

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

April 8, 2014 10am-5pm
Spruce/Aspen Room, Hilton Hotel, Anchorage, AK

Committee: Bill Tweit (chair), Stephanie Madsen, Dave Benton, Jon Kurland, John Iani, Jim Ayers (teleconference), David Fluharty (teleconference), Steve Ignell (teleconference), Diana Evans (staff)

Others attending in person included: Karla Busch, Kris Balliet, Heather Brandon, Melanie Brown, Merrick Burden, Jackie Dragon, Matt Eagleton, Sarah Ellgen, John Gauvin, Jeanne Hanson, Gretchen Harrington, Brad Harris, John Henderschedt, Frank Kelty, Mike LeVine, Todd Loomis, Steve MacLean, Joe McCabe, John Olson, Lauren Smoker, Jon Warrenchuk

The Chair opened the meeting with a discussion of the agenda.

Bering Sea Canyons Discussion Paper

Steve MacLean presented an overview of the Bering Sea Canyons discussion paper. The paper responds to a June 2013 Council motion requesting additional information to validate the coral predictive model, and identifying possible management measures for conserving areas of coral concentration and associated fish productivity. The paper also identifies that since the Council's June 2013 action, the dialogue amongst stakeholders has broadened from specifically coral protection, to include discussion of the need for broader habitat protection, including closing representative habitat types, and considering research closures.

The Committee debated the tension between wanting to move Council action forward, and wanting to wait for the results of the summer camera drop survey, which are not anticipated to be available to the Council until October 2015. There was discussion about whether there are areas of the Bering Sea slope and shelf break that can currently be verified as having coral present, on the basis of which the Council could initiate an analysis now. There was also discussion about what type of new information and validation will be available after the survey work. The Committee discussed how much progress staff could make in preparing an analysis of coral protection areas without actually establishing lines on a map.

The Committee recommends the Council continue on the course set in its June 2013 motion to focus on areas of likely high abundance and concentration of deep-sea corals in Pribilof and Zhemchug Canyons. In doing so, the Committee recommends:

1. the Council consider developing a purpose and need statement for this action. As part of the purpose and need statement the Council could include the objective to identify areas of known high concentrations of deep-sea corals and develop appropriate management responses. The purpose and need statement could consider the importance of deep-sea coral concentration areas as habitat for managed species, the historical patterns of fishing along the Bering Sea slope (including foreign fishing) and in the canyons, the potential for fishery impacts on areas of high coral concentration, and the relevant provisions of the MSA regarding coral protections including the discretionary provisions of Section 303 (b) (2) regarding area closures.
2. establishing a timeframe for identifying areas for consideration, and developing the appropriate analyses. The timeframe should be designed to facilitate such preliminary analyses (general fishery and economic data, potential fishery impacts on corals, etc.) as may be appropriate, but area delimitation should be timed to be informed by the Fishermen's Information and camera drop projects scheduled for the summer of 2014.

In making this recommendation, the Committee recognizes that the Bering Sea slope and corals issue also overlaps to some degree with the EFH 5-year review. The Committee considered that a discussion of broader habitat protection is appropriate within that context. Members of the Committee were not clear what identifying “research closures” would entail, and the AFSC offered to initiate a further conversation internally about the concept of closures for protecting ecosystem function.

PSEIS SIR

Diana Evans presented the Supplemental Information Review (SIR) that has been prepared for the Alaska Groundfish Fisheries Programmatic SEIS (PSEIS). The SIR is designed to assess whether NEPA’s conditions requiring an EIS to be supplemented have been met for the PSEIS. The Committee agreed that the SIR represents a useful and thorough review of new information about the groundfish management program, compared to the program that was analyzed in the 2004 PSEIS. Staff has suggested additional work to ensure the expert reviews are consistent, and the Committee supports these improvements. With respect to the public comment letter requesting more time to read the document, the Committee notes this request can be accommodated while the SIR is being finalized. However, **on the basis of the draft SIR, and considering the groundfish management program as a whole, it is the Committee’s view that the threshold for requiring the PSEIS to be supplemented has not been triggered.**

While the SIR focuses specifically on the question of whether the Council and NMFS are required to supplement the PSEIS, the Council may also choose to supplement or begin a new programmatic if desired. For example, if the Council wants to change its management policy for the groundfish fisheries, this would require FMP amendments, with an accompanying NEPA analysis. The Committee questioned whether the recently adopted ecosystem vision statement ought to be included in the groundfish management policy, and what process that might entail. Following discussion, the Committee concluded that, because the vision statement is in essence derived, or distilled, from the principles that are the basis of the groundfish management approach, revision to the FMP policy is not necessary. The Committee did note the utility of the SIR in assessing the change in cumulative effect of the Council management program in last ten years, as the Council has fully implemented the management policy identified in the PSEIS preferred alternative, and now embodied in the FMPs.

