

NPFMC Ecosystem Committee history

The Ecosystem Committee (ECO) was established by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council in **1996**. The initial mission statement called for the committee to provide advice to the Council about ecosystem issues, serve as an educational forum for ecosystem issues, interact with the Groundfish Plan Teams, and provide direction and feedback for specific ecosystem-related research projects. Initially the committee developed a working definition of ecosystem-based fishery management for the NPFMC, provided advice on the Council's essential fish habitat (EFH) actions, and assisted in the development of the Ecosystems Consideration chapter in the annual groundfish Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) reports.

In **2004**, the Council reconstituted the ECO with new membership and refined the mission statement that called for the committee to:

Discuss current ecosystem related initiatives and assist in shaping NPFMC positions relative to:

- (1) defining ecosystem based management,*
- (2) structure and Council role in potential regional ecosystem councils,*
- (3) implications of NOAA strategic plan,*
- (4) draft guidelines for ecosystem based approaches to management,*
- (5) draft MSA provisions or requirements relative to ecosystem based management, and*
- (6) generally coordinating with NOAA and other initiatives regarding ecosystem based management.*

Over the next several years, the ECO was instrumental in the development of the Aleutian Islands Fishery Ecosystem Plan and the memorandum of understanding that created the Alaska Marine Ecosystem Forum (AMEF). The AMEF was an organization of ten Federal and four State agencies designed to improve coordination and cooperative understanding between the agencies on issues of shared responsibility for marine ecosystems off Alaska's coast. The AMEF was active between 2006 and 2011. The ECO also advised the Council on development of the Arctic Fishery Management Plan, revisions to EFH, and identification of Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC).

In **2013**, the ECO was again revised and the Council rearticulated the committee's purpose to allow the Council to better utilize the committee in addressing immediate issues and taking a longer term view of the Council's leadership role in the continuing evolution of Ecosystem Based Fishery Management (EBFM). A Council motion, passed in February 2013, stated that the Council:

1. Will identify from time to time issues that require immediate attention and refer them to the Ecosystem Committee. In the near term those issues could include EFH consultations, conservation of deep sea corals, marine canyons, or emerging ESA issues such as right whales.
2. Tasks the committee to continue work on further refinement and implementation of the Aleutian Islands FEP.
3. Tasks the committee to consider longer term EBM approaches and opportunities. Examples could include further work with respect to the Arctic FMP and changing conditions in the Arctic, refining approaches to EBM and integrating science into management decisions in a practical manner appropriate to North Pacific fisheries, or refining concepts of adaptive management and monitoring to ensure that management measures are meeting goals over time.

Over the next year, the ECO considered and contributed to development of an assessment of the risks posed by trans-Pacific shipping through Aleutian Islands passes, considered protections for deep-sea corals in the Eastern Bering Sea, and developed a draft Ecosystem Based Management (EBM) vision

statement for the Council. The Ecosystem Approach was adopted by the Council in **February 2014**, and reads as follows:

Ecosystem Approach for the North Pacific Fishery Management Council

Value Statement

The Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, and Aleutian Islands are some of the most biologically productive and unique marine ecosystems in the world, supporting globally significant populations of marine mammals, seabirds, fish, and shellfish. This region produces over half the nation's seafood and supports robust fishing communities, recreational fisheries, and a subsistence way of life. The Arctic ecosystem is a dynamic environment that is experiencing an unprecedented rate of loss of sea ice and other effects of climate change, resulting in elevated levels of risk and uncertainty. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council has an important stewardship responsibility for these resources, their productivity, and their sustainability for future generations.

Vision Statement

The Council envisions sustainable fisheries that provide benefits for harvesters, processors, recreational and subsistence users, and fishing communities, which (1) are maintained by healthy, productive, biodiverse, resilient marine ecosystems that support a range of services; (2) support robust populations of marine species at all trophic levels, including marine mammals and seabirds; and (3) are managed using a precautionary, transparent, and inclusive process that allows for analyses of tradeoffs, accounts for changing conditions, and mitigates threats.

