



# Discussion of December 2025 Council meeting

June 2025; excerpted from Council's E Staff Tasking Action Memo

## December 2025 Council meeting is overscheduled

Staff have identified two main problems with our ability to achieve the December Council meeting as currently anticipated on the 3-meeting outlook, one affecting the Council, and one affecting the SSC. The meeting is currently scheduled to occur from December 1-9, in Anchorage at the Egan Center. We are unlikely to be able to extend our meeting dates because it is a time when the venue gets a lot of bookings for holiday parties.

**The discussion below focuses specifically on constraints relating to time management in December; please note that these are not the only issues that the Chair and Executive Director will take into consideration with respect to decisions about when to schedule agenda items for the Council,** either now or at a later date. Especially at present, there are many other substantive factors (e.g., uncertainty about agency staff capacity, Council funding, national NMFS directives or work related to compliance with Executive Orders) that may continue to have an effect on scheduling. We are raising this issue at this meeting in order to get Council and public input, and to continue to provide as much advance notice as possible about upcoming agenda timings, however it is important to recognize that we often need to adjust to new circumstances as they arise.

### **1. Not enough time to address all issues on the Council's agenda**

Because we scheduled final action for chum salmon for December, which will take a considerable amount of Council and AP time<sup>1</sup>, we have already removed all agenda items except those that must be done at that meeting. BSAI and GOA groundfish harvest specifications and charter halibut management measures are always on the December agenda, to allow the new groundfish harvest specifications to be implemented as soon as possible in the new year, and to provide the IPHC with charter halibut measures input before their January annual meeting. Additionally, since we have now removed the February Council meeting, two additional agenda items must be taken in up in December: Cook Inlet salmon harvest specifications (as with groundfish, proposed specifications must be published, and the Council will approve final specifications at the April meeting in order to allow the fishery to open in June), and Norton Sound red king crab specifications (which allow a winter crab fishery to open). **Adding together the likely time needed for these must-do items, plus the chum salmon agenda item, exceeds the time available for our December venue booking at the Egan Center in Anchorage.**

In order to assess the time required for the planned agenda, we approximated the time spent on these agenda items this past December and February. Note that we do not have a good basis to estimate whether final action on chum will have more testimony than at initial review (approximately 3 days' worth in February, 188 testifiers), but Council discussions generally take longer at final action, and **it would be prudent to assume that the chum bycatch agenda item will take at least as long if not longer.** Additionally, we anticipate that if we remain with the current scheduling, **we will expect to receive more testimony under BSAI final specifications** than we did last year, so we will need to plan for additional time to be able to accommodate that. Because all of the items on the agenda except chum bycatch are "must-do" items that the Council cannot defer to a subsequent meeting if things unexpectedly run long,

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<sup>1</sup> Because it is final action, the chum analysis is not scheduled to go to the SSC.

we need to ensure that our time management includes sufficient buffer to meet our Council responsibilities to accommodate public testimony and provide appropriate time for Council deliberation.

Agenda item	Time at SSC	Time at AP	Time at Council
Groundfish ESRs (Dec 2024)	4 hr	3 hr	2 hr
BSAI final specifications (Dec 2024)	12.5 hr	4 hr	7 hr **
GOA final specifications (Dec 2024)	5.5 hr	1 hr	3.5 hr
Charter halibut mgmt. measures (Dec 2024)	-	1.5 hr	1.5 hr
NSRKC specifications	45 min	15 min	15 min
Cook Inlet salmon specifications (Feb 2025)	7 hr	-	4 hr
Chum salmon bycatch initial review (Feb 2025)	-	32 hr (4 days)	35 hr (4.5 days) **
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30 hr</b>	<b>42 hr</b>	<b>at least 53 hr, likely more</b>
<i>Time available during Dec 2025 footprint:</i>	<i>20-24 hr (2.5-3 days, M-W)</i>	<i>40 hr (5 days, Tu-Sat)</i>	<i>48 hr (6 days, Th-Tu)</i>

\*\* We anticipate that in 2025 we may need more time for these agenda items than was previously used

An additional constraint regarding the December meeting relates to the timing of the charter halibut agenda item. The IPHC has scheduled its interim meeting for December 2, which is the first Tuesday of the Council meeting. ADFG staff typically wait until after the interim meeting to finalize their analysis for the Council process about the impact of potential charter management measures given the preview of halibut stock status. Compounding the situation this year, many key staff have moved on: there is a new staff person who will be undertaking the ADFG analysis, and the NMFS regional office expert on charter halibut also recently retired. As a result, a “best” case scenario is that the ADFG analysis is available by the end of the day on Friday; the Charter Halibut Management Committee (which is chaired by a Council member who is fully engaged in the Council meeting) would need to meet over the weekend in an evening; and then, bypassing the AP by necessity, we could schedule the agenda item for Council consideration on Monday or Tuesday of the Council meeting. We have considered whether we could move the charter halibut agenda item to a special (virtual) Council meeting; this might be possible, but the Council would need to meet before December 24<sup>th</sup>, as the IPHC requires that materials for its annual meeting be available 30 days prior (and the meeting is scheduled to begin the week of January 26<sup>th</sup>).