2015 EFH 5-year Review Approach

Matt Eagleton and Diana Evans briefed the Committee on the proposed approach for the 2015 EFH 5-year review. The 2015 review will focus on three key areas where revised workproducts are anticipated: refining EFH species descriptions with specific habitat data, streamlining and updating the fishing effects model, and developing a spatial dimension to the non-fishing effects descriptions. The review will also prioritize stocks for habitat assessment, in accordance with the Habitat Assessment Improvement Plan (HAIP), and will inform the Council’s 5-year consideration of whether habitat priorities should be identified for a HAPC call for proposals. John Olson and Dr. Brad Harris provided a more detailed overview of work on the fishing effects model, identifying both new data sources that will be included in the model, and analytical tools that are being built in, for example, to assist in examining the efficacy of Council closures, or stock-specific habitat questions.

The Committee asked a number of clarifying questions about the scope and content of the review. Committee members were interested in how the review will represent progress both in our understanding of the relationship between habitat productivity and species productivity, and in addressing the issues identified in the 2004 CIE review on the evaluation of the effects of fishing on EFH. Other Committee members suggested that it would be useful to reflect on whether the process that the Council has chosen to use to implement EFH and HAPC provisions in the North Pacific is working effectively, and to consider including an implementation plan for conducting habitat assessments for prioritized stocks under the HAIP rubric process (while cautioning that such a plan would need to take into account other staff tasking and funding

priorities). The Committee discussed how the proposed review timeline reconciles with the anticipated camera drop results that will be available to the Council in October 2015, and noted that the Council will likely still be considering EFH actions at that time. There was also discussion of how the review will address the Arctic, especially non-target species including forage species (fish, zooplankton, etc), and whether the role of the sea ice/water interface should be considered as EFH in the Arctic. The Committee noted that the review should look at the evaluation of non-fishing activities related to increased shipping and traffic through the Bering Strait, and what role the Council might play regarding these activities..

The Committee supports the 5-year review approach as it has been laid out, and anticipates that it will result in an informative and useful product. Additionally, given heightened public and Council interest, the Committee hopes that the review will specifically highlight any new information relevant to the habitat of the Bering Sea shelf break, slope and canyons areas.

Mr Eagleton also updated the Committee about eight EFH projects that were funded this year.

Other issues

Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan

The Committee discussed the Council's motion from February 2014, which initiated a BS FEP, and requested that the Council engage in a process to get public input about what the appropriate objectives for the FEP should be. The Committee notes that the term "scoping" implies that the Council is embarking on a regulatory action, which is not the case for the BS FEP. The Committee suggests that the Council hold outreach meetings to solicit public comment on the design and objectives for the FEP in Nome, during the June Council meeting; in Anchorage, perhaps in August; and in Seattle, in September. The February discussion paper identified the primary issues that still need to be considered with respect to the FEP. The Committee recommends that a one-page handout be prepared that summarizes these questions, and orients the public as to the issues on which the Council is requesting input.

Ecosystem vision statement action plan

In February 2014, the Council adopted an ecosystem vision statement, which reaffirms the Council's focus on ecosystem-based fishery management. The Council had tasked the Committee with evaluating the vision statement's implications for near- and long-term Council actions. The Committee discussed what the action plan should look like, and agreed to prepare a one page table of existing and planned Council actions, and ideas for conceptual proposals for future consideration, related to the primary implementation categories on which the vision statement provides direction (long-term planning, specific fishery management actions, and science planning). The Committee also suggested that it might develop some trigger questions for Council consideration, for example at final action, regarding how a proposed Council action accords with the vision statement. The Committee proposes to work on this action plan by email, and finalize a workproduct for the Council at their next meeting.

Committee Scheduling

The Committee discussed scheduling its next meeting. The Committee suggests holding an Ecosystem Committee meeting immediately following the Seattle outreach meeting on the BS FEP. Agenda items would include recommendations on the BS FEP, an ecosystem action plan, progress on the EFH 5-year review, as well as any updates on other issues that the Council has asked the Committee to track (e.g., Alaska Arctic Policy Commission, international shipping lane designations in the AI).