



Ecosystem Committee REPORT

27 May 2021, via AdobeConnect

The NPFMC Ecosystem Committee met on 27 May 2021, from 12pm – 4pm (Alaska) to receive an update from the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan Team, prioritize future agenda items and schedules, and receive a brief update from the State of the Ecosystem workshop planning group.

Committee Members in attendance:

Bill Tweit (Chair)
Jim Ayers
Dave Benton
David Fluharty

Rose Fosdick
John Iani
Stephanie Madsen
Theresa Peterson

Steve MacLean (NPFMC)

Members absent: Gretchen Harrington, Jeremy Rusin

Others in attendance:

Diana Evans (NPFMC)
Kerim Aydin
Diana Stram (NPFMC)
Kirstin Holsman
Anne Marie Eich
Brenden Raymond-
Yakoubian

Erich Rader
Tom Panamaroff
Steve Marx
Karla Bush
Megan Williams
Kate Haapala (NPFMC)
Sarah LaBelle (NPFMC)

Mateo Paz Soldan
Raychelle Daniel
Lauren Divine
Chris Tran
Ivonne Ortiz
J. Wheeler
Joe Krieger

Intro and Agenda

Bill Tweit (Chair) and Steve MacLean (NPFMC staff) provided a brief recap of ecosystem related topics from the April 2021 Council meeting. MacLean provided a summary of the announcement from NMFS that they are updating the Conservation Plan for Northern fur seals, as recommended by the committee and the Council in 2017. The meeting agenda was modified to increase the time available to the ecosystem committee for agenda prioritization and planning. The agenda change and resulting discussions resulted in the EC being unable to address the ecosystem workshop planning agenda item. The Committee did hear from Tom Panamaroff, the newest member of the steering committee for workshop planning. The committee reviewed minutes from the April 2021 committee meeting and noted there remains concern about the OECM discussion and how Council designations such as Essential Fish Habitat fit into the framework.

Bering Sea FEP Climate Change Task Force

Dr. Diana Stram (NPFMC) and Dr. Kirstin Holsman (AFSC) presented an overview of the Climate Change Task Force (CCTF) workplan, and a summary of progress to date. The CCTF has responded to recommendations from the ecosystem committee and Council to make the product more friendly for general users, and to add an industry representative to the CCTF. The committee also greatly appreciated and agreed with the proposed regular (6 month) updates to the committee.

Much of the discussion at the committee focused on development of the FEP Climate indicators. One committee member encouraged the CCTF to consider local indicators as well as general ecosystem indicators, stating that local impacts are important for the residents of the northern Bering Sea region. The committee as a whole recognized the importance of indicators, but there was some discussion about the ways that indicators are developed and how they will be integrated into the work of the CCTF and LKTKS TF and BSFEP Team. One committee member noted that the LKTKS task force membership was selected by the Council to meet specific objectives of the task force, and developing indicators was not a part of the original objectives. Another committee member noted that the discussion of indicators has been happening for several years, including the development of an Action Module specifically to develop indicators for the BSFEP. The member stressed that development of indicators is imperative to be considered for ecosystem health and encouraged the committee and Council to have that discussion sooner than later. Other committee members noted the difference in progress of the CCTF and LKTKS TF and questioned whether the LKTKS should spend time developing indicators before the “onramps” for information integration was completed. Dr. Holsman and Dr. Stram noted that the CCTF plans an iterative process to develop indicators that will include public input and opportunity for review and revision. The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed much of the work of each task force and affected their progress in different ways. The task force co-chairs felt that their indicator identification process is not intended to impede with the other teams’ progress, but to borrow from the expertise of the other teams.

Bering Sea FEP Team report

Diana Evans (NPFMC) and Dr. Kerim Aydin (AFSC) provided a report from the BS FEP Team meeting that occurred on May 24-25 2021. The committee appreciates the work that the FEP Team has done to respond to recommendations from the committee and Council.

