



Ecosystem Committee REPORT

12 November 2020 online meeting

The Ecosystem Committee met on 12 November 2020 to receive an update on the Local Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, and Subsistence information Task Force, consider upcoming Council ecosystem initiatives and committee agendas, and receive information about potential EFH consultation on a mining project in Norton Sound.

Committee Members in attendance:

Bill Tweit (Chair)
Steve MacLean (NPFMC)
Gretchen Harrington
Jeremy Rusin

Jim Ayers
John Iani
Rose Fosdick
Stephanie Madsen

Dave Fluharty
Theresa Peterson
Dave Benton

Members absent: none

Others in attendance:

The number of public participants varied throughout the day from 15 to more than 40 people.

The ecosystem committee meeting convened at 9:00 AM.

LKTKS Task Force Update

Dr. Kate Haapala (NPFMC) provided a high-level update on the Local Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, and Subsistence Information (LKTKS) Task Force's work to date, including major outcomes from the November 2020 meeting, and a snapshot of their work, overall. Dr. Haapala presented the Task Force's Goals and Objectives, and major outcomes from their meeting in November. The Task Force has moved forward to identify sources of LKTKS information to produce a search engine of "narrative" sources of data, and finalized its description of subsistence which considers Federal and State definitions as well as incorporating the cultural and spiritual dimensions of residents of the Bering Sea region. Dr. Haapala also described the Task Force's work to identify on-ramps for LKTKS information to inform Council decisions, and described the Task Force's work to define how the Council can meaningfully engage with LKTKS holders. Dr. Haapala highlighted that the Task Force felt that building relationships is key to meaningful engagement. Dr. Haapala also described the Task Force's case study concerning Norton Sound red king crab. Dr. Haapala took questions during and after her presentation.

The committee had several comments and questions regarding who holds Local Knowledge (LK) and Traditional Knowledge (TK). The work presented so far to the committee has focused on TK knowledge holders, but the committee pointed out that fishermen also have generations of LK. The Council regularly hears from a relatively small group of industry representatives, many of whom have accumulated years of LK about specific areas, but the Council does not regularly hear from skippers and experienced crew members who also hold LK. Those LK holders may be not aware or not able to participate in the Council process and could be treated similarly to how the Task Force recommends engaging tribes. There was also discussion about TK holders, and the definition of "tribes". Dr. Haapala was encouraged to consider a broader description than Federally recognized tribes, and to consider a broader definition of who are TK holders. Dr. Haapala noted that there is importance in recognizing tribes and tribal governments, but

noted that communities are recognized by “concentric circles” and the Task Force is not pushing to be exclusive, but acknowledges that there is reason to be cautious in assuming too much. (incomplete). One committee member noted that to Alaska Native people, when discussing tribes, it is important to think back millennia: an important element of TK knowledge is the transmittal of knowledge from ancestry. The ancestral knowledge provides a long-term relationship between the people and the area (land and water). It was noted that there is specific knowledge about where species occur, what they do, and how they are related to other species (e.g., forage fish to predators). But the most valuable **Traditional Knowledge** is that which allowed people to survive, and that is the knowledge that is transferred to the next generations.

Some committee members noted the overlap between the LKTKS Task Force and the Community Engagement Committee and wondered if there was consideration at the Task Force about how to use the recommendations to foster engagement with other tribes in other parts of Alaska. Dr. Haapala noted that the Task Force did discuss whether it was appropriate to consider other areas or focus exclusively on the Bering Sea region. Because the FEP is Bering Sea focused, the Task Force focused its efforts on the Bering Sea region but are aware of the interest in applicability to other regions. Dr. Haapala also noted that the CEC and the Task Force have some overlap, but also have distinct mandates. If the Task Force identifies recommendations for on-ramps, the work of the CEC may be useful to transfer those practices or recommendations to other areas.

One committee member noted that the ecosystem committee is an on-ramp to the Council process for varied sources of knowledge, including TK and LK, as the ecosystem committee has been tasked with reviewing information and providing recommendations to the Council on ecosystem and related information from agencies, tribes, and others.

In summary, the ecosystem committee acknowledges the work done by the LKTKS Task Force and that their work is still in progress. The work of the Task Force so far presents good information about TK, but the ecosystem committee has similar questions about how LK will be treated. The ecosystem committee is interested in hearing more clearly about how holders of TK are defined, separate from Tribal organizations, and potentially separate from Federal designations. The ecosystem committee also recognizes that the work is focused on the Bering Sea ecosystem, as appropriate, but is interested in understanding how the ecosystem committee and other committees of the Council may be able to expand the Task Force’s work to apply to other regions.

