

**Spring 2017 Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC) Meeting Summary**  
**June 13-14, 2017**  
**Courtyard by Marriott Providence – Providence, RI**

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*Attendees, by group affiliation:*

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC):

Bob Beal, Executive Director  
Toni Kerns, Interstate Fishery Management Program Director

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC):

Michael Luisi, Chairman  
G. Warren Elliot, Vice-Chairman  
Dr. John Boreman, Chair, Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)  
Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director  
Rich Seagraves, Senior Scientist

New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC):

Dr. John Quinn, Chairman  
Terry Stockwell, Vice-chairman  
Tom Nies, Executive Director  
Chris Kellogg, Deputy Director  
Jason McNamee, Vice Chair, SSC

NOAA Fisheries Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)

Dr. Jon Hare, Science and Research Director  
Dr. Susan Gardner, Deputy Director  
Dr. Jim Weinberg, Stock Assessment Workshop (SAW) Chairman  
Dr. Michael Simpkins, Chief, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division  
Dr. Russ Brown, Chief, Population Dynamics Branch

NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)

John Bullard, Regional Administrator  
Mike Pentony, Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries  
Gene Martin, Northeast General Counsel Section Chief (via teleconference, Day 2 only)  
Emily Gilbert, Sustainable Fisheries Division (*NRCC staff support*)  
Shannah Jaburek, Sustainable Fisheries Division (*NRCC staff support*)

Additional Attendees (Presenters)

Dr. David Van Vorhees, Fisheries Statistics Division, NOAA's Office of Science & Technology (via teleconference on Day 1)  
Diane Borggaard, GARFO Protected Resources Division (in person, afternoon of Day 1 only)

*No Public Attendees*

- Day 1 -

1. Long-term Assessment Goals and Prioritization

*Review Proposed Two-Track Approach and Discuss Prioritization and Scheduling Process Recommendations*

Dr. Michael Simpkins provided a review of the proposed two-track assessment approach (i.e., separate management and research tracks) and presented the working group's draft prioritization and scheduling factors. Following the presentation, there was a discussion on what levels of peer review would be appropriate for management track assessments. The management track includes data updates, assessment updates, and operational assessments. To date, these all require different levels of peer review. Dr. Simpkins noted that if the NRCC felt these should be standardized, or if NRCC members wanted more flexibility in a tiered approach to peer-review for these management assessments, those rules need to be defined and agreed upon. Dr. Jim Weinberg asked if stock status determination would be incorporated into the management process, which would have a more limited review than the research assessment track, and Dr. Simpkins clarified that there has not been an affirmative decision that stock status would occur in the management track.

There was some concern that the timing of research assessment results would impact the management timeline. Dr. Simpkins confirmed that a research assessment would not be scheduled in between management tracks to avoid major disruptions. Ideally, the results from an assessment would be scheduled so that they are available in time for specification setting process.

After Dr. Simpkins noted that the NEFSC is over capacity with its current assessment scheduling, Mr. Tom Nies asked whether the working group had discussed ways to increase capacity. Dr. Simpkins replied that the estimates for capacity should be considered a baseline and that it is possible that more capacity will be available in the future.

Dr. Simpkins noted that the working group needs guidance moving forward. Although the NRCC was not ready to formally approve the two-track process, there was support for the scheduling factors in concept and interest in moving forward with a draft schedule. The NRCC ultimately agreed that the working group should develop a first draft of assessment prioritization for consideration at the next NRCC meeting (Action Item #1).

*Plan B Working Group Update and Discussion*

Dr. Russ Brown then provided an update from the Plan B working group, which has been developing a policy document to define roles, responsibilities, and process in cases where standard stock assessment modeling approaches are deemed insufficient or inappropriate, and simpler empirical approaches are required to provide management advice. Currently, when this situation occurs during a benchmark the roles and responsibilities are clear, but when it occurs during an update assessment the roles and responsibilities are not as clear. The working group's document will provide further guidance for both situations. Dr. Brown also discussed the three

Plan B approaches that have been used in the past (i.e., the area swept approach, the survey change approach, and the data limited toolkit), noting that additional approaches are likely to be developed in the future.

