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NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Ecosystem Committee REPORT

March 6, 2026, 8:30 am-12:00 pm; Zoom

Committee Members in attendance:

Linda Behnken, Shannon Carroll, Craig Chythlook, Cathy Coon (NMFS AKR), Jennifer Ferdinand (NMFS AFSC), David Fluharty, Nicole Kimball (Co-chair), Krystal Lapp, Nate Pamplin (Co-chair), Ernie Weiss, Caitlin Yaeger, Katie Latanich (Council staff coordinator)

Members absent: None

Council and NMFS staff, and invited presenters in attendance:

Sara Cleaver, Christina Conrath, Bridget Ferriss, Gretchen Harrington, Brad Harris, Lis Henderson, Anna Henry, Kirstin Holsman, Anita Kroska, Alicia Miller, Jodi Pirtle, Elizabeth Siddon, Mason Smith, Molly Watson, Doug Shaftel, Mallarie Yeager, Molly Zaleski

Others in attendance:

Danielle Bennett, Hekia Bodwitch, Loretta Brown, Tara Coluccio, Lisa Ellana, Jamie Goen, George Hall, Lillian Hart, Lauren Hynes, Nicholas Jacuk, Heather McCarty, Maggie Mooney-Seuss, Jamie O'Connor, Mateo Paz-Soldan, Bill Tweit, Terese Vicente, Spencer Weinstein, Megan Williams, Katherine Yahnke, Susie Zagorski

Ecosystem Committee (EC) co-chairs Nate Pamplin and Nicole Kimball convened the meeting and briefly reviewed the revised Terms of Reference¹ as well as the Council's December motion² which outlined agenda topics for the first two meetings. This first meeting was an introductory and organizational meeting.

EFH 5-Year Review

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) 5-Year Review Plan

Dr. Jodi Pirtle, NMFS AKR, provided a review of EFH regulations and processes as required by the Magnuson Stevens Act, and an overview of the 2028 EFH 5-Year Review Plan³ approved by the Council in December 2025 and reviewed by the Scientific and Statistical Committee in February 2026. All Councils are required to conduct an EFH evaluation every 5 years. Federal Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) must describe, identify, and map EFH for each life stage of the Council's managed species and minimize to the extent practicable the adverse effects of fishing on EFH. In general, the process allows the stock assessment authors to conclude whether fishing effects on their species' EFH were *more than minimal and not temporary*, and if so, they may recommend elevating their species to the Plan Teams and the SSC for possible mitigation to reduce fishing effects to EFH. Dr. Pirtle's presentation reviewed the EFH components (Components 1, 2, 6, 7, and 10) prioritized by NMFS and Council for this review cycle,

¹ Available on the Council [website](#)

² E Staff Tasking [Motion](#), December 2025

³ D2 [EFH Review Plan](#) December 2025

highlighting new and updated information inputs and products that will be developed as part of the EFH evaluation process.

Dr. Pirtle’s presentation summarized the information and review processes that will contribute to the final EFH 5-year Review Summary Report, and she encouraged EC members to review the most recent 2023 summary report⁴ to understand the types of information and conclusions made. After the scientific review is complete, the Council amends FMPs based on the updated EFH information from the review and can determine whether to recommend priorities for additional EFH conservation and enhancement measures, and/or to identify additional Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs), which must meet specific criteria.

A Committee member asked for clarification on plans for developing Level 3 EFH information and maps. Level 3 refers to EFH information for which data are available on habitat-related growth, reproduction, and/or survival by life stage, and was provided for the first time in the 2023 EFH 5-Year Review. In the upcoming review, Level 3 EFH information and maps will be updated for focal species with published temperature-dependent vital rates.

EC members also asked clarifying questions about the Fishing Effects model (FE model) used to evaluate the cumulative impacts of fishing gear on seafloor EFH. Dr. Pirtle and Ms. Molly Zaleski, NMFS AKR, clarified that the FE evaluation looks comprehensively across all gear impacts to assess overlapping, cumulative impacts relative to each species’ core EFH area. They also clarified that when stock assessment authors review outputs of the FE model as species experts, they are following an established FE evaluation process and applying scientific analysis as part of that process in determining whether to elevate species to consider potential mitigation measures.^{5,6}

A Committee member asked how the 2028 EFH Review process allows for discussion about salmon, noting that the Salmon FMP is not a focus of this review cycle, and that Component 9, Research and Information Needs, is not prioritized for a comprehensive review and update. Dr. Pirtle noted that while the Salmon FMP is not being updated this review cycle, NMFS AKR incorporates salmon EFH information and impacts analyses in decision documents for Council fisheries management actions and also uses the most up to date and best available science for EFH consultations for non-fishing Federal actions that may adversely impact nearshore and freshwater salmon EFH. Dr. Pirtle clarified that the Alaska EFH Research Plan⁷, which NMFS uses to prioritize and fund research to advance habitat information, will not be updated as part of the review process.

