

Bering Sea FEP: Lessons Learned

Document for the Ecosystem Committee

September 2022¹

In April 2022, the Council recommended the Ecosystem Committee begin collecting information to inform the initial steps for potential development of a GOA Fishery Ecosystem Plan, or similar tool. The Council requested the Committee to identify:

- the series of decision points for the Council, primarily the value an FEP might serve in the GOA;
- lessons learned during development of the BS FEP;
- whether the FEP Team and action module/taskforce format should be continued, and if so, would modifications be useful to streamline the process;
- the timing to intersect with ongoing projects such as GOA CLIM; and
- the question of staff, resources, and opportunities for partnerships or synergies, particularly if effort would be redirected from the Bering Sea.

The resulting information would be available for Council consideration, should it decide to initiate scoping for a GOA FEP or similar process.

Staff have noted that while the Council has tasked the Committee with addressing the above tasks, Council staff who have been involved in the development of prior FEPs have a unique perspective on some of these topics. Specifically, as pre-cursor to the Committee's discussion, Council staff have identified some of the "lessons learned" during the recent development of the Core Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan (BS FEP) and the implementation of the initial two task forces (the Climate Change Task Force (CCTF) and the Local Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, and Subsistence (LKTKS) Task Force), and additional considerations that could be informative for the Committee's discussion.

Scoping for FEPs

For the BS FEP, the Council engaged in outreach and scoping meetings to specifically ask for input on whether the development of an FEP for the BS would be valuable. The situation in the Bering Sea differed from that in the Aleutian Islands, as the purpose of the AI FEP was to assess risk in an ecosystem area about which the Council knew least; for the Bering Sea, it is the best studied ecosystem area in which the Council manages.

The Council held three scoping meetings between June and October 2014, all in conjunction with Council meetings (in Nome and Anchorage) or with an Ecosystem Committee meeting (in Seattle). They were well-attended, and the scoping process identified universal support from stakeholders for FEP development, although also caution about how to develop a process that managed expectations and was cautious about using staff resources. The Council asked for input on the following questions:

- What should be the objectives of the Bering Sea FEP? What questions should the FEP answer?
- What kind of actions should be considered in the FEP? Should the FEP provide specific or general guidance for fishery management? (for example, strategies to respond to climate change,

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preserve subsistence fishing and hunting resources, maintain healthy populations of top level predators, etc.)

- Would the FEP provide added value over existing Council documents, and if so, how? (for example, annual SAFE reports, essential fish habitat descriptions, etc.)

Should the Council choose to proceed with scoping in the GOA, a similar format could be followed, or a new format could be considered. Scoping meetings could be done in conjunction with Council meetings or in conjunction with other community-level events to encompass broader participation. The following sections highlight staff reflections for consideration as the Committee considers next steps.

Composition and Role of the FEP Team

A primary and valuable function of both FEP Teams (AI/BS) so far is having served as the advisory body in identifying key regional issues for both the BS and AI, and developing and compiling the type of FEP that will best suit the Council's needs for that region. Both Teams have had difficulty in transitioning from that strategic, development process to an ongoing role. Some Team members have identified the value in having the Core FEP Team continue to meet beyond the original development of the FEP, as this maintains momentum behind the goals of the FEP and keeps ecosystem conversations relevant to the ecosystem area current for the Council. However, the task of the current FEP Team, or any new FEP Team, should be considered moving forward.

A primary task for the BS FEP Team, as conceived in the BS FEP, is to provide oversight of action module development. But perhaps due to the high-profile nature of the initial modules, the Council has maintained direct oversight of the action modules, with advice from the Ecosystem Committee. As such, the current task forces do not require an additional layer of FEP Team review and feedback, yet the task forces continuously bring updates on their work to the FEP Team as envisioned in the FEP, requiring additional time from staff and members of the Task Forces and Team. Learning from this experience, one consideration is whether the FEP Team needs to act as a review body for other groups stemming from the FEP, such as the Task Forces, rather than having that be a direct Council role as with other Council initiatives.

The AI FEP team disbanded when the BS FEP began to be developed, and the current FEP Team is specific to the Bering Sea. Members of the Team were selected based on Bering Sea-specific experience they could lend to the Team. A FEP Team with experience and knowledge specific to the GOA would likely require a different makeup of participants. This would either require a new GOA FEP Team, or membership of the current FEP Team would need to be reconsidered. There are staff capacity issues with fielding multiple ecosystem expertise-related teams, and also capacity concerns with respect to members of the public trying to understand all that is happening under multiple FEP Teams. Having multiple FEP Teams would require more meetings, potentially competing priorities from different regions, and the need for increased communication across multiple groups. Stakeholders involved in multiple regions have noted the challenges of knowing where and how best to provide feedback and engage across multiple advisory bodies. Having a single ongoing FEP Team for all regions (BS, AI, GOA) could be beneficial in that it could alleviate confusion that could arise from multiple FEP Teams, but it would still be important to consider what exactly its role would be.