There was a general discussion of incorporating Plan B approaches in to an assessment's terms of reference. Mr. Jason McNamee, a member of the Plan B working group, mentioned that the group had similar thoughts. To avoid situations where a Plan B approach is developed ad-hoc during an assessment overview panel, such an approach would be identified in advance so that if peer reviewers decide a model will not go forward, a backup plan has already been identified. The NRCC agreed to the working group's suggestion that the assessment scientist(s) for a given assessment will review the model approach and provide a Plan B assessment, and the reviewer will make the determination on whether the model fails and if the Plan B assessment is needed and should be reviewed. The Plan B working group will finalize their document at the end of July 2017 and the NEFSC will send out the document for review (Action Item #7).

2. Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES) Transition Update

Dr. David Van Voorhees of the Fisheries Statistics Division (NOAA's Office of Science and Technology) provided an update on the MRIP FES transition. Dr. Van Voorhees discussed the upcoming June 27-29, 2017, peer review of the FES calibration model. If approved, the model will be applied later this year using 2015 and 2016 data. Charter boat effort estimates will not be affected because that data relies on vessel trip reports. The access point angler intercept survey calibration model is also under development, with a peer review likely to occur in 2018.

There was a brief discussion about compliance issues, specifically regarding some for-hire fleet captains uninterested in participating in dockside interviews. Dr. Van Voorhees noted that they are working closely with the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP) and state agencies that are conducting intercept surveys to address cooperation issues.

Dr. Simpkins asked when calibrated data may be available to start benchmark assessments on affected stocks. Dr. Van Voorhees committed to having revised statistics available by July 1, 2018.

3. Review Current Assessment Schedule

*Update on 2017 Operational Assessments*

Dr. Brown discussed the data needs for the 20 operational groundfish assessments and reviewed the current timeline. In February 2017, the NEFSC determined that a key piece of data (age/growth) would not be available for most of the groundfish assessments that require age data. This pushed back the operational assessment peer review to the week of September 11, 2017. Dr. Brown noted that the full suite of survey data may not be available for red fish and white hake, but they feel comfortable making some assumptions about age composition for these slow growing species. The assessment oversight panel is scheduled for July 24, 2017. The NEFSC is still working on forming the peer review panel for mid-September.

Mr. Chris Kellogg noted that the NEFMC's SSC meeting will likely be pushed back to mid to late October, but that should not impact the current timeline for decision-making on Framework 57 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP.

There was a brief discussion about ACCSP data availability and timing of the data necessary for the groundfish operational assessments. Mr. Robert Beal noted that the ACCSP data was available for use well before the May 1 deadline, but Dr. Simpkins noted there was an internal delay with the NEFSC due to staff availability. Dr. Jon Hare commented that communication can be improved and the NEFSC can layout specific timelines in the future that include its internal review timeline.

The NRCC then discussed Plan B specifically in the context of the 20 operational assessments. Dr. Hare reiterated the earlier points made regarding the plan to have assessment scientists prepare a "Plan B" assessment, but whether or not that plan will be reviewed will be a decision for the peer review panel.

The discussion then moved towards consideration of what type of changes could be made in an operational assessment (e.g., incorporate improved catchability estimates). The NRCC agreed it would be beneficial to create a list of allowable adjustments for consideration by the assessment scientists and assessment overview panel, building from a list of parameters developed a few years ago by Dr. Paul Rago and approved by the NRCC. The NEFSC and NEFMC, as well as both Councils' SSCs, will work on developing guidelines for a list of rules for changes allowed to operational assessments (Action Item #2).

#### *2018 and 2019 Assessment Scheduling*

NRCC participants reviewed and discussed the 2018 assessment schedule, provided some clarifications and revisions to the schedule, including the addition of a summer flounder benchmark assessment for the second half of the year. There is some uncertainty surrounding the second half of 2018 due to the MRIP transition and availability of updated MRIP data.

Similarly, the NRCC did not draft the 2019 schedule due to uncertainty surrounding MRIP data updates, as well as the potential for adopting the new assessment two-track process. The working group will be putting together a draft schedule for what the management and research tracks would look like for 2019 and the NRCC will review at its Fall 2017 meeting.

