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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, 2021
TO: Council
FROM: Tom Nies, Executive Director
SUBJECT: **In-person and Virtual Meeting Guidance**

1. 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 past year, however, the Council managed to conduct business while relying entirely on virtual meetings. Council members and the public adjusted well to this approach. At some point in 2021, the Council is likely to resume in-person meetings. The Executive Committee discussed guidance for virtual meeting after in-person meetings are resumed.

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"> • Less travel time and reduced travel costs for all: staff, Council members, and the public • Reduced meeting room costs • Less time in staff travel and meeting set-up; including coordination of meeting locations for consecutive meetings • Reduced time commitment for public that may want to listen or comment on part of an agenda • Increased public attendance • Some public participants think atmosphere is less intimidating when making public comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No face-to-face interaction with participants or between members • No opportunity for informal offline information exchange • More staff resources needed to run committee meeting and webinar at the same time, including tech support for public • Some public participants uncomfortable with the technology, or have limited internet connections that make participation difficult • Real-time meeting coordination more difficult • Screen fatigue • Occasional technological glitches • Slower meetings (“Can you hear me?”, “You’re muted”, roll call votes, etc.) • Single screen available

3. The Executive Committee considered the possibility of a hybrid meeting: a meeting that is in-person but that allows remote participation (by the public, Council members, or both). NMFS advised that Councils cannot select which members of the public can attend in-person but has not said whether allowing mandatory or voluntary remote participation would be a problem. At the Committee and AP level it would be difficult for staff to conduct a hybrid 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. While it would also be difficult for a Council meeting, we routinely have more staff present and could spread the workload.

4. Questions the Council may want to discuss:

- a) Are there general principles that should be established (e.g. Committees should meet in-person when adopting final preferred alternatives for the Council's consideration)?
- b) Do we need specific guidance on which meetings can or should be virtual, or should that be left to staff?
- c) Are there meetings that should always be in-person?
- d) What should be our position on hybrid meetings?

5. The Executive Committee believes the better approach is to adopt general principles. Suggestions are on the following page. 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. Council meetings will be held in-person, and broadcast using a listen-only webinar. The Council will consider allowing remote public comment at Council meetings.
2. 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. In-person committee and advisory panel meetings will not be broadcast on a webinar, and remote public comment will not be taken. Virtual meetings will provide opportunities for remote public comment.
 - d. Hybrid meetings (some participants 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 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.
3. When planning public hearings, the Council will consider a mix of virtual and in-person hearings.
4. PDT meetings can be either in-person or virtual, at the PDT chair's discretion.