

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

April 4, 2005 1-4 pm

Aspen Room, Hilton Hotel, Anchorage, AK

Committee: Stephanie Madsen (Chair), Jim Balsiger, David Benton, Jim Ayers, David Fluharty (by teleconference), John Iani (by teleconference), Doug DeMaster (3-4 pm), Chris Oliver (staff), David Witherell (staff), Diana Evans (staff)

Others present included Bill Wilson, Cathy Coon, Sue Salveson, Peter Jones, Heather McCarty, Peggy Parker, Donna Parker, and Paul MacGregor.

The Ecosystem Committee discussed the five items on its agenda. The Committee set the morning of May 11th for their next meeting, to be held by teleconference, and also determined to meet immediately prior to the June Council meeting.

1. Update on national conference

Mr Oliver reviewed the findings of the main conference panel on the issue of 'Developing an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries' from the *Managing Our Nation's Fisheries II* conference in Washington, DC, in March 2005. The Committee discussed the conference, and noted the differences among regions apparent during the conference. These differences impact the issuance of national guidance on ecosystem-based fishery management, which may limit regional flexibility if it is embodied in regulation, and also the ability of scorecards to make comparisons across regions. The importance of interagency coordination was also raised.

2. Update on Council-NMFS working group to develop ecosystem-based fishery management national guidelines

Mr Oliver summarized the outcome of the working group's first meeting, which took place in late March. Guidelines are still in the conceptual stage at the moment, and a timeline for developing guidelines and a procedure for vetting drafts through the Councils and the public will likely be determined at the next working group meeting, in late April. Members of the Committee are particularly interested in understanding the available levels of public participation in developing national and regional guidelines. It was also mentioned that the working group should keep track of any efforts to develop guidelines for the broader ecosystem management process.

3. Brief update on current North Pacific ecosystem efforts

Dr Balsiger and Mr Jones (NMFS, Alaska Region) gave a brief update on the funding outlook for ecosystem efforts in the Alaska region for the next three years. The Council also received briefing material on the North Pacific Climate Regime and Ecosystem Productivity group, and the recent SSC ecosystem modeling workshop.

4. Review of staff discussion paper on the Council's role in developing an ecosystem approach to management in Alaska

The Committee discussed the paper at length. The Committee recommends that the Council consider exploring a model based on Option 2, to set up an independent ecosystem council, with support (administrative and staffing) from the NPFMC, NOAA Fisheries, and the State of Alaska. The Committee

recommends that the approach be initiated on a pilot basis for the Aleutian Islands. The Council will receive the staff discussion paper at this meeting, so will likely be unable to act on the Committee's recommendation until the June meeting; in the meantime, the Committee requests that the Council chair, and Council staff, be authorized to contact the State of Alaska, and other potential collaborators, to determine whether there is interest in pursuing this idea. Should the Council concur with the Committee's recommendation, a workshop would be planned, to which all agencies or organizations with interest in the Aleutian Islands would be invited, to further elaborate the idea.

The Committee was clear that the details of the ecosystem council would need to be worked out in an open forum, with participation by collaborating agencies and stakeholders. Both the name of the group, and its membership, are yet to be determined. In general, however, the approach favored by the Committee would explore the creation of an independent ecosystem council whose membership would consist of representatives of agencies or organizations with jurisdiction over the ecosystem area to be managed. This group would be advised by an area subgroup, composed of stakeholders in the area. The stakeholders would include agency technical staff, industry representatives (commercial fishing, shipping, etc.), Native and community representatives, environmental representatives, and other appropriate parties. The Committee also discussed the need for a science panel. The Committee referred to Table 1 in the staff paper to discuss possible members of both the ecosystem council and the Aleutian Islands subgroup.

The Committee clarified that it does not see the creation of an ecosystem council as in any way relinquishing the NPFMC's authority over fishery management. The ecosystem council would provide a mechanism for dialogue with other agencies, to understand the impacts of agency actions on other agencies' activities. This would be a voluntary council, and its recommendations would have no force of law. The advantage of representing agencies with jurisdiction over the area of the ecosystem council is that it provides a mechanism for the ecosystem council's recommendations to be implemented by the participating agencies.

The Committee proposes the Aleutian Islands as a pilot area for developing the ecosystem council; yet the Aleutian Islands may not fit into the LME concept for ecosystem management that has been adopted by NOAA. However, Dr Balsiger indicated that based on his discussions with Dr DeMaster, identifying the Aleutian Islands as a distinct subregion is likely to be compatible with the LME concept.

5. Review of discussion paper considering area-specific management in the Aleutian Islands

The Committee reviewed the staff discussion paper. The Committee addressed the issue of the geographic boundary of the Aleutian Islands, as raised in the paper, namely whether the Aleutian Islands should be defined as the subarea identified in the BSAI groundfish FMP, or should also include the Fox Islands to the east. Members of the Committee expressed a preference for retaining the existing subarea bounds, from a management and policy perspective. Material before the Committee suggests that this may be supported by recent scientific research.

The Committee discussed whether an ecosystem approach to fisheries management would more appropriately be addressed by discussion within each FMP, or by an overarching Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP). The Committee felt there was confusion about the interrelationship of the FMPs and a FEP, and indeed about the definition and content of a FEP. Dr Fluharty suggested that the 1999 Ecosystems Principles Advisory Panel Report to Congress gave an explanation of this relationship, and staff will provide further information on this issue at the next Committee meeting.

The Committee agreed to address the SSC's recommendation to develop a statement of the goals and objectives for the analysis at the next meeting.