

2022 SPRING NRCC MEETING SUMMARY
Venue at Portwalk Place – 22 Portwalk Place, Portsmouth, NH
May 9-10, 2022

Attendees

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC)

Bob Beal, Executive Director

Toni Kerns, Interstate Fishery Management Program Director, Day 1

Patrick Campfield, Fisheries Science Program Director, Day 2

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC)

Mike Luisi, Chair

Wes Townsend, Vice-Chair

Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director

Brandon Muffley, Staff

Dr. Paul Rago, Chair, Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)

New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC)

Eric Reid, Chair

Rick Bellavance, Vice-Chair

Tom Nies, Executive Director

Chris Kellogg, Deputy Director

Dr. Lisa Kerr, Chair, SSC

NOAA Fisheries Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)

Dr. Michael Simpkins, Chief, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division

Dr. Russell Brown, Chief, Population Dynamics Branch

NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)

Mike Pentony, Regional Administrator

Sarah Bland, Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries

Dave Gouveia, Assistant Regional Administrator for Analysis and Program Support

Liz Sullivan, Sustainable Fisheries Division (NRCC staff support)

Laura Hansen, Sustainable Fisheries Division (NRCC staff support)

Guest Presenters

Kevin Madley, GARFO Staff, Habitat, Day 2

Deirdre Boelke, NEFMC Staff, Day 2

Maria Fenton, GARFO Sustainable Fisheries Division, Day 2

Dr. Larry Alade, NEFSC Population Dynamics Branch

Additional Attendees

Geoff White, ASMFC, ACCSP Director

Julia Beaty, MAFMC Staff

Mary Sabo, MAFMC staff

Dr. Cate O'Keefe, NEFMC SSC Vice-Chair, Day 1

Michael Pierdinock, NEFMC

Angela Forristall, NEFMC Staff, Day 1
Dr. Jamie Cournane, NEFMC Staff
Jonathon Peros, NEFMC Staff
Janice Plante, NEFMC Staff
Sam Asci, NEFMC Staff
Joan O'Leary, NEFMC Staff
Mike Pierdinock, NEFMC
Dr. Kiersten Curti, NEFSC Population Dynamics Branch, Day 1
Andrew Lipsky, NEFSC Fisheries & Offshore Wind, Day 2
Dr. Anthony Wood, NEFSC Population Dynamics Branch
Dr. Charles Adams, NEFSC, Day 1
Dr. Mark Terceiro, NEFSC, Day 1
Sean Lucey, NEFSC, Day 2
Moiria Kelly, GARFO Sustainable Fisheries Division
Peter Burns, GARFO Habitat, Day 2
Spencer Talmage, GARFO Sustainable Fisheries Division, Day 2
Wendy Morrison, NMFS Headquarters, Day 2
John Carmichael, SAMFC Deputy Executive Director, Day 2
Roger Pugliese, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) Staff, Day 2

Public Attendees

Greg DiDomenico, Lund's Fisheries
Brad Schondelmeier, MA DMF Staff
Katie Almeida, The Town Dock
Meghan Lapp, SeaFreeze, Ltd.
Jeff Kaelin, Lund's Fisheries

Note: NRCC decisions and action items that resulted from this meeting are in bold for ease of reference.

– Day 1 –

1. Stock Assessments

Dr. Chris Moore, Mr. Bob Beal, and Mr. Tom Nies shared their thoughts on how the new stock assessment process has been working so far. Dr. Moore expressed that timing has been a concern, when things were not complete by the expected time, often due to resource issues. Rigidity has also been an issue in the process, and Dr. Moore expressed the need for more flexibility. Mr. Beal added that the new process seems to take more meetings, but acknowledged those could be due to the newness of the process. He also expressed concern about the lack of guidance for the chairs of the research track working groups, such as whether meetings can be open or closed to the public. Mr. Nies raised the concerns about the lack of incorporation of new science, and the limitations in resources if the Science Center is doing most of the work. There have been issues with data flow. Additionally, it has been difficult for plan development teams

(PDTs) to keep up with the work necessary for providing catch advice, and it is possible incorporating the new state-space model for more species could make it more challenging. Dr. Mike Simpkins provided an outline of the broad-scale challenges from his perspective, including the cost/benefit of inclusion and the assessment workloads.

