



New England Fishery Management Council

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

MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 19, 2018
TO: Executive Committee
FROM: Mr. Tom Nies, Executive Director
SUBJECT: Future of the RSC

This memo provides a staff recommendation on the whether the Research Steering Committee (RSC) should continue as a standing Council committee, to inform your discussion at the November 27, 2018, Executive Committee meeting.

BACKGROUND

The Council’s recent program review recommended that a reevaluation of the *Research Review Policy* (in the Council’s *Operations Handbook*) and the purpose and functions of the RSC. In August 2018, the RSC agreed by consensus that:

“The Council program review raised legitimate concerns about the need to revisit the purpose and functions of the RSC. The RSC has identified several potential roles for itself in setting research priorities, helping to see that the priorities are fulfilled, and in research communications. The RSC recommends that the Council examine the facets of engaging in the research enterprise (e.g., set priorities, promote cooperative research, coordinate how priorities may be met, ensure project quality, promote use of results) and determine if continuing a standing RSC is necessary.”

In September 2018, the Council passed the following motion unanimously:

“that the Council requests its Executive Committee to bring a recommendation to the December Council meeting on whether the RSC should continue, and if so, on its purpose and functions.”

For background on the formation and history of the RSC, and other information that supports Council decision-making on the future of the RSC, please refer to the September 13, 2018, memo from the RSC Coordinator, Dr. Rachel Feeney, to RSC Chairman, Dr. Matthew McKenzie.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The staff recommends that the RSC not continue as a standing Council committee, unless the RSC becomes more central to research priority setting within the Council, and the National

Marine Fisheries Service recommits to using the RSC as an advisory body and for proactive outreach to help ensure project results are available to the Council. Rationale includes:

1. The *Operations Handbook* states that a primary purpose of the RSC “is to assist the Council in identifying and prioritizing regional research needs.” However, RSC is only tangentially involved in doing so.
 - a. For the Council’s 5-year research priority setting, the RSC has been deferring to the SSC and species committees. During the last cycle (2017-21), the RSC had the opportunity for input, but did not take it, only commenting on document structure/searchability of priorities.
 - b. Early on, the RSC was heavily involved in setting RSA priorities, but that has largely been a species committee task recently.
2. The RSC is no longer serving as an advisory body to the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC). The RSC formed in 1999, when Congress appropriated funds for cooperative research and directed NMFS to work with the Council and public to design a research program and develop research priorities. Up until about 2011, the RSC regularly gave input to the NEFSC Cooperative Research Program on budget use and priorities. Since then, the program has shifted to funding networks of researchers, decision-making has been more in-house, and there has been less funding available for research. In the last few years, the NEFSC has not reached out to the RSC to invite involvement in priority setting.
3. For doing management reviews of completed research:
 - a. It has become more laborious for Council staff to identify the status of research projects, obtain final reports and any technical reviews. With waning research funds, there are fewer staff at research funding programs to liaise with the Council and facilitate the communication and use of project information. Staff of research funding programs used to feed Council staff with project final reports and technical reviews. There is no longer proactive outreach, and RSC staff have needed to seek out updates and reports.
 - b. To complicate project discoverability, NMFS research funding programs each have webpages, but they vary in the amount of information posted about funded projects. Particularly, for the Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program and Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant Program, Council staff have found it difficult to identify funded projects, determine project status, and access final reports.
 - c. Most RSC consensus statements that come from its management reviews state something to the effect that: “this project has value and should be considered by the Council.” This input is so general, that it is not adding a lot of value.
4. RSC membership is intentionally broad, but that limits expertise to provide specific recommendations. When specific research/review related tasks have arisen, a targeted group has formed. For example:
 - a. The Northeast Trawl Advisory Panel was formed as the forum for input/dialogue about the survey methods/gear.
 - b. A specific committee was formed to conduct the Council’s 2018 RSA program review.

Updates to the *Operations Handbook* are needed whether this recommendation is adopted or not.”