

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

Tuesday, May 20, 2008 9am-12pm
Swedish Cultural Center, Seattle, WA

Committee: Stephanie Madsen (chair), David Benton (teleconf), Jon Kurland, Jim Ayers (teleconf), Dave Fluharty, John Iani, Diana Evans (staff), Bill Wilson (staff)

Others attending included: Lisa Lindeman, Sarah Gaichas, Jennifer Sepez, Jennifer Boldt, Chris Krenz, John Gauvin, Dave Fraser, Joe McCabe, Melanie Brown, Francis Wiese

The Ecosystem Committee discussed the Arctic FMP, further implementation of the Aleutian Islands Fishery Ecosystem Plan, and received updates on other issues.

Arctic FMP

Mr Wilson briefed the Committee on progress on the FMP since February. The Committee had several recommendations for the Council in February with respect to the structure of the alternatives, in particular Alternative 3, and notes that Mr Wilson has followed the Council's instruction to incorporate these changes. **The Committee concurs with the revised alternatives language.**

One issue that has been raised with respect to the development of the Arctic FMP is whether it will pass the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)'s approval. There have been other FMPs submitted nationally which prohibit fishing, and these have had difficulty in this respect. The Committee heard, however, that the Pacific Council's FMP amendment to prohibit krill fishing has recently been approved, after amendments to address OMB's concerns. Mr Wilson has indicated that he will follow up with the Pacific Council to make sure that any lessons from their experience can be put into effect in the case of the Arctic. The Committee noted that this may result minor changes to wording in the purpose and need statement, or the alternatives.

The Committee spent some time discussing an element of the NOAA GC guidance on the Arctic FMP. NOAA GC notes that the Council has the option to make a 'finding' that the State could be granted the authority to regulate unregistered vessels in the Arctic, in which case prohibiting fishing in the Arctic might be accomplished by deferring management to the State, without writing a Federal FMP. The Committee understands the option put forward by NOAA GC, but does not believe that the option reflects the Council's intent. For clarity's sake, and to prevent further confusion, **the Committee recommends that this option be treated in the Arctic FMP analysis as an alternative that was considered and rejected by the Council.**

The Committee recommends that the Council keep the development of the Arctic FMP high on the priority list, and on the timeline that would allow Council initial review in October 2008, and final action in December 2008. The schedule has slipped since the last time the Committee met in February 2008. At that time, Mr Wilson was concerned that the crafting of the FMP text would cause a delay to the schedule. Since then, Mr Wilson has set up a working group with Alaska Region, AFSC, and NOAA GC staff, which should hopefully address this issue. The Committee looks forward to reviewing a revised draft of the FMP.

The Committee gave minor feedback directly to Mr Wilson, including a suggestion to look at information on Arctic fishing conditions from other countries that do manage Arctic fisheries (e.g., Norway, Canada).

Aleutian Islands Fishery Ecosystem Plan

The Committee discussed how to proceed with further implementation of the AI FEP, particularly the issue of defining ecosystem health and desirable states for indicators. The staff discussion paper from February 2008 addresses some of these issues. In February, the Committee did not have time to address all elements of the discussion paper. The Committee would, however, like to recall the Council's attention to specific recommendations in February, addressing the issue of AI Ecosystem Team membership. The Team has highlighted some gaps in its expertise, which could be addressed by adding members to the Team before the next meeting. **The Committee recommended that the Council solicit a panel of names from the SSC, in order to add a marine mammal biologist to the AI Ecosystem Team.** In February, the Committee also discussed adding an economist to the Team, and what the specific contribution of an economist would be to the Team and to the FEP. The Committee asked staff to work with the Team and Council / NMFS economists to come up with a description of the type of additional economic analysis that might be informative for the FEP (including considerations of both market and non-market factors), and what the scope of socioeconomic expertise should be on the Team. This issue will be addressed at the next Committee meeting.

The Committee discussed at length a plan for moving forward with the policy elements of the FEP, to do with defining desirable ecosystem states. So far, the FEP has used an indicator approach to monitor the state the AI ecosystem. Dr Fluharty suggested that there are other approaches that might prove useful for the Council, including a 'limit of acceptable change' approach that might keep the focus more on management enterprise and impacts. Mr Ayers suggested identifying the basic elements and management practices that contribute to maintaining the health of the ecosystem. The Committee concluded that these issues are more profitably discussed in a face-to-face meeting. The Committee encourages the Team to organize a meeting to consider these various approaches, and also to come up with a structure for the Committee and the Council to work through some of these questions and decision points. It may be useful to invite some of the leading theorists to a seminar or working group exchange format. The Committee, or a subset of the Committee if full attendance is not possible, could participate in these discussions. Ms Evans noted that these discussions may have an additional utility to the Council, as a preparation for issues to be addressed when the programmatic groundfish PSEIS is updated.

NOAA's Integrated Services Plan

NOAA's Alaska Regional Collaboration Team has produced an integrated services plan for NOAA Alaska Region, which has been out for public review since April. The plan provides an overview of the NOAA products and services in Alaska, and includes a series of vision papers, each following a specific template, which identify ways in which NOAA would like to improve services in Alaska by 2020.

Although the public comment period has technically ended, NOAA has indicated that it is still interested to receive the Council's comments. The Committee notes that the concept of the 'vision' in each template is unclear; is it NOAA's vision (which seems inconsistent), or are the papers forecasting a possible future scenario? With respect to the Arctic fisheries vision paper, the paper does not appropriately reflect the Council's impending action to prohibit Arctic fisheries. Additionally, the Committee discussed the integrated services plan in the context of NOAA's planned integrated ecosystem assessments, a first step of which is to bring together information about NOAA's services across agencies. **The Committee does not note any policy concerns with respect to the plan, however the Committee recommends sending NOAA a letter to correct some factual issues in the plan and to request clarification about certain elements.** In particular with respect to integrated ecosystem assessments, the Committee appreciates the agency's work in collecting such information together for the first time, and the plan could be a useful tool for NOAA to inform the Alaskan public of NOAA services, and receive feedback on the value of these services. The draft plan would benefit from revisions to give it a clearer focus.

Updates on NOAA's integrated ecosystem assessments

Dr Fluharty informed the Committee that the NOAA Science Advisory Board is creating a standing committee that will address ecosystem management and track NOAA's integrated ecosystem assessments. As originally conceived, these ecosystem assessments were to be created at a regional level (so as to reflect regional ecosystem differences) and in partnership with non-NOAA agencies. Dr Fluharty, through the Science Advisory Board forum, has been trying to emphasize the importance of these partnerships. Nominations for the standing committee will be solicited through a Federal Register announcement, and **the Committee recommends that the Council track the call for nominations and actively participate in suggesting candidates for membership of the standing committee.**

Additionally, the Committee recalls that in October 2007, the Council sent a letter to Dr Steve Murawski requesting him to attend a Council meeting and provide a presentation on the agency's progress with implementing integrated ecosystem assessments, and specifically the proposed public input process, and linkages with partners such as the Council in the development of the assessments. **The Committee recommends that the Council contact Dr Murawski again to ask for this presentation.**