

Council process ideas for change

PROGRESS REPORT, September 2022

The Council has been considering opportunities to adjust Council operations in order to best meet its mission. At the Council's request in April 2022, staff have initially focused on five issues for a more in-depth discussion. Discussion of three of the issues (AP/SSC nominations, B reports, tradeoffs between accommodating remote testimony and meeting in remote communities) was provided in [June 2022](#); this paper addresses the remaining two issues:

- Reevaluate the timing of crab and groundfish harvest specifications in light of fishery needs and stock prioritization
- Reduce the number of annual Council meetings from 5 to 4, and drop the February meeting; and consider making 1-2 meetings a year virtual

At a future date, the Council may also consider other ideas included in the Council's original [February 2022 staff discussion paper](#), or that were raised in public comment, for example at the [March 2022 public meeting](#).

The council motion in April 2022 requested that staff reconvene the Executive Committee augmented by AP and SSC leadership in a public meeting to discuss these issues. After investigating the two issues, **staff is not recommending a Council decision point at this meeting**. For harvest specifications, the recommendation is to implement incremental improvements within the harvest specifications process this year, to see whether these can address concerns about author, Plan Team, and SSC workload. For the meeting cycle issue, based on needs from our hotel contracts, we have committed to holding the February meeting in Seattle in both February 2023 and February 2024. The earliest we could make a change is for 2025, which gives us a little more time to consider options as we move forward. Given that the staff paper does not recommend a Council decision point for this meeting, holding the meeting was delayed to a future time.

1. Timing of crab and groundfish harvest specifications in light of fishery needs and stock prioritization

The Council identified an interest in evaluating the timing of the BSAI crab and BSAI/GOA groundfish specifications cycles. Both for crab and groundfish, the timeframe is extremely compressed for AFSC and ADFG stock assessment authors to complete their assessments with the latest survey data and get them internally reviewed in time for the Plan Team meeting; and for the Plan Team to provide the SAFE report and minutes to the SSC with sufficient time for the SSC members to review prior to their scheduled meeting. Additionally for some crab fisheries, any delay as to when the Council can take action on setting ABC and OFL adds pressure on ADFG to set TAC and NMFS RAM division to issue quota shares in order to meet the October 15th crab fishery opening date. For groundfish, the timing is also impacted by the Thanksgiving holiday occurring immediately before the December SSC meeting, and the regulatory process for proposed and final specifications that spans December holidays.

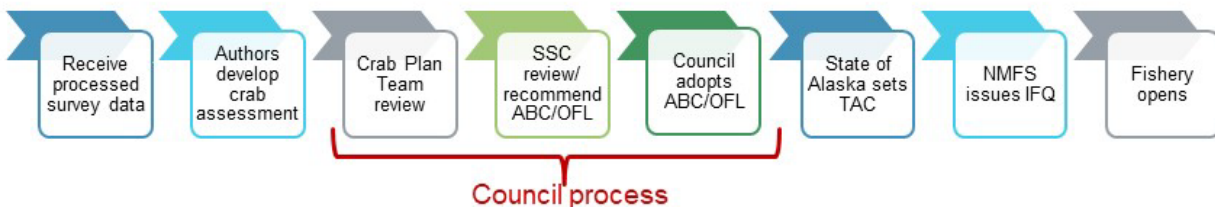
The Council has identified strong potential for changes to the harvest specifications timing to alleviate the workload for SSC members, which is increasingly burdensome. As outlined in the [NMFS stock prioritization review](#), which is being presented at the October Council meeting under agenda item D1, the number and complexity of groundfish and crab assessments has increased dramatically over the past twenty years, with the total number of pages associated with SAFE reports tripling over this time period. The timeframe for the harvest specifications cycle is unchanged, however, meaning that Plan Team and SSC reviewers still receive documents only shortly before the meeting, and meet for the same number of days despite the increase in review material. With increasing uncertainty due to climate change, the complexity of assessments is unlikely to diminish in the near future.

