



Ecosystem Committee REPORT

20 April, 2021 9 AM – 12 PM via AdobeConnect

The Ecosystem Committee met on 20 April 2021 to plan agenda items for the next year. The agenda is available online at <http://meetings.npfmc.org/Meeting/Details/2004>.

Committee Members in attendance, all via AdobeConnect or via phone:

Bill Tweit (Chair)
David Fluharty
Gretchen Harrington
Jeremy Rusin

Jim Ayers
John Iani
Rose Fosdick
Stephanie Madsen

Theresa Peterson
David Benton
Steve MacLean (NPFMC)

Others in attendance:

Jon Warrenchuk
Julie Raymond Yakoubian
Maria Davis (NPFMC)
Megan Mackey
Megan Williams

Mike LeVine
Paul Wilkins
Shannon Gleason (NPFMC)
Kelly Cates
Raychelle Daniel

David Witherell (NPFMC)
Diana Evans (NPFMC)
Anne Marie Eich
Mellisa Johnson

Other members of the public may have been in attendance online.

State of the Ecosystem Workshop

The committee reviewed a draft [proposal](#) for a second State of the Ecosystem Workshop that is tentatively planned for April 2022. The workshop is intended to be the second in the ecosystem workshop series that was initiated in February 2018 in Seattle, WA. The first workshop focused on the state of western scientific climate change modeling and understanding. This second workshop is intended to focus on the varying perspectives of ecosystem changes and how those changes affect fishery dependent communities, subsistence activities and resources, and other parts of the marine ecosystems. The draft theme of the workshop, as proposed by the steering group, is “Sharing Perspectives of a Changing Ocean Climate”, and is intended to invite discussion from multiple perspectives, including traditional and local knowledge, western science, and other perspectives on the climate-related changes occurring in the Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, and Arctic Ocean.

Committee members encouraged the working group to add additional members from rural Alaska as quickly as possible and again encouraged addition of the former (and now reconstituted) Community Engagement Committee members. The committee supported one committee member’s hopes that the workshop would develop pathways for rural and Alaska Native community members to participate and feel welcomed in the Council process.

Essential Fish Habitat

The committee reviewed the Council’s [motion](#) regarding the EFH 5-year review. The motion endorses the SSC suggestions for more review of the Species Distribution Models (SDMs) and their performance, and

the Fishing Effects (FE) model before the Council reviews the summary report, currently scheduled for June 2022. Ms. Gretchen Harrington (NMFS AKR ARA Habitat Conservation Division) informed the committee that they are preparing for the Plan Team review of the SDMs in September 2020, and SSC review in October 2021, then the Fishing Effects (FE) review by the Plan Teams and SSC in February or April 2022. The committee has consistently requested regular updates on the EFH 5-year review process and encourages updates to the committee when presenting to other Council bodies.

Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures

The committee reviewed the Council's [motion](#) regarding the Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures related to Executive Order (EO) 14008 section 216(c). The motion requests that the Ecosystem Committee work with Council and Agency staff to confirm criteria, based on the latest FAO guidance, for the identification and recording of Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) in North Pacific Federal waters, and requests that the committee assess which conservation areas in Council waters qualify for OECM status, and identify additional actions that could be considered to qualify other areas.

One committee member informed the committee that there is a group at the University of Washington (UW) that is working with the FAO on this guidance. The waters of the North Pacific have been identified as a potential case study for how areas not formally identified as conservation areas according to the FAO guidelines might be considered because of fishing and other activity restrictions and biodiversity conservation measures imposed by the Council or other processes. Other committee members encouraged Council staff to coordinate their report with the UW project to avoid duplication of effort. The committee chair stressed that the immediate need was to confirm the criteria that define OECMs, and then to take inventory of the Council's management areas and comparing them against those criteria. After that step has been done, the committee and council may consider the next step to identify potential actions the Council could take.

