



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY - DRAFT

Research Steering Committee

Hilton Garden Inn, Boston, MA

January 17, 2018

The Research Steering Committee (RSC) met on January 17, 2018 in Boston, MA to discuss: potential improvements to the NEFMC research priority setting process, updates on the implementation of program review recommendations for the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's Northeast Cooperative Research Program, and recently completed research projects.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Mark Alexander (Chairman), Bill Gerencer, Jeff Kaelin, Richard McBride (via webinar), Chris McGuire, Matt McKenzie, Peter Moore, Mike Pol, Graham Sherwood, and Mary Beth Tooley. The RSC was supported by NEFMC staff: Rachel Feeney (RSC Coordinator), Jonathon Peros and Sam Asci (Scallop Plan Coordinator and staff, via webinar), and Deirdre Boelke (Herring Plan Coordinator, via webinar). Six others attended in person, including Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) staff and participants of the research projects discussed. About five others attended via webinar.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The RSC made several recommendations for improving how the Council sets its research priorities.
- The RSC discussed three research projects and made recommendations on the use of project outcomes in management.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

1. Meeting cover memo
2. Meeting agenda
3. RSC meeting summary, July 19, 2017
4. Research Priorities
 - a. Staff memo re the research priority setting process, January 2, 2018
 - b. NEFMC *Research Priorities and Data Needs for 2017-2021*
 - c. Presentation slides
5. NEFSC/Northeast Cooperative Research Program
 - a. *Northeast Cooperative Research Program Review, Northeast Fisheries Science Center Summary and Response*, March 2017
 - b. Presentation slides
6. Management reviews
 - a. RSC-related excerpts of the Council's *Operations Handbook*
 - b. RSC management review worksheet
 - c. Staff memo re peer-reviewed publications, January 2, 2018
7. Project: *Seasonal Scallop Bycatch Survey*

- a. 2013 Scallop RSA project final report, *Seasonal Bycatch Survey of the Georges Bank Scallop Fishery*, May 2015
- b. Technical evaluation
- c. 2015 Scallop RSA project final report, *Optimizing the Georges Bank Scallop Fishery by Maximizing Meat Yield and Minimizing Bycatch* revised October 2017
- d. Technical evaluation and PI response, October 11, 2017
- e. Presentation slides
- f. RSC meeting summary, June 25, 2012
- g. RSC meeting summary, April 8, 2015
8. Project: *River Herring Bycatch Avoidance*
 - a. 2014 Herring RSA project final report, December 31, 2016
 - b. Technical evaluation, April 19, 2017
 - c. PI response to technical evaluation, September 22, 2017
 - d. Presentation slides
9. Project: *Effects of Fishing on Herring Aggregations*
 - a. 2008 Herring RSA project final report, May 31, 2011
 - b. Technical evaluation, October 2011
 - c. Presentation slides
10. Correspondence

INTRODUCTION AND AGENDA REVIEW

Chairman Mark Alexander began the meeting at 9:10 a.m. There were no agenda changes.

COUNCIL RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND DATA NEEDS

The purpose of this agenda item was to develop recommendations for improving the process for setting the NEFMC research priorities and data needs, including how these priorities are documented. RSC Coordinator Dr. Rachel Feeney presented an overview of how other Regional Fishery Management Councils set their five-year research priorities and NEFMC staff input (Documents 4a-c). The regions appear to vary greatly in terms of the amount of effort dedicated to creating and updating lists. The NPFMC seems to dedicate the most effort, having created an online database that is updated annually. However, no matter the degree of effort, a common theme is that there has been little feedback from NMFS about what happens with Council research priority documents once submitted, as well as how the priorities are getting addressed.