Council Ecosystem Initiatives and Ecosystem Committee Planning

Council staff provided a brief summary of the Staff Paper presenting a summary of the work that Council advisory bodies and other organizations are conducting regarding the state of the North Pacific ecosystem, and a series of questions that committees and the Council might consider as they develop plans for another ecosystem workshop. One committee member note that the Preview of Ecological and Economic Conditions (PEEC) work was not included in the staff paper. Staff indicated that the staff paper could be revised to include their work.

Next Ecosystem Workshop

Ecosystem committee members noted that this agenda item really identified two tasks: the assignment from the Council to consider another ecosystem workshop, and long-term planning for the ecosystem committee work plan. The committee chair noted that it would be productive to consider committee priorities, then consider how those affect or are affected by the request from the Council. The chair noted that neither objective for this agenda item are constrained to the Bering Sea system. The workshop can

build upon the LKTKS Task Force's conclusion that "Relationships are key" to fostering engagement and make progress on the FEP and other initiatives.

One committee member noted that the previous ecosystem workshop was thought of by many as a great opportunity for people who don't otherwise engage in the Council process to become involved. It was an opportunity for people from different communities to engage with Council stakeholders, as a preliminary approach to allowing people gather to talk about the basic features underpinning their lives and their unique ways of life. Introducing the different perspectives of formal observation and monitoring and people with long-term TK observations was a valuable outcome of the first ecosystem workshop. The committee member suggested that a small number of committee members could work with the chair to begin to organize a steering committee to work with Council staff to begin organizing a workshop. It was stressed that additional members of the steering committee should include people with diverse backgrounds and knowledge (TK and LK) to identify specific issues that could be discussed.

Another committee member suggested that there is value in focusing another ecosystem workshop on the Bering Sea considering all the work that the Council is already undertaking regarding the Bering Sea ecosystem. A useful organizing theme could be the FEP, FEP modules, etc. Other science initiatives from ICES/PICES, the Chukchi Sea Integrated Ecosystem Assessment, and others could also be considered. Another option could be to consider including Russian scientists (TINRO and NIRO), persons familiar with recent scientific investigations led by the NPAFC, and knowledge holders to enhance scientific communication and cooperation across the maritime border.

Other committee members stated that although they did not object to focusing the workshop on the Bering Sea ecosystem, that decision should not be made yet, and the steering committee should consider the value of including other ecosystems (GOA, Arctic) in the workshop. Alternately, breakout groups could discuss future initiatives to address the GOA or Arctic.

Because the Council has indicated that they wished to hear from other committees, and because other groups will be meeting in December (CC Task Force), **the committee reports to the Council that it supports another workshop, and if the Council agrees, that it begin to form a steering committee and recommended three Committee members (Madsen, Fosdick, Tweit) to serve on the steering committee along with others the Council may designate. This workshop should be organized around the FEP and related actions, and be responsive to the recommendation from the LKTKS Task Force recommendation that relationships are key by incorporating active participation and presentations by representatives with LK and TK experience and expertise. The committee hopes that the workshop would develop deliverables and actionable recommendations for Council consideration.** A steering committee should not only oversee workshop planning, but also ensure that a workshop will result in ongoing efforts to maintain the connections established during the workshop.

Future Ecosystem Committee work planning

The committee noted 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 noted that the time frame would be for work over the next year or two, and that issues could be area-specific, or coastwide in nature. For example, 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. The committee may be able to identify and shape issues in those areas that may become actionable for the Council at some point in the future. The committee noted that the Gulf of Alaska is the epicenter of ecosystem changes that can be seen in commercial species (e.g., Pacific cod) and other species (e.g., forage fish). It may be useful for the committee to consider these issues in a way to make them actionable for the Council as the need arises.

Forage fish are an example of coast-wide issues that the committee could also consider. There are known changes occurring in primary and secondary productivity throughout the North Pacific. There has not,

however, been a coast-wide look at what is happening with forage fish and how those changes might affect commercial fisheries. Identifying some of those coast-wide effects could be useful for the Council. The committee could begin considering ways to address those effects in the medium- to long-term (6 months to 2 years out).

One committee member reminded Council and agency staff that although the committee is considering these issues now, there is no expectation that the committee will begin working on these issues until tasked by the Council to do so. These are brainstorming suggestions to signal to the Council that they may be issues worth paying attention to, and the committee still works at the pleasure of the Council and will not begin work until directed by the Council. Realizing that there are limited staff and resources, the committee is developing a list of issues to be aware of and may address as the Council directs.

The committee chair noted that there is much international interest in the Arctic and suggested that the Council could be of most value by concentrating on upcoming issues in the Gulf of Alaska where there is less activity. Another committee member noted that the GOA is very diverse and complicated. There is more human population in the GOA than in the Council's other LMEs, and is in some ways segregated from the others. It was suggested that the committee consider side-boarding their considerations to specific activities or concerns that might have direct impact on Council managed species.

