

North Pacific Fishery Management Council

Dan Hull, Chairman
Chris Oliver, Executive Director



605 W. 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, AK 99501-2252

Telephone (907) 271-2809

Fax (907) 271-2817

Visit our website: <http://www.npfmc.org>

DRAFT NPFMC Ecosystem Committee Minutes April 4, 2017 Anchorage, AK

Committee members present: Bill Tweit (Chairman), Stephanie Madsen, Rose Fosdick, Dave Fluharty (phone), Doug DeMaster, John Iani, Jon Kurland, Jim Ayers, Steve MacLean (Council staff)

Others present in person or online: Chris Rooper, Maggie Mooney-Seus (NOAA), Diana Evans, Lori Swanson, Steve Marx, John Warrenchuk, Michael Williams, Tom Gelatt, Becca Robins-Gisclair, Nicole Kimball, Julie Raymond-Yakoubian, Brendan Raymond-Yakoubian, Theresa Peterson, Mike LeVine, Quinn Smith

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Ecosystem Committee (ECO) met in Anchorage, AK on April 4, 2017 from 9 AM – 5 PM. Agenda items included the Bering Sea FEP; Programmatic Groundfish Objectives; AFSC Budget, MML northern fur seal research, AKR northern fur seal management; EFH Omnibus EA; Lenfest Ecosystem Task Force report.

Bering Sea FEP

Diana Evans presented a review of progress made toward the Bering Sea FEP. There was discussion from the committee about refined objectives in the FEP Discussion Paper, and the process for identifying new action modules for development. Ms. Evans clarified that objectives in the discussion paper had not been changed, but rather the FEP Team edited objectives to make them consistent with the Ecosystem Vision Statement and other operational objectives that the Council has identified in the FMPs and other documents. Committee members expressed concern that action modules currently identified should be completed before any new action modules are identified. When new action modules are identified, a process similar to other Council processes should be followed whereby the Council identifies its priorities, then proposals for action modules that meet those priorities are developed. This is similar to the process used by the Council to develop new HAPC areas. The Plan Team, in its minutes, indicated that development of new action modules could be done later, and the committee agreed. Ms. Evans stated that the FEP Team felt that some ideas for new action modules could be developed now, while the currently identified action modules are developed without committing to new action modules. Ms. Evans stated that it is important to get to a point where the process for developing new action modules is identified and documented for public review. Ms. Evans also announced that Mr. Davin Holen has been nominated to the BS FEP Team, and forwarded his bio to the Committee.

There was discussion about the schedule for completing the core FEP document, and a desire by the committee to see updates to the discussion paper before the core FEP is presented to the Council in October 2017. An update to the committee was suggested for June.

The committee expressed its appreciation to Ms. Evans and the BS FEP team for the update and look forward to future updates and completion of the core FEP document.

AFSC Budget, northern fur seal management and research

Dr. Doug DeMaster (AFSC) presented information about the current and immediate future budget scenarios for the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, noting that increasing responsibilities for personnel costs and reduced overall budgets will likely result in declines for programmatic spending. Some areas have seen substantial declines (pinniped research) while other programs have seen increased funding (Cook Inlet beluga whales) due to programs like “species in the spotlight”. Reductions in operational budgets will likely result in decreased survey effort (fewer stations sampled) for 2017. DeMaster pointed out that the number of FTEs at the AFSC had decreased by more than 75 in the last five years. Mr. Michael Williams (NMFS, AKR Protected Resources Division) presented information about the agency’s management responsibilities and plans for northern fur seals on the Pribilof Islands and Bogoslof Island.

Dr. Tom Gelatt (AFSC Marine Mammal Laboratory [MML]) presented information about the MML Alaska Ecosystem Program’s northern fur seal research program.

Regarding northern fur seal management, the Ecosystem Committee and presenters commented that it may be time to update the northern fur seal Conservation Plan that was last updated in 2007. One Committee member noted that the Council previously formed a Fur Seal Committee (FSC), and it may be appropriate, now, to reconstitute that FSC to ensure that regular communication between the Council and northern fur seal managers and researchers continues. Other committee members felt that the Ecosystem Committee is the appropriate committee to engage with AFSC and AKR regarding northern fur seals. Ultimately, the Committee recommended that the Ecosystem Committee should maintain that role, rather than reconstituting the FSC.

The Ecosystem Committee concluded that the Ecosystem Committee should continue to communicate with the AFSC and AKR regarding northern fur seals. The Committee also recommended that the Council encourage NMFS to update the northern fur seal Conservation Plan, and expressed their support for keeping northern fur seal research a high priority in agency and Council research priorities. The Ecosystem Committee encouraged the agency to continue to consider winter (central north Pacific and California Current) conditions as they affect northern fur seal populations.

Essential Fish Habitat Omnibus Amendments

Steve MacLean (Council staff) presented information about the Environmental Assessment for 8 Actions to amend the Council’s FMPs to modify Essential Fish Habitat in the BSAI Groundfish, GOA Groundfish, BSAI Crab, Arctic, and Salmon FMPs, revise conservation recommendations for non-fishing activities, consider revisiting HAPC, and revise EFH research priorities.

The Ecosystem Committee commends the EFH team for making continued advancements in analytical approaches and continued progress in refining the description and identification of EFH, as well as addressing potential threats to EFH from fishing and non-fishing activities. Much of the committee discussion centered around Action 7 (HAPC). The Committee was divided on whether to recommend Alternative 1 (Status quo) or making no recommendation on Action 7. The committee noted that the Council previously expressed its intent to align the HAPC process with the EFH review, but noted that no compelling information was presented in the EFH analysis that would justify the Council initiating HAPC action now. The Council retains the ability to initiate a HAPC process at any time. There was discussion about whether it is possible to recommend that Action 7 be removed from the EA, but it was noted that could preclude the analysis for moving forward at this time. Ultimately, the Committee chose to make no recommendation on Action 7.

The Ecosystem Committee passed a motion to recommend the Council adopt Alternative 2 for Actions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8, and make no recommendation concerning Action 7, and move the analysis forward for initial and final review.

Programmatic Groundfish Objectives

Jim Armstrong (Council staff) provided an update on the annual review of the Council's Groundfish Management Policy Objectives and Workplan. There was discussion about the original intent of and reasons for the Programmatic SEIS, and what Council actions or documents stem from the PSEIS or would require revising the Programmatic SEIS. The committee appreciates the more regular updates to the Policy Objectives and Workplan.

Lenfest Fishery Ecosystem Task Force report

Dr. Phil Levin (U. Washington & The Nature Conservancy) presented the final report from the Lenfest Ecosystem Task Force, which was completed in November 2016. Dr. Levin noted that many of the recommendations from the Task Force are already in place in the Council's programs and Plans, but did note areas where the recommendations from the Task Force were not in place: establishing clear priorities, and measuring the effectiveness of actions. There were questions about the next steps for the Task Force, Dr. Levin noted that the objectives of the Task Force are complete. The Committee thanked Dr. Levin for the update.