NEFMC staff felt that in considering process improvements, it would be helpful to know more about the end use of the priorities. How would greater effort in priority setting help get research accomplished? To that end, the letter that the Executive Director sent to NMFS requesting clarification on the end use of the priority lists submitted by the Councils (Document 10). Staff noted that there exists several processes creating lists of research needs (e.g., assessments, RSA, action, 5-year); efficiencies could be realized. A master list with regular updates may be helpful. Including rationales (e.g., potential management use) would improve communication and ensure the list is focused on research questions. Documenting a process in the *Operations Handbook* would not hurt, unless too prescriptive. However, the *Handbook* should reflect reality (it currently states that a purpose of the RSC is to annual identify and prioritize research needs, which is not happening). Staff also felt that there should be more concerted efforts to seek feedback on if and how research needs are being met.

RSC discussion

Chairman Alexander opened the discussion by asking what should be included in research priorities (rationale), how often priorities should be revisited, and what is the most efficient way

for the Council to keep the document updated. It is difficult to know NMFS's needs for these priorities. Ms. Tooley liked aspects of the NPFMC, particularly including a rationale and status of the priority and using a spreadsheet to track the priorities; these may help in accomplishing priorities. Mr. McGuire asked and staff clarified that other Councils do not have RSCs, and the SSC has a key role in priority setting, though the SSC's plate is pretty full already. He favored the MAFMC process and document, because it was fairly simple to use. Staff noted that this past cycle, the SSC reviewed the priorities and made several comments that impacted the final list. The SSC wished for more rationale and felt that cross-cutting priorities. Mr. Kaelin supported the spreadsheet approach, felt that priorities should be organized not just by species but broad categories, and that the Northeast Regional Coordinating Committee should be involved in seeking feedback from NMFS. Dr. Pol felt that the RSC could be involved in ensuring priorities are being addressed. Dr. Sherwood noted that it is clear how Council priorities feed into the RSA program, but it is less obvious how they are used in other cases. Mr. Gerencer encouraged the Council to focus on what is needed for decision-making, where the lack of information has hindered management. Ms. Tooley discouraged the use of "low" to describe a priority. Mr. McGuire suggested that the NEFMC and NEFSC priorities be included in a master document. Mr. Moore added that the ASMFC priorities would be important for a global document. Mr. McGuire hopes that the reviewers of proposals are looking at regional priorities to get a sense of the level of interest in a project. Several RSC members supported having national funding programs better linked to regional priorities. Dr. Pol felt that the RSC could help verify that the research is being met. Mr. McGuire felt that noting completed projects would help identify what has been done.

Public comment

Mr. Smolowitz (Coonamessett Farm Foundation) – Ranking and prioritization by the Council is not helpful. Each funding program have specific goals. Researchers know what the research needs are. A RSC process should identify broad needs and identify funding to address it. He gave a few examples of data gaps (cold pool in the Mid-Atlantic, what is feeding the burgeoning seal population, fisheries development). There is a lot of funding going to research that is not needed (e.g., NOAA's research funding on microplastics) that well-connected people get money for. He would rather not rank the needs. During a management review, the RSC should discuss what was learned from a project, in terms of research needs and how they may be addressed.

RSC discussion cont.

Chairman Alexander encouraged the RSC to talk about its role in the priority-setting process. Dr. Pol recalled that the Council's charge to the RSC to review priorities predates the Magnuson mandate for the SSCs to do that; he wondered if the RSC has sufficient expertise and did not want to duplicate efforts. Ms. Tooley noted that the RSC and SSC have very different make-ups. Staff noted that when the RSC last reviewed research priorities (March 2017), the discussion focused on process; there were very few comments about items on the list. Dr. Sherwood felt that needs should get characterized rather than ranked. RSC members noted that much of the RSC's time has been spent on reviewing reports rather than steering, but perhaps its future could be different than its past.

After further discussion, the RSC developed the following consensus statement.

Consensus Statement #1: The RSC recommends that for Council research priorities:

- *Format:* Use a spreadsheet rather than a Word document. However, a searchable database would be ideal.

