



Planning for Return to In-Person Meetings

STAFF DISCUSSION POINTS for Council review, April 2021

The Council staff are beginning to plan for how to resume in-person meetings, following over a year of all-virtual meetings because of the COVID-19 pandemic. To assist us with that effort, we are looking for Council input on some key elements that we will then factor into our planning.

While the requirement to move our meetings to an online platform has required us to forfeit advantages of meeting in-person, virtual meetings have also offered new opportunities that the Council may wish to continue. As we are planning what a return to in-person meetings looks like, we are thinking about two phases – the immediate transition, where we are still operating under some level of CDC guidelines about necessary social distancing actions to limit the spread of the virus; and the longer-term phase where we (hopefully) return to a more permanent meeting pattern that is not influenced by pandemic restrictions. The discussion that follows takes into account both short term transition needs and how to build towards the intended longer-term meeting format.

Timing

At this point, we are planning to hold our first in-person Council meeting in October 2021. A final decision on whether we can in fact proceed in-person will be previewed at the June Council meeting and finalized by early August, to allow participants and staff sufficient time for travel planning. We will also need to finalize what our COVID protocols will be for the Council meeting, and may suggest a meeting of the Council's Executive Committee to review and discuss, perhaps sometime in late August. Depending on prevailing conditions, **we are considering keeping either the SSC or the AP virtual in October**, to reduce the number of concurrent meetings. See more discussion below.

We do not intend to hold any in-person Committee or Plan Team meetings before the October 2021 Council meeting. Once we have run the first in-person Council meeting, we will be able to apply those lessons to other Council-sponsored meetings.

Remote participation at Council meetings (SSC, AP, Council)¹

To plan appropriately, we need to know who is allowed to participate in the meeting remotely. There are three categories of participation in our process:

- Testifiers
- Members (SSC, AP, Council)
- Presenters (Council staff, NMFS staff, agency report-givers, others)

Audio tech: We have been looking into technical audio solutions to have people both listen online to our in-person meetings as well as call in to testify or present, interact with members, and have a 2-way dialogue that is still broadcast in the room and online. Right now, we can definitely use a simple speaker phone, but we are still working on how to achieve high quality sound during conversations involving multiple persons in the room, on the phone, and listening online. We don't have the technology or

¹ Note, at this point we are not considering how remote participation would be handled at the Committee level. It is our intent that once a Council policy has been established, individual Committee Chairs would determine how to apply guidelines to meet the needs of their individual committees. We will also determine how best to adapt the Council policy to Plan Teams.

equipment to do that just yet, and AV expertise that is compatible with these high tech digital platforms is in high demand and difficult to secure.

Limits on staff availability: Administering any hybrid -type of meeting with in-person and remote features such as live audio streaming, remote participation, public comment, remote presentations would require dedicated and expanded administrative staff time during the meeting (in excess of current staff capacity). An in-person meeting requires all of our existing administrative staff to make the meeting run smoothly, and adding full remote participation, testimony, and broadcasting would require substantially more administrative tasking. To accommodate this limitation, our AV portion of the meeting may look a bit different than our current online broadcasting/ streaming.

Member experience: As everyone knows who has participated in a meeting with some members in the room and some on teleconference, it definitely changes the dynamic of the meeting. The member interactions and consensus building are a central part of our Council/SSC/AP process, and we caution that allowing some members to participate remotely may diminish that ability. Public testimony is a more discrete element of the meeting, so the impact is less. Presentations fall somewhere in the middle – depending on how involved the report, if there is a lot of need for back and forth questions between members and the presenter, having the presenter be remote may inhibit that discussion.

Staff recommendations on remote participation

Members: During an in-person SSC/AP/Council meeting, the staff recommends that the Council require participation of members be *only* in-person (i.e., members cannot participate and vote remotely). A mix of in-person and remote participation would cause meeting disruption, confusion, reduced transparency, and create enormous administrative challenges.

Testifiers: We can devise a solution to accommodate remote testimony, if that is the Council's interest, however we would recommend that remote testimony opportunities be condensed compared to in-person. For example, we might set up a single remote public testimony opportunity for all the D items combined, to occur before we start staff reports/ in-person testimony/ deliberations on each issue individually. At least until we can figure out a good solution and have some experience with remote testimony during an - in-person meeting, remote testimony for each agenda item would be disruptive and present substantial administrative challenges.

Presenters: Regarding presentations, our inclination would be to highly encourage presenters to attend in-person, and perhaps require it for complex reports, but we would need to offer some flexibility on a case-by-case basis, as we evaluate the nature of different presentations as decisional or informational.