Committee discussion focused on the future work of the FEP Team. One committee member noted that the FEP Team, ecosystem committee, and other advisory bodies work at the pleasure of the Council and questioned whether the Council has requested that the FEP Team consider additional FEPs or action modules. The committee member also expressed concern with the FEP Team managing the work of existing and future task forces. The committee **agreed that a joint meeting of the FEP Team and the ecosystem committee would be useful to coordinate and provide consistent input to the Council. The committee requested the Council authorize a joint meeting in March 2022.**

One committee member noted that an action that is happening outside of the fishery management arena is the global focus on biodiversity conservation and the second objective of the FEP that includes consideration of biodiversity. The committee member was concerned that the biodiversity goal of the FEP was not well articulated, and that fishery management actions, in general, get very poor consideration for biodiversity conservation although many of the management actions do promote effective biodiversity conservation. The committee member recommended that the FEP Team, ecosystem committee, and Council should demonstrate that EBFM is a better way to go about protecting oceans and biodiversity than is portrayed by those advocating for strict closed areas. The committee member felt that this is likely to be the most important thing occurring and changing the face of fishing in the next few years and encouraged thoughtful development of that FEP objective. Another committee member agreed and noted that the common goals of biodiversity and sustainability and vibrant fisheries and coastal communities are not exclusive. The member suggested that the identification of ecosystem indicators, as discussed previously, is important and should proceed such that the Council and the public will be informed of the biodiversity conservation, fishery sustainability, and community benefits of EBFM.

Ecosystem committee planning

The committee reviewed the list of potential committee agenda topics and proposed schedule for the next year. A committee member suggested that the list included ongoing committee assignments, new assignments, and new initiatives, and recommended organizing the discussion around those broad themes.

Ongoing committee assignments include review of Essential Fish Habitat including the 2022 5-year review, and northern fur seal co-management and conservation. New assignments include review of the Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECM) component of EO 14008 and marine debris issues identified in the BS ESR in December. New initiatives include addressing GOA climate change, and coastwide issues such as forage fish.

Ongoing assignments

The committee agreed that the committee responsibility regarding ongoing assignments is to continue to receive information from scientists and co-managers to be able to inform the Council of issues that may require Council attention.

Northern Fur Seals

The committee receives regular updates on northern fur seals from the co-managers on the Pribilof Islands, NOAA AKR managers, and scientists from the AFSC. At the April 2021 committee meeting, the committee requested that staff contact co-managers on the Pribilofs to identify the preferred time for updates to the committee. The co-managers on St. Paul Island affirmed that the February time is preferred for their presentation to avoid subsistence and fishing activities on the island. The committee noted that a new piece of information is the plan by the AKR to update the Conservation Plan for Eastern Pacific Stock of Northern Fur Seal. The committee supports the request from the agency to update the ecosystem committee and the Council in October 2021.

Essential Fish Habitat

Regarding EFH, the committee noted that the issues are not new to the committee, and their role as in the past is to receive updates and reports and provide input to the agency during the review process. The committee has been receiving regular updates from the Habitat Conservation Division and looks forward to further review opportunities.

New Assignments

Other Effective Conservation Measures

The committee noted that the Biden administration's approach to the 30x30 initiative outlined in the America The Beautiful report recommends a ten-year locally led campaign. The committee learned about work that is ongoing regarding OECMs, including projects at the University of Washington, and a CCC workgroup that was authorized at the May 2021 CCC meeting. The committee recommends that the next step should be to schedule presentations from the groups working on OECMs to understand what work could be done to facilitate efforts in the North Pacific. One committee member recommended that the Council focus on how important ecological areas that have already been identified by tribes and NGOs can contribute to EO 14008, and whether additional management measures can be implemented to strengthen their resilience to climate change. Another member noted that this is different than the OECM task that was assigned by the Council but recommended that the committee continue to track the issue to see how the process develops.

Marine Debris

Regarding Marine Debris in the northern Bering Sea, the committee was informed that there is ongoing work by other organizations, including NOAA and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Ocean Service (NOS) to address marine debris. The committee recommended speaking with representatives of the NOS who are coordinating some of that work to understand what is happening and whether and how the Council can contribute. The committee also noted passage of the Saving the Seas Act and the creation of a Marine Debris Foundation and the [solicitation](#) of nominations for the Marine Debris Foundation Board of Directors recently announced in the Federal Register. The ecosystem committee **suggests that the Council highlight the FR notice to inform people who may be interested in the board of directors.** One committee member also noted that it is important to track efforts to

address marine debris in the GOA. There are multiple organizations addressing marine debris in the GOA and it was suggested that those groups also present information to the committee. Another committee member suggested that the ecosystem committee and Council may only have an informational role, and may not be in a position to take action.

