

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

February 4, 2014 8:30am-12:30pm
Marion Room, Renaissance Hotel, Seattle, WA

Committee: Bill Tweit (chair), Stephanie Madsen, Jim Ayers, David Fluharty, Steve Ignell, Dave Benton, Jon Kurland (teleconference), Diana Evans (staff)

Others attending in person included: Carolyn Anwaester, Kerim Aydin, Kris Balliet, Heather Brandon, Melanie Brown, Merrick Burden, Keith Bruton, Raychelle Daniel, Jackie Dragon, Stephanie Dunlap, Sarah Ellgen, Rose Fosdick, John Gauvin, John Henderschedt, John Hocevar, James Landon, Mike LeVine, Steve Marx, John Olson, Megan Peterson, Amber Smith, Jon Warrenchuk

The Chair opened the meeting with introductions and a discussion of the agenda.

Ecosystem vision statement and action plan

The Committee considered comments on the draft ecosystem approach, which has been available for public review since the December 2013 meeting. Noting two comments on the importance of addressing fur seal declines, the Committee considered that this concern is already encompassed within the vision statement and will also be considered in the discussion on implementation. The Committee also reacted to a comment about the vision being implemented with best available science, acknowledging that “best available” should not equate to perfectly known and recognized that an adaptive management approach is appropriate. Structurally, the Committee reorganized the vision statement paragraph to emphasize the Council’s responsibility for managing fisheries for a variety of users, and the vision that these fisheries are dependent on a healthy ecosystem, with robust fish and marine species populations. After much discussion about whether to include the term ‘healthy’, despite the lack of a precise definition, the Committee chose to include it as part of the ecosystem vision, in addition to measurable descriptors that are currently used in the Ecosystem SAFE report– productive, resilient, and biodiverse. Similar discussion about the use of ‘explicitly’ in the Implementation Strategy resulted in the consensus that the Council process has to recognize the level of variability and uncertainty that we expect in the near future, and that decisions should be made cognizant of those dynamics.

The Committee recommends that the Council adopt the ecosystem approach, as revised and attached. As articulated in the Committee’s December 2013 minutes, the purpose of the vision statement is to reaffirm the Council’s focus on ecosystem-based fishery management, and to provide direction for long-term planning, specific fishery management actions, and science planning.

Previously, the Council had tasked the Committee with developing an ecosystem vision statement as well as evaluating its implications for near- and long-term Council actions. The Committee did not have time to work further on the latter aspect, and will focus on how the ecosystem approach affects Council actions at the next Committee meeting.

Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan

Diana Evans presented the discussion paper on considerations for developing a Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) for the Bering Sea. The paper identifies the original objectives of the Aleutian Islands FEP, and the process that was undertaken; the availability of ecosystem information about the Bering Sea; and questions for the Council in deciding whether to undertake a Bering Sea FEP. Given the information that is already available synthesizing the Bering Sea ecosystem processes, and identifying indicators for monitoring, the

paper suggests that in order to develop an FEP with added value, the Council might use the FEP to direct or guide specific management action of some kind.

The Committee discussed whether developing an FEP for the Bering Sea is warranted, given the fact that the area is well-studied, and the project would be resource intensive. Notwithstanding these challenges, the Committee sees particular value for the Council in undergoing this process, and **the Committee recommends that the Council should proceed with developing an FEP for the Bering Sea.**

The discussion paper summarizes some information about ecoregions in the Bering Sea, and identifies that the slope area falls within the southeastern Bering Sea ecoregion, and that the southeastern and central regions together comprise a distinct, subarctic, biogeographic province (identified as the Eastern Shelf province). This also equates approximately to the Eastern Bering Sea Large Marine Ecosystem area (EBS LME), adopted by NOAA. **The Committee suggests that the geographical scope of the FEP should be the EBS LME**, although defined by biophysical characteristics rather than bounded by the US EEZ. Focusing on the larger province comports with the Bering Sea Project (BSIERP) work, as well as other research. The Committee understands that there are two ecoregions included in the LME, and suggests that the southeastern area, which includes the slope, and the majority of fishing grounds, should be prioritized, in a stepwise approach to FEP development. The Committee also noted, however, that if the FEP is to address strategies for climate change, the FEP would need to consider impacts at the larger EBS LME scale. Defining the appropriate scope is directly linked to the Council's objectives for the FEP.

The Committee identified several potential objectives for a Bering Sea FEP. First, despite the availability of information about the ecosystem from other sources, the Committee saw a distinct benefit to developing a Council document to synthesize this information. While the FEP should clearly build upon, rather than duplicate, the work that is being done elsewhere, developing a Council document gives the Council ownership, and becomes a vehicle for expressing Council values. The Committee also heard from the AFSC that the process of identifying key ecosystem focal points for fishery managers, through the AI FEP process, has improved the identification of indicators and research needs, and would also be helpful in the Bering Sea. The FEP would be a way to ensure that ecosystem science is communicated to the Council and stakeholders, and would create an institutional mechanism for ensuring periodic updates. There can also be a feedback loop to the science community, to provide input on science planning.

