



Planning for October 2021 Council/SSC/AP Meetings

STAFF DISCUSSION POINTS for Council review, June 2021

As reported in April 2021, Council staff has been planning for the resumption of in-person meetings, beginning at the earliest with the Council/SSC/AP meetings in October 2021. The experience of moving to the online platform has offered new opportunities, such as remote testimony, that the Council is interested to continue if possible. We are also cautious that there continues to be uncertainty about what the status of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination rates, and local/State/Federal guidelines will be in October. We are trying to find the right balance among effective meetings, safety for staff and participants, and broad public access.

Another important factor in our planning is the ability of NMFS and other Federal and potentially State staff to travel. The Federal government is proceeding cautiously about changing its procedures for approving travel, and it is unlikely that those restrictions will be relaxed in time for a seamless approval process for the Federal staff who usually attend our meetings, although it seems likely that at minimum, a few key participants would be able to get approval.

This discussion provides the current assumptions under which we are planning for the October meeting; some options to discuss about which meetings occur in-person; and a section that identifies how an October in-person meeting is likely to be different than previous in-person Council meetings (updated from April).

Planning assumptions

We are moving ahead with the following assumptions, based on input at the April Council meeting:

- **Members all in-person or all remote:** For Council/AP/SSC meetings, we are not planning to accommodate members participating remotely. We recognize that if the meeting mode is in-person, some members may not be able to participate because, for whatever reason, they are unable to travel to and attend the meeting. This has always been the case for Council/ AP/SSC meetings, however in recognition that there are presently heightened concerns for some about travel and in-person meetings at this time, we would intend to canvass members before the meeting to confirm that enough members are willing to attend in-person. Otherwise we will hold the meeting virtually.
- **Broadcast all in-person Council/AP/SSC meetings:** We intend to broadcast audio, and ideally audio and powerpoints, for all in-person AP and SSC meetings in the immediate future, as well as for the Council as we have done for many years. We will not be capturing or broadcasting video of the members sitting together in the in-person meeting room.
- **Accommodate remote testimony at Council:** We are looking to have a remote testimony option for an in-person Council meeting, and if possible, also for future in-person AP/SSC meetings. Broadcasting the remote testimony into the room we can do, but we have not yet been able to identify a high-quality audio solution for the back and forth of questions from members to the testifier. We are still working on options.
- **Encourage presenters to attend in-person but accommodate remote presentations:** We believe that in-person meetings will run most effectively if presenters are also in the room, to best

facilitate dialogue between members and the presenter on the agenda item, especially given the audio concerns regarding back and forth interactions identified immediately above.

- **Minimize overlapping meetings:** At least for October, we are working to minimize the number of simultaneous meetings or events occurring in-person. We are recommending against holding all three meetings in-person (Council/AP/SSC); see more below. We are not planning any Council-sponsored evening events or committee meetings; committee meetings will be virtual and likely scheduled to occur before the start of the meeting, in September.
- **Social distancing and capacity considerations:** We are looking to rent more hotel meeting space to allow for distancing, and potentially set up audience overflow space at the hotel. See more discussion below about what to expect.

Staff recommendations for October

The safest, most precautionary option would be to continue to hold the October meeting virtually. We have developed a successful online model for running these meetings that allows public and member access, and continues to meet the Council's decision-making needs. That being said, we recognize the benefits provided by in-person meetings (better communication, improved trust, relationship building, etc.) and note that many people have expressed interest in getting back to in-person meetings as soon as possible.

1. **The staff recommends against holding all three meetings (Council/AP/SSC) in-person in October.** There are several relevant factors that in combination lead us to that recommendation. First, we are adding considerably to technical/administrative tasks for running in-person meetings by adding remote testimony and more broadcasting options. Three simultaneous meetings will stretch us thin on our opportunity to troubleshoot and innovate on the fly while still staffing the meetings as before. We could mitigate this by scheduling the Council to start after the SSC concludes, but that also trades off with an extended travel footprint for in-person participants and staff. Finally, holding all three meetings in-person will likely draw a larger attendance, and also strain our ability to implement distancing and capacity protocols at the meeting.
2. **Our preference is to hold the Council in-person and the AP and SSC virtually.** This would result in a somewhat similar schedule to our recent virtual meetings – the AP and SSC meeting during the first week of October, October 4-8, and the Council beginning the following week on Monday, October 11th (likely scheduled through Saturday the 16th if issues run long). This provides clarity for staff and participants – all meetings the first week are virtual, all meetings the second week are in person or broadcast online. By starting with only one in-person meeting, it provides the best opportunity to pilot and test new changes such as remote testimony and potentially presentations, it reduces capacity for the number of persons needing to attend the meeting, and mitigates many of the potential travel approval issues for NMFS staff, especially those who present only to the SSC on harvest specifications. It provides a more gradual transition to in-person meetings for staff and participants with concerns about travel and attending large meetings. This schedule also accommodates the extra time needed for any advisory group meeting virtually to finalize their minutes for the Council.

