

Northeast Trawl Advisory Panel (NTAP) September 2020 Report

Meeting 1: The NTAP Working Group met 8/3/20 to discuss research priorities that may help improve and enhance the Bigelow trawl survey. Members of the working group include gear engineers, biologists, assessment scientists, council members, and fishermen, as well as a few other folks who have been involved with NTAP over the years.

Coming into this year, we had a plan for the research necessary to standardize the trawl survey and improve the performance of the spread of the trawl doors. Then COVID-19 hit and all of our plans went out the window. Last year in late August, we tried a set of #9 Bison doors that I had on hand. They turned out to be too big and overspread the gear in the deep water. This year, I found a set of #8 Bison doors that we hoped would do the job. We fixed them up and they were ready to go. That trip was scheduled for August when the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) calibrates the gear for the fall trawl survey, but then all work on the Bigelow stopped. The plan was to get the spread so that it was right in all depths of water and then “talk” about changing the doors on the survey. Once the gear was working correctly, we could calibrate an industry boat to the Bigelow, and then we would have a platform to fall back on for the survey and maybe even enhance the survey with being able to cover more areas during the Bigelow survey.

My opinion on this is that the most important thing we need to do is fix the trawl survey. That was the reason NTAP was repopulated when Bill Karp was head of the science center. Then and only then should we calibrate an industry boat to the Bigelow. I voiced my opinion at the working group and did not win the argument.

The main reason for the meeting was that the funding they had secured was going to expire on 9/31/20. They can file for an extension of 1 year. The survey has been cancelled so they had to make a decision on whether to fund one of the other projects or ask for an extension (and risk not getting it) so they could start the calibration next year when the survey hopefully gets going again.

These are the options that came out of the working group to be put before the full NTAP.

- 1) Evaluate potential to combine the Northeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (NEAMAP) survey index and NEFSC bottom trawl survey index into one index for use in stock assessment
- 2) Calibrate the two surveys for potential use of NEAMAP protocols in wind energy areas
- 3) Prepare NEAMAP as a potential sampling platform for missed inshore survey strata
- 4) Refine methods for calibrating surveys in the Northeast region

Meeting 2: The full NTAP met on 8/7/20 to discuss the outcome of the working group and get updates on NTAP activities.

- A. In August 2019, we tested a set of #9 Bison doors that performed well in the shallow water but overspread the gear in the deep water. So, we decided to try a set of #8 Bison doors hoping to

get enough spread in the shallow water and not over spread in the deep water. Those tests were scheduled for August 2020 but COVID happened and that test is on hold.

- B. Wingspread experiment publication – Here are the key takeaways from the tests. Wingspread had no significant effect on efficiency. (I disagree with this statement.) Changes in wingspread were observed to have no significant effect on “total” catch. The key word is total catch. It did, however, have an effect on certain species. When asked if the results could have effects on stock assessments, the answer was yes. As we continue to see the analytical assessments fail and change to plan B or index-based assessments, we are more reliant on the trawl survey catch to come up with the quotas we debate here at the council.
- C. Swept Area Integration Update – There are two possible approaches for integrating swept area into stock assessments. It was discussed that the change in area swept due to wingspread could be important for Index-based assessments. A panel member noted that for specific species like yellowtail flounder, a small change in estimated biomass can be important for the council when allocating closed area trips annually to the scallop fishery. One closed area trip can be worth 60 million dollars to that fishery.
- D. 2020/21 Research Update – We discussed the work done by the working group on 8/3/20 trying to bring a recommendation to the full NTAP today. These are the options we had come up with from that meeting:
 - 1) Evaluate potential to combine NEAMAP survey index and NEFSC bottom trawl survey index into one index for use in stock assessment
 - 2) Calibrate the two surveys for potential use of NEAMAP protocols in wind energy areas
 - 3) Prepare NEAMAP as a potential sampling platform for missed inshore survey strata
 - 4) Refine methods for calibrating surveys in the Northeast region

After much debate the full NTAP came up with its own set of research priorities, which included some of the working group’s recommendations and some that the full panel came up with that had to be put back out for a vote.

Overall, NTAP most strongly supported preservation of funding to execute side-by-side tows between NEAMAP and Bigelow in FY 2022 (October 1, 2021 – September 30, 2022). NTAP voted with varying levels of support for the other research topics: designing surveys for wind energy areas suitable for integration in stock assessments, mining currently available data, and extending inshore surveys. Support for all options varied from first to last choice among panelists, but more panelists ranked side-by-side work as their first choice.

To determine the ranking, first choices were scored at 3 points, second at 2 points, third at 1 point, and fourth at 0 points. 11 panel members responded. NEFSC representatives did not participate. Some panel members ranked only one or two alternatives.

Here are the results with the rankings for each:

Score summary

21	Carry over funding to Fiscal Year 2022 (Side-by-side comparison, NEAMAP/Bigelow)
16	Design survey for wind energy areas suitable for integration in stock assessments
13	Mine currently available data
10	Extend inshore surveys (NEAMAP, MA, ME/NH)

There are several potential applications of side-by-side NEAMAP/NEFSC bottom trawl survey work:

- 1) Evaluate potential to combine NEAMAP survey index and NEFSC bottom trawl survey index into one index for use in stock assessment
- 2) Calibrate the two surveys for potential use of NEAMAP protocols in wind energy areas
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At this point, the most expedient next steps appear to be a subset of the Working Group, primarily members with NEAMAP and NEFSC bottom trawl survey teams, meeting periodically throughout the upcoming year to plan logistics and operational details for the side-by-side experiments, with recommendations for Panel approval.

In conclusion, I think we have drifted away from the original intent of the NTAP. The original mission when Bill Karp repopulated the panel was to fix the trawl survey and then calibrate an industry boat or boats to be able to do the survey if the Bigelow wasn't available. Now the priority seems to be just calibrating a boat to something that we know is not working. I truly believe that the initial calibration from Albatross to Bigelow is where the problem is. We now have 11 or 12 years of Bigelow information. It may be time to talk about starting the Bigelow's own time series without the calibration. That was discussed at our very first meeting when the panel was repopulated.

– Terry Alexander, NTAP member, New England Fishery Management Council