Perspective on task forces/action modules

One question that has arisen is whether a Core FEP (equivalent to the BS FEP document) is necessary to achieve the objectives of an action module or accomplish the work of a task force. One benefit of having a formalized FEP is that it provides a unifying, strategic overview to which the Council, staff, the public, and task forces may reference in identifying task-specific goals and objectives. However, it should be noted that development of a Core FEP requires considerable staff, agency, and stakeholder time. The task

forces were intended to work semi-autonomously; instead, Council/SSC/Ecosystem Committee involvement has been more than expected, which has increased the amount of time staff need to devote to engagement with these bodies.

The current task forces were formulated with the intent to disperse the workload among taskforce members, and to achieve input from a diverse body of experts in addition to agency staff, in the products coming out of action modules. In practice, it is often difficult to keep a project on a Council timeline while working with volunteers, and at times, the task forces function more like Council committees which review documents prepared by agency and Council staff rather than all members sharing an equal workload. It is clear that the choice for appointing lead staff and chairs is critical to the success of the group, especially due to the larger workload required from these members and their ability to work well together, and such appointments require careful consideration and assessment of their other tasking. One option to consider in future is whether the function of a task force should in fact be that of a reviewing body rather than a working group, as this would minimize the amount of staff time spent managing other members, but would still encourage expert perspectives within the review process that are not already included on the SSC or AP. The Ecosystem Committee could also consider other ways to achieve wider involvement, either through workshops, meetings in other parts of Alaska, etc.

The original intent of the task forces was to state the commitment required (2-3 years) of task force members up front, however, work conducted by the task forces is taking longer than originally planned. While this is in some part due to changes in Council and agency priorities as a result of COVID, this has nonetheless been challenging for some task force members, as it requires a commitment of their time beyond what was expected, and some had expected more finalized products and outcomes in a shorter time. As a new type of Council group, it can also be difficult for some members to understand the line between their role as expert contributors on the taskforce, and advocates in the remainder of the Council process.

Revisiting the purpose and Council interest in action modules could be a worthwhile exercise for the Committee, either for implementing future BS FEP action modules, or for applying a similar model to a GOA FEP or even to action modules for the AI, as has been suggested. If action modules are meant to target some of the high-profile issues (climate change) that the Council is currently tackling, it may be simpler to work directly through a typical Council process rather than doing so within the FEP framework. If the interest in particular action module topics is to continue work on incremental EBFM improvements, then perhaps the action module concept has more merit.

Next Steps

As the Committee considers the Council GOA FEP scoping motion, some considerations to keep in mind are the following:

- What are the tradeoffs between further progress on the BS FEP action modules which have not been initiated, or developing a GOA FEP, as there are limited resources to do both.
- What is the value of having a formal FEP document, and is it needed in order to accomplish the work of the task forces or the goals of the action modules. One option the Committee could consider in moving forward is using FEPs primarily as strategic documents that identify scoping priorities for next time period.
- What are the key priorities for the GOA? How integrated are they?
- Who are the key stakeholders specific to those priorities (science, public). Is an FEP is useful to move those forward, or would it be better to pursue those as individual projects?

Additional ideas for the Committee to consider:

- FEPs could rotate through the regions - GOA (could be divided into multiple regions) AI, BS, Arctic.
- Identify clear tasking for FEP process: opportunity for extensive scoping with regional stakeholders and scientists; identify any pressing priorities for research and management that should be pursued through Council avenues.
- Strip out the intention to have an ongoing Team role for each FEP. Instead, convene a team of people for the scoping process/development of FEP/updates, that is a temporary task and then disperses.
- To track the identified priorities, perhaps develop a document similar to the groundfish workplan document that tracks projects and progress for all regions, so that this is not lost to the Council.
- Continue to use and improve appropriate opportunities for science/management interface that are outside of the Team but responsive to real time needs and priorities. AFSC report is one such; perhaps periodic workshops could be another opportunity (SSC annual workshop, Ecosystem Committee ideas for more stakeholder involvement could be a model). This frees up FEP Team staff to do these more focused tasks.