



North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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Ecosystem Committee

REPORT

March 29-30, 2022, via Zoom

<https://meetings.npfmc.org/Meeting/Details/2856>

Committee:

Bill Tweit (Chair)
Jim Ayers
Dave Benton
David Fluharty

Rose Fosdick
Gretchen Harrington
John Iani
Stephanie Madsen

Theresa Peterson
Jeremy Rusin
Diana Evans (staff)

Agency staff attending included: Erika Ammann, Kerim Aydin, Rachel Baker, Karla Bush, Sara Cleaver, Kate Haapala, Alan Haynie, Kendall Henry, Kirstin Holsman, John Olson, Ivonne Ortiz, Sarah Rheinsmith, Kalei Shotwell, Michael Smith, Sarah Wise, David Witherell

Public attending included: Raychelle Aluaq Daniel, Ben Enticknap, Karen Gillis, Nicole Kimball, Heather Mann, Steve Marx, Mateo Paz-Soldan, Brenden Raymond-Yakoubian, Olga Romenko, Matt Tinning, Jaylene Wheeler, Paul Wilkins, Megan Williams

The Chair opened the meeting with introductions and a discussion of the agenda, which included: 1) updates from the February Council meeting on the Ecosystem Committee report and the Groundfish management policy review, 2) reports from the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan (BS FEP) Team and Taskforces, 3) report on IPCC findings and ACLIM progress, 4) a discussion of GOA ecosystem research, 5) an update on the CCC areas-based management work, and 6) brief updates on the EFH 5-year review timing, funding opportunities under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and planning for the second Council Ecosystem Workshop.

Updates from February 2022: Groundfish management policy (PSEIS)

Diana Evans and Bill Tweit provided an overview of the Council's response to the January 2022 Ecosystem Committee report, in particular its support for a Plan Team forage fish workshop and planning for another Council ecosystem workshop on a later time frame. The Committee also received a short update on the triennial review of the groundfish management policy, which was adopted through the Groundfish Programmatic SEIS (PSEIS) in 2004. Diana noted that the Council last evaluated the ongoing applicability of the PSEIS in a Supplemental Information Report (SIR) finalized in 2015, and that at the February 2022 meeting, it was noted that it is probably time to revisit that process again. The Council discussion did not provide guidance on process, timeline or prioritization; if the initial step is development of an SIR, it could be as long as two years before a decision is made about whether to revise the PSEIS. Some Committee members expressed concern about this potential schedule for review, noting that the analysis of the original PSEIS is almost 20 years old, and that the SIR would be almost 10 years old once the new SIR is completed. Committee members cited the increased rate of environmental change in the North Pacific region, the changes in species distribution and productivity, and the heightened concerns of stakeholders as a reason for the Council to consider a more robust and timely review of the PSEIS and associated management program. **The Committee recommends that given the time elapsed since the original analysis, and the ongoing rate of environmental change in our region, the Council should initiate a robust process to reevaluate the PSEIS, which includes scoping and opportunities for public input earlier in the process than development of an SIR alone might require.**

BS Fishery Ecosystem Plan Reports and ACLIM update

The Committee received three BS FEP reports during the course of the meeting. A discussion of each of the reports is provided below, followed by overarching themes that were discussed by the Committee with respect to these agenda items and throughout the meeting.

Diana Evans and Kerim Aydin provided a report on the annual **BS FEP Team** meeting in March, which focused on continued development of the Bering Sea Ecosystem Health Report, a strategic report intended to help the Council understand and monitor ecosystem status and change over the longer time period, and fisheries' effects on the ecosystem, based on the series of ecosystem goals and objectives established in the FEP. The Team co-Chairs described some challenges and strategies for developing areas of the report for which indicators are not already available, and their intent to produce a pilot report by the end of the year for as many objectives as possible. As clarified with the Committee, the Team continues to welcome public involvement in the development of the report, and also intends to work with the Taskforces as appropriate. The strategic report is intended to assess the current state of the ecosystem; work of the CCTF or ACLIM would provide a complement that extrapolates change into the future.

Kate Haapala and Sarah Wise presented progress of the **Local Knowledge/Traditional Knowledge/Subsistence (LKTKS) Taskforce** over the past year. The Taskforce is refining its draft protocol for bringing LKTKS into the Council process, and has developed a search engine for LKTKS reference materials. The approach of the Taskforce, whose members include a wide diversity of perspectives and lived experiences, has been very collaborative, and the Committee noted the significance of trust as a keyword in the protocol. The Committee asked clarifying questions about onramps and how best to communicate the source context of LKTKS information, and was interested in the immediate availability of the search engine to inform ongoing work. The Committee also discussed with the co-Chairs the application of the protocol once it is finalized, how it should or should not be applied to other regions than the Bering Sea, and to Council or NMFS events and processes (perhaps in conjunction with lessons learned compared to past experiences).

