



New England Fishery Management Council

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DRAFT, 2018

Samuel D. Rauch III
Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs
National Marine Fisheries Service/NOAA
U.S. Department of Commerce

Dear Sam:

The New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) is responding to your June 14, 2018 notice of availability and commenting on the proposed “Northeast Regional Implementation Plan of NOAA Fisheries Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management Roadmap” (IP), published at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/ecosystems/ecosystem-based-fishery-management-draft-implementation-plans>.

We understand that the IPs include a plan and strategy to engage stakeholders and partners in a process to develop ecosystem management for the Nation’s fisheries, while supporting and recognizing the developing EBFM approaches within each region. They also identifies milestones for the following six national Guiding Principles:

- o Implement ecosystem level planning
- o Advance our understanding of ecosystem processes
- o Prioritize vulnerabilities and risks of ecosystems and their components
- o Explore and address trade-offs within an ecosystem
- o Incorporate ecosystem considerations into management advice
- o Maintain resilient ecosystems

As you know, the NEFMC has been engaged in developing an example Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) for Georges Bank, as a template to be used for Management Strategy Evaluation in 2019. We intend for this process to produce a FEP for eventual implementation, replacing or augmenting our existing Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) that regulate Georges Bank fisheries.

The NEMFC is pursuing a fundamentally different EBFM approach relative to other Councils and management authorities. Unlike other EBFM approaches, the NEFMC is focused on place-based management and trophic guilds (i.e., energy production units) as management units rather than managing fish stocks using independent harvest control rules. The new approach addresses the implications of both biological interactions (i.e., predator/prey) and fishery interactions (bycatch and mix species fisheries).

Although comprehensive, well-thought out and supporting of our EBFM development efforts in the Northeast Region, we recommend that the IP also address the following issues and concerns.

- The activities called for in the IP will be funded and staffed at the same time as scientific research to support current management activities. We already have a shortfall in the number of stock assessments that can be completed by existing personnel. Some stocks have not had a benchmark assessment for over ten years and are not scheduled for one in the next six years. The IP should address how competition for resources and personnel will be managed, so that EBFM development and assessment needs are adequately met.
- Placing heavy emphasis on data needs and on evaluating and analyzing tradeoffs, the IP should identify existing tools and practical steps for incorporating ecosystem considerations into management decisions (Guiding Principle 5), or the steps needed to develop these tools.
- While providing support for practical guidance for developing EBFM policies and management approaches, what opportunities will the councils and the public have to review and comment on this guidance before it is final? The plan states: “GARFO is currently developing regional guidance on national EBFM policies and management approaches, in collaboration with NOAA General Counsel, NMFS Headquarters, and the NEFSC.”
- EBFM guidance should address action 5b2: Support consistent and effective implementation of the NS1 guidelines, which includes guidance on incorporating ecosystem information into stock management.
- As part of the IP, GARFO/NEFSC should recommend a set of standard ecosystem Terms of Reference that could be applied across multiple assessments (e.g., an evaluation of the importance of managed forage species to dependent predators).
- The NEFMC supports the creation of an EBFM Fishery Policy Analyst position within GARFO. To be effective this person should have a strong working background in fisheries and ecology.
- The two Northeast Region Councils are currently taking somewhat different approaches to the application of ecosystem management to fisheries. Given the overlap of managed fisheries in the region (along with those managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission), the IP should recognize that in some management areas there will need to be meshing or coordination of management policy of species that are related by diet, predation, or by fishery.
- The IP should prioritize harvest control rules and ecological reference points that account for ecosystem needs.
- The IP should emphasize the importance of Annual State of the Ecosystem Reports and the indicators to be applicable and informative for decisions made by the councils. In addition, the councils (and ASMFC) will need guidance on how to use the Reports and indicators (e.g., in control rules).
- The IP's engagement strategy discussion is very brief with no details - it would be helpful to outline the structure and process associated with this strategy.
- The impact of bycatch on ecosystems is not recognized as an important consideration. Thus, there is no discussion of promoting selective fishing gears (especially important for HMS fisheries) or protecting habitat from destructive fishing gear.
- The Ecological Production Unit (EPU) boundaries and corresponding characteristics/drivers have not yet been meaningfully considered and used strategically in Northeast fisheries management decisions to date, though there is substantial opportunity to do so and benefits that could be realized. The IP should identify approaches to identify these boundaries based on scientifically sound characteristics of species and fishery distribution.

We are glad that the IP recognizes and will be supportive to the development work of both Councils (NEFMC and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council). The IP and added staff

support at the Greater Atlantic Regional Office and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center will be a big help for developing a FEP and applying ecosystem approaches to existing management plans. The NEFMC looks forward to working with the new staff to achieve these goals.

Please contact me if you have questions.

Sincerely,

John F. Quinn
Chair