NRCC Stock Assessment Process Evaluation

Northeast Region Coordinating Council

November 19-20, 2026

Providence, RI

Background

- NRCC is tasked with prioritizing, communicating, and coordinating marine fisheries science and management resources across the Greater Atlantic region.
- In 2025, changes in federal priorities interrupted the NRCC's routine stock assessment scheduling process, including pausing most Research Tracks and altering the schedule of Management Tracks.
- In response, the NRCC initiated a regional evaluation to solicit stakeholder feedback about the effectiveness of the dual-track assessment framework prior to adopting a new 5-year schedule.

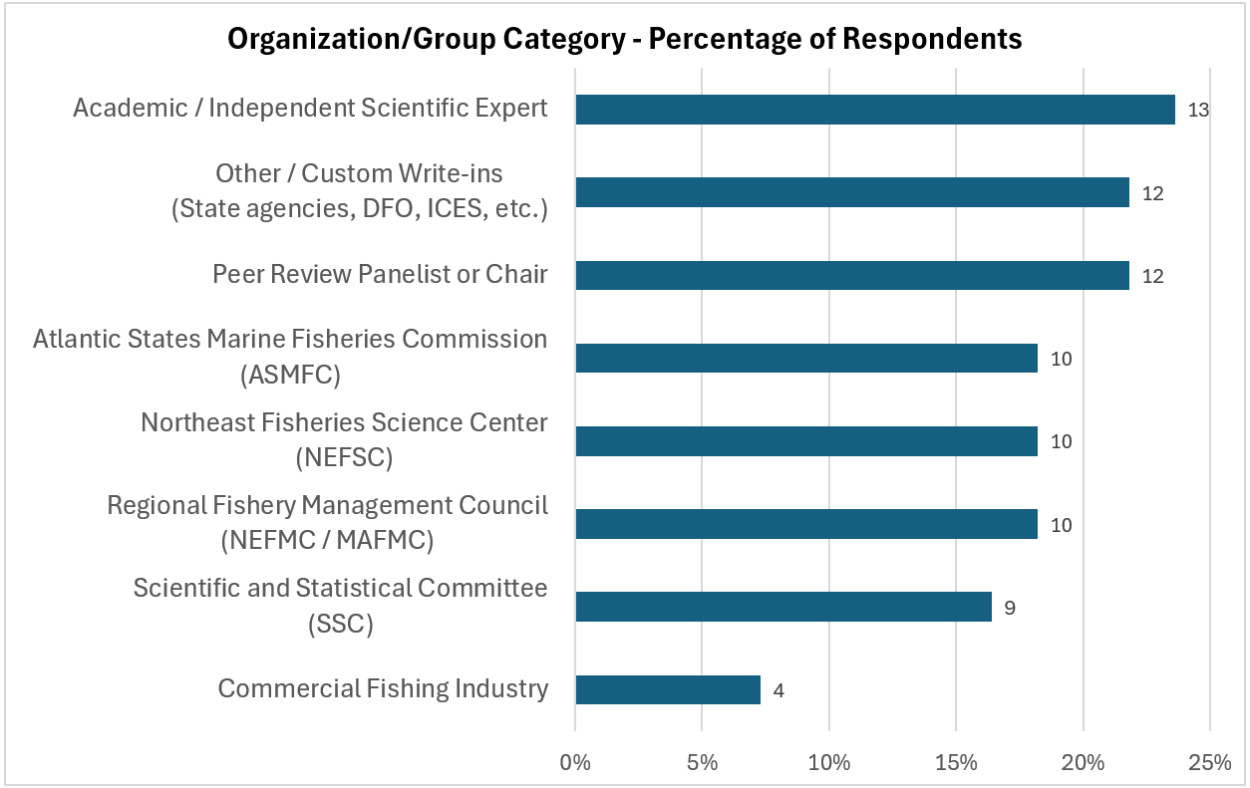
Background

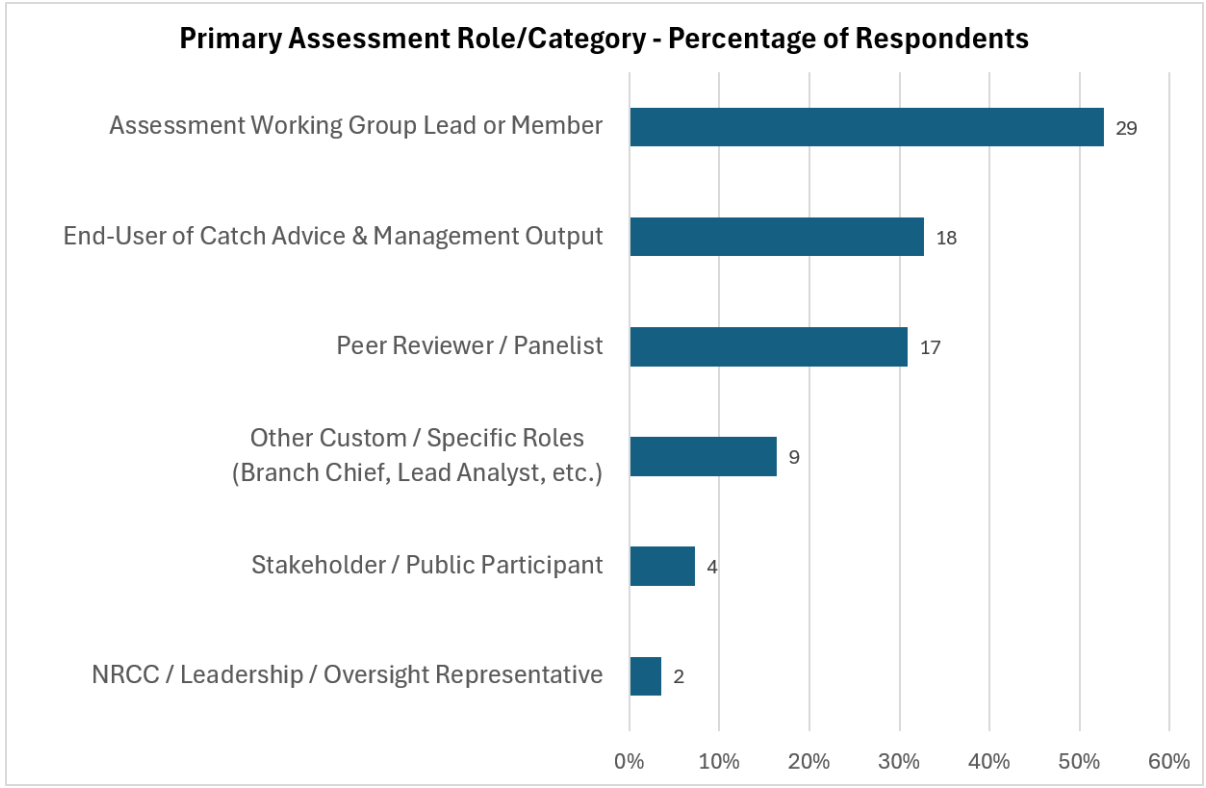
- May 2026 NRCC Action Item:
  - *NEFMC will send out a questionnaire for the NRCC member organizations to assess what has worked well and where there is opportunity for improvement for Management Track and Research Track assessments.*
- The **NRCC Stock Assessment Process Evaluation** was reviewed by all NRCC member organizations and broadly distributed across partner networks in August 2026.

Report

- NEFMC staff compiled all submissions received between August 17 and October 6, 2026.
- Data was compiled in MS Excel and open-ended qualitative responses were analyzed with Google Gemini AI software.
- Synthesis of responses was conducted at an aggregate level across all respondent categories without segmenting specific user groups.
- Qualitative summaries were generated using standardized AI prompts consistently across all open-ended questions.