Implementation Strategy

The Council intends that fishery management explicitly take into account environmental variability and uncertainty, changes and trends in climate and oceanographic conditions, fluctuations in productivity for managed species and associated ecosystem components, such as habitats and non-managed species, and relationships between marine species. Implementation will be responsive to changes in the ecosystem and our understanding of those dynamics, incorporate the best available science (including local and traditional knowledge), and engage scientists, managers, and the public. The vision statement shall be given effect through all of the Council's work, including long-term planning initiatives, fishery management actions, and science planning to support ecosystem-based fishery management.

In **2014**, the Council also initiated development of the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan (BSFEP) to formalize the Council's strategy to integrate ecosystem data (including traditional knowledge, local knowledge, and subsistence information) into the Council's decision-making process. The ECO was intimately involved in the development of the BSFEP goals, objectives, and actions, and continues to guide development of the BSFEP as it moves to development recommendations for implementation. Development of the BSFEP and the Action Modules (Local Knowledge Traditional Knowledge and Subsistence Information, and Climate Change) has been a major investment of ECO time since 2014.

As the BSFEP developed, and interest in integrating local and traditional knowledge and subsistence information into the Council's process has grown, the ECO became the primary advisory body for Council consideration of local and traditional knowledge and information about subsistence resources that may be impacted by Council actions. Although the BSFEP Local Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, and Subsistence Task Force is now directing development of the LK, TK, S Action Module, the ECO continues to receive regular updates and provide guidance to the Task Force.

In recent years the ECO has also become the opportunity for residents of rural Alaska to speak about their ecosystem concerns, and the ways that commercial fisheries, climate change, or other factors are affecting their environment and their communities. Although the ECO or Council may not have authority or opportunity to address the community impacts or their causes, some members of the ECO felt that it

was important that the Council provide opportunity for residents of coastal Alaskan communities to voice their concerns about ecosystem issues.

During development of the BSFEP from **2014 - 2018**, the ECO kept to a very active meeting schedule, including several meetings outside the normal Council meeting schedule. The extra-session meetings were necessary to keep the ECO informed of the rapid process that the BSFEP Team was making, and to provide ECO recommendations to the BSFEP Team. The approval of the BSFEP by the Council in December 2018 provided an opportunity for the ECO to reconsider their role in guiding the Council on EBFM.

In preparation for the **April 2019** Committee meeting, the ECO co-chairs queried committee members about issues they felt the committee should be considering for the near future. The ECO recommended 2 or 3 annual meetings in coordination with Council meetings is reasonable, and agendas should be robust and respectful of time and expense for members and the public to attend, and should reflect requests from the Council for committee input. General topics that the committee felt were appropriate for the committee to consider are, without prioritization:

- Climate effects across regions
- Arctic issues
- Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan
- Potential development of a Gulf of Alaska Fishery Ecosystem Plan
- Potential updates to the Aleutian Islands Fishery Ecosystem Plan
- Top level predators
- NOAA Science
- Groundfish workplan
- Russian/Canadian boundary and EEZ
- Habitat perspectives
- Pollutants

The Committee revisited their future work planning in **November 2020**, noting that a valuable part of their work is to consider challenges that they can start to consider to “get ahead of the curve” and identify areas that may affect Council decisions. The Committee also noted that because much of the committee and the Council’s attention and energy have been spent in the Bering Sea recently, issues in the Gulf of Alaska and the Arctic have not received as much attention, and it might be useful for the committee to consider these issues in a way to make them actionable for the Council as the need arises. Specifically, the Committee proposed and the Council approved two initiatives to review the state of the science and identify key questions of importance to Council management that may need to be addressed in the near future, specific to climate impacts coast-wide on forage fish, and ecosystem changes in the GOA.