The FEP could also be used for management evaluations of the Bering Sea, to inform future action. An example might be a retrospective evaluation of the ecosystem effects of fish extraction in the Bering Sea over the last thirty years, and the system of management, including the 2 million mt optimum yield limit. Another example could be to evaluate implicit and explicit tradeoffs in our fishery management, and see how ecosystem information could assist in understanding those tradeoffs. The FEP could also be used to identify and track the key ecosystem questions that are most relevant for fishery management. The Council's key questions may not necessarily be the same ones as those considered by other projects, such as BSIERP, therefore providing added value for a Council FEP.

Evaluating a Council response to climate change would be a very important objective for the FEP. We are beginning to see changes in ocean conditions, and there is a need to develop strategies for climate readiness. There is a lot of work being developed at the AFSC with ecosystem models, and scenario building. There may be a way, through the FEP, to start testing these tools, to learn how to use them more directly in fishery management, and to identify impediments to climate readiness that the Council can remedy. There may also be other ways to engage with the AFSC, and think about adaptive management for this area. Additionally, the human uses of the Bering Sea are likely to change considerably over the coming years, as non-fishing uses (vessel traffic, but also other activities) increase. It is important to be able to think about how to protect the Bering Sea as a food production area as well as a unique ecosystem. The FEP process, under the auspices of the Council, provides a transparent public process for considering key questions, such as what are key indicator species in the Bering Sea, what are metrics of resiliency, what are scenarios that would describe

what is happening there, including nonfishing activity, what are potential impacts on this highly productive ecosystem, and what tools are available to the Council in considering a response.

The Committee agrees that outreach will be a key component of developing the FEP, and an outreach plan should be considered as the project is further developed.

Updates

Alaska Arctic Policy Commission Preliminary Report

Stephanie Madsen provided a short update on the recently released Preliminary Report of the Alaska Arctic Policy Commission (AAPC), which is out for public review. The Commission was formed by the Alaska legislature to formulate State policy on the Arctic (noting that the definition of the Arctic includes the Bering Sea), and Ms Madsen and Kris Norosz are fishery representatives on the Commission. The report includes a short section of strategic recommendations on fisheries, and also supports closing Arctic waters until sufficient science is available, consistent with the Council's Arctic FMP.

Aleutian Islands Risk Assessment (AIRA) international shipping designations

Diana Evans shared an update from the AIRA Analysis Team and their contractors (Nuka Research), on the development of International Maritime Organization (IMO) applications for designating measures for international shipping in the Aleutians. The Team is developing two alternative packages for consideration by the AIRA Advisory Panel and Management Team. One will be a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) application that will include routing measures and areas to be avoided, and the second is an application for routing measures in the AI (not under the auspices of a PSSA). The Analysis Team is using three years of satellite vessel data to identify the routing measures. The intent is for the PSSA Workgroup and the AIRA Advisory Panel to decide which application to forward to NOAA and the Coast Guard, for the State Department to bring before the IMO. A workproduct is expected in April.

The Committee noted that they would like to review the applications when they are ready, to recommend whether the Council should provide comments on the applications.

AFSC vision development for ecosystem science

Steve Ignell reported on progress with AFSC efforts to develop a vision statement and science plan for their ecosystem science. The vision will be generalized to ecosystem-based management, as AFSC ecosystem science supports more than just fishery management. The ecosystem science plan will fold in and prioritize numerous current programs at the AFSC, such as the development of ecosystem components in stock assessment models, and conservation engineering work to reduce bycatch. A work product is expected in late summer or fall.

PSEIS development

Diana Evans noted that the Supplemental Information Review (SIR) for the Programmatic Groundfish SEIS is on track for Council review in April.

The Committee would appreciate the opportunity to review the SIR and provide recommendations to the Council.

EFH 5 year review, Norton Sound red king crab research

John Olson updated the Committee on the region's progress with planning for the 2015 EFH 5-year review, noting that more information may be presented in April. The intent is to conduct a more comprehensive review in 2015 than in 2010, and to focus on three key areas: improving EFH species descriptions, streamlining and updating the fishing effects model, and improving the non-fishing effects descriptions. Additionally, Mr Olson reported that the agency has secured some funding for Norton Sound red king crab

research, for a literature review, and development of a predictive habitat model. The Committee asked whether the Corps of Engineers had received and responded to the Council's letter from April, but Mr Olson was not aware of a response, to date.

Scheduling

The Committee discussed scheduling its next meeting during the April Council meeting, to continue addressing issues that the Council has previously tasked to the Committee (developing an action plan for the ecosystem approach statement, the EFH 2015 5-year review, tracking international shipping lane designations in the AI, review of the SIR, and Bering Sea canyons and coral conservation issues).

Ecosystem Committee's draft (2/4/2014)

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, and interrelationships between marine species. Implementation will be based on adaptive management, incorporating 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.