- *Content for each priority should include:* A description/rationale, priority code, what other priority lists it is included on (e.g., assessment, RSA), all categories that the topic addresses (e.g., species, broad category), research status (e.g., not begun, underway, completed).
- *Coding:* Rather than “low/medium/high,” uses codes such as, “near-term,” “critical,” “long-term/strategic,” “urgent/immediate”, and “value-oriented”.
- *What to include:* Keep the list focused on the Council’s needs. Once a project is completed, it should not be removed, but the research status updated and the entry amended to note/link where information may be accessed.
- *Outreach:* There should be more concerted outreach to national research funding programs, and a suggestion made that they should require proposals to indicate if and how the research would meet a Council priority or reward proposals that do address Council priorities.
- *Process:* The Plan Development Teams should continue to have the lead in developing and updating research needs. RSC review should continue to be a step in updating the list. The RSC should be more involved in tracking if and how needs are being met.

NORTHEAST FISHERIES SCIENCE CENTER/NORTHEAST COOPERATIVE RESEARCH PROGRAM

Dr. John Hoey (NEFSC/Cooperative Research Branch Deputy Director) presented an update on steps taken to implement the recommendations of the program review, particularly on: the catchability study, integrating cooperative research across the NEFSC, the potential expansion of Study Fleet technologies for fishery reporting, and the longline survey and uses of its data. He welcomed questions about NEFSC prioritizations. He noted some staffing moves and hiring within the Fisheries Monitoring and Research Division. The NEFSC has created cross-division working groups to better utilize resources and strengths, identify data gaps, and integrate cooperative research to improve assessments (e.g., existing mackerel working group with industry, new fluke working group). CRPP ran a “speed talk” series that was helpful towards NEFSC-wide collaboration. Dr. Hoey gave a brief history on all the survey catchability studies that have occurred since 2009 (e.g., rock hopper vs. chain sweep). 2018 will be the 5th year of the longline survey to help improve information about species that may not be captured in the trawl survey or have limited data (e.g., cusk, halibut, wolffish). There is ongoing work on bait plumes. Data have been used for cusk and thorny skate. Study Fleet software is being used at the trip and sub-trip levels, constituting 83% of all eVTRs submitted (120 vessels). He reported on a few projects that advance electronic technologies.

RSC discussion

[to be completed]

After a few questions, the RSC developed no consensus statements.

MANAGEMENT REVIEW OF FINAL RESEARCH REPORTS

Chairman Alexander noted that each of the following projects were funded by a Research-Set-Aside (RSA) program, and the Council expects to conduct a RSA program review later this year. He encouraged comments that may help the program review, in addition to specific comments about the projects.

Project: Seasonal scallop bycatch survey

A seasonal bycatch survey has been funded through the Scallop Research-Set-Aside (RSA) program since 2011, and the RSC has reviewed the project in June 2012 and in April 2015. Chairman Alexander asked the RSC to focus on the Scallop PDT request that the RSC focus on the utility of this survey as a time series and the potential for using data on a range of species, data that is not otherwise collected by the federal observer program (e.g., spawning condition of flatfish).

Ron Smolowitz, Dr. Liese Siemann, and Luisa Garcia presented a summary of the project.

[to be completed]

After discussion, the RSC developed the following consensus statement.

Consensus Statement #2: The RSC recommends that the reports and data from the *Seasonal Scallop Bycatch Survey* should continue to be used in management. If the project continues, it would be valuable to maintain the principles of a time series (i.e., compatibility year to year). Research on scallop bycatch is important and should continue as a high priority.

Project: River herring bycatch avoidance

With funding from a variety of sources, portside sampling of the Atlantic herring and mackerel fisheries has been conducted by the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries since 2008. The 2014 Herring RSA project, *River Herring Bycatch Avoidance*, was funded to help improve the accuracy and precision of incidental river herring catch estimates, to reduce bycatch through avoidance, and to test net sensors to help determine any associations between environmental conditions and river herring bycatch. The Herring Plan Development Team has used portside sampling data to help characterize river herring bycatch and develop bycatch caps for the 2013-2015 and 2016-2018 Atlantic herring specifications. The National Marine Fisheries Service has been examining whether portside sampling data are comparable to that of federal fisheries observers for monitoring catch. The topic of portside sampling and bycatch avoidance remains a NEFMC research priority, and was recently identified as a priority for the 2018-2020 Herring RSA. Chairman Alexander asked the RSC to focus its management review on the bycatch avoidance network, use of net sensors, utility of the project for a task the NEFMC expects to complete in 2018: developing a white paper on the consideration of river herring and shad as stocks in the Atlantic herring fishery.