Discussion focused particularly on the individual crab and groundfish specifications processes are discussed in the sections below. **After discussions with Plan Teams and staff, however, the recommendation for this year is to work on incremental improvements within the current timing, and see whether these can address concerns about author, Plan Team, and SSC workload.** The following actions are being piloted during the current fall cycle, and will be assessed after the meetings. They include:

- Recordings of the Plan Team meeting are being made available to SSC reviewers, to receive a more detailed understanding of the Plan Team discussion when useful, for preparing for the meeting
- Council staff are tracking changes between Plan Team and SSC versions of the assessments, to allow SSC members to begin their review earlier and still catch any changes
- Continued and renewed emphasis on fast turnaround of minutes and SAFE reports following the Plan Team meetings.
- SSC and Plan Team leadership meet after each Plan Team meeting and before presentation of the report to the SSC, to streamline what the SSC does/does not need to review in detail
- For crab, the Crab Plan Team intends to ask authors only to bring forward two models for the assessment, last year's assessment model updated with new data, and the preferred model for the upcoming assessment. This will streamline the author's work in the short time after they receive new data, as well as Plan Team and SSC review. Authors may retain discretion to bring forward an additional option if needed.
- For groundfish, the Groundfish Plan Team is working on internal procedures to improve efficiencies, including author presentation templates, roles during the meeting to keep the meeting on track, and guidelines to facilitate a fast turnaround of consistent and streamlined minutes
- Continued stock prioritization considerations may affect the volume of groundfish assessments
- SSC leadership has committed to prioritizing recommendations in their report, to identify which items are critical, and which might be addressed over the longer term. The SSC continues to ask authors to note how each recommendation has been/will be addressed to ensure they are not lost, but an exhaustive response is not needed for every recommendation.
- SSC leadership has offered to provide feedback, using Council staff as intermediaries, for authors if SSC recommendations are unclear or priorities need clarification.

Timing of crab harvest specifications

For crab, the current timing for incorporating the latest survey data into the September/October assessment cycle with an October 15th fishery start date continues to be challenging. Many actions must occur *in sequence* for the fishery to open (see figure below), of which the Council contributes only a part.



The timing of the starting point is fixed to the schedule of the summer survey; and the Northern Bering Sea is the final leg of the survey, which further limits availability of data for those assessments where those are a key component. At the other end of the process is the fishery start date on October 15th. The Council meeting is generally fixed to the first full week of October, the exact dates of which vary by calendar year, and the Crab Plan Team is generally scheduled to end two weeks before the Council meeting. The SSC has expressed concern that particularly in some years, the need for authors to rush to

incorporate new data into assessments which is received at the last minute, may necessarily trade off with quality and thoroughness of both the assessment and review by the Plan Team and the SSC.

Staff explored several possibilities, including delaying the October fishery start date, delaying until December the review of all crab stocks except Bristol Bay red king crab (BBRKC), and standardizing all crab specifications cycles to align with groundfish. Feedback from industry highlighted that keeping the BBRKC fishery to an October 15th (or earlier if possible) start date is critical to match with BBRKC markets around the new year, and also with processing availability. The Crab Plan Team also noted that Tanner crab should also be opened on October 15th as well, to avoid bycatch in the BBRKC fishery. ADFG identified that the workload for crab TAC-setting is easier to manage if the stocks remain spread out in time, rather than consolidating into a single TAC-setting event as with groundfish. The Crab Plan Team was also concerned that standardizing the crab and groundfish timing would dilute the attention available to consider crab stocks. At the same time, the Crab Plan Team also noted that a December review might provide a better opportunity to incorporate northern Bering Sea data into the snow crab assessment (although this would create a tight timeframe for beginning the fishery in January) and also challenges with the timing of the Aleutian Islands golden king crab (AIGKC) assessment which is reviewed in May despite the fishery not closing until the end of April.

Based on feedback from the Crab Plan Team and the crab industry, staff will continue to explore the possibility of a change in the timing of crab specifications specifically for snow crab (currently reviewed in October) and Norton Sound red king crab (NSRKC, currently reviewed in February), both of which assessments rely on the northern Bering Sea data. The idea would be to explore moving both assessments to a December Council meeting review. This would remove one obstacle from the Council dropping the February Council meeting (see below for further discussion), and potentially allow more time for a less hurried snow crab assessment. The SSC will have further discussion of the importance of northern Bering Sea data for snow crab at this October meeting. Staff will explore the urgency and options for moving AIGKC review to a different meeting, however this could potentially require a regulatory change to ensure that the timing continues to align with the receipt of processor fees and the issuance of quota share for the IFQ year.

The Crab Plan Team provided two final comments on this topic. First, it was noted that changing the timing of any assessment would require careful thought and management of the transition. Secondly, the Crab Plan Team reiterated the importance of the January modeling workshop, which ideally would continue to be hosted by the Council and to occur in-person. That being said, the workshop does not necessarily need to be linked to a Crab Plan Team meeting, if the NSRKC assessment review moves to December.