Kirstin Holsman presented the report from the **Climate Change Taskforce**, and their intent to prepare a Climate Readiness Synthesis for the fall as the first phase of their workplan. The report will include an initial evaluation of the Council process with respect to management, knowledge base, and a review of climate information in the SAFE reports. The report will be valuable to highlight areas of challenge as the CCTF proceeds to the identification of adaptive tools and bottlenecks in future phases. The Committee is interested in the website under development, which will be a good communication tool for the public to engage with CCTF work. The Committee also asked questions about the CCTF's review of the [stakeholder ecosystem matrix](#) product, which they reviewed at the request of the Council. The CCTF noted useful ideas in the matrix, and provided feedback about how to improve the transparency and nuanced evaluation in future iterations. The discussion noted that the process of getting input from diverse persons and perspectives in the development of climate research is important to defining the goals of the system, and identifying acceptable options and ways to mitigate against climate shocks, in order to ensure resilience.

Kirstin Holsman and Alan Haynie also presented an update on **ACLIM**, the Alaska Climate Integrated Modeling project. The ACLIM work links a series of specific, highly quantitative oceanographic, biological, and socioeconomic models (climate-enhanced single species and ecosystem models, socioeconomic models of how the fishing fleet responds to different catch levels and distribution patterns), and runs them through various fishing policy and climate scenarios to predict possible outcomes. Kirstin began the presentation summarizing key findings from the 2021 IPCC report, particularly as they relate to Alaska. Committee members keyed in on the fact that predictions have changed with respect to the impacts of climate change effects in Alaska, from a distant future problem to an immediate present one, and therefore so has the urgency of the need for management tools to respond.

Alan described the development of policy scenarios that are intended to help identify potential constraints and bottlenecks in the adaptability and resilience of the management process. Committee members asked questions about accounting for salmon and subsistence effects, diversity of harvest, and the constraints of the MSA and current perceptions of ecosystem health. The ACLIM team is planning for a Council workshop at the June meeting to get further public input about top priorities. Finally, the Committee recognizes the value that ACLIM results will have as an input to the next phase of the CCTF workplan, to develop adaptive tools.

The Committee appreciated all the reports, and highlights the progress of the FEP Team, the LKTKS Taskforce and CCTF, as well as the ACLIM project. As the products start to come together, it is easier to see how they will begin to fit in with the Council process, and the Committee encourages and looks forward to their completion.

Throughout the discussion of these reports, **the Committee's discussion repeatedly circled back to the tension between the time needed to undertake many of these ongoing, strategic ecosystem and climate products that are underway, for example through the FEP framework, and the urgency of needing to respond now to the immediate, rapid onset of effects of climate change being experienced in Alaska.** The impacts are being felt acutely, both by Bering Sea communities with respect to subsistence and cultural practices, as well as through marine heatwave and other anthropogenic warming effects on population declines in fishery species, seabird and marine mammal mortality events, and increased variability and uncertainty. The Committee acknowledges the underlying tension between the importance of a deliberative, strategic approach to guide management change, while at the same time wanting to be able to develop and apply tactical tools more immediately in the short term while waiting for those longer products. Committee members held different opinions about the appropriate balance between these two dynamics.

Another recurring Committee discussion was how early and often to include other voices in the discussions, assessments, and decisions about the impacts of climate change. While the LKTKS protocol, when final, will certainly help to provide guidance for the Bering Sea, there is a continuing need to broaden the knowledge base for Council decision making as conditions change and people are affected who have not been used to engaging in the Council process. The Council is aware of this issue and has undertaken efforts to address it; Committee members differed in their recommendation of how much to broaden those efforts or wait and see the current efforts through to fruition. Members' discussion points included reflections on the devastating effects of climate change on indigenous communities, for example as a result of salmon run declines, and how that should be acknowledged by the Council; as well as tradeoffs with what the Council does and does not have the ability to solve, and expectations for how information will be used in decision making.

CCC Area-based Management and OECM work

David Witherell (NPFMC) described the ongoing work of a Council Coordination Committee (CCC) subcommittee that is tasked to prepare a report on area-based management measures in the U.S. EEZ, to inform the America the Beautiful Act (ATB) 30 by 30 initiative. With representatives of the other Councils, he has been compiling a list of all of the Council closure areas to determine 1) if they qualify as a conservation area (based on the subcommittee's adopted definition), 2) have governance associated with them, 3) their classification by type and management focus, and 4) whether they meet at least three principles under ATB. A draft of the report will be published and presented to the CCC in May. The Ecosystem Committee was impressed by the staff effort, and asked clarifying questions to understand this process and how it will fit in with the ATB initiative. It is hoped that the Subcommittee's work will inform the ATB guidance document and the ATB Atlas which are being developed at the national level.

