



## Council Communications Group

### DRAFT REPORT

The Council Communications Group (CCG) met May 22-23, 2018, in Sitka, Alaska. The following members were in attendance:

Diana Martino, CFMC  
Alida Ortiz, CFMC  
Jennifer Gilden, PFMC  
Sandra Krause, PFMC  
Emily Muehlstein, GMFMC

Sylvia Spalding, WPFMC  
Maria Shawback, NPFMC  
Peggy Kircher, NPFMC  
Mary Sabo, MAFMC  
Janice Plante, NEFMC

*Participated via teleconference:*

Kim Iverson, SAFMC  
Cameron Rhodes, SAFMC

*Also in attendance:*

Rebecca Ferro, NOAA Fisheries Communications  
Laurel Bryant, NOAA Fisheries Communications  
Julie Speegle, NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region

The SAFMC participated via teleconference, and NOAA Fisheries Communications staff attended and provided input and updates where relevant.

This was the second in-person meeting of the CCG since becoming an official advisory committee to the Council Coordination Committee in 2012. The first CCG meeting was held in Honolulu in 2016. The communication leads from all eight councils used this opportunity to share best practices, review different applications and programs, increase technical expertise, and analyze communication strategies and tools. While every Council's communication staff and strategy differs slightly, the goal of informing and engaging the public remains at the forefront.

### 1. Communication and Technology

Each Council provided an update on its communication tools and procedures (attached).

*Public comment and forms*

The CCG discussed ways to allow the public to comment on Council agenda items electronically, and several Councils have an electronic platform for this. The SAFMC uses Google docs; the PFMC and NPFMC use a public comment form hosted by Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission; and the SAFMC uses Wufoo forms. Oral public comment was considered more effective than written comment.

The CCG discussed website administration and agreed that ideally, one person should be responsible for website postings and changes. However, some Councils do not have the resources to allow this. Website updates end up being split up between many people, often without oversight.

**Best practices:**

- Understand where all electronic comments and other data are stored and where they are backed up regardless of what application is in use.
- Ensure that data is searchable for FOIA purposes.

- Create and use a style guide for website postings to ensure clarity and uniformity across the site.

#### Offices at Council meetings

The CCG expressed interest in providing internet/office services other than what a hotel provides at a Council meeting. The PFMC provides a full-service office and internet for the public at each of its Council meetings. The group discussed challenges with inconsistent wifi connectivity at Council meetings. Some Councils provide their staff with personal wi-fi hotspots. As Councils move toward paperless meetings, meeting facilities' ability to provide reliable internet is a growing concern.

#### **Best practices:**

- Internet speeds and connectivity issues should be written into hotel contracts.
- Meeting broadcasts can be conducted over Council wifi hotspots when the hotel internet is unreliable.

#### MSA Reauthorization effects

Some recent MSA reauthorization bills have proposed new requirements for broadcasting, distribution, and archiving meeting recordings. While some Councils broadcast SSC meetings, other Councils have concerns with the resources available to do so. Although the proposed legislation includes the language "to the extent practicable," concerns remain regarding fluctuating internet and connectivity in remote areas. The MAFMC, NEFMC and GMFMC broadcast SSC meetings and have a trained technical staff person to monitor the broadcast while assisting with the SSC report.

## **2. Promoting the Regional Council system**

The CCG discussed the need to provide a unified voice from Councils on certain topics.

#### Logo and letterhead

For the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and CCC meeting in 2016, the CCG developed a logo that is being used on various materials. At this meeting, the CCG reviewed a draft letterhead for future CCC correspondence.

#### [fisherycouncils.org](http://fisherycouncils.org)

The fisherycouncils.org website, which was redesigned after the 2016 CCG meeting, is a tool for the Councils to share joint messages and communication products and additionally serves as a repository for all CCC and SCS meeting documents, correspondences, and proceedings. MSA Reauthorization information and correspondence to and from the CCC is also posted here, along with draft bills, section-by-section summaries, Council comment letters, and the CCC working paper, all of which are more appropriately housed on a shared site. The NMFS website, which has archived CCC materials, is undergoing a transformation and may not act as a "file share service" in the future, making it especially important to have this information permanently available on fisherycouncils.org.

The site is designed to not require frequent updates and is easy to maintain. The MAFMC has agreed to keep the site updated with support/input from other CCG members.

**Recommendation:** Continue to host and maintain [fisherycouncils.org](http://fisherycouncils.org) as the repository for all CCC, SCS, and joint Council materials.

