North Pacific Fishery Management Council

Simon Kinneen, Chair | David Witherell, Executive Director
605 W. 4th Avenue, Suite 306, Anchorage, AK 99501
Phone 907-271-2809 | www.npfmc.org

# Ecosystem Committee

REPORT

1 April, 2019 Hilton Hotel Anchorage, AK

Committee Members in attendance:

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| Bill Tweit (Co-chair) | Jeremy Rusin | Dave Benton (ph) |
| Theresa Peterson (Co-chair) | Gretchen Harrington | |
| Rose Fosdick | John Iani | |
| Jim Ayers | Stephani Madsen | |

Members absent: Dave Fluharty

Others in attendance:

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| Sarah Close (ph) | Brenden Raymond-Yakoubian | Jeff Napp |
| Steve Marx (ph) | Ernie Weiss | Amy Kirkham |
| Karl Haflinger (ph) | Lauren Divine | Patrick Pletnikoff |
| Doug Limpensel (ph) | Richard Slats | Megan Peterson |
| Ivonne Ortiz (ph) | Julie Raymond-Yakoubian | Anne Marie Eich |
| Jodi Pirtl (ph) | Fred Phillip | George Pletnikoff |
| Kerim Aydin (ph) | Roy Ashelfelter | Bridgert Mansfield |
| N Laman (ph) | John Gauvin | Becca Robbins Gisclair |
| Keith Bruton | Jon Warrenchuk | Mike LeVine |

## Ocean Acidification Network Update

Dr. Robert Foy presented an update from the Ocean Acidification Network. After the presentation, the committee thanked Dr. Foy for the presentation and posed questions about funding levels for ocean acidification monitoring and research. Dr. Foy indicated that funding is a restriction to monitoring and research for the Arctic and most of the subarctic. There are few moorings available, and only periodic surveys in the area. Due to time constraints, the Committee was unable to formulate any recommendations to the Council regarding Dr. Foy's presentation, and hopes to be able to discuss this further at an upcoming meeting.

### Northern Fur Seals

Marine Mammal Laboratory update

Dr. Jeremy Sterling presented an update on northern fur seal research and monitoring at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, Marine Mammal Laboratory (MML). The update included information on the population status of northern fur seals in Alaska, recent data from northern fur seal foraging studies using Saildrones, and an update on a Lenfest Ocean Program project to incorporate northern fur seal data in ecosystem models.

Dr. Sterling was asked about the nexus of the northern fur seal population information, the adult females in the current Saildrone feeding study, and fishery data, and whether the MML is coordinating work with the captive fur seals at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Sterling stated that the focus of the current feeding study is on adult females, but there are many other studies that have and are investigating other

age classes. Because of previous field efforts there are many tags out and they are starting to get return data from those tagged seals. The demography work at the MML is focused on identifying which age classes, and where in time and space fur seals may be seeing survivorship challenges. Dr. Sterling noted that northern fur seals are present in the Bering Sea from May through November and that there is some winter work occurring, specifically investigations into the pup migration. The Lenfest project described is addressed at modelling how much food northern fur seals need, not specifically pollock. Other species are consumed in different areas, the Lenfest project may help to understand how important those differences may be in driving northern fur seal dynamics.

Dr. Sterling was also asked about the ability to detect differences in pup growth rates at different rookeries. Dr. Sterling responded that there are two sorts of studies related to pup growth, weight and growth rates. Weights at different sites are "easy" to collect because they involve single captures. Pup weights are collected every two years at different sites. Growth rates are more difficult because they require repeat captures of multiple individuals over the summer.

Dr. Sterling was asked whether pups at some sites are in better condition than others. Dr. Sterling responded that there is some evidence to suggest differential growth rates between St. Paul, St. George, and Bogoslof, related to the length of female foraging trips and the number of times pups are fed during the summer. Dr. Sterling noted that preliminary data suggest that pups less than 7 kg when weaned show low survivorship, but he also noted that there are different responses at different sites.

Dr. Sterling was asked whether the northern fur seal studies are primarily in the Pribilof bioregion as identified in the Bering Sea Project. He responded that the project extends further than that.

Dr. Sterling was asked about the participation of local residents and inclusion of traditional knowledge in the MML studies. The program within the MML is intimately involved with the Pribilof communities and regularly seeks their help, and the Alaska Regional Office works closely with the communities and implements NMFS' co-management program.

Dr. Sterling anticipates that in the next year the MML will have additional information to present to the committee; the first publications from the Lenfest project will soon be submitted and they anticipate having several publications to present next year. Dr. Sterling agreed that the February meeting in Seattle is an opportune time for the MML scientists to present to the committee.

### Aleut Community of St. Paul Island co-management

Dr. Lauren Divine, director of the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island's Ecosystem Conservation Office (ECO), presented information about northern fur seal co-management research and activities on St. Paul. ECO's activities as co-managers include: monitoring and managing subsistence harvests, developing and implementing harvest sampling programs, assessing and monitoring pollutants in northern fur seals, improving understanding of the sources, fates, and effects of marine debris, and conducting studies to quantify the effects of human activities at or near breeding or resting areas. Opportunities for co-management that ECO has identified include: undertaking conservation or management measures to eliminate or minimize deleterious impacts to fur seals, promoting joint research and collaborative programs, estimating pup survival, and estimating stock vital rates. Dr. Divine stated that the tribal governments on the Pribilofs possess unique and comprehensive body of indigenous and traditional knowledge, they are conducting long-term western scientific data collection and holistic local research and management that is sensitive to the communities, and are positioned to be a valuable partner to NMFS moving forward.

