

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

September 16, 2014 8:30am-5pm
Room 2039, Building 4, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, Seattle, WA

Committee: Bill Tweit (chair), Stephanie Madsen, Jeanne Hanson, John Iani, Jim Ayers, David Fluharty, Steve Ignell, Diana Evans (staff)

Others attending included: Kerim Aydin, Merrick Burden, Yvonne DeReynier, Molly Dischner, Jackie Dragon, Matt Eagleton, Tim Essington, Ivy Fredrikson, John Gauvin, Chris Hoffman, Jim Ianeli, Mike LeVine, Kristin Marshall, Steve Marx, John Olson, Ivonne Ortiz, Brad Robbins, Becca Robbins-Gisclair, Erin Taylor, Ernie Weiss, Stephani Zador

The Chair opened the meeting with introductions, and minor rearrangements of the agenda to accommodate scheduling constraints.

Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan (BS FEP)

Yvonne deReynier gave a presentation on the development of the Pacific Fishery Management Council's FEP for the California Current. An appendix to the FEP lists ecosystem initiatives for the Council. Every March the Council receives a State of the Ecosystem report, reviews the initiatives, and biennially selects a new initiative to work on. The Committee asked about public involvement in the development of the FEP, how the FEP is currently used in the Council process, and the relationship between the FEP and the California current integrated ecosystem assessment (IEA). The Committee appreciated the Pacific FEP's balance between capturing a big picture perspective, and leading to specific management action.

Tim Essington, the co-chair of the Lenfest Fishery Ecosystem Planning Taskforce, gave the Committee a briefing on the Taskforce's scope of work and first meeting. The taskforce is focusing work in three areas: 1) identifying the benefits of fishery ecosystem planning, with case studies; 2) developing a menu of different ways that people have done EBFM; and 3) developing new science tools that can help bring non-traditional data into the management process. The intent is to provide guidance that results in action but is not prescriptive. Although the timeline for the project is two years, the intent is to provide regular updates on the taskforce's work through a distribution list (members of the public can subscribe at <http://eepurl.com/dsPqD>). The Committee asked a number of clarifying questions, including identifying that Councils are a prime audience for the taskforce's work.

Diana Evans reviewed the public comment received to date from public hearings in Nome and Seattle, and identified recurring themes. These include, but are not limited to, acknowledgement that the Bering Sea environment is changing, and the FEP can provide information for adaptive management decisions, and to consider tradeoffs among ecological, social, and economic factors. The FEP should include local and traditional knowledge, and consider subsistence. The FEP is an opportunity to consider our current ecosystem-based management actions in a comprehensive way, and to identify gaps and a strategy for filling them. **The Committee notes that there is broad support for continuing with development of a BS FEP**, and that many of the same themes have been expressed, at the public hearings in Nome and Seattle, and in written comment letters. While acknowledging that the Council will want to consider comments from the Anchorage hearing before acting on the Ecosystem Committee recommendations, the Committee nonetheless felt it appropriate to provide recommendations for the further development of an FEP.

The Committee discussed the question of how to design an FEP that builds on existing work, but also adds value for fishery management, and specifically for Council members making management decisions. For example, the groundfish PSEIS and accompanying groundfish management policy, the EFH EIS, and

the annual Ecosystem Considerations chapter and its Bering Sea ecosystem assessment, address many of the policy, monitoring, and scientific assessments that would be considered within an FEP. At the same time, the Committee considers that a Bering Sea FEP provides an opportunity for the Council to look comprehensively at the process of considering the BS ecosystem in fishery management. **The Committee suggests that the FEP can be a tool that provides comprehensive integrated information to assist the Council in decisionmaking, and help them to realize the Ecosystem Vision statement, and to avoid catastrophes and conflicts.**

One of the discussion items from public comment was agreement that the BS FEP should lead to action of some kind. The Committee discussed what a management outcome of the FEP might be, and noted that it is important to manage expectations early on with respect to this point. The Committee agrees with the previous Council position that the FEP should not replace FMPs, but also acknowledges that there needs to be clear forethought about how the development of the FEP will affect the Council management process. **The Committee believes that the FEP should be action-informing rather than action-forcing.**

The Committee recommends the following primary and secondary objectives for the BS FEP:

- **Primary:** sets up a framework for considering policy choices and tradeoffs affecting FMP species and the ecosystem
 - Resiliency of Council management strategies, and options for responding to changing circumstances (e.g., climate change scenarios, changes in shipping patterns, etc.)
 - Evaluation of management tradeoffs – among FMPs, fisheries, or with other activities
- Identifies most relevant BS ecosystem characteristics from a fishery management perspective
- Communication tool for ecosystem science and Council policy
- Transparent public process for Council to identify ecosystem values and management responses

