheries. The process must include robust tribal and stakeholder engagement. The Committee agreed on the urgency of climate change discussions with respect to the management framework, the importance of holding those discussions in public, and of inviting persons with diverse perspectives and ideas into the dialogue. Members of the Committee differed on the sequencing of events, how much preparatory work staff should do in-house to set the stage for public discussion, and the interpretation of elements of the NEPA scoping process. The majority of the Committee recommends that staff map out the timeline of how ongoing initiatives such as upcoming SSC and Taskforce workshops in early 2023 can be framed to contribute public dialogue relevant to the PSEIS, as well as identifying other possible public avenues for developing new ideas, such as through a Council agenda item. At the same time, staff should continue compiling information on the history of the 2004 PSEIS, new information relevant to impacts and uncertainties of the groundfish fisheries under climate change, and opportunities to leverage existing work to benefit PSEIS alternatives development. This effort might better be termed a discussion paper rather than development of a SIR.

Scheduling

The Committee did not have time to address one issue on its agenda: a discussion on developing a scoping process for a potential GOA Fishery Ecosystem Plan. This agenda item will be taken up at a future meeting.

The Committee anticipates its next meeting will be in early 2023, potentially in advance of the February Council meeting.