Additional Council decision points

1. **Are the Council's recommendations on who can participate remotely exclusive to the immediate COVID transition period, or is the Council interested in exploring remote participation also for the longer term?** Knowing whether the Council is considering this for the long-term will help us understand what level of financial and time investment to devote to a solution.
2. **If the Council decides to allow remote participation, should we apply the same rules for the AP and SSC as for the Council?** Note that in the past during in-person meetings, we have not broadcast AP and SSC meetings. If the Council is considering allowing remote participation, **the first change would be that we would need to begin broadcasting those meetings.** Given that this step alone would require additional administrative staff capacity compared to previous in-person meetings, our staff recommendation would be to begin with broadcast only, and perhaps extend to remote testimony at a future meeting of the AP or SSC. As above, it will also help to

know whether this change is intended to be a temporary accommodation during the COVID transition, or a long-term change in approach.

3. **Is there a possibility that the Council might be interested in keeping at least one meeting a year as a virtual meeting, even once in-person resumes?** Knowing this may affect how we evaluate which broadcast platforms best meet our changing needs, and assist us with meeting planning and hotel arrangements.

How will transitional in-person meetings be different than previous in-person?

As we described in June 2020, we intend to base all of our decisions on whether and how to meet in person by taking into account the prevailing CDC guidelines and the State and municipal requirements of the place in which we are to meet. We will also take into account NOAA travel and meeting requirements, as so many of our essential participants are NOAA staff.

Pre-surveys of attendance: If we require in-person attendance for members, we will likely need to survey members (and possibly presenters) before a final decision about in-person is made, to see who is planning to travel to attend, and whether there are sufficient members to hold the meeting in person. We may also need to implement a registration protocol so that we can assess what our hotel space needs are likely to be. We would likely begin gathering this input after the June Council meeting concludes.

Broadcasting the meeting: We anticipate that once in-person meetings resume, we will no longer use webcams to show people in the room. Rather, we will effectively go back to broadcasting an audio-only version of the meeting, or if we can make the technology and staffing work, potentially audio and real-time view of the presentation slides. (Note that we will continue to post all presentations, supplemental materials, and motions on the eAgenda in real-time – that would not change.)

Scheduling: We are assuming that the Council will want to keep the total meeting “footprint” to no longer than we had previously (~9 days, Monday-Tuesday), or at least as limited as possible. To reduce the number of people mingling in hallways and bathrooms, we are considering running only two in-person meetings at a time in October. We could accomplish this by not starting the Council until the SSC has concluded, but this might lengthen the meeting overall; or by holding 2 meetings in person and keeping the third meeting virtual. Given the agenda items for October and December, under this latter scenario we would likely have the AP meet in person in October and the SSC meet virtually, and reverse that in December – AP would meet virtually and the SSC in person. We would also likely set up a separate room at the Hilton so our staff can give reports to the virtual SSC meeting from the hotel. We would need to account for the extra time to prepare the SSC or AP report in a virtual environment, and the report out to the Council would be scheduled to amalgamate several issues at once at a time certain, rather than reporting issue by issue following the staff presentation.

We are also planning, at least at the outset of return to in-person, to continue holding Committee meetings in advance of the Council, rather than in conjunction with it.

New audio equipment: As previously anticipated to occur in 2021, Ken Bettisworth will have concluded his audio services with us once we go back to in-person meetings. We have begun to purchase our own equipment that will be fully compatible with future broadcasting and online technical specifications, and our administrative staff will now be running audio and audio broadcasting. Council members should expect a system similar to that used in the AP and SSC, with push-to-talk microphones.

COVID-specific protocols

Vaccination status: We may not feasibly be able to require people to show proof of vaccination in order to attend or participate in our meeting, however we can encourage people to attend in person only if they have been vaccinated.

Mask requirements: We anticipate that CDC guidelines will recommend that all attendees wear masks that cover their nose and mouth, given the number of people congregating at the Council meeting.

Social distancing: We anticipate that we will need more meeting space than we usually require. We are looking into renting all of the meeting space on the mezzanine floor of the Anchorage Hilton, so that there would not be any other meetings happening in our immediate vicinity during the Council meeting, cost and space permitting. We will also utilize some of the additional space to enlarge our meeting rooms, with 6 ft (or prevailing guidelines) between members at the table, and spacing of public chairs.

Water/coffee/food: Food and beverage services in the meeting rooms are likely to be limited for members as well as the public. If we are not able to cater lunches for Council members, we may need longer lunch breaks.

Handout/reference table: We will be looking into options to minimize congregating around tables in the hallway, and may limit paper copies to on-request.

Contact tracing needs: We are discussing whether we will need a registry of who is attending the meeting in person, if we need to keep track of attendees for contact tracing purposes.