



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 13, 2018 update (July 31, 2018 original)
TO: Dr. Matt McKenzie, Research Steering Committee Chairman
FROM: Dr. Rachel Feeney, RSC Coordinator
SUBJECT: Status of the RSC

The program review of the New England Fishery Management Council (Council), finalized in May 2018, recommended that the Council reevaluate its *Research Review Policy* (in the Council’s *Operations Handbook*) and the purpose and functions of the Research Steering Committee (RSC). Considering this, Executive Director Tom Nies asked the RSC to, at its meeting on August 8, 2018, develop Council recommendations about this policy and the future of the RSC. This memo was originally written to help prepare the RSC for their discussion. It has since been revised and now includes a summary of the RSC recommendations, a table that may help Council decision-making on the future of the RSC, and examples where the *Handbook* is inconsistent with current practice.

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RSC FORMATION AND HISTORY

Except where noted, the following brief history of the Research Steering Committee has been pieced together from archived communications and meeting documents and from personal memory from my time as a staff member of the Northeast Consortium (2004-2011). Some of the early meeting records are spotty. **This summary should NOT be considered complete and may contain errors**, but it gives a sense of the early purposes and functions of the RSC and how it has evolved.

1999-2000

In 1999, funding for collaborative fisheries research programs was on the rise (Armstrong *et al.* 2008; Feeney *et al.* 2010):

- The Northeast Consortium, based at the University of New Hampshire, formed with \$2M of Congressionally earmarked funds.¹
- Congress appropriated \$4M for NMFS to use for cooperative research, management, enforcement and stock assessment related to New England Fisheries and directed NMFS to work with the Council and public to design a research program and develop research priorities. The Northeast Cooperative Research Partners Initiative (CRPI)² was formed by the Northeast Regional Office and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center to administer the funds related to research (\$2.5M).³ The early funds were directed towards groundfish research.
- Congress appropriated \$5M for a Disaster Assistance Program in which groundfish fishermen would be compensated for their participation in research and activities like removal of ghost gear or disentanglements of marine mammals. The Office of Cooperative Research formed at the Regional Office to administer the funds.

February 1999 – The Council had a presentation from its Executive Director Paul Howard outlining scientific needs and shortfalls in light of the passage of the Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA 1996) that had increased the need for more accurate/timely science to support decision-making (incl. National Standard 2 on basing management on the best scientific information available).

May 1999 – Via a memo to the Council’s Executive Committee, the Executive Director called for greater regional coordination of research and recommended the formation of an “Experimental Fisheries and Research Programs Steering Committee.”

July 1999 - The Council established the “Experimental Fisheries and Research Programs Steering Committee” comprised of four Council members, one NESFC staff, one NMFS Regional Office staff, two fishery scientists, four fishermen, one member of the conservation community, and one from academia.

October 1999 – The first committee meeting was held, though the committee’s name was shortened to the “Research Steering Committee.” At this meeting, the RSC agreed to the request by the NMFS Office of Cooperative Research to review and prioritize collaborative research proposals funded by the Disaster Assistance Program and gave input on the design of the Disaster Assistance Program.

November 1999 – The RSC met and: received another request from NMFS to identify research priorities and review proposals for the Disaster Assistance Research Program, reaffirmed its commitment to be involved in the development of research priorities for this program but did not define its role explicitly, provided input on CRPI activities and on the formation of what would become the Scallop Research-Set-Aside Program (RSA), and agreed to work on a mission statement for itself.

¹ As of August 2008, the NEC had administered \$32M, funding 181 projects involving 500+ fishermen, 215+ scientists and others.

² The NCRPI has had multiple names over the years: first called an “initiative”, then a “program”. In 2017, a Cooperative Research Branch was formed.

³ As of August 2008, it had administered \$23M, funding 71 short-and several long-term projects involving 206+ fishermen, 181+ scientists and others.

Late 1999-early 2000 – The RSC worked with NMFS to develop research priorities and a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the NMFS cooperative research funds.

April 12, 2000 – The RSC met and: developed a review and evaluation process for considering preproposals for NMFS groundfish cooperative research funds, developed conflict of interest and recusal protocols for this review, discussed a review process and evaluation criteria for the upcoming review of Scallop RSA proposals, and discussed options for closing the next meeting to the public.