#### Potential solutions include the following:

- Move final action on the chum bycatch analysis from December 2025 to April 2026. This would alleviate the overall timing constraint for December, and regarding the Council overscheduling issue (note the separate concerns regarding the SSC below), would allow the Council to take up must-do items as planned. While the charter halibut timing is tight, it would be doable in this scenario; the Council might consider breaking a little early one day in order to allow the Charter Halibut committee to avoid meeting late into the night. Under this scenario, the Council could also bring forward for consideration some agenda items that are currently slated for April 2026.
- Move some or all agenda items, except chum salmon bycatch, to a virtual Council meeting that would be held later in December, likely the week of December 15-19. The Council could also consider separate virtual meetings in December (for charter halibut and groundfish specifications) and January/February (for NSRKC and Cook Inlet). Again, this would alleviate the Council’s scheduling issues, but depending on the configuration, not necessarily the SSC’s constraints as identified below. One downside of having a mostly single-issue meeting is sequencing the agenda item between the AP and the Council; as we witnessed in February, when we are only addressing a single issue that takes several days to complete, the AP is unable to deliberate and complete its report before the Council begins public testimony on the same issue.

## **2. Not enough time for the SSC to review specifications agenda items**

A second overscheduling issue is specific to the SSC. Although the SSC is not scheduled to review the chum salmon analysis at this meeting, the December SSC meeting (December 1-3) also does not have enough time to accomplish SSC must-do specifications agenda items. The December meeting has always been a busy one for the SSC, just to try to get through groundfish final specifications (of which the ecosystem status reports (ESRs) in the chart above form a component). The groundfish stock assessments are voluminous, and SSC reviewers are often assigned their heaviest workload of the year, especially for members whose expertise is stock assessment. Reviewing the Cook Inlet salmon assessments at the same meeting adds additional strain to those same key members. Additionally, the preparation and editing of the SSC report for the December meeting is also a higher burden for SSC leadership, especially considering the short turnaround time needed for the Council to receive the report.

While the Cook Inlet Salmon Assessment Workshop that took place in May was held with the aspiration of streamlining SSC review for the 2026 cycle, any benefit is unlikely to be significant enough to offset the deficit of time available in December. Similarly, the SSC can work directly with presenters and groundfish and crab Plan Team leadership in advance to curtail presentations to only the core issues, or to move some topics to a different meeting. For example, the Crab Plan Team is already working towards moving the NSRKC assessment review to October instead of December, but that is not an option for 2025. The December meeting has long been overburdened, and many of these “low hanging fruit” savings have already been instituted over the last several years. As a result, these changes alone are unlikely to resolve the December scheduling problem. Significantly cutting back both staff presentations to the SSC, and SSC member deliberations, also risks undermining the integrity of the scientific review process.

We have explored the possibility of adding an extra day to the SSC’s schedule in December, but SSC Chairs do not have capacity to take on additional preparation in advance for more agenda items, add an extra meeting day, and condense the time for turning around the report following the meeting while still producing the report in time for when the Council needs to review it. It is also not possible to completely move the SSC meeting earlier, because of the timing constraints of Thanksgiving and the Groundfish Plan Team meetings.

### **Potential solutions that we could consider include the following:**

- Move review of Cook Inlet salmon specifications in December 2025 to a special meeting, at a different time. For example, perhaps we could hold a special SSC meeting in late January or early February, with a brief virtual Council meeting to follow (and no AP input). We could also consider whether to add NSRKC to that special meeting as well, although it does not represent a substantial time savings. In order to maintain our commitment to reducing the Council meeting footprint down to 4 meetings a year, we could consider having the SSC meeting in person for this January/February meeting, but not having the SSC meet at all during the April meeting. This would require some attention to the agenda items scheduled for the Council in April, to ensure that the Council does not schedule items that require SSC review. If the Council were also to move chum salmon bycatch final action to the April 2026 meeting, this might work out advantageously as the SSC is not scheduled to review that agenda item. At present, we are proposing this as a potential solution for December 2025; we are continuing to search for a better long-term solution to Cook Inlet salmon specifications timing.
- Consider moving NSRKC, some Cook Inlet salmon tier 3 stocks, and potentially more groundfish assessments off of an annual review cycle (noting that stock prioritization has already adjusted groundfish assessment cycles). Not reviewing the Cook Inlet tier 3 stocks would provide the biggest gain in time, as NSRKC is a short agenda item; even so this solution alone is unlikely to resolve the December SSC meeting concerns.
- Establish a more extreme implementation of the groundfish assessment review schedule, such that the Plan Teams and SSC would not consider any changes at all in an update assessment except for new data; the assessment would exclusively rerun a previously-reviewed model with

the most recent data. SSC review of assessments takes less time in these circumstances, compared to when authors tweak parameters, or propose even a slightly different model or methodology for the assessment. This downside of this approach for either authors or the SSC is that when new data does not seem to fit well with the existing model, there is no opportunity to investigate until the next assessment cycle. This transition from current practice might take more than a single year to implement, and so might help in the longer term but may not be sufficient on its own to resolve the timing constraints in December 2025.