Dr. Simpkins presented the proposed schedule changes for research track (RT) and management track (MT) assessments. This includes extending the black sea bass MT from November 2022 to early spring (possible February) 2023, and extending the spiny dogfish MT from July 2022 to fall 2022. While the change to the black sea bass RT would not affect the timing of the spring 2023 MT, the spiny dogfish change would, requiring shifting the from fall 2022 to spring 2023, and could necessitate shifting effort on the scallop forecasting methods from 2023 MT to 2024 RT. While Dr. Moore had not been concerned with moving the dogfish MT to fall 2022, he expressed concern about pushing it out further. **The NRCC agreed with the changes to black sea bass (February 2023) and spiny dogfish (fall 2022). If there is a conflict between scallop and dogfish, scallop is the priority.** Dr. Simpkins also noted that the cod RT will likely require an extension, and if the current two stocks become four, this would require adding two new cod MTs to the schedule, for which there is not room. He recommended waiting until it was known when the RT would occur before making adjustments to the MT schedule, and Mr. Nies reiterated the concern about the timing of the MTs and the need for cod stock specifications.

Regarding the 2027 RT stocks/topics, Dr. Simpkins proposed striped bass with monkfish in spring 2027, and gave two topic-based options for the fall: projections or ecosystem information. The goal of the projections topic would be to improve stock projections evaluating past performance of projections in the Northeast, determining sources of error in projections, and examining methods for projecting biological rates. The goal of the ecosystem information topic would be to address ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM) and changing climate conditions in management recommendations, develop a framework to evaluate a range of issues, and more. Mr. Beal indicated support for striped bass. Dr. Moore said that if he had to pick, he would want projections, but he reiterated an earlier point by Mr. Nies that it is very linked to the ecosystems topic. Dr. Simpkins suggested that one of the topics could be moved to 2025, which currently has ensemble modeling (using and combining multiple models). Dr. Lisa Kerr suggested that the ecosystem and projection topics could potentially be combined. **The NRCC agreed that the spring 2027 RT should be striped bass with monkfish, with the projection topic in the fall, with efforts to adjust the projections TORs to include ecosystem effects as possible.**

Dr. Simpkins provided an update on the assessment process improvements, listing the completed and remaining tasks, as well as some new topics that the assessment working group would be considering. Mr. Nies asked how the working group prioritizes their list, and Dr. Simpkins stated it was by discussion. Mr. Nies indicated that he would prefer if the NRCC had more input into the prioritization, although he agreed that the NRCC should not need to sort through all items on the list. Dr. Moore raised the issue of time and resources constraints and asked whether it made sense to continue making improvements; Mr. Nies expressed the need to continue to make improvements, although it might not need to be done by the assessment working group. Dr. Simpkins will put together a list of topics for the Assessment Working Group to focus on based on the issues brought up at the meeting (**Action Item #1**). For clarification, the

assessment working group includes the following members: Ms. Sarah Bland, Mr. Pat Campfield, Dr. Matt Cieri, Mr. Chris Kellogg, Dr. Richard Merrick, Mr. Brandon Muffley, Dr. Paul Rago, Dr. Simpkins, and Ms. Michelle Traver.

The NRCC also discussed whether lobster should remain on the schedule for 2025. Mr. Beal stated that it would not change anything for ASMFC. Dr. Simpkins suggested that if it would not follow the same pattern as others (i.e. working group with open meetings) it might be better to take off the list. Mr. Beal clarified that it would have open meetings, data workshop, modeling workshop, etc.