#### 4. River Herring Topics

Ms. Toni Kerns provided a brief update on the Atlantic sturgeon and river herring stock assessments. The new benchmark stock assessment for Atlantic sturgeon will be peer reviewed in late summer and presented to the ASMFC fishery management board in October. The assessment describes trends on both a coastwide and individual distinct population segment basis. The sturgeon assessment is data poor, describing relative trends in abundance and mortality, and will not produce stock status determinations.

The 2012 river herring benchmark stock assessment has been updated with data through 2015. The assessment update will be presented to the ASMFC Shad and River Herring Management Board at the 2017 ASMFC Summer Meeting (August 1-3). This assessment is also data-poor and will not provide estimates of abundance or overfished stock status determinations, but will provide estimates of total mortality relative to per-recruit benchmarks.

Dr. Weinberg asked why the assessment update only included data through 2015. Ms. Kerns replied that not all the run counts for 2016 are available.

Ms. Kerns also spoke to the NRCC about the collection and warehousing of river herring river run data through a river herring data portal. There are currently numerous communities and townships that conduct river run counts, but how they are conducted differs, making it difficult to incorporate information into an assessment. There is interest in establishing a group that can sort through the information that is collected, but funding would also be needed.

Dr. Hare mentioned that the Northeast Ocean Data Portal may be an appropriate venue. This portal already has a geographic component and staff to maintain it. The NRCC agreed to form a small working group to develop the boundaries of the river herring data portal, consider funding sources, and talk to the Northeast Ocean Data Portal (Agenda Item #3).

Finally, Diane Borggaard (GARFO) joined the NRCC to provide an update on the status of the River Herring Technical Expert Working Group (TEWG), which began as a collaborative effort led by ASMFC and GARFO's Protected Resources Division. Ms. Borggaard emphasized the TEWGs interest in supporting river herring efforts in the future.

## 5. NEFSC Progress Reports on Various Working Groups

### *Updates for the 2018 Workshop on Climate Change and Species Distribution*

Dr. Hare updated the group on the status of the Climate Change and Species Distribution Workshop. The working group is continuing discussions on issues and potential management approaches related to this topic. Any species that are chosen for this workshop will not be from high profile, controversial examples, but would serve as examples for broader groups of species (i.e., Spanish mackerel, instead of cobia or blueline tilefish). Moving forward Dr. Hare will become less involved in the working group and another NEFSC representative will take his place.

### *Update on the Progress of the Cod Stock Structure Working Group*

Dr. Hare will be stepping down as the lead of this working group and has identified someone to replace him. The working group is reaching out to Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans for its participation, but there has been little communication to scientists or managers to date. The NEFSC and NEFMC will continue to coordinate effort with scientists and managers through the Transboundary Management Guidance Committee (Action Item #5). The cod stock structure review will likely be pushed back to 2018. Dr. Hare noted that this is currently being considered as a research track review and because this involves a stock identification issue,

which applies to a number of other stocks, it may shed light on the proposed assessment structure for the research track.

Dr. Simpkins asked if this is still a priority for the NEFMC. Mr. Nies stated that this is still on NEFMC's priority list, and does not think it is likely the NEFMC will vote it down in November.

#### 6. Discussion of Discard Methodologies Produced by the NEFSC and GARFO

Dr. Chris Moore discussed concerns regarding the black sea bass commercial discard comparison between GARFO and the NEFSC and wanted clarity on why these estimates are not more closely aligned. Mr. Nies stated that this is an issue with NEFMC species as well, both for discards and for landings estimates, and felt this should have been a topic for the discard methodology review last fall.

Dr. Simpkins noted that methodologies were designed to meet different objectives, and as a result are not identical, but agreed that both parties should review which differences are critical to achieving objectives versus which are not and can be modified for better alignment. The NRCC agreed that there is a need for a coordinated response from GARFO's Analysis and Program Support Division and the NEFSC. The NRCC created Action Item #4 for NEFSC and GARFO to report out at the next NRCC meeting on the differences in discard and landing estimates, why those differences exist, and if necessary, how the differences can be resolved.