April 25-26, 2000 – The RSC met in closed session⁴ and: reviewed preproposals for NMFS cooperative research funds, serving as NMFS’s evaluation team.

July 14, 2000 – The RSC met in closed session and, in partnership with a subset of Scallop Committee members, reviewed preproposals for the Scallop RSA funds.

July 17-18, 2000 – The RSC met in closed session and reviewed full proposals for submitted to NMFS for funding through the 2000 Congressional appropriation for cooperative groundfish research.

October 3, 2000 – The RSC met in closed session and reviewed proposals for the Scallop RSA funds.

October 26, 2000 – The Executive Committee met and discussed clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the RSC. It was felt that the RSC and Council should steer (recommend research priorities and projects) and after that, the process should be handed off to another entity to manage and administer the projects.

Late October - December 2000 – The RSC met three times and discussed its activities over the past year and planned for subsequent research funding processes.

2001-2002

The RSC met several times and received updates on the NCRPI projects and gave input on developing RFPs and reviewed proposals. As the first wave of projects were being completed, Council staff and Plan Development Teams (PDTs) were receiving a lot of research information from scientists and fishermen, requesting that it be used in management. The PDTs needed help in determining the degree of technical review and scientific rigor before potentially using research products in management.

2003-2005

May 2003 - The RSC completed development of a process to evaluate final reports resulting from collaborative research projects and integrate the results of that research into the management process.

September 2003 - This process was initially approved by the Council and came to be known as the *Research Review Policy* (in the *NEFMC Operations Handbook*).

April 2004 - The RSC developed recommendations for revising the *Research Review Policy* to add a strawman that articulates criteria for a competent technical review. This was done at the request of the Council’s Executive Committee. The intent was to provide context as to how a piece of work might impact management decisions and/or to identify or direct research efforts that support management initiatives.

⁴ Given that MSA requirements preclude the Council from convening closed meetings and because of confidentiality issues, the RSC served as NMFS’s evaluation team and met in closed session several times as noted in this memo.

September 2004 - The Council approved this revision to the *Research Review Policy*.

May 2005 – By this time, the RSC was regularly reviewing final reports, not only those funded by the NMFS, but the Northeast Consortium and other sources. The RSC raised a concern about conducting management reviews of incomplete projects and recommended that only finalized work be reviewed.

June 2005 - The Council accepted this recommendation and revised the *Research Review Policy*.

2006-2015

The RSC recommended priorities for collaborative research funds. Here are examples. In early 2009, priorities for expenditure of the additional cooperative research funds recently announced by the NOAA leadership. In 2006, the Magnuson-Stevens Act amendments had directed Councils, in conjunction with their Scientific and Statistical Committees, to develop and submit to the Secretary of Commerce, lists of five-year research priorities and data needs. In November 2010, the RSC recommended that the RSC continue to provide input on priorities for cooperative research funds, noting the separate Council-SSC process for the five-year priorities. In 2012, Council funded groundfish research, administered by the Northeast Consortium.

The RSC regularly conducted management reviews of selected research reports. Several meetings were solely dedicated to doing management reviews (e.g. June 25, 2012). In July 2009, the RSC discussed a list of all final cooperative research reports that had a technical review but no management review and prioritized which would receive a management review in future.

The RSC regularly received updates from and give input to the NCRP (on budgets and programs, e.g., at November 2011 RSC meeting) and to the Council (for RSA funds⁵). In July 2009, gave input on NCRP strategic planning. In 2009-2010, NCRP received \$6M for cooperative research, from which several networks of researchers were funded to develop research projects with oversight from the NCRP. In February 2011, the RSC discussed this approach and made a few recommendations about transparency and participation.⁶

With Council approval, a few updates to the *Research Review Policy* were made.

2016 – present

Late 2016 - With a decline in membership (see section below), the RSC was reinvigorated with several new members.