*RFMC two-page overview*

Mary Sabo from the MAFMC will update the two-page Regional Fishery Management Councils (RFMC) overview with minor changes to the quick facts section. This document was circulated to legislative staffers and stakeholders. Jennifer Gilden of the PFMC will use material from the same document to create a story map, a more interactive and detailed version of the same flyer that will be posted on the Regional Councils site. This material serves as an introduction to the Council process and role for those who are unfamiliar with the RFMCs.

### **3. Communicating effectively using social media**

Cameron Rhodes from the SAFMC gave an overview of Fish Rules—a mobile online app—and how it was developed and is used. The GMFMC is also contracted with Fish Rules.

Although Fish Rules has competitors, it is the industry leader. Its developers are responsive, its utility robust and user-friendly, and fishermen engaged. NMFS is converting its site to be mobile-friendly, but Fish Rules is an app that works when there is no internet connection—using GPS—and shows both state and federal regulations. Additionally, the app is interactive, using alerts and a small social component. Currently, the app focuses on hosting recreational regulations and will eventually provide commercial regulations.

The CCG had a lengthy discussion regarding regulations and whose responsibility it is to host them. Those who use the app agreed that if a Council isn't currently hosting regulations, they shouldn't begin. The CCG agreed that the Code of Federal Regulations is not fisherman-friendly; both SAFMC and GMFMC saw a need for fishermen to have access to plain-English regulations and are working to meet that need. The Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) is meeting that need for MAFMC and NEFMC. The CCG agreed that while regulations should ideally be hosted by NMFS, apps and similar technology allow Councils to address immediate needs to communicate with fishermen, such as up-to-date regulations, on a region-by-region basis.

Emily Muehlstein of the GMFMC gave an overview of platforms and metrics of social media sites the Council uses and noted that people who use social media use it as their primary source of news. She highlighted the term “digital divide,” where one is either a digital immigrant or digital native—reflecting comfort level with digital technology. In addition to using social media to share all Council communications, positive social content such as “Fish Fact Friday” or “Marine Map Monday” are used as time allows. YouTube is used to explain Council actions, although there is an up-front cost and learning curve to produce videos. YouTube audiences are typically “ready learners” who gain in-depth understanding from the videos.

**Best practices:**

- Draft and keep “rules of (social) engagement.”
- Engage the public with the appropriate social channels for a given Council’s audience (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.).
- Keep track of analytics.
- Write articles to answer FAQs on specific items that can be referred to over time.

- Use a content management system to monitor/post across platforms.
- Understand algorithms to be most effective on Facebook.
- If there are no resources to monitor Facebook/YouTube comments, turn them off.

#### **4. Public comment inside/outside Council meetings**

The CCG discussed commenting apps and forms under the earlier agenda item of public comment tools. There was brief discussion regarding public comment forms and the ability for the public to comment at committee meetings, which varied among Councils.

#### **5. Working effectively with news/media**

Janice Plante, NEFMC, gave a presentation on best practices when working with reporters and news outlets. She emphasized the importance of developing relationships with reporters and making time to talk with them. The NEFMC is now using press releases instead of newsletters, but she cautioned that, even with a carefully crafted press release, the media can extract and sensationalize any part of it. If misinformation has been distributed, seek a correction from the author and, if that fails, then the editor. At times, a counter-point story can be written for another publication or pitched to a different reporter. Services such as Meltwater or Stove Boat can provide media updates.

**Best practices:**

- Know your reporters and media representatives and develop relationships.
- Send out positive news stories often.

#### **6. Regional and national communication between Councils and NOAA**

Laurel Bryant from NOAA Office of Communications gave an introduction into fisheries communication. The NOAA Fisheries process for approving press releases is lengthy, and there are more effective ways to get news and priority messages out via social media, featured stories, and leadership messages. Partnerships with Councils and finding stories to highlight regional fisheries, programs, or species are ways to engage and educate the public. Contact information for NOAA Fisheries Communication personnel was included as part of the presentation for reference. The CCG reviewed NOAA Fisheries' video site and YouTube channel, and specific videos used for outreach and education were highlighted. There was a discussion of using these on individual Council pages along with translation or subtitles where necessary.

**Best Practices:** All NOAA photos and videos are public domain and available for use. Councils are encouraged to use these freely.

**Recommendation:** In addition to reaching out to the Executive Directors of each Council when there is a message that needs to be amplified, NOAA Fisheries Communications should include the communication specialist or public information officer from each RFMC.

Rebecca Ferro gave an update on the NOAA Fisheries web transformation. The main goals are to bring the site up-to-date with current technology, use mobile-friendly architecture, and provide improved user experience. The scheduled five-year transition focuses on telling current stories and highlighting relevant issues rather than serving as a file server for agency documents. Councils were

encouraged to work with NOAA Fisheries Communication leads in their region to identify bugs and dead links.