#### 7. Update on NEFMC/MAFMC Coordination on FMPs

Dr. John Quinn provided a brief update on the NEFMC and MAFMC's coordination on various FMPs. Since the last NRCC meeting, the NEFMC now has two additional seats on the MAFMC's Demersal Species Committee to coordinate management of summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass. Dr. Quinn also noted that there are reports of potential jurisdictional issues with ocean quahog and scallops.

### **- Day 2 -**

#### 8. Update on Multispecies/Ecosystem Model Review

Dr. Hare gave an overview the status of the multispecies/ecosystem model review. Mr. Nies and Dr. Hare initially worked out a goal statement, agreed on it, and came up with a draft list of terms of reference, which were reviewed by the NEFMC's ecosystem plan development team and are close to being finalized. A Center of Independent Experts review is already scheduled for early 2018. Dr. Hare noted that the goal statement makes it clear that this work is a research track process.

Mr. Nies emphasized that the purpose is not to use these model to set specifications, but to see what specifications set by the model would look like. The NEFMC's FMPs are not ready to incorporate the model results.

The NRCC discussed workload on NEFSC staff with regards to the different ecosystem approaches between the NEFMC and MAFMC. Dr. Hare noted that they are working to bring

in more NEFSC staff, but it is a slow process. The NEFSC will inform all parties if staffing becomes an issue.

#### 9. Ecosystem Reports to the Councils

Ms. Kerns was interested in incorporating a few ASFMC managed species impacted by climate change (e.g., menhaden, lobster) in ecosystem reports similar to those the NEFSC provides to the Councils. Ms. Kerns also noted that the ASMFC is willing to offer state staff assistance. Dr. Simpkins agreed that this would be possible, so long as the indices are restricted the NEFSC's survey coverage, and noted interest in any help the ASMFC could provide. The NEFSC and ASMFC will have a conference call to work out the details. Ideally, Ms. Kerns noted it would be helpful to have the reports in August or September for the ASMFC, and the climate change working group is also meeting late summer or early fall. The report would be helpful at both meetings.

Dr. Simpkins also requested feedback from the NRCC on how to make these reports more useful. Mr. Nies suggested providing qualitative statements in the status reports about what is being seen and what this could mean going forward for a particular stock. The NRCC discussed the use of a risk matrix, similar to what the MAFMC developed in their *Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management* guidance document.

#### 10. Exploring Use of Programmatic EIS for FMPs

Mr. Nies wanted to discuss any interest from NRCC members to explore the use of a programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) for an FMP. The idea behind a PEIS is that it might reduce the length of NEPA documents for specific actions. This discussion was prompted in part from a discussion amongst deputy directors and senior staff at the most recent Council Coordinating Committee meeting. Some Councils have had luck in developing PEISs.

The NRCC briefly discussed the use of PEIS. After discussing the topic with Ms. Jen Anderson, the GARFO NEPA Coordinator, Ms. Emily Gilbert notified the NRCC that PEISs are useful for specification actions in FMPs that are generally straightforward. In FMPs that typically involve a lot of unexpected changes year-to-year, a lot of work may go into a PEIS without any ultimate realized benefits. Dr. Moore recalled that the MAFMC discussed utilizing a PEIS, but ultimately decided not to, due to similar concerns that ultimately no time savings may result.

Ms. Gilbert noted that Ms. Anderson is happy to discuss the PEIS process with anyone interested. Mr. Pentony asked to be involved in any communication between Ms. Anderson and the Councils.

#### 11. Coordinating Atlantic Herring Management between NEFMC and ASMFC

Mr. Nies introduced the recent issues over lack of coordination with the NEFMC and ASMFC Atlantic herring FMPs. The ASMFC recently approved measures for its FMP that conflict with current Federal measures, as well as the goals and objectives of the Federal FMP. Mr. Nies expressed interest in having a NEFMC representative on the Atlantic Herring Section, noting that the ASMFC has a seat on the NEFMC's Habitat Committee for coordination purposes.

The NRCC briefly discussed the pros and cons of joint management, noting some challenges of joint management from the perspective of the Councils and the ASMFC.

