

NPFMC Ecosystem Committee

Minutes 5 June, 2018 Kodiak, AK

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Ecosystem Committee met in Kodiak, AK on 5 June 2018 from 9 AM to 5 PM.

Committee members present included Theresa Peterson (Co-Chairman), Bill Tweit (Co-Chairman), Dave Fluharty (by phone) Rose Fosdick, Jon Kurland, John Iani, Stephanie Madsen, Jim Ayers, Jeremy Rusin.

NPFMC Ecosystem Workshop

Katie Latanich (Fisheries Forum) presented the Summary Report and Discussion Guide from the Ecosystem Workshop hosted by the Council in February 2018. Public testimony was provided by Lauren Divine (Aleut Community of St. Paul Island) and Brenden Raymond-Yakoubian (Kawerak, Inc.). The committee asked a few questions of clarity from Ms. Latanich, and after public testimony went right into discussion of the ecosystem workshop, and recommendations for the Council.

There was consensus among the committee that the ecosystem workshop was a valuable exercise that presented diverse and inclusive perspectives on ecosystem issues and concerns. The report and discussion guide is a strong statement that the NPFMC has done much, and continues to do much, to develop ecosystem-based fishery management policy and strategies. Many of the Council's current initiatives, such as the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP), community engagement considerations, social science planning team (SSPT) and ecosystem modeling, are consistent with the principles of ecosystem-based fishery management (EBFM) as presented in the summary report, and the committee noted that it is important to consider how to knit the initiatives together, so they work synergistically to move the Council's EBFM initiatives forward. Committee members noted that the ecosystem workshop brought disparate stakeholders, including some who might not otherwise be involved, together to discuss issues of importance to the Council and communities. Some committee members felt the Council should continue to actively involve rural communities and tribes in ecosystem discussions. Committee members expressed that it is important that the dialogue that was emphasized at the workshop should continue and urged the Council to ensure that momentum is not lost. However, it was also noted that it is important to ensure that the purpose of the Council's EBFM efforts are not lost in the desire to continue communications or develop another workshop. It's important to "connect the dots" of all the similar initiatives being conducted to aid the Council during its discussions and considerations.

The committee members noted that although they all felt the workshop was a useful and valuable exercise, the committee was struggling with identifying the appropriate next steps. There was discussion about whether annual or biennial workshops should be considered, or if other informal, informative opportunities should be pursued first. One suggestion was to request that NMFS consider an evening session to facilitate public discussion of the Ecosystem Considerations Report when the SAFE Report is introduced. An evening session could also provide opportunity for the AFSC to continue dialogue about ACLIM that was presented during the ecosystem workshop. The committee also felt that NMFS should also continue to seek opportunities for engagement with diverse stakeholders outside the normal Council process.

After considerable discussion the committee concluded that **the NPFMC has already done much and continues to do much to develop ecosystem-based fishery management policies and strategies. The Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan, community outreach and engagement strategies, social sciences planning team, and ecosystem committee are some of the existing efforts to continue to develop the Council's EBFM strategies. The Council's existing efforts provide opportunity for communities and stakeholders to communicate with the Council about issues and ecosystem concerns. The Council should continue to seek ways to allow for informal, informative discussions about ecosystem issues,**

and develop ways for those discussions to infuse the whole Council process. The Council should remain alert to opportunities to engage scientists, communities, user groups, and other stakeholders to advance the Council's EBFM policies and strategies.

Northern Fur Seal Conservation Plan Update

Mr. Michael Williams (NMFS AKR) gave a detailed presentation of NMFS' research and management activities related to the objectives in the Northern Fur Seal Conservation Plan. Although the Plan was last updated in 2007, the goals and objectives identified in the plan continue to guide NMFS' activities to recover the population. Northern fur seals were declared Depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1986, and remain depleted because the population is estimated to be below 50% of carrying capacity. The population, overall, continues to decline, driven by the decreasing numbers on St. Paul Island despite stable or increasing pup production on St. George Island and Bogoslof Island. Mr. Williams' presentation is available on the ecosystem committee website (<https://www.npfmc.org/committees/ecosystem-committee/>) and provides detail on the numerous fur seal conservation activities and publications from NMFS since 2007. The committee encourages the Council and other interested stakeholders to review the presentation.

The Conservation Plan identifies four objectives to guide NMFS' activities to recover fur seals, paraphrased as follows:

1. Identify and eliminate or mitigate the cause or causes of human related mortality...
2. Assess and avoid or mitigate adverse effects of human related activities on or near the Pribilof Islands and other habitat essential to the survival and recovery...
3. Continue and, as necessary, expand research or management programs to monitor trends and detect natural or human-related causes of change...
4. Coordinate and assess implementation of the plan...

The committee felt that the objectives identified in the conservation plan remain relevant to the conservation of northern fur seals, and it is clear that there is a tremendous amount of current and ongoing work. It was noted that the presentation and information contained therein will be useful to identify research priorities related to the conservation of northern fur seals. The committee noted that the Council has previously requested annual updates from NMFS AKR and AFSC on the agency's management and research activities related to northern fur seals. **The committee recommends that the Council also request annual updates on northern fur seal activities and research from the co-management partners on St. Paul Island and St. George Island.**

Bering Sea Bathymetry

The committee received an excellent and informative presentation from Mark Zimmermann (NOAA, AFSC) summarizing work to improve the understanding of bathymetric data in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea. Mr. Zimmerman and his colleague, Megan Prescott, have digitized and corrected smooth sheets from the Gulf of Alaska, Cook Inlet, and Bering Sea to improve bathymetric data available to the public through AFSC's bathymetry website (<https://www.afsc.noaa.gov/RACE/groundfish/bathymetry/>). The improved bathymetric data have been instrumental in numerous NOAA and Council projects, including the model-based descriptions of Essential Fish Habitat recently adopted by the Council in the 5-year EFH review. One of the results from the improved bathymetric data that stood out to the committee was the apparent sounding error that resulted in erroneous identification of the Zhemchug Pinnacles. **The committee recognized the value of the project to improve understanding and utility of bathymetric data for the Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea and encourages the Council to express support for resources necessary to complete the project.**

Dutch Harbor Dredging

The Committee received a presentation from Mr. Chris Hoffman (US Army Corps of Engineers, Alaska District) summarizing a project to dredge a channel through a shallow bar at the entrance of Iliuliuk Bay that limits access to Dutch Harbor by deep draft vessels. The project may involve confined underwater blasting with concomitant risks to marine mammals. The USACE is coordinating with NOAA Habitat to develop dredging and deposition plans, and plans submit an Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) proposal to NOAA Protected Resources to take a number of marine mammals by Level B (disturbance) and Level A (injury) harassment in September 2018. The dredging project will allow access to Dutch Harbor by deep draft vessels that currently do not have access. This will increase safety by allowing those vessels to use Dutch Harbor as a harbor of refuge, for medical evacuations from deep draft vessels, and reduce the risk of fuel spills as fuel transfer to Dutch Harbor currently involves lightering to smaller vessels and the increased risks associated with multiple transfers. **The committee appreciates the presentation from Mr. Hoffman, encouraged him to continue outreach to the fishing industry and other interested parties, and requested an update to the committee after the IHA application has been submitted.**