

Update to Council, October 2005

Ecosystem Approaches to Management (EAM)

In June 2005, the Council reviewed a staff discussion paper proposing various ways for the Council to be involved in an ecosystem approach to management in Alaska. The Council chose to move forward with the exploration of a regional ecosystem council, or similar collaboration, for the Aleutian Islands.

An EAM is a broad approach that focuses on a geographic ecosystem area and the relative role of all activities, including but not limited to fisheries, occurring within it. An EAM provides a mechanism for coordinating activities in the ecosystem area to achieve an overall goal of ecosystem sustainability and productivity. Regional ocean or ecosystem councils have been proposed nationally as a way to implement an EAM. An ecosystem council could provide a process for exchange of information among the various stakeholders of an ecosystem area, and a mechanism for each responsible authority to understand the impacts of agency actions on other agencies' activities.

The Council's June 2005 motion proposed that the Council chair approach NOAA Fisheries and the State of Alaska, engaging them in a partnership to explore the idea of a regional ecosystem collaboration. The Council chair and staff met with NOAA Fisheries and the State of Alaska's Subcabinet on Ocean Policy in June and August.

In general, the group endorsed the Council's preliminary preferred collaborative structure as a starting point for discussion. The Council suggested creating an ecosystem council comprised of one representative from each local, state, and federal governmental agency with jurisdiction over activities affecting the Aleutian Islands ecosystem area. The ecosystem council would provide a forum for information sharing about human activities and natural processes affecting the ecosystem, in order for each agency independently to make informed decisions that support sustainable natural resource management. The ecosystem council would have no independent jurisdiction or authority.

The group suggested the term 'ecosystem forum' might more appropriately capture the intent of the collaboration, and further clarified that the forum would not require motions or voting as the forum has no authority to take action. Additionally, the group recommended against formal advisory groups, at least initially, preferring to include scientific and stakeholder input within the main meeting format. The group also suggested that the Aleutian Islands ecosystem area encompass the islands from Unimak Pass extending to the west.

The group continues to recommend a public workshop to develop the idea of an Aleutian Islands ecosystem collaboration in an open forum. However, prior to raising the public's expectations as to the feasibility of this project, the group suggested the need for a precursory step. At a meeting to be scheduled in late fall of this year, other Federal agencies should be canvassed to see whether they would be willing participants in such an endeavor. Given the voluntary nature of this initiative, enough jurisdictionary agencies in the Aleutian Islands must be willing to participate in order for the ecosystem collaboration to have utility. The Council chair and staff will report back to the Council following this meeting.