

Scallop Research Set Aside Program Policy

The Scallop Committee, at the request of the New England Fishery Management Council's Executive Director, developed a policy for how the Council is involved in the review of Scallop research set-aside proposals.

The Scallop Research Set-Aside (RSA) program is a process coordinated by the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC). Four RSA programs were established by the Mid-Atlantic and New England Fishery Management Councils, and are currently unique to the Northeast Region. No Federal funds are provided for the RSA programs. Instead, funding for research is provided by the sale of Set-Aside allocations in quota-managed or Day-at-Sea (DAS) managed fisheries, which are awarded through a competitive grant process.

The Scallop RSA program was formally included in the Atlantic Sea Scallop Fishery Management Plan in 1999. The program has evolved over time, but currently about 2% of the total projected scallop catch is set-aside to fund research projects that support scallop management. At least biennially, the Council recommends the specific research priorities that should be used for the Scallop RSA funding announcement.

The Scallop Plan Development Team (PDT) and Scallop Advisory Panel provide specific input about needed research priorities through the NEFMC Scallop Oversight Committee, and the Committee's recommendations are then considered and approved by the full Council. The Council's decision forms the basis for the federal funding opportunity that is published by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

NMFS generally solicits proposals through one of the NOAA Grants Management Program's Semi-Annual Omnibus Grants Notice (Omnibus Notice-June and December) call for proposals. NMFS submits draft documents to NOAA Grants, which publishes a Federal Register Notice (FRN) announcing the availability of the opportunity to submit proposals. Additional information is provided on a Federal web site (Grants.gov) that posts a Federal Funding Opportunity (FFO) announcement, which includes detailed information on how to submit proposals, research priorities and deadlines for submissions.

All Federal Grants applications are submitted through an internet based system called GRANTS.GOV (GOL). The administration of NOAA grant competitions and awards are processed through the GOL system. Federal Program Officers (FPOs) access the system to upload documents needed to announce the competition (FFO), manage all competitive grants processes, monitor post award progress and close out grants after final reports and products are received, reviewed and accepted. The Council or Council staff is not involved in this stage of the program at all.

Each proposal is subject to a thorough review process. The process has evolved over time to include input from both technical reviewers and fishery managers. Each proposal is reviewed by three subject matter experts that score the technical merits of the proposals. Reviewers consider several aspects of each proposal including importance and/or relevance and applicability of the proposed project, technical/scientific merit, overall qualifications of the project, project costs, and outreach and education. Each technical reviewer provides a final numerical score based on a possible 100 total points. The NEFSC is responsible for assigning the technical reviewers, which include staff from multiple departments within both NEFSC and the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO), as well as other relevant experts from academia, Council staff, state agencies and various researchers. If needed, Council staff assists in finding highly qualified technical reviewers. These reviewers are required to sign a conflict of interest form before participating in the review and must submit written comments and final scores directly through NOAA Grants Online.

Concurrently, Council staff assists the NEFSC in identifying a diverse group of individuals to participate in the management review process of all proposals. A meeting is held with about a dozen individuals to discuss the management relevance of each proposed project. The group of reviewers includes individuals from the NEFMC Scallop Committee, Scallop Advisory Panel, and Scallop PDT members, appropriate NEFSC staff, and other scallop fishery and management experts. Individuals on the RSA Management review panel must also sign a conflict of interest form and are required to examine all proposals prior to the meeting. Following the discussion of each proposal, each management reviewer is requested to submit written comments. The management reviewer comments are used by the NEFSC in the selection process to determine management relevance and applicability of a project.

After this phase of the review, individual management reviewers, including Council members and staff, are no longer involved in the selection process. NEFSC staff is responsible for compiling all the information provided from both technical and management reviewers, and the Science Center Director then makes the final decision regarding selection of proposals. The agency is responsible for the final decision because this is a legal requirement of the grants process used to distribute RSA funds. After final projects are selected, NMFS also administers the grant process, including regulatory consultation, any necessary permitting, report review, etc. After final reports are available, the results are forwarded to the Research Steering Committee, for review or directly to the Scallop PDT if project results have already been reviewed.