New Initiatives

Gulf of Alaska Climate Change

The committee noted that there are many ongoing research projects in the Gulf of Alaska to understand the effects of climate change and other issues. The committee recommended that staff develop a scoping paper to summarize the existing projects, and the timelines associated with those projects. This will inform the committee about the timing of initiating action such as an FEP or other actions. It was noted that the work in the Bering Sea aligned well with the work on FEP and the same timing would be important in the GOA. One committee member noted that a project at the AFSC involves interviewing GOA fishers to record their perspectives on climate change and their responses. The committee noted that this could be a plenary session for the ecosystem workshop, but the committee did not make that formal recommendation, preferring to allow the ecosystem workshop group to develop the agenda.

Forage Fish Coastwide

The committee also recommended that staff develop a scoping paper to summarize the issues and state of science and current survey work regarding forage fish. Forage species are a foundation for ecosystem function and health and understanding status and trends of forage species is an important component to effective EBFM, and could provide important insights into trends for target species and fisheries. Some work to understand the effects of climate change on herring has occurred, but there has been little work on smelts, capelin, sandlance and other species. The committee noted that most scientific work on forage species is localized or regional, and that a coastwide assessment of the status of forage species will likely help to better understand status and trends. The committee also noted that it is premature to decide on what actions, if any, are warranted, and believes that a scoping paper would be useful to identify gaps in knowledge, and provide information for policy decisions or discussions about forage species. A scoping paper would help to identify if there are actions that the committee or Council could consider.

After discussion, the following recommendations or requests were made, all were approved without objection.

- **The committee recommends that the Council approve a joint meeting between the ecosystem committee and the BS FEP Team, potentially at the March 2022 FEP Team meeting.**
- **The committee recommends that staff finalize plans for ongoing briefings with northern fur seal co-managers and researchers and schedule them on an ecosystem committee calendar.**
- **The committee requests an update in October 2021 from the Alaska Regional Office Protected Species Division on the status of the Conservation Plan for the Eastern Pacific Stock of Northern Fur Seal.**
 - **The committee recommends that the update include information from the co-managers on the Pribilof Islands, if possible.**
- **The committee recommends that staff reach out to organizations addressing marine debris in Alaska to develop an overview of activities for committee review and consider whether a Regional Action Plan for Alaska would be useful.**
- **The committee recommended that the discussion paper requested by the Council in December 2020 to summarize whether Council regulatory actions meet the OECM**

definitions could be delayed until other projects to address OECMs are understood (Spring 2022).

- **The committee recommends that the committee continue to track how important ecological areas identified by tribes and NGOs can contribute to the EO 14008 discussion, and whether additional management measures can strengthen their resilience to climate change.**
- **The committee recommends that the Council task staff with developing a scoping paper on the status of research initiatives taking place in the GOA and the timelines associated with those projects. The scoping paper should identify gaps in understanding, and list actions that the Council could take to address them (GOA FEP, etc.). The paper should identify possible decision points such as structure of FEP Team, if BSFEP structure fits the GOA.**
- **The committee recommends that the Council task staff with developing a scoping paper on the state of scientific understanding of forage fish ecology, coastwide, the status of research initiatives on forage fish ecology, and the timelines associated with those projects. The scoping paper should identify gaps in understanding, any major issues regarding forage species status and trends, and list potential actions that the Council could take to address them.**
- **The committee recommends that the Ecosystem Workshop steering group meet again soon to continue planning.**

Following those recommendations, the committee received word that China has deposited its note of ratification of the Central Arctic Ocean Agreement, and that agreement can now go into effect. **The committee extends its congratulations to committee member David Benton for his work to develop the Central Arctic Ocean Agreement.**

The chair adjourned the meeting at 4:23pm.