During the assessment topic, the NRCC made time to take public comment. Dr. Steve Cadrin commented that inclusiveness in the assessment process is part of the solution. Mr. Greg DiDomenico spoke about the *Illex* assessment, stating that the facilitator had helped a lot, and suggested that while terms of reference should be drafted by the deputies, they should be edited by people in the field. Ms. Megan Lapp also commented about the *Illex* assessment, stating that it was not the process itself but personal problems, but that the moderator had helped.

2. Did Not Fish Reports

Dr. Moore provided the background that, since the requirement to file “did not fish” (DNF) reports had been removed, electronic vessel trip reports (eVTR) had come online. At the MAFMC, some members have discussed interest in bringing back the DNF reports, and while it is not at the top of its implementation plan, if the NEFMC also wanted to move forward with this change, it could be moved to a higher priority. Mr. Nies relayed that the topic was discussed at the NEFMC, and there was a mixed reaction, with some resistance to reinstating the requirement for commercial vessels. He said there were plans to discuss at various spring committee meetings. Mr. Eric Reid mentioned that there were already checks and balances for commercial, and Mr. Rick Bellavance indicated his support for a requirement for recreational for-hire vessels. This topic will be discussed again at the Fall 2022 meeting (**Action Item #2**).

3. COVID Data Gaps

Dr. Russ Brown provided an update on the data gaps that persist due to COVID-19. The NEFSC spring and fall bottom trawl surveys were not conducted in 2020, but the surveys since then (spring 2021, fall 2021, and spring 2022) were successfully completed. There were some assessment impacts. For age-based assessments, missing surveys were treated as missing, which increases uncertainty, but the models could handle the missing data. For data-limited assessments, while it varied by the method, simulation work done for the Georges Bank cod demonstrated that the PlanBSmooth can handle missing surveys. Dr. Brown also noted that as time passes the impact of these missing surveys will lessen. Additionally, reductions in observer coverage were not the same across fleets, and reduced intercepts of recreational trips were not consistent across all regions. Reductions in port sampling had started before COVID, but intensified during the pandemic. Overall, COVID reduced the amount of data available for stock assessments, and we should expect a higher uncertainty in stock assessments, although it will vary by stock.

Mr. Nies asked whether GARFO and NEFSC are coordinating on issues caused by the lack of observer coverage and assumed discards, and Mr. Dave Gouveia said they are. Mr. Nies also asked whether the Catch Accounting and Monitoring System (CAMS) would be retroactively done for past years. Mr. Gouveia stated that the primary goal was to have CAMS develop a common set of data for landings and discards that will enable CAMS to be used for this year's stock assessments. However, although the landings component will be ready for the spring/summer assessments, the discard component would not be ready until into the fall assessments. Mr. Gouveia further noted that any consideration for a retrospective analysis would occur once CAMS has been developed and peer reviewed. Mr. Nies asked, if there were decisions regarding accountability measures (AM) made for 2020 catch and then CAMS changed those data, would the AM decisions be revised, and Mr. Gouveia indicated that he did not expect the quota monitoring and AM decisions to change given that the methodology used in CAMS is similar to the existing methodology currently used in quota monitoring. Mr. Reid asked how market sizes are standardized, and Dr. Brown indicated that while it would be good to be standardized, it is not. Mr. Beal asked what will happen with port sampling numbers, and Dr. Larry Alade stated that port sampling is constrained by funding.

