



New England Fishery Management Council

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To: Tom Nies, Executive Director
From: Scientific and Statistical Committee
Date: April 21, 2014

Subject: Role of social scientists on the SSC

The four social scientists serving on the SSC requested a discussion among the SSC as a whole about issues of concern and the role of social science and social scientists in SSC process. Prior to the March 27, 2014 SSC meeting, the four social scientists and the Chair met via conference call to discuss this agenda item and structure the discussion. Three concerns arose from that meeting:

1. Terms of reference (TORs) with a social science focus are rare in SSC process.
2. Social scientists can and have enabled a quorum to be reached for SSC decisions that lie more in the natural sciences, especially OFL and ABC advice.
3. When social science issues do come before the SSC, the small number of social scientists on the SSC means a critical mass for developing sound advice might be lacking.

The SSC was grateful to its social scientist members for critically examining their role and striving to ensure that SSC advice grounded in both the social and natural sciences is as sound as possible. Moreover, the SSC expressed general support for the importance of having social scientist members, and noted that those members also offer valuable insights in deliberations grounded primarily in the natural sciences.

That expression of support notwithstanding, the SSC took seriously the concerns that were raised by its social science contingent, and considered three possible courses of action offered, but not necessarily endorsed, by the social scientists:

1. Revisit past SSC recommendations that social science factors be included to inform ABC advice.

This proposal is different than the role of social science in developing a risk policy, although the SSC noted that actualization of a Council risk policy should give social scientists on the SSC a stronger role in defining with greater specificity the objectives that ABCs are striving to meet. Instead, this proposal is to use social science analyses and indicators to lend additional insight into biological trends. For example, market factors or management changes might explain a decline in catch that might otherwise be attributed to stock decline.

The SSC was supportive of this approach, particularly the use of fishery performance reports like those produced by MAFMC and considered by its SSC when setting ABCs. The SSC suggests that its social scientists take the lead in identifying the types of social science information that should be provided, and work with the PDT and AP Chairs in determining

how to produce that information and those reports. Council staff noted that demands and time constraints need to be considered in proposing new duties along these lines.

2. Do not have a ‘token’ social science TOR for each meeting, and develop a quorum standard based on the expertise required for the task at hand.

The SSC agreed that ‘token’ social science TORs are not warranted, but disagreed with developing a quorum standard. SSC members noted that, even in the absence of formal reports, social scientists members have brought valuable social science insights into ABC deliberations, as well as valuable insights on issues of natural science. The SSC also felt these concerns will be lessened if fishery performance reports providing relevant social science information are utilized, which would in fact increase the importance of social scientist participation to most effectively evaluate and interpret that information.

Despite opposing a formal quorum standard, the SSC shares the concern raised by the social scientists about the possibility of achieving a nominal quorum including members with less to offer on a given issue. The SSC urged all of its members to exercise their own discretion about when and how to contribute to a decision, depending upon the issues at hand. Furthermore, the SSC agreed that careful scrutiny of meeting composition to ensure that adequate expertise is present is warranted when attendance is close to quorum.

3. Recruit relevant experts for short-term appoint to the SSC for specific needs.

The SSC is supportive of this proposal, and suggests developing a roster of relevant experts outside the SSC to draw upon as needs arise. The SSC noted that it has adopted this approach once before when habitat expert Dr. Robert Whitlach at the University of Connecticut was appointed for review of work by the Habitat PDT. Dr. Whitlach’s participation was extremely valuable in that instance.

Summary of recommendations

- 1. Social scientists on the SSC should work with PDT and AP Chairs to define social science information that can inform development of ABC advice, and a process for producing and communicating that information. A useful model might be the MAFMC fishery performance reports.**
- 2. ‘Token’ social science TORs are not warranted.**
- 3. A quorum standard is not warranted. However, individual members should exercise discretion about when and how to participate, and scrutiny of meeting composition when attendance is close to a quorum is advisable.**
- 4. A roster of social science experts for short-term appointment to the SSC for specific needs should be developed and utilized.**