There was a lengthy discussion regarding Section 508 Compliance of the Americans with Disability Act and the impact it has on website pages, written documents, and infographics. It was agreed that compliance with this Act would be an enormous undertaking. Some Councils are being proactive in this approach as time and resources allow, and others are waiting for a directive. It remains unclear exactly how the Act affects the RFMCs.

**Best practices:** Councils should use short, informative, 508 Compliance tutorials available on NOAA Fisheries website.

## 7. Council and advisory body meeting communication protocols

Sylvia Spalding from the WPFMC gave a report and led the round-table discussion on how each Council uses its Advisory Panels (APs), how they draft reports or minutes, and how they communicate to the Council.

The CCG noted that all RFMCs to have Council staff at each AP meeting. In most cases, the staff person helps draft the agenda, runs the meeting, and writes the report or minutes. Some Councils broadcast the meeting. It was generally agreed that when meetings are broadcast or recorded, they lose some informality and candor. Fishermen or industry advisors may be reluctant to speak openly and honestly on knowing they will be recorded. In some cases, new AP and committee chairs are brought to the Council office for training; in the CFMC, district AP members are encouraged to attend the SSC meetings as observers. There was brief discussion regarding holding informal Q and A sessions during a Council meeting. Both the SAFMC and GMFMC have these sessions at Council meetings and noted they may be losing their effectiveness; an annual session may be more effective.

It was noted by both SAFMC and GMFMC that having these sessions during every Council meeting can result in redundancy and loss of effectiveness. Instead, it's beneficial to host Q&A's when the Council is addressing especially complex or important issues.

## 8. Education programs and training of Council staff

### MREP

Kim Iverson from the SAFMC gave a history and overview of the Marine Resource Education Program (MREP), noting it is workshop-based, covers fisheries science and management, and is run by fishermen for fishermen. Partnering and developing relationships is the key to expansion of the program. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and the program is evolving and growing. Jennifer Gilden of the PFMC noted the MREP development, success, and popularity in the Pacific region, and Alida Ortiz of the CFMC categorized MREP as the most successful educational program for fishermen in her region.

During the CCG discussion, it was noted that, since the program is so successful, it could be offered to congressional staffers, judicial members, or people in the supply chain.

**Recommendation:** The MREP steering committee should consider congressional staffers and other non-fishery groups for participation in MREP workshops.

### Training for Council/AP/SSC

All Councils send new Council members to the new Council member training in DC. Some Councils on occasion send their staff, AP chairs and/or SSC members if space is available. It was agreed that, although the SSC and AP could benefit from training, it is not usually offered. There was lengthy discussion that, when SSC members communicate complex science in clear, plain language, it leads to a more engaged and educated public.

**Recommendations:** Offer a session at the SCS workshop on communicating science.

### Educational Initiatives

Sylvia Spalding of the WPFMC outlined the expansive educational initiatives available to people in the region as part of the Council's stewardship principles. Scholarships, internships and fellowships, summer programs and other opportunities are available through partnerships and grants administered by the WPFMC.

## **9. Publications and Outreach**

Sylvia Spalding, WPFMC, reviewed the Council's publication and outreach initiatives and working with vendors. The CCG had a lengthy discussion regarding the emphasis placed in each Council on education and outreach, without a specified budget to support it. It was noted that on June 5, 2009, the CCC requested that NOAA provide the Councils with "\$2M as an additional annual allocation to the Councils specifically for outreach, education, and engagement, including funding for staff trained and dedicated for these activities", based on the NOAA Science Advisory Board Report on Engaging NOAA's Constituents (2008) that recommended that 10 percent of NOAA's budget should be dedicated to outreach and education. Most Councils produce materials as needed on a case-by-case basis. It was generally agreed that there is less focus on printed materials and that there may be a better way to distribute information. NEFMC was recently a major sponsor of an international scallop workshop, which, for a small investment, yielded large outreach results, positive media exposure, and enhanced the Council's position as a trusted organization.

The CCG expressed interest in developing an "outreach kit" that could be tailored to each region or issue. The CCG recognized the need to conduct a poll on Council outreach and IT resources and background.

**Best practices:** Understand audience and distribution before you publish printed material.

**Recommendations:** The CCC and NOAA reconsider the 2009 request for additional, dedicated funding for education, outreach, and engagement.

Alida Ortiz from the CFMC gave a presentation on the impacts of the hurricanes Irma and Maria on the region. The CFMC had a meeting scheduled for September 22, 2017, but the hurricane hit September 20. Despite great challenges, the Council convened in December to meet with fishermen and to prepare a report to FEMA and other disaster agencies. She noted that fishery resources change with hurricanes but recover faster than fishery infrastructure, and agencies need to be prepared for this change.