It was noted that the discussions about staffing and resource limitations are also happening at NOAA, and that given those restrictions it might be useful for the committee to consider work in the GOA that would be meaningful for commercial fishery management. The Agency is considering a Gulf-wide marine mammal survey in 2022 that would be important from a top-predator standpoint and could align well with the ecosystem committee's focus on the GOA.

The committee notices the Council of its interest in ecosystem changes in the Gulf of Alaska, and identifying key questions of importance to Council management and proactively identify for the Council issues that may need to be addressed in the near future. The committee requests that the Council authorize the committee to begin reviewing the state of the science to identify specific issues that the committee would consider. The committee also requests that the Council authorize the committee to begin considering coast-wide issues such as climate impacts on forage fishes by identifying potential impacts, organizing questions and recommending approaches for addressing changes in forage fish populations.

The committee heard public comment from Lauren Divine (Aleut Community of St. Paul Island), Mellisa Johnson (Bering Sea Elders), and Megan Williams and Michael Levine (Ocean Conservancy). Committee members noted that all public comments supported an ecosystem workshop focused on the Bering Sea, with breakout sessions to consider other areas for later discussion or additional workshops. Public comment also universally recommended inclusion of TK and LK holders in the workshop steering committee and encouraged the Council to be inclusive of tribal participation.

Norton Sound Mining EFH implications

Mr. Seanbob Kelly (NMFS AKR Habitat Conservation Division HCD) provided a presentation about a proposed large suction dredge gold mine in Bonanza Channel/Safety Sound estuary in Norton Sound. The mine would produce nearly 1 million cubic yards of dredged material per year for 5 to 10 years. The Narrative and Plan of Operations submitted by the proponents do not yet meet required standards to allow NMFS to conduct an essential fish habitat (EFH) consultation. However, in previous letters to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) NMFS has stated that HCD has determined that the proposed action may adversely affect EFH for salmon and red king crab. The complicated permitting process is ongoing, and although NMFS has submitted three letters informing proponents of EFH requirements over the last three years, NMFS has not yet received a completed EFH Assessment. The agency is currently waiting

for the USACE decision on NEPA requirements for the mine, and continues early coordination work with the USACE and other resource agencies to identify potential impacts to EFH. Once NMFS receives an EFH Assessment, the agency will conduct the EFH consultation. The Council has previously stated that it wishes to be informed of projects for which the Council may wish to submit comment in cooperation with NMFS.

After Mr. Kelly's presentation, the committee noted that the proposed mine sits in an area of great importance to Norton Sound residents, many fish camps are located in Safety Sound, and the community of Solomon is very near the proposed mine site. Some committee members noted that Tribal Consultation would be an important part of any discussion. Mr. Kelly reminded the committee that the USACE is the action agency and is the responsible agency for any Tribal Consultation. One committee member noted that Safety Sound provides food for ESA listed ice seals, and provides habitat for all salmon species in Norton Sound. The committee noted that removal of 1 million cubic yards of material per year is a major disturbance and is likely to have major impact on the estuary and surrounding habitats. A committee member noted that this sort of project is exactly the sort of project that the ecosystem committee is tasked with keeping the Council informed of, and that the ecosystem committee should be kept aware as the project progresses.

One committee member asked what the State of Alaska's position on the mine is. Mr. Kelly replied that the State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has permitted core test dredging but has not yet permitted the full mine. The State permits are required before the USACE begins review.

The committee received public comment from Charles Lean and Chandre Szafran.

After public comment Gretchen Harrington (ARA HCD) noted that the USACE is the action agency and would be responsible for any Tribal Consultation. NMFS is consulting under EFH non-fishing activities, but only after the action agency prepared an EFH Assessment. Once an adequate EFH Assessment is received, NMFS will begin the consultation phase and provide conservation recommendations to the USACE. The USACE can disagree with the conservation recommendations but must, in that case, explain in writing what actions they will take to protect EFH.

After discussion **the ecosystem committee notes that they received the presentation and significant public comment identifying substantial concern by Norton Sound residents on potential impacts to subsistence species of fish and marine mammals. The committee has never received a non-fishery related EFH report as detailed as this and recommends that the Council track the mine proposal and permitting process and, when appropriate, provide comment both on the potential impacts to Essential Fish Habitat, and on wide-ranging ecological and social concerns in the Norton Sound region. The committee also recommends that the Council encourage the action agency and reporting agencies engage in meaningful Tribal Consultation.**

Next Ecosystem Committee meeting

The ecosystem committee requests that the Council approve the next ecosystem committee meeting on January 26, 2021. Potential agenda items include a presentation on EBFM operationalization from the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, a report from the Climate Change Task Force, operational plan for the deep-sea coral Alaska research program, best practices to address marine invasives, and continuing planning for the next ecosystem workshop.

The ecosystem committee meeting adjourned at 3:30 PM.