March 2017 – January 2018 - The RSC met three times and: developed input on the 2017-2021 Council research priorities, conducted management reviews of Council-funded research administered by the Northeast Consortium and RSA project reports, and discussed the five-year research priority setting process. The RSC recommended changing the format from a Word document listing to a more searchable spreadsheet with additional information on rationale, status, applicable fisheries, etc. The RSC prompted discussion with NMFS on how Council priorities are getting used and received updates from and give input to the NEFSC NCRP. The RSC recommended that the network approach to funding research be reviewed.

⁵ The Council developed the Monkfish and Herring RSA programs in 2006 and 2008, respectively.

⁶ After November 2011, it seems that the RSC gave less regular input on NCRP funding activities.

RSC MEMBERSHIP

The Council's policy on the general stratification of stakeholder interests within the RSC has remained unchanged since its inception (4 Council, 1 NEFSC, 1 GARFO, 2 scientists, 4 fishermen, 1 academic, 1 conservation community). However, the actual membership of the RSC has rarely conformed to this policy. For example:

- Between 2006-2016, no staff of GARFO served on the RSC.
- Up to 2016, there have always been 2-3 staff of the NEFSC on the RSC. From 2006-2012, 1 or 2 of these staff were from the Northeast Cooperative Research Program.
- Between 2001-2016, the RSC did not have four fishermen on the RSC (just one fishermen after 2012 and none in 2016).
- Between 2003-2006, and in 2016, there was no conservation community member on the RSC.
- By the end of 2016, there were just three RSC members apart from the appointed Council members, thus the need to repopulate the RSC in 2016. Given the pool of applicants, the concept of "fishermen" was expanded to include other industry members or representatives. The NEFSC Science and Research Director appointed a staff member from outside the NCRP. It is the sense of Council staff that the rationale for this change was that, since the RSC often develops recommendations related to the NCRP, the NEFSC appointee should be external to this program.

RSC STAFF

The following are staff functions related to the RSC:

- Coordinate and support RSC meetings and follow-up activities.
- Communicate Council research priorities to funding organizations.
- Upon request, provide input on draft RFP priorities and proposals for relevancy to.
- Facilitate communication and knowledge sharing about research that may be useful to the Council.

The RSC was staffed by Pat Fiorelli from 1999 through the spring of 2011. Up until the summer of 2016, when Rachel Feeny took over, RSC coordination had been assigned to three other staff members. Continuity of activities was likely hampered by this turnover.

CURRENT CONSIDERATIONS

- In recent years, funds for collaborative research have waned, causing:
 - Less demand for input on research program priority setting and fewer funded projects.
 - Fewer staff resources at research funding programs to liaise with the Council and facilitate the communication and use of project information. Staff of cooperative research funding programs used to feed RSC staff with project final reports and technical reviews. Now, RSC staff need to periodically reach out to request updates.
- On research priority setting:
 - In recent years, setting RSA priorities has largely been a species committee task.
 - Council five-year research priorities are largely set by 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.

- At the last three RSC meetings (2017-2018), the RSC had opportunities to give feedback and input to the NEFSC on future directions but made very few suggestions.
- On management reviews:
 - It has become more laborious for Council staff to identify the status of research projects, obtain final reports and any technical reviews.
 - 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 BREP and S-K, Council staff have found it difficult to identify funded projects, determine project status, and access final reports.
 - 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.
 - RSC membership is intentionally broad, but that limits expertise to provide specific recommendations. When specific research/review related tasks have arisen, the Council has opted to form a targeted group has been formed. For example:
 - When, in 2017, the Habitat PDT needed a report on seabed habitat characterization reviewed, an RSC review was considered, but it was decided that a sub-group of the SSC would be more appropriate.
 - The Northeast Trawl Advisory Panel was formed as the forum for input/dialogue about the survey methods/gear.
 - A specific committee was formed to conduct the Council’s 2018 RSA program review.
 - Some current RSC members have stated at recent meetings that too much meeting time is spent on reviewing completed work.
 - However, there is value in having a public forum to highlight and talk about research and think a bit bigger picture than the management actions of the moment.

COUNCIL PROGRAM REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS (MAY 2018)

In May 2018, the Council underwent a programmatic review. The reviewers picked up on some of the above considerations and recommended that the purpose and functions of the RSC be carefully examined. Here are the RSC-related excerpts from their final report.

