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## New England Fishery Management Council

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 John F. Quinn, J.D., Ph.D., *Chairman* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

### MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** April 2, 2022  
**TO:** Council  
**FROM:** Tom Nies, Executive Director  
**SUBJECT:** **In-person and Virtual Meeting Guidance**

1. Last year the Council discussed meeting polices in anticipation of a return to in-person meetings. Prior to the pandemic the Executive Committee repeatedly opposed the routine use of virtual meetings because they hamper (or reduce) communications among participants. Over the last two years the Council managed to conduct business while relying entirely on virtual meetings. Council members and the public adjusted well to this approach. The Executive Committee expects that we will resume in-person meetings this spring, barring any COVID complications. At some point in 2021, the Council is likely to resume in-person meetings. The Executive Committee reviewed last year's discussion and suggests guidance for the staff..

2. A list of some advantages and disadvantages to virtual meetings is provided in the table below. This table is based on the typical advisory panel, committee, or Council meeting, and not specialized meetings such as workshops. Hybrid meetings (part in-person, part virtual) will be addressed later.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less travel time and reduced travel costs for all: staff, Council members, and the public</li> <li>• Reduced meeting room costs</li> <li>• Less time in staff travel and meeting set-up; including coordination of meeting locations for consecutive meetings</li> <li>• Reduced time commitment for public that may want to listen or comment on part of an agenda</li> <li>• Increased public attendance</li> <li>• Some public participants think atmosphere is less intimidating when making public comments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No face-to-face interaction with participants or between members</li> <li>• Possibly less-thorough discussions</li> <li>• No opportunity for informal offline information exchange</li> <li>• More staff resources needed to run committee meeting and webinar at the same time, including tech support for public</li> <li>• Some public participants uncomfortable with the technology, or have limited internet connections that make participation difficult</li> <li>• Real-time meeting coordination more difficult</li> <li>• Screen fatigue</li> <li>• Occasional technological glitches</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slower meetings (“Can you hear me?”, “You’re muted”, roll call votes, etc.)</li><li>• Single screen available</li></ul>
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3. The Executive Committee discussed hybrid meetings: a meeting that is in-person but that allows remote participation (by the public, Council members, or both). The April Council meeting will be our first hybrid meeting, and we expect it will go smoothly. Providing remote Council meeting access for the public at future Council meetings should be possible, and the Executive Committee recommends this be the practice. In-person attendance by Council members and staff should be encouraged.

4. At the Committee and AP level it may be difficult for staff to provide remote access for the public at every in-person meeting. Not every Committee/AP is supported by multiple staff: managing the meeting, taking notes, running the sound system, assisting anyone with connection problems, and running the webinar would be impossible with one staff person, and could even be difficult with two. Holding all Committee/AP meetings with remote public access would, in some cases, require augmenting the staff at a meeting. That will have impacts on completing other tasks. Nevertheless, the Executive Committee recognizes that the public is used to remote access. The Executive Committee recommended the staff explore ways that remote public participation can be accommodated for Committee meetings.

5. Much like last year, the Executive Committee recommends adopting general principles. Suggestions are on the following page, with changes from last year’s suggestion highlighted. If the Council agrees, this guidance would be used by meeting chairs and staff when planning meetings. After gaining experience with these principles, they could be modified if necessary and added to the Operations Handbook,

## Strawman NEFMC In-Person and Virtual Meeting Guidance

The following guidance is provided for future in-person and virtual meetings of the NEFMC.

1. The NEFMC will hold meetings one of three possible ways:
  - a. In-person, with or without remote participation by the public
  - b. Virtual, where all attendees participate remotely
  - c. Hybrid, where Council/Committee/AP/public can participate either remotely or in-person.
  
2. Council meetings will be held in-person whenever possible. All Council meetings will be broadcast on a webinar, and remote public comment at Council meetings will be permitted. Some Council meetings may be hybrid, but Council members and staff are encouraged to attend in-person.
  
3. Committee and AP meetings may be either in-person or virtual, as decided by the chair and staff. The following guidance should be considered:
  - a. Chairs should hold some in-person meetings over the course of the year to facilitate face-to-face interactions between Committee/AP members and the public.
  - b. Committee meetings that are addressing important or controversial issues – such as developing a preferred alternative recommendation for the Council – should be held in person if at all practical.
  - c. Council staff will explore whether it is possible to provide remote access to all in-person Committee and AP meetings, particularly for those meetings when a Committee is making final recommendations to the Council.
  - d. Hybrid meetings (some members present while others participate remotely) are discouraged but may be scheduled with the approval of the Executive Director in exceptional circumstances (e.g. unexpected storm prevents travel). Rather than a hybrid meeting, the Committee Chair and the staff should consider a virtual meeting.
  - e. Meetings that are expected to last less than half a day are more efficient if they are virtual, as there are significant savings in travel time for all participants.
  
4. When planning public hearings, the Council will consider a mix of virtual and in-person hearings. In-person hearings will not be webcast and will not allow remote comments.
  
5. PDT meetings can be either in-person or virtual, at the PDT chair's discretion.