4. Future NRCC Meeting Procedures

Mr. Nies stated that previously, all meetings had been in-person, and that the presentations were in-person. He asked what the expectations for future meetings should be, assuming no drastic change to COVID conditions. He added that in the current (hybrid) meeting, there had been public comment, which was very rare before COVID, and that the hybrid meeting required a sound system set up that he was not sure NEFSC or GARFO could provide. Mr. Beal relayed that the ASMFC was also dealing with this, and was discouraging remote participation by leads, but perhaps it should be available for short presentations. Mr. Mike Luisi asserted that if you are a voting member, you should be present for the meeting, but that was a lot to ask for short presentations. Dr. Simpkins stated that the NEFSC was trying to get conference rooms that could allow for this type of meeting to occur routinely. Ms. Sarah Bland stated that GARFO's conference rooms are set up for virtual options; while GARFO does not have the equipment to provide for a hotel, it could be done at the GARFO office. Mr. Luisi added that the MAFMC was trying to be consistent in the way meetings are held throughout 2022, and recommended that the NRCC do the same. Mr. Nies suggested that for the Fall 2022 NRCC meeting, all principles should be in person. He also expressed a concern that making the meetings so accessible to the public could inhibit conversation.

Mr. Mike Pentony expressed his disappointment in the perspectives shared, and argued that we should be moving beyond the old approach of requiring in-person attendance, and that meetings should be accessible (i.e. hybrid), which is not the same as making the meetings public. He brought up that often presentations are very short, and that we should capitalize on what has been learned and the available technology to not require everyone to travel. He suggested that hotels may have technology available, or that GARFO could supply Google Meet kits, and that returning to the old approach should not be the goal. Dr. Simpkins added that there is value in having staff available to engage, give presentations, and answer questions, which is more difficult if it cannot be done through webinar, or requires the staff to travel. Mr. Reid suggested that the NRCC defer to the host of the fall 2022 meeting (NEFMC) for now.

5. Fisheries Dependent Data Initiative and CAMS

Mr. Gouveia provided an update on the Fishery Dependent Data Initiative (FDDI) and CAMS. After giving a summary of what has been completed so far, he provided more information regarding the work that is currently underway and yet to do. The regional electronic vessel trip report (eVTR) data model is transitioning from the design phase to the implementation phase, and they are modifying Fish Online eVTR applications to support lobster and clam reporting. They are establishing a universal trip identifier (UTID) working group that would include members from GARFO, NEFSC, and ACCSP. For CAMS, there will be a peer review by the Center of Independent Experts (CIE), and development of a Change Board approach to ensure CAMS is able to evolve over time. The CIE review is expected in early 2023.

Mr. Bellavance raised the issue of vessels that are permitted across different jurisdictions, and how changing requirements can cause additional disruptions. Mr. Gouveia replied that in the past, requirements have been developed in silos. The goal is to be building something that has enough flexibility to incorporate other changes. Mr. Nies asked whether 2021 landings were ready. Mr. Gouveia stated that state landings for fall 2021 were still needed, but Mr. Beal relayed that the April download for state landings should be ready.

– *Day 2* –

6. Scenario Planning

Ms. Deirdre Boelke provided an update on behalf of the scenario planning core team. They are currently in the scenario creation phase. The core team received 89 applications to participate, and the list was winnowed down to 75. The scenario workshop will be a 2.5-day meeting, held in June 2022 in Washington DC. There will be 3-4 online webinars subsequently held in July-August 2022, for scenario deepening, and there will be discussions planned at various Council and Commission meetings in the fall.

Mr. Nies asked how many fishermen were included in the workshop, and Ms. Boelke explained that they were still working on filling a few seats, and acknowledged that the summer timing of the workshop did pose a problem for active fishermen. Mr. Luisi asked whether NRCC members would be able to attend, and Ms. Boelke stated that there would be some Council and Commission members attending as participants, and that the meeting was open, so others could listen, either in person or via webinar. Several commented that it seemed the group was on track. ASMFC will provide an update on funding for scenario planning, due summer of 2022 (**Action Item #4**).

7. Aquaculture

Mr. Kevin Madley provided an overview of the aquaculture program. The executive order (E.O.) 13921, Removing Barriers to Aquaculture Permitting, designates NOAA as the lead agency for NEPA in certain cases. He provided a case study of the Pacific Ocean Aquafarms, where NMFS will serve as the lead agency due to the specific expertise. He also provided

information about several guides, including on aquaculture permitting, grants and financial assistance, and state-by-state permitting requirements.