Alternatively, we could consider holding both AP and Council meetings in-person, and keeping the SSC virtual for this meeting. (If so, and if we continue similar limitations in December, we might have the SSC meet in-person in December and the AP be virtual). Under this scenario, we would schedule the SSC October 4-8; the AP Thurs-Mon, October 7-11; and the Council Sat-Thurs, October 9-14. (Note that Monday October 11th is a Federal holiday).

How will an October in-person meeting be different than previous in-person?

Prevailing COVID-19 conditions have changed since we last reported in April 2020. The State of Alaska and the Municipality of Anchorage have both lifted all their required pandemic restrictions, although recommendations still exist. The CDC has also issued guidance distinguishing behaviors for vaccinated and non-vaccinated persons. We will continue to ground our decisions in prevailing Federal, State, and municipal recommendations and guidelines, Federal and State travel and meeting guidance, and the needs of the Council.

Pre-surveys of attendance: If we require in-person attendance for members, we will likely need to survey members (and possibly presenters) before a final decision about in-person is made, to see who is planning to travel to attend, and whether there are sufficient members to hold the meeting in person. We may also need to implement a registration protocol so that we can assess what our hotel space needs are likely to be. We would likely begin gathering this input after the June Council meeting concludes.

Broadcasting the meeting: We anticipate that once in-person meetings resume, we will no longer use webcams to show people in the room. Rather, we will effectively go back to broadcasting an audio-only version of the meeting, or if we can make the technology and staffing work, potentially audio and real-time view of the presentation slides. (Note that we will continue to post all presentations, supplemental materials, and motions on the eAgenda in real-time – that would not change.)

Scheduling: We are assuming that the Council will want to keep the total in-person meeting “footprint” to no longer than we had previously (~9 days, Monday-Tuesday), or at least as limited as possible. To reduce the number of people mingling in hallways and bathrooms, we may choose to run some meetings in person and others virtually. If using a combination, we may need to set up separate screening/presentation rooms at the Hilton if virtual meetings are occurring simultaneously with in-person ones. We may continue to hold Committee meetings in advance of the Council, rather than in conjunction with it. We also need to account for extra time for the SSC or AP to prepare their report from a virtual meeting (when members are less able to work evenings/weekends because of home life obligations), and that report may continue to be given at a single time, rather than issue by issue.

New audio equipment for Council: As previously anticipated to occur in 2021, Ken Bettisworth will have concluded his audio services with us once we go back to in-person meetings. We have purchased our own equipment that will be fully compatible with future broadcasting and online technical specifications, and our administrative staff will now be running audio and audio broadcasting. Council members should expect a system similar to that used in the AP and SSC, with push-to-talk microphones.

COVID-specific protocols

Vaccination status: We do not feasibly have a way to require people to show proof of vaccination in order to attend or participate in our meetings, however we can encourage people to only attend in person if they have been vaccinated.

Mask requirements: We would follow CDC guidelines that recommend all attendees wear masks that cover their nose and mouth unless they are fully vaccinated. We have no way to verify acquiescence.

Social distancing: We anticipate that we will increase the level of distancing between members at the table and among audience chairs. We may consider capacity limits on rooms, and plan for adjacent overflow rooms to which the meeting is broadcast. We are looking into renting more meeting space at the Anchorage Hilton. We may also dispense with the staff table and reference or handout tables, to minimize people congregating around tables in the hallway, and instead encourage use of online reference materials and phone calls or emails to staff for assistance.

Water/coffee/food: Food and beverage services in the meeting rooms may be limited for members as well as the public. If we are not able to cater lunches for Council members, we may need longer lunch breaks.