Committee members suggested that it would be important for Council and Agency staff to consider the durability and permanence of designations as they compare them against FAO guidelines. Some committee members urged staff to compare current closures against the OECM guidelines and identify existing closures that may qualify as OECMs. The committee also encouraged staff to carefully consider designations like EFH that may include fishing restrictions, but have limited regulatory effect with other agencies and other activities that might adversely affect EFH or the ecosystems supporting important fishery and marine resources.

The committee member is aware of projects that are useful references for identifying and developing conservation measures for protected areas. Those projects include the effort that some NGOs and Alaska Native Organizations undertook in 2010 to identify an atlas of important ecological and subsistence areas using Federal, state, and academic scientific and traditional knowledge, and recent completion of an atlas of resources and vulnerabilities of the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas, and a similar atlas for the Pribilof Islands. The committee member provided links to the documents and suggested that those areas should be considered for protection in the 30 by 30 process, in parallel with the comparison of OECMs and the Council's existing closures. The committee member also stressed the importance of including indigenous people from the beginning of any Council endorsed process to develop policy positions or identify and protect important areas.

Other committee members recognized the importance of the suggestion to consider important ecological and subsistence areas in future discussions but reiterated that the most important consideration now is to compare the Council's current closure inventory against the OECM guidelines and identify those that qualify. An example was made of the Aleutian Islands closure: the closure has been in place for at least 20 years, there are no plans to withdraw it, but because the closure was designated by administrative rulemaking it is not eligible to be considered as an OECM. The question is whether the AI closure promotes the effective conservation of biodiversity. The Council must make that determination

responsibly and scientifically. The committee concluded that the initial report to the Council will contain the comparison of the Council's current closure inventory against the OECCM guidelines including the permanence and scope of Council actions, but will also include initial scoping of additional actions that the Council could consider, and also call the Council's attention to other resources and opportunities to partner with NGOs and Alaska Native Organizations to identify other intents and priorities for the 30 by 30 process.

Public Comment

Carbon in marine sediments

The committee heard public testimony from Jon Warrenchuk (Oceana) about the release of carbon from sediment disturbance due to trawling.

Committee members questioned whether the release of carbon from trawling was similar to the release from farming or construction activities on land. Another committee member questioned whether the storm and ice activities on the Bering Sea shelf that are known to disturb bottom sediments more than trawling have already affected the bottom sediments such that fishing effects would be undetectable. Much of the carbon that is disturbed by fishing activities is not dissolved, but resettles as the sediment resettles. Committee members also noted that there are other projects and papers that come to different conclusions than this paper and there is no consensus on the effects of sediment disturbance on carbon release. The majority of the committee members agreed that the evaluation is far more complex than can be accomplished during the EFH review and suggested that the Council's SSC and AFSC scientists should be consulted before considering any Council action.

Northern Fur Seal Co-Management

The Council received comment from Dr. Lauren Devine (Aleut Community of St. Paul Island) that the Tribal governments on St. Paul and St. George Island are prepared to provide a summary of co-management activities to the committee at its earliest convenience. The committee thanked Dr. Devine.

OECCMs

Mike Levine (Ocean Conservancy) speaking on behalf of Dr. Devine stated that as the Council and ecosystem committee consider OECCMs and other opportunities for area based management they should ensure that input from tribes and communities is included.

Ecosystem Committee Agenda Planning

The committee considered the agenda topics for the coming year, and the timeline for addressing them. The committee recommended that Council staff discuss with co-managers the most convenient time for them to present to the committee. The committee also identified climate change impacts in the GOA, coastwide issues (forage fish), and marine debris as issues for the committee to consider. The committee was unsure of potential actions regarding marine debris but encouraged further investigation through other organizations like Kawerak that are paying attention to marine debris in the northern Bering Sea. The committee requested that Council staff and the committee chair work together to identify an appropriate schedule for the committee to address the priority agenda items, and acknowledged that it may be necessary for the ecosystem committee to meet concurrently with every Council meeting to address the agenda items.