The Committee also considered what goals and objectives should be identified within the FEP. Based on the themes from the public hearings, there seems to be a lot of consensus that the Council goals of maintaining a healthy ecosystem, and maintaining fish stocks at sustainable levels, will be assisted by development of an FEP. Committee members suggested that the FEP should provide specific, actionable metrics. Although the Committee did not make any recommendations at this stage, various examples were suggested. For example, the 15 management actions in the Science Advisory Board Report could be tangible objectives in the FEP. These include, among others, developing a regionally specific description of the ecosystem, and an assessment of the food web. Assessing Bering Sea fishery management comprehensively with respect to EBFM best practices might be a different objective. A tangible action might be to utilize the modeling capacity at the AFSC, and integrated ecosystem assessment work, to evaluate climate change scenarios and options for management response. The Committee was also intrigued by the Pacific FEP's Chapter 5, which lays out fishery impact considerations for other agencies to use in evaluating non-fishery activities impacting the marine environment, and the Aleutian Islands FEP 'summary of interactions' table (i.e., Table 6-1, on page 141).

The Committee recognizes that there are national initiatives ongoing through the Science Advisory Board and Lenfest that may provide additional guidance on the development of the BS FEP. While it is important to continue to track these national initiatives, the Committee believes that the Council should still continue with its own development, and that there will opportunity to interact with national guidance over the development of the project. The Committee also had some discussion about what the BS FEP product should look like. **The Committee recommends adopting the PFMC mantra to “inform but not overwhelm”.** The Committee recognized that using and developing the FEP will likely be iterative, and is considering different ways to capture the FEP as a process, rather than merely as a static document. In terms of next steps, if the Council decides to continue development of the FEP, the Committee will

request an AFSC briefing on the Bering Sea integrated ecosystem assessment, and relevant ecosystem models such as FEAST and FAMINE. The Committee will discuss the FEP format further, and explore alternative products for the FEP, rather than just a “book on a shelf”.

Ecosystem Vision Statement Action Plan

In February 2014, the Council adopted an ecosystem vision statement reaffirming the Council’s focus on EBFM. The Council had tasked the Committee with evaluating the vision statement with respect to implications for near- and long-term Council actions. The Committee has identified four overarching avenues for giving effect to the vision statement:

1. Planning (long-term planning processes)
2. Management (FMP and other MSA implementation and management actions)
3. Science (science planning to pursue science and information to support EBFM, including increased dialogue between scientists and managers on ecosystem science products)
4. Human component (both fostering an inclusive and transparent process, and incorporating a social science component into ecosystem discussions)

The Committee recommends four actions that could give effect to the Council’s vision statement:

- **Continue with development of a Bering Sea FEP.** It was noted that the AI FEP document also included planning elements that would be useful to revisit. (long-term planning)
- **Revise the groundfish workplan,** which identifies priority actions to implement the groundfish management policy objectives, and which has not been updated since 2007 (long-term planning/management actions)
- **Plan a Council discussion with the NPRB and AFSC** to share the Council’s ecosystem vision statement, and look for opportunities to promote partnership in ecosystem research, both through the annual RFP process as well as the NPRB’s integrated ecosystem research programs (science planning)
- **Re-engage with the Alaska Marine Ecosystem Forum (AMEF).** Meetings of the AMEF have lagged in recent years, and yet the Forum is a productive venue for sharing information on issues of marine stewardship with State and Federal agencies. Shipping issues, the IMO polar code, and Arctic issues were all suggested as relevant topics for an AMEF meeting. The Committee also volunteered the Ecosystem Committee chair to be the Council representative, should the Council Chair or Executive Director be unable to attend.

Based on the Council’s decision, the Committee is interested in helping with next steps on any or all of these actions.

2015 EFH 5-year Review Update

John Olson updated the Committee on progress with the 5-year review, and the various habitat research projects that have been funded this year. The team is developing a new methodology to allow the use of more precise information to describe EFH for managed species when appropriate, through the use of General Additive Model (GAMs). With respect to fishing effects, the 2005 model has successfully been converted to the new code. The group is working on incorporating new data sources, however they will need an additional 3-4 months in order to complete their work. Progress is also being made with developing models to assess non-fishing effects on EFH.