Strengths

“The RSC gets high marks for bringing scientists, fishermen, and managers together in positive ways, historically to review cooperative/collaborative research plans and results. Cooperative research results have been used by the Council in management, and in some cases have helped inform stock assessments. However, the context has changed and the goals of the RSC are changing.”

Opportunities for Improvement

“The effectiveness of ... the *Research Review Policy* ... in guiding Council actions is not clear. The Council must develop research priorities every five years, as required by the MSA. It appears to the Panel that every entity (NEFSC, GARFO, the Council and staff, academics and the Northeast Cooperative Research Program) develops their own ideas about research priorities. The RSC is supposed to synthesize these but it is not clear that their recommendations are fully taken into account when other groups determine their research programs for the following year. The effectiveness and application of the RSC recommendations are not visible enough to guide Council action. Council research priorities may be helpful for individual researchers applying for funds. However, the Center, the Saltonstall-Kennedy program, other councils, and the ASMFC also set priorities.”

“With a decline in collaborative research funding, the charge of the RSC may be shifting toward more work on Council research priorities, and it could become the center for that task. In that case, membership composition that is currently appropriate to the task of reviewing research project results may have to be reassessed and changed for the purpose of determining research priorities. There is concern about adding Council RSA programs to the review and prioritization tasks of the RSC, as a major extra strain.”

TOR 1c Recommendations

1. “The Panel recommends that the Council re-evaluate the composition and objectives of the *Research Steering Committee (RSC) Policy* and guidance in light of changes in kinds and nature of research and the possibility that it can become the Council’s central committee for establishing research priorities.

➤ How to implement: Council staff to review current guidance for RSC (in the Operations Handbook) and the RSC policy and update if necessary. Clarify purpose, roles, and tasks of the RSC.

➤ Review the research priority setting processes of other Councils, and then collaborate or interact with partner agencies, such as NEFSC. (Note: this is a May 2018 CCC agenda item.)”

3. “The Panel recommends that the Council continue to seek opportunities to better integrate and leverage research needs that cross the Center, Region, and Council.

➤ How to implement: The RSC should map out the research planning/prioritization and roles of each agency and subsidiary body to identify and assess any potential redundancies/duplication of effort in order to provide opportunities to increase efficiency and uptake.”

AUGUST 8, 2018 RSC RECOMMENDATIONS

The RSC discussed its future on August 8, 2018, and made the following consensus statement. The full meeting summary containing discussion points is available at:

<https://www.nefmc.org/library/aug-8-2018-research-steering-committee-meeting-summary>

Consensus Statement: 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.

- Identify research priorities
 - Continue to assist in priority setting for future RFPs for Council funds.
 - Track what has been funded, how priorities are being addressed.
- Encourage having research priorities met
 - Identify what 5-year research priorities have fallen through the cracks.
 - Be a platform for considering questions on the relevance of research results to Council FMPs.
 - Provide input on EFP decisions.
- Enhance research communications
 - Be a conduit between the Council, GARFO and NEFSC.
 - Convene scientists and fishermen, as outreach for projects.
 - Be a place to discuss big ideas that may fall outside of immediate management priorities (e.g., full retention, climate change).

COUNCIL ENGAGEMENT IN THE RESEARCH ENTERPRISE

After the August 2018 RSC meeting, Table 1 was developed through a collaboration of staff, the RSC Chairman and a few RSC members. It aims to identify the entities within the NEFMC and the Greater Atlantic Region of NMFS that are involved in federal fisheries research and give a snapshot of how. There are many other research funders (e.g. Sea Grant, Fish and Wildlife Foundation) and institutions of researchers that are not included here. Table 1 may be useful in decision-making on whether the RSC should continue and what unique role it should play in the research enterprise.