Fishing Effects Model

Dr. Brad Harris (APU) provided an introduction to the updated Fishing Effects model for the EFH review. The FE model is a decision support tool that uses spatially explicit vessel monitoring and

⁴ D2 2023 EFH Review Final [Summary](#), December 2025

⁵ Pirtle, J. L., G. A., Harrington, M. Zaleski, C. Felkley, S. Gardiner, and J. T. Thorson. 2025. Essential Fish Habitat 5-year Review Final Summary Report: North Pacific 2023 Essential Fish Habitat 5-year Review. U.S. Dep. Commer., NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-F/AKR-31, 134 p. <https://doi.org/10.25923/velv-ns96>

⁶ Zaleski, M., T. S. Smeltz, S. Gardiner, J. L. Pirtle, and G. A. Harrington. 2024. 2022 Evaluation of Fishing Effects on Essential Fish Habitat. NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-F/AKR-29, 212 p. <https://doi.org/10.25923/c2gh-0w03>

⁷ Pirtle, J. L., J. T. Thorson, S. R. Bayer, T. P. Hurst, M. E. Matta, and M. C. Siple. 2024. [Alaska Essential Fish Habitat Research Plan](#): A Research Plan for the National Marine Fisheries Service’s Alaska Fisheries Science Center and Alaska Regional Office. U.S. Dep. Commer., NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-F/AKR-33, 17 p. doi: 10.25923/sf79-ym32

observer data, gear dimensions and contact information, and published literature to quantify and visualize fishing activity, estimate fishing footprint or swept area and bottom contact, and estimate cumulative impacts of fishing on benthic habitat. The next iteration of the FE model will be improved through cooperative research that enables the model to more accurately estimate bottom contact of pelagic trawl gear, by simulating and testing fishing practices and gear configurations in both BSAI and GOA.

Alaska Coral and Sponge Initiative

Dr. Christina Conrath, NFMS AFSC, provided an overview of new research conducted under NOAA's Alaska Coral and Sponge Initiative (2020-2024). Dr. Conrath reviewed the Initiative's research priorities and projects, focusing on the validation of Gulf of Alaska coral and sponge distribution models using visual surveys that collect environmental and spatially explicit biological data. These methods improve on information that in previous reviews was based on bycatch from trawl surveys. For the upcoming EFH 5-year Review, this improved information on the distribution of structure-forming invertebrates (corals, sponges, and sea pens) will contribute to the environmental data used in species distribution models to map EFH.

Looking ahead, the NMFS and Council will work together to determine when committee input on the ongoing EFH 5-Year Review effort is most helpful, likely in 2027.

Climate Resilience Planning

Katie Latanich provided an update on two initiatives in progress to advance the Council's priorities for building climate resilience. Both topics will be discussed at the June 2026 Council meeting. At its upcoming May meeting, the Ecosystem Committee will review discussion papers on these issues and may provide recommendations to the Council.

Harvest Specifications Process Discussion Paper

Council staff are preparing a discussion paper that will assist the Council in considering whether to initiate a formal analysis to modify the harvest control rules for any species to improve climate resilience, or to change other aspects of the harvest specifications process. This document will explore opportunities for strengthening consideration of risk and uncertainty, focusing in particular on harvest control rules that inform how the SSC provides ABC recommendations based on stock status and information availability. Overall, this is intended to evaluate whether climate science and data and new modeling can improve the process by which the Council sets harvest limits. This also requires an evaluation of ecosystem data availability.

The discussion paper will provide an overview of the current specifications process for specifying OFL, ABC, and TAC; describe how climate-related risk and uncertainty are currently addressed in this process and discuss potential mechanisms for making changes. It will also explore potential goals, objectives, and performance metrics for adapting the harvest specifications process to enhance climate resilience. The discussion paper does not presuppose the Council will need to make significant changes in the harvest specifications process. It provides a starting point for the Council to understand where there is potential to consider new information or approaches, and the objectives and criteria that could be used to evaluate how well these approaches perform.

Upon review of this document in May, the Ecosystem Committee could provide input on goals, objectives, and tradeoffs for climate resilience; recommendations to the Council regarding next steps, and/or ideas for ongoing communication and engagement with the public. The EC's role does not include review of the modeling or technical aspects of this work.

The Committee offered comments and asked several clarifying questions about this work, including on the exploration of socioeconomic objectives, particularly for sablefish; and on opportunities for informal, collaborative forums for the public to learn and engage on this issue (e.g. MREP format). Committee members also asked whether and how changes to harvest control rules could account for abrupt shocks like marine heat waves.

Groundfish Management Policy Review

The Council's upcoming Groundfish Management Policy Review will provide an opportunity for the Council to review the BSAI and GOA Groundfish FMP goals and objectives established in 2004 through the Programmatic Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, and consider whether this guidance continues to be timely and relevant. Council direction is focused on ensuring the goals and objectives reflect the new climate resilience plan and the efforts and products relative to incorporating Local and Traditional Knowledge and Subsistence information (LKTKS). Not all Councils have such a review, but the North Pacific has created this process as a means of adaptive management. Council staff provided an overview⁸ of information to be provided in the 2022-2025 review document. Like past reviews, this document will summarize Council actions relative to goals and objectives in the form of a table. However, this review will also include a narrative section to provide more context for whether, why, and how the Council's actions align with goals and objectives, link this review with the Council's climate resilience planning, and consider other forms of Council policy guidance (e.g., the Council's Ecosystem Policy).

Public Testimony

Two members of the public provided testimony, and no written comments were submitted. Megan Williams (Ocean Conservancy) encouraged using the EFH process to identify new conservation opportunities, and suggested looking at the overlay of multiple species' EFH areas with fishing impacts to identify ecologically important sub-areas. Mateo Paz-Soldan (City of St. Paul) supported any opportunities to bring LKTKS into the EFH review process.

Next meeting

The Ecosystem Committee will hold its next meeting in person at the Council offices in Anchorage, Alaska on May 8, 2026.

⁸ E Groundfish Management Policy Review [Workplan](#), December 2025