Dr. Divine was asked whether plastics had been found in harvested northern fur seals. Dr. Divine noted that plastics had been found in harvested seals, and also in seabird tissues and eggs. When asked about pup survival, Dr. Divine stated that the tribe is concerned with length-at-age data since they are targeting subadult male seals. Dr. Divine also stated, when asked about the Lenfest project, that she believes the Lenfest project will provide valuable data. Dr. Divine noted that the tribe initially submitted a proposal

with the Lenfest PIs that would have included ECO in the partnership, but the initial proposal was not funded and was left out of the project ultimately funded by Lenfest. However, ECO continues to work with the Lenfest PIs to share information with the community.

Dr. Divine was asked about when ECO would like to present again to the ecosystem committee. She stated that any time that the committee hears from MML about northern fur seals, ECO would appreciate the ecosystem committee structure the presentation as a joint presentation. Dr. Divine noted that ECO collects data year-round and have noted increases in the number of seals present on the island over winter, and earlier in the spring.

Dr. Divine was asked about whether ECO had noted any correlations between northern fur seal prey and the northern fur seal population during warm and cold years. Dr. Divine stated that ECO has not been involved in those analyses, but are doing some studies of multi-year indicators for Steller sea lions on the island. These studies are subsistence-centric, and don't have to do with the health of the sea lion stock.

St. George perspective

Mr. Patrick Pletnikoff, mayor of the City of St. George Island, provided perspectives from St. George. He stated that the relationship between the Aleuts on St. George and the U.S. Federal government has been "tenuous at best", and exclusively one-sided. He noted that the Council's ecosystem committee is a good body for their community to present their community perspectives because they are not limited to a 3 or 6 minute presentation. When asked about early returns of northern fur seals on St. George Island, Mayor Pletnikoff noted that they have had 50-60 northern fur seals ashore in early February, which is a few months earlier than normal. Mayor Pletnikoff also noted that kittiwakes are on the island earlier than normal.

Public Comment

The committee received public comment from Roy Ashelfelter and Jon Warrenchuk.

Committee Recommendations

Members agreed that it is important to receive annual updates on NFS studies being conducted by NMFS and ECO; and suggest that the February time frame seemed appropriate to hear from both.

## 3-Year committee planning

Prior to the meeting, the committee co-chairs queried committee members during the time between meetings about issues that they felt the committee should be considering for the next 3-years, and the timing of future committee meetings.

In general, the committee feels that 2-3 meetings in coordination with Council meetings is a reasonable meeting schedule. Committee members noted that meeting agendas should be robust, respectful of time and expense for members and the public to attend, and reflect requests from the Council for committee input. If issues are assigned to the committee outside of a "normal" 2-3 meeting cycle, the committee should be prepared to address them outside of that schedule.

General topics for the committee to consider include:

- Climate effects across regions
- Arctic issues
- Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan
- Potential development of Gulf of Alaska Fishery Ecosystem Plan
- Potential updates to the Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Plan
- Top level predators
- NOAA science

- Groundfish workplan
- Russian/Canadian boundary and EEZ
- Habitat perspectives
- Pollutants

The committee agreed to provide these topics to the Council, without prioritization at this time, and recommend to the Council that the committee be directed to consider these further at the next meeting and shape them into a proposed work plan.

## Habitat Issues

Ms. Samantha Simpson and Mr. Matt Eagleton presented the plans from the NMFS Alaska Region Habitat Conservation Division (HCD) for the next review of Essential Fish Habitat in Alaska. The proposed plan identifies a number of projects that NMFS intends to undertake to provide advice about whether updates are recommended for any of the 10 EFH components in the Council's FMPs. HCD anticipates that they will be able to provide a report with their recommendations to the Council, including to the ecosystem committee, after April 2020. Ms. Simpson and Mr. Eagleton were asked to provide additional updates to the ecosystem committee as information becomes available.

Committee questions and discussion were limited. However, committee members provided some suggestions to HCD staff on the outline, and noted that they appreciated the extensive coordination with the EC and Council that is envisioned in the timeline, and appreciated that HCD staff stated they plan to return to the committee and provide additional opportunities for the committee to review the proposed plan and progress.

## Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan

Ms. Diana Evans (NPFMC Deputy Director and co-chair of the FEP Team) presented a summary of work on the Bering Sea FEP and plans for the upcoming FEP Team meeting on May 6-7. The intention of that meeting is to spend time considering the Action Modules that were approved by the Council (Local Knowledge & Traditional Knowledge, Climate change). The FEP Team is preparing a workplan for those action modules and will present those to the Council in June. The FEP Team will also continue to work on implementation of the Core FEP including matching the FEP objectives with indicators tracked in the annual Bering Sea Ecosystem Status Report, and developing the synthesis of the Bering Sea physical and biological characteristics using a bioregional approach.

Ms. Evans was asked about the process to create each Action Module Task Force. She explained that the FEP Team is developing the Action Module workplans, then based on approval of those workplans the Council will call for nominations after June. The ecosystem committee will have opportunity to provide recommendations to the Council on the types of expertise that they feel should be included on the Task Forces. The Council chair will appoint members of the Task Forces, as is normal for Council committees.

## Agenda items not addressed

Because of time constraints, the following items on the committee's agenda were not addressed:

- Deep-sea coral research program pre-planning
- CCC habitat workgroup proposed workshop
- Marine mammal conservation status reports

The Committee concluded that a June meeting might be useful, in order to receive a report from the FEP team meeting in May, continue their development of a multi-year work plan based on feedback from the Council at this meeting, and consider the above three items.