Dr. Dave Bethoney and Brad Schondelmeier presented a summary of the project.

[to be completed]

After discussion, the RSC developed the following consensus statement.

Consensus Statement #3: The RSC recommends that the reports and data from the *River Herring Bycatch Avoidance* project should continue to be used in management. This project has produced high quality work; the bycatch avoidance program has reduced bycatch and should continue. This work, including all its publications, would be very helpful for developing the white paper on considering river herring and shad as stocks in the Atlantic herring fishery.

Project: Effects of fishing on herring aggregations

In 2007, Amendment 1 to the Atlantic Herring Fishery Management Plan established the Herring RSA program. Through Amendment 1, a seasonal closure for midwater trawl gear was established in the Gulf of Maine (Area 1A). The rationale for this closure included that it may provide an opportunity for research to determine the impact of this gear type on local aggregations of the herring resource. In 2008, the first and only project to be funded that year was titled, *Effects of Fishing on Herring Aggregations*. Although the project aimed to study the impact of midwater trawling, funding limitations required that the project focus solely on methods development. The topic of localized depletion remains a NEFMC research priority, and was recently identified as a priority for the 2018-2020 Herring RSA. Chairman Alexander asked the RSC to comment on the potential for using the methods developed in future research.

Dr. Michael Jech presented a summary of the project.

[to be completed]

After discussion, the RSC made the following consensus statement.

Consensus Statement #4: The RSC recommends that, due to low sample size, the results of the *Effects of Fishing on Herring Aggregations* project should not be directly used in management. However, valuable lessons have been learned from this study. Acoustic tools could be important for future studies of vessel effects and localized depletion, and used in conjunction with catch data to discriminate herring species.

OTHER BUSINESS

Cox's Ledge Habitat Management Area

Dr. McKenzie noted that Council member Terry Alexander will be asking the full Council to develop a research priority to study the effect of raised ground cables and shortened or no sweeps to quantify any reductions in swept area. Ms. Tooley noted that raised footropes have been researched extensively in the Bering Sea and is a regulatory measure for groundfish vessels there, and there is ongoing research in the Gulf of Alaska, but NMFS rejected the Cox's Ledge measure in the Omnibus Habitat Amendment due to insufficient local research. Dr. Pol noted that some work was done under the GEARNET project. Mr. Kaelin supported getting this research done.

Bureau of Ocean Energy Management

Mr. McGuire highlighted that the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management has funding for research, with an annual process to accept ideas for research (closes in February). With increased discussion on the intersection of fisheries and offshore energy projects, there may be opportunities for the RSC to engage to help Council priorities be accomplished with that funding source. He asked that the RSC consider this at a future meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 5:35 pm.

APPENDIX I – RSC WRITTEN MANAGEMENT REVIEWS OF COMPLETED RESEARCH

In preparation for the January 17, 2018, Research Steering Committee meeting, RSC members were asked to prepare for the management review of research projects by considering in advance the 11 questions guiding a management review relative to the final reports to be discussed. Each RSC member was assigned one project to be a lead reviewer for, but was encouraged to prepare comments on additional projects too. This appendix to the meeting summary compiles all written comments received from individual RSC members. These comments should not be considered the consensus of the RSC. Duplicative comments have been removed.

Project: Seasonal scallop bycatch survey

[to be completed]

Project: River herring bycatch avoidance

[to be completed]

Project: Effects of fishing on herring aggregations

[to be completed]