Timing of groundfish harvest specifications

As reported previously, the current two-year groundfish specifications process was designed to provide a complex balance of using the more recent survey data in stock assessments, complying with regulatory procedures, and opening the fisheries at the start of the calendar year. The October/December review cycle is specified in the groundfish FMPs, and major changes to the process may require an FMP amendment.

Earlier discussions raised suggestions to align the crab and groundfish Plan Team cycles by moving the September Groundfish Plan Team meeting to May, so that the SSC would review all crab and groundfish models in June for deployment with new survey data in the fall specifications cycles. Feedback from the Groundfish Plan Team highlighted some concerns that moving the model review to May rather than September would result in an additional opportunity to make changes and report back to the SSC, and so could potentially create more work than less (the example of previously holding modeling workshops on Bering Sea cod was cited). There was also some concern about a May/June cycle affecting the time available for authors to do other research.

An alternative suggestion was to move the September Plan Team meeting earlier (for example, late August), to allow more time for authors to work on their assessments in the fall. The Plan Team noted a tradeoff with receiving presentations on final survey results that occur in September, and emphasized the importance of these presentations which are useful to authors, the Plan Team, and industry. It was noted that there might be other ways to broadcast these results other than tying them to the Plan Team meeting, for example, through an AFSC public meeting.

The Groundfish Plan Team will continue to evaluate the degree to which efficiencies within the current timing can help to alleviate workload concerns, as well as the implications of further stock prioritization which will be discussed by the SSC and Council in October 2022. Staff will continue to explore further timing changes for groundfish if they seem fruitful.

2. Council meeting annual schedule

The Council is interested in evaluating whether to change the annual meeting schedule for the Council, including potentially reducing the number of annual Council meetings from 5 to 4, and dropping the February meeting, as well as considering how best to use virtual meetings. February was identified as a potential meeting to drop, because there is always a particularly short working time between the end of the December meeting and the deadline (mid-January) for materials to be posted for the February meeting, as preparers and reviewers take time off over the holidays. As a result, the February meeting is often shorter than other Council meetings because fewer reports or analyses are ready for review.

In June, the Council heard from staff that we have hotel commitments rolled over from COVID to host two meetings at the Renaissance Hotel in Seattle. If we renege on those commitments, the Council will be obligated to pay a considerable penalty that is waived if we can reschedule those meetings instead in 2023 and 2024. We have dates reserved to host our normally scheduled February meeting there for both years. Over the summer, we spoke with the hotel and Council members about potentially moving at least the February 2024 meeting in Seattle to later in the year, but were not able to find an alternative that met our needs. As a result, we are committed to a Seattle February Council meeting for at least the next two years, and could start thinking about a different meeting schedule earliest for 2025.

One thing that we can do within the existing schedule is to be especially thoughtful in agenda-planning for both the December and February meetings. We have heard from the SSC that from a workload perspective, the majority of the December SSC meeting needs to be devoted to groundfish specifications review. For 2022, the schedule is currently arranged so that the SSC only takes up groundfish specs and the snow crab rebuilding analysis, which is on a very tight timeframe. Any additional issues for the December agenda are AP/Council only (e.g., Charter halibut specifications, discussion papers, committee reports, final actions). In planning for the February agenda, we can also try to the extent possible to be cognizant that staff who have a lot of work to prepare for December agenda items will have little time to prepare for February, and adjust accordingly.

In the longer term, we will continue to look at the feasibility of changing the meeting schedule, and related questions such as how that might affect the dates of remaining meetings (with the intent to avoid dates that overlap with other management groups), and which one of those remaining meetings should occur in the Pacific northwest. Also, whether it makes sense to keep a fifth meeting that occurs virtually, at which the agenda purposefully does not include the types of actions that are best addressed in-person, based on feedback we have received so far (e.g., controversial final actions and some initial reviews that affect a large and disparate number of stakeholders, communities, and/or sectors, to allow more opportunity for informal dialogue). We intend to do some research into meeting venue options in the Pacific northwest at other times of the year, which we would normally report back to the Finance Committee in April. At that time, we should also have feedback from the SSC and Plan Teams about the success of efforts to improve workload efficiencies in this fall specifications cycle, and the urgency of reconsidering timing, which might affect the Council meeting schedule as well. As a result, we plan to bring a further report on this issue back to the Council at the April 2023 meeting.