The Committee noted that GIS work is needed to complete some spatial evaluations, for example total area closed accounting for overlapping areas, and **the Committee recommends that the Council highlight the need for GIS funding to complete the work of the subcommittee.** The evaluation of

closed areas off Alaska will be very useful to the Council beyond simply as a contribution to the ATB process. **The Committee also recommends that the report highlight that the implementation of conservation areas off Alaska is often the result of ground-up collaborations taking place over many years**, some initiated from public action, developed with diverse stakeholder and agency involvement. **The Committee suggests the Council might encourage the CCC to emphasize to the Departments of Commerce and the Interior that they should consider a similar bottom-up approach to identifying important areas for ATB.**

GOA ecosystem research staff paper

In response to a Committee and Council scoping request from last year about ecosystem initiatives in the GOA and their intersection with management, Sara Cleaver (NPFMC) presented a staff paper with a brief summary of high-level GOA research programs and a discussion of gaps in understanding relative to the GOA, including both actual data gaps as well as gaps of communication between ongoing research and the management process. The paper also identifies some actions the Council may wish to consider, for example, the development of a GOA FEP. The Committee appreciated the paper and the presentation, and discussed comparisons to the BS FEP development process, as well as examples of parallel ecosystem change in the GOA both current and in the past, for example, the decline of GOA crab. The Committee also discussed the importance – in the GOA and in other large marine ecosystems – of maintaining a balance between conducting standard stock assessment surveys and basic research and monitoring, both of which underpin recommendations that support annual management and longer-term resilience. The Committee acknowledged that current resource limitations are likely to impact NOAA Fisheries' ability to maintain ecosystem monitoring and data collection. The Committee also noted that the Climate, Ecosystems and Fisheries Initiative was not funded in FY22.

The Committee recommends that the Council task the Ecosystem Committee with development of a scoping process to inform potential development of a GOA Fishery Ecosystem Plan, or similar tool.

The Committee noted that before initiating the BS FEP, the Council held several scoping sessions with stakeholders to identify whether to do a BS FEP and if so, what its goals and objectives should be; a similar design would be important for the GOA, to engage with those living and working in the region. To facilitate such a dialogue, the Committee's task would be to identify:

- the series of decision points for feedback, including what value an FEP might serve in the GOA,
- lessons learned from the BS FEP,
- whether the science Team and action module/taskforce format should be continued or streamlined,
- 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 design of a scoping process would thus be ready for the Council, when it decides whether to initiate scoping for a GOA FEP or similar process.

Other business

EFH 5-year review

Sarah Rheinsmith (NPFMC) updated the Committee on outcomes of the SSC's review of EFH materials at the February 2022 Council meeting. In response to SSC feedback and requests, the Ecosystem Committee will next review ongoing work in preparation for the October 2022 Council meeting, when the SSC is scheduled to review results from the assessment of fishing impacts on EFH. The Committee supports the revised timeline. In light of the conversations at this meeting, Gretchen Harrington noted that the EFH models that have been developed as part of this review cycle are also used in the ongoing

ecosystem and climate modeling work. A written public comment letter was received relating to the EFH 5-year review, which the Ecosystem Committee will consider at its fall meeting.

Funding opportunities under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act

Erika Amman (NMFS) briefed the Committee on funding opportunities that have recently or will shortly become available. There are three funding opportunities through the [NOAA Restoration Center](#) for restoration projects that increase resilience for coastal communities, or provide for fish passage. Additionally, more money is being provided for grants through the [Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund](#), from which the Alaska Salmon Sustainability Fund also draws. Finally, a partnership between NOAA and NFWF is creating the [National Coastal Resilience Fund](#), to award \$140 million in competitive grants to create and restore natural systems for current and future threats from coastal hazards. This last opportunity is currently accepting pre-proposals. **The Committee recommends that the Council assist in publicizing these funding opportunities.**

Planning for the second Council Ecosystem Workshop

Diana Evans and workshop planning subgroup members (Bill Tweit, Stephanie Madsen, and Rose Fosdick) discussed the status of refocusing their proposal for a second Council Ecosystem Workshop, to identify a focal issue and perhaps reframe the event as part of a continuing series of engagement events. Subgroup members reiterated their interest in involving additional perspectives in the planning process. The subgroup will resume its work after the April Council meeting.

Future meetings

The Ecosystem Committee will likely delay the planned meeting in May, because the schedule for the EFH 5-year review material on fishing effects has been pushed back. The Committee will plan a 2-day meeting prior to the October Council meeting, to review the Climate Change Taskforce Climate Readiness Synthesis, receive an update on ACLIM, and review EFH materials to be presented to the SSC in October. The Ecosystem Committee is also interested in scheduling a presentation from the Ecosystem Status Report team at a future meeting.

Finally, the Ecosystem Committee congratulates Alan Haynie on his appointment as the next General Secretary of ICES, and notes that he and his work on Alaska fishery issues will be missed.