Mr. Beal agreed greater coordination is needed and noted that the ASMFC would need to adjust its charter to accommodate NEFMC voting members on the Section. The ASMFC Policy Board will discuss this at its August 2017 meeting (Action Item # 6) which can be done through the Policy Board, and that it can be discussed at the August meeting.

## 12. Other Business

### *Standard Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM) Working Group Update*

Dr. Simpkins provided a quick update on the SBRM working group. The group has been formed, but needs a chair. The NRCC discussed interest in having the NEFMC and MAFMC jointly chair the SBRM working group. Although both Councils were interested in this idea, Mr. Nies and Dr. Moore needed more time to consider whether their staff had time to co-chair. They will report back to Dr. Simpkins soon.

Dr. Simpkins also suggested including the 3-year review of SBRM to the working groups duties, as required by the final SBRM rule. The final rule included a requirement that the Councils conduct a review of their FMPs to confirm whether or not the current FMPs/SBRM complies with the new guidelines. Mr. Pentony clarified that GARFO is confident the collective SBRM for this region is in compliance. This would not require much on the part of the working group, but the group would be a good vehicle to conduct this requirement. The NRCC agreed.

### *Review of NRCC Performance*

At the last NRCC meeting, a subset of NRCC members agreed to conduct a basic evaluation of the NRCC's performance and consider whether changes should be made in how the group functions. Mr. Beal, who volunteered to lead that group, updated the NRCC on the status of the review. Although there has been one conference call, not much more has been done on this topic to date.

### *Scheduling the Fall 2017 NRCC Meeting*

The NRCC identified November 15-16, 2017, as the fall meeting date. The MAFMC is hosting and the location will likely be Washington, D.C.



## NRCC Spring Meeting 2017 Action Items

June 13-14, 2017

The Providence Courtyard by Marriott, Providence, RI

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Next NRCC Meeting will be November 15-16, 2017, in Washington, D.C.

(MAFMC host)

1. Stock assessment working group continue developing the two-track assessment process  
Lead: NEFSC  
Appointees need from  
Next step(s): Provide draft for both research and management assessment schedule using prioritization approach  
Due date(s): Next NRCC meeting
2. Develop guidelines for list of rules for changes allowed to operational assessments  
Lead: NEFSC and NEFMC and SSCs  
Appointees needed  
Next step(s): Provide feedback on guidance document  
Due date(s): Week of June 19, 2017
3. Create smaller working group to develop the boundaries of the River Herring Data Portal  
Lead: ASMFC (Toni Kerns)  
Appointees needed from NEFSC and MAFMC  
Next step(s): Figure out the parameters but not go too deep until funding source identified; Talk to ocean portal  
Due date(s): Have a call within next month
4. Report out to NRCC explaining the differences in the discard and landing estimates  
Lead: NEFSC and GARFO  
Appointees needed from  
Next step(s):  
Due date(s): Next NRCC meeting
5. Coordinate effort of the Cod Stock Structure working group with Canadian scientists and managers through TMGC  
Lead: NEFSC and NEFMC  
Appointees needed from  
Next step(s): Finalize the draft TORs and start talking with Canada  
Due date(s): July 11, 2017, at TRAC meeting

6. Review New England Council membership on the Atlantic herring section

Lead: **ASMFC**

Appointees needed from

Next step(s): Include the issue on the Policy Board's next agenda

Due date(s): August 2017

7. Review document coming out of Plan B working group

Lead: **NEFSC**

Appointees needed from

Next step(s): Finalizing the document and sending it out

Due date(s): July 30, 2017

8. Think about adding peer review of striped bass to the summer flounder SARC

Lead: **NEFSC**

Appointees needed from

Next step(s):

Due date(s): Next NRCC meeting

9. Discuss any updates to MRIP Transition and Calibration Timeline, if necessary

Lead: **NEFSC**

Appointees needed from

Next step(s):

Due date(s): Next NRCC meeting

Fall 2017 NRCC (**MAFMC host**) – November 15-16, 2017

Spring 2018 NRCC (**NEFSC host**) – TBD