8. Wind Update

Mr. Mike Pentony and Mr. Andy Lipsky provided updates on the offshore wind projects in the region. As a result of numerous projects in the region, there are several overlapping and consecutive National Environmental Policy Act, Essential Fish Habitat, and Endangered Species Act consultations, and continued heavy workload with limited staff resources. There is ongoing coordination with the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and other agencies. While FY22 omnibus includes some support for NEFSC to provide scientific support for the regulatory process, it has not yet gone through the approval process.

9. SAFE Reports

Ms. Maria Fenton provided an update on the status of the Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report process. The Councils would house the reports on their websites, and GARFO would link to those pages on its website. Council staff and Ms. Fenton have been working on a solution where the review of SAFE reports could be incorporated as a step during the specifications rulemaking process. If there were a change in stock status or significant new information, the plan would be to update the documents sooner. Documents would be uploaded directly to the Council website, unless available online elsewhere, with the goal of reducing duplication. GARFO points of contact would reach out to the Council's staff person for the relevant fishery management plan and the SAFE report contact, to ensure the correct documents are uploaded and labeled. Only current documents would be stored, and there would not be public facing historical documents, although those would be available from GARFO. The goal is to have this process established in 2022.

Mr. Nies noted that for assessments, the data portal does not have the actual final MT assessments. Dr. Simpkins stated that those will be in the NMFS publication archive once they meet accessibility requirements (i.e., "508 compliance). Dr. Moore clarified that the Councils would be responsible for housing the documents, but that GARFO would be responsible for managing the reports, and Ms. Fenton confirmed this.

10. Port Sampling

Dr. Larry Alade provided an overview of the port sampling situation. Due to stable funding but increasing costs, recent years have seen a substantial reduction in the number of commercial biological samples collected by the Northeast Port Biological Sampling Program. A new contract began in February 2021, which increased costs and further reduced the number of samples. There are numerous potential consequences of this reduced sampling for stock assessments, which will likely be stock specific. Gaps in sampling will increase uncertainty, and there will be possible reduced tracking availability of cohorts and year class strength, increased uncertainty of selectivity, and impacts on model performance. Simulation testing is needed to determine the impact of reduced sampling, although Population Dynamics Branch does not have the full capacity to conduct this analysis.

Overall, the NRCC expressed significant concern regarding the impacts that the reduction of port sampling would have on stock assessments. **The NRCC agreed that the reduction of port sampling due to limited budget should be raised at the upcoming Council Coordination Committee (CCC) meeting in May 2022.** NEFSC and GARFO will examine the costs of the Port Sampling Program and come up with a ballpark number of the amount of funding needed to meet the needs of the stock assessments in time for the CCC meeting (**Action Item #3**).

11. Protected Resources

Dr. Moore summarized the current issues that the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions are facing, regarding whales, sturgeon, and sea turtles. He summarized the various processes that are occurring for each, including the North Atlantic Right Whale team and the sturgeon working group. However, there is confusion regarding process regarding sea turtles, it is unclear whether there is a team/working group, and there is no Federal Register notice to get information.

Mr. Pentony explained that for sea turtles, GARFO is currently conducting scoping in an attempt to gather more information. GARFO has presented at both Councils. There is no Federal Register notice because it is not in rulemaking. Mr. Reid expressed concern about the process, asking if once input was received, then would decisions be made? Mr. Pentony replied that there is not a specific timeline. When Dr. Moore pressed to know what would be in the rule, Mr. Pentony explained that he could not say if he knew, there would already be a rulemaking document. Dr. Moore stated that it would be useful to have a working group like there is with sturgeon, and that the uncertainty that is causing concern with stakeholders.

Next Meeting

The Fall 2022 NRCC meeting is scheduled for October 24-25, 2022. NEFMC is chairing.