

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

December 6, 2005 1-4:30 pm
Birch Room, Hilton Hotel, Anchorage, AK

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

Others present included: David Witherell, Bill Wilson, Jon Pollard, Earl Krygier, Cathy Coon, Lenny Corin, Linda Kozak, Kristy Despars, Sandra Moller, Clarence Pautzke, Terry Quinn, Jane DiCosimo, John Gauvin, Michelle Ridgway, Donna Parker

The Ecosystem Committee discussed the five items on its agenda. The next Ecosystem Committee meeting will be on Tuesday, February 7, 2006, starting at 1pm, at the Doubletree Hotel in Seattle, WA.

1. Ecosystem Forum in the Aleutian Islands

Ms Evans provided an overview of the Council's progress with the State of Alaska and other Federal agencies regarding a regional ecosystem collaboration in the Aleutian Islands. The meeting materials and meeting summary from the most recent meeting in mid-November was discussed. Ms Madsen reported that overall the meeting generated interest and cautious support among the agencies. Dr Fluharty identified sources of information for similar regional collaborations elsewhere in the nation. Ms Madsen noted that the initial boundary of the Aleutian Islands considered for this forum includes the islands west from Unimak Pass.

2. Report on the NOAA Research Council External Ecosystem Task Team (eETT)

Dr Fluharty reported on the preliminary findings and recommendations of the external Ecosystem Task Team, of which he, Ms Madsen, and Dr Terry Quinn are members. The eETT was created to provide advice to NOAA on its science and research programs as they relate to NOAA's overarching goal to protect, restore, and manage the use of coastal and ocean resources through ecosystem-based management. The ecosystem goal cross-cuts the nine NOAA line offices, and Dr Fluharty noted that part of the challenge is to make a centralized and line-office driven coordinating and asset distribution function build toward a regional ecosystem approach.

Members of the Committee provided feedback to Dr Fluharty and the eETT regarding NOAA's approach to Congressional appropriations, the consideration of Alaska as a single regional ecosystem complex, the importance of maintaining the regional focus and identifying contacts for each regional ecosystem, and the need to replace aging infrastructure.

3. Summary of Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC) report

Dr Terry Quinn presented a summary of a recent PSMFC report, "Strengthening Scientific Input and Ecosystem-Based Fishery Management for the Pacific and North Pacific Fishery Management Councils." The report was based on a panel discussion of six scientists, including Dr Quinn. Among other things, the report provides a definition of ecosystem-based management, and practical steps for the Council to take to move forward with ecosystem-based management.

The Committee discussed the report, including the issues of balance and tradeoffs, and the fact that an ecosystem approach such as envisioned in the report has not yet been actuated. Mr Benton asked Dr Quinn how the findings of the report might apply to the Council's Aleutian Islands Fishery Ecosystem Plan action. Dr Quinn suggested the following guide: first, to identify the interactions in the Aleutians, including spatial relationships and human activities. The recent volume of Fisheries Oceanography devoted to the ecology and oceanography of the Aleutian Islands provides much of this information. Second, the Council should consider what it wants to accomplish in the Aleutian Islands. By listing societal goals, and the various forms of human involvement in the Aleutian Islands, tradeoffs will become evident. This would provide a way to move forward.

4. Discussion of ecosystem elements of MSA reauthorization bills

Ms Evans presented a brief summary of ecosystem elements of the Bush Administration's MSA reauthorization bill. There are no specific references to the ecosystem in S 2012, Senator Stevens' reauthorization bill.

The Committee discussed the bills briefly, and noted that neither reauthorization bill would prevent the Council from proceeding with its AI Fishery Ecosystem Plan as currently conceived. Dr Fluharty suggested that the Council may want to consider some kind of workshop with other regions that are working on FEP efforts, such as Hawaii and the East Coast.

5. Aleutian Islands Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP)

Ms Evans summarized four discussion items relating to the AI FEP for the Committee's attention: to revise the purpose and need statement to reflect SSC comments from October, 2005; to comment on the outline and the focus on cumulative and aggregate effects; to identify whether the FEP should contain goals and policy; and to consider the role of an AI Ecosystem Team. The Committee proposed various changes to the discussion paper, and recommends that staff revise the paper to make appropriate edits, addressing the SSC's comments from October, and incorporating the ideas from the PSMFC report. The Committee recommends that the discussion paper be brought back before the Committee at the February meeting, after which the Committee intends to make recommendations to the Council.

Specifically, the Committee requested staff include and compare the Council's ecosystem-based management definition with the definition arrived at in the PSMFC paper. The Committee also noted that other definitions not addressed in the PSMFC paper, such as a definition used by the NMFS-Council working group on ecosystem guidelines, could also be included. The staff discussion paper should also include a section to describe how the FEP will function as a planning document.

The PSMFC report recommended specific steps for the Council to take to advance their ecosystem-based management approach (see pages 7 and 14 of the report). The revised staff discussion paper should address how the process of developing the FEP will accord with these steps. Analytical tools such as the traffic light approach highlighted by Dr Quinn in his presentation should also be explored.

The Committee decided that discussion of an Ecosystem Team should be deferred.