Selected acronyms in the following table:

BREP = Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program

CRB = Cooperative Research Branch

EFP = Exempted Fishing Permit

FMP = Fishery Management Plan

PDT = Plan Development Team

RSA = Research-Set-Aside

RSC = Research Steering Committee

S-K = Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant Program

SSC = Scientific and Statistical Committee

Table 1 - The Federal fisheries research enterprise in New England

Council/NMFS Entity		Planning and Priority Setting	Promoting Cooperative Research	Proposal Selection for Funding	Project Oversight	Research Results	
						Quality Assurance	Promoting/Using
NEFMC	RSC	Input (5-year)	Input to CRB			Mgmt. review	Rec. to Council
	PDTs, staff	Input (5-year, RSA, BREP, S-K)		Proposal review, EFP input		Technical review	Use data in actions
	FMP APs, Ctes	Input (5-year, RSA)		EFP input			
	SSC	Input (5-year)				Technical review	
	Full Council	Approve (5-year, RSA)					
	Observer Policy Cte	Find data gaps in monitoring	Find solutions re monitoring				
	Fishery Data for Stock Assessment Working group (short-term)	Find data gaps in GF assessment	Find solutions re GF assessment				Recommendations to Groundfish Cte
NEFMC/MAFMC	Trawl Survey Advisory Panel	Find data gaps in survey	Industry-based testing				
Northeast Region Coordinating Committee		Input to NEFSC on assessment related priorities					
NMFS	NEFSC Directorate	Annual NEFSC plans		Approves CRB spend plans & RSA project selection			Incorporate coop. res. in assessments
	NEFSC Coop. Research Branch	Annual CRB plans; Input (BREP & S-K)	Implement CRB programs	Set CRB spend plan	Administer grants & contracts, project oversight	Facilitate tech. review	w/in NEFSC, RSC liaison, industry outreach
	SAW/SARC	Needs identified				Assessments are peer review	Assessments use research
	GARFO	Input (BREP & S-K)	Support CRB programs	EFP approval, input on national RFPs	EFP oversight, grants admin.		Secretarial actions, S-K & RSA outreach
	NMFS HQ	Approve (BREP & S-K)	Implement BREP & S-K	National RFPs (BREP, S-K)	Administer grants & contracts		

INCONSISTENCIES WITH THE NEFMC OPERATIONS HANDBOOK

The NEFMC *Operations Handbook* contains a description of the Research Steering Committee (p. 19-21) and the *Research Review Policy* (<https://www.nefmc.org/about>). As described in the section that starts on Page 3 of this memo, this policy was created in 2003 and revised a few times but has not been updated in several years.

There are several parts of both the RSC description and the *Research Review Policy* that are inconsistent with current practice (Table 1). It is recommended that if the Council wishes to continue its RSC, these sections of the *Handbook* be closely examined and potentially revised to align with the desired purpose, roles, and activities of the RSC.

Table 2 - Examples of inconsistencies between the *Operations Handbook* and current practice

<i>Handbook statement</i>	<i>Current practice</i>
The purpose of the RSC is “to assist the Council in identifying and prioritizing regional research needs” and that the RSC will do so “at least on an annual basis.”	Research priority setting largely falls within species committees. Apart from the annual RSA priorities for scallops, herring, and monkfish, priorities are updated on a five-year timeline.
At several points, it implies that all scientific information used by the Council must be first subject to a management review by the RSC.	Only a minor subset of project reports has ever come before RSC. Given that the RSC meets about three times annually, there simply is not space on meeting agendas to accomplish this.
“When funding is available for collaborative research-related projects through NMFS, provide recommendations to the Regional Administrator (RA) concerning the contents of the agency’s Requests for Proposals (RFPs)...”	This only happened early on. The Council is periodically asked to comment on NMFS’ RFP priorities, but the comment deadlines are too short to arrange for RSC input. Thus, staff develop comments based on existing Council priority lists.
“Serve on NMFS’s evaluation teams and review concept papers and final research proposals submitted in response to NMFS RFPs concerning collaborative research; forward recommendations to the agency concerning the approval of final proposals”	This only happened early on, and since RSC mtgs must be public, the RSC was meeting under the auspices of NMFS. Today, NMFS may ask individual RSC members to be reviewers, but has not asked the RSC as a body for a long time.
Project leaders “will be required to identify project objectives, expected impact on or use in the management process and the end users of their results. Typically this should be stated at the proposal stage, but minimally should be detailed in a final report.”	Except for Council-funded research, the Council does not have the authority to require certain content in the proposals and reports submitted to research funders.