The Committee noted that they are heartened by the increase in funding for habitat research this year, and the development of tools and models to better define EFH and understand habitat impacts. The Committee clarified with John that new models will be reviewed by the SSC’s peer review process prior to being used in to inform the identification of appropriate EFH areas in the 5-year review. At least one

Committee member believes that is imperative, for legal and credibility reasons, that there should not be reduction in areas identified as EFH, and their respective protections, without AFSC verification. **The Committee strongly supports using field data to ground truth the models being developed**, both the GAM models to identify EFH descriptions and those for non-fishing effects. Steve Ignell indicated that this should be feasible, using data both from the recent coral survey and other AFSC field projects. **The Committee recommends that the timeline for the 5-year review be extended in order to accommodate incorporating the new data sources into the fishing effects model.**

Other issues

NOAA Science Advisory Report on EBFM

Dave Fluharty presented a 2014 report of the NOAA Science Advisory Board, “Exploration of Ecosystem Based Fishery Management in the United States.” The report assesses progress toward implementation of ecosystem-based fishery management (EBFM) among regional fishery management Councils. The overarching conclusion is that NMFS should have a conference across the regions, to look at progress on ecosystem science, identify key drivers of change by region, and use that to prioritize regional science needs. Dr Fluharty also reported that a new task of Board is to investigate ways to value ecosystem services, with a tentative timeframe of reporting back in a year. In response to a question from the Committee, Dr Fluharty noted that the report clearly identifies stock assessments as a cornerstone to understanding the ecosystem.

Norton Sound red king crab research

John Olson presented the results of research to identify red king crab habitat in Norton Sound this summer. The research is responsive to Council concerns in 2013 about the US Corps of Engineers Regulatory Division’s removal of a stipulation on mining permits that prohibited mining in waters shallower than 30 ft due to the impact on red king crab habitat. **The Committee reiterates its concern about allowing permits in shallow waters in Norton Sound, and supports the NMFS generating the necessary information about crab habitat through this study.**

Alaska Arctic Deep Draft Ports study

Chris Hoffman, of the US Corps of Engineers Environmental Study division, briefed the Committee about a feasibility study that is currently underway to expand deep draft capacity for shipping and resource development in the Arctic. A likely alternative is expansion of the Port of Nome, for which there could be a need to dispose of a quantity of dredged material in marine waters beyond 3 miles. Mr Hoffman reported on preliminary field studies focusing on crab and benthic fish impacts in order to designate an ocean disposal site. The Committee asked several questions of clarification, considering other options for disposal and consideration of maintenance dredging. It was suggested that the investigation should also take into account subsistence uses of the marine waters, and potential impacts on salmonid species which are not well sampled for with the gear types used in the study. The Committee also encouraged Mr Hoffman to liaise with Mr Olson about NMFS’ recent survey work.

National Ocean Acidification Report

Steve Ignell gave a briefing on the national Ocean Acidification Plan, and the ocean acidification research and monitoring that is taking place in Alaska. He noted that the importance of research into the biological response of organisms to ocean acidification, which is of particular concern to fishery managers, may sometimes not be recognized as much as the need to monitor physical changes in pH values. The Committee asked questions of clarification, but made no specific recommendations.

Aleutian Islands Risk Assessment Draft Operational Response Report

Diana Evans alerted the Committee to the recently issued draft report of the Aleutian Islands Risk Assessment Project, “Recommending an Optimal Response System for the Aleutian Islands”. The public comment period for the report is open until October 27, 2014. In addition to other measures, the report identifies routing measures and areas to be avoided for the Aleutian Islands, which are intended to apply to all deep-draft vessel traffic engaged in international commerce through the area. The Committee asked whether the routing measures would apply to fishing vessels, and the report clarifies that “fishing vessels and vessels trading at Aleutian ports would not be required to adhere to these restrictions for that portion of their voyage necessary to reach their fishing grounds or port of call.”

Alaska Arctic Policy Commission

Stephanie Madsen, who represents fishing interests on the Commission, updated the Committee on the strategic recommendations in the Commission’s draft Implementation Plan. The recommendations are to 1) addressing of response infrastructure gaps in the Arctic, 2) strengthened the research agenda, 3) healthy communities, and 4) economic development that responds to the cultural requirements for Alaska marine resources. With respect to fishery management, Ms Madsen noted that the report identifies support for current governing structures, including the Council process, which should be the framework for any State or Federal fishing in Arctic waters. Ms Madsen may schedule a listening session on the draft report in conjunction with the Council meeting.

Committee Scheduling

The Committee discussed scheduling its next meeting, and the Chair will investigate the possibility of dates in November, as the Committee has identified some potential conflicts with holding the meeting on the Tuesday of the December Council meeting. Currently, the Committee would plan to review the BS corals discussion of alternatives, as previously requested by the Council. The Committee also expressed an interest in scheduling an update on progress with ecosystem modeling and the integrated ecosystem assessments during the last year.