Respondent Profile – 55 responses





Primary group or organization

Primary role in process past 3-5 years

Research Track Assessments

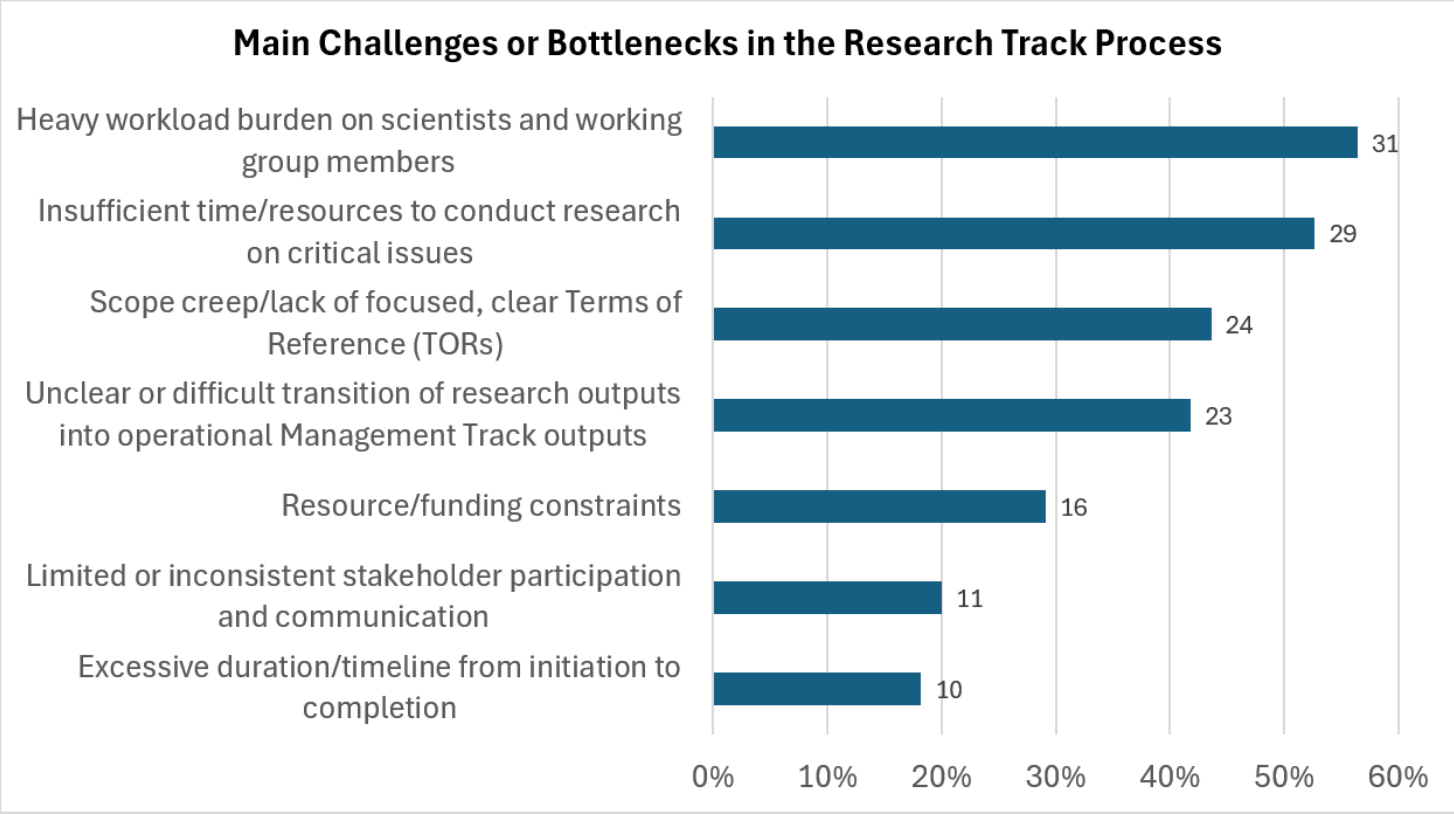
How effectively do Research Track assessments achieve the following:

- **Fostering Innovation:**
  - Exploring novel and complex model structures, ecosystem drivers, or climate variables
- **Thorough Evaluation:**
  - Allowing sufficient time for diagnostic testing and data evaluation
- **Interdisciplinary Input:**
  - Incorporating scientific research and stakeholder knowledge into advancing model development and/or understanding of stock dynamics



Research Track Assessments

What are the main challenges or bottlenecks in the Research Track process?



- **Workload Burden & Capacity:**
  - Over half of respondents reported heavy workload and operational constraints
- **Issues with Process & Scope:**
  - Nearly half reported scope creep and unfocused TORs
  - Specific feedback about data acquisition and compilation
- **Funding, Engagement & Timeline:**
  - Less concern around these topics as major bottlenecks and challenges

Key Takeaways – What's working best?

- Innovation, Methodological Rigor, Deep-Dives
  - Allows space away from routine deadlines to evaluate candidate models and diagnostics
  - Facilitates novel data inputs

- Broad Expertise, Inclusivity, Transparency
  - Expertise beyond Science Center, including academic and state partners
  - Regular public meetings foster collaboration with fishing industry
  - Intensive peer review



High value on dedicated innovation time



Methodological advancement and transition



Effective multi-institutional collaboration



Substantial progress on climate and ecosystem



Effectiveness is dependent on leadership

Key Takeaways – What needs improvement?

- Scope Control and Data Reuse
  - Avoid reopening previously resolved data processing and baseline parameters
  - Streamline data assembly

- Workload Distribution and Resource Allocation
  - Address passive working group participation

- Transition and Governance Efficiency
  - Provide clear update on status of “pause”
  - Standardize reporting templates



Narrow and prioritize TORs



Shift burden off lead assessment scientists



Bridge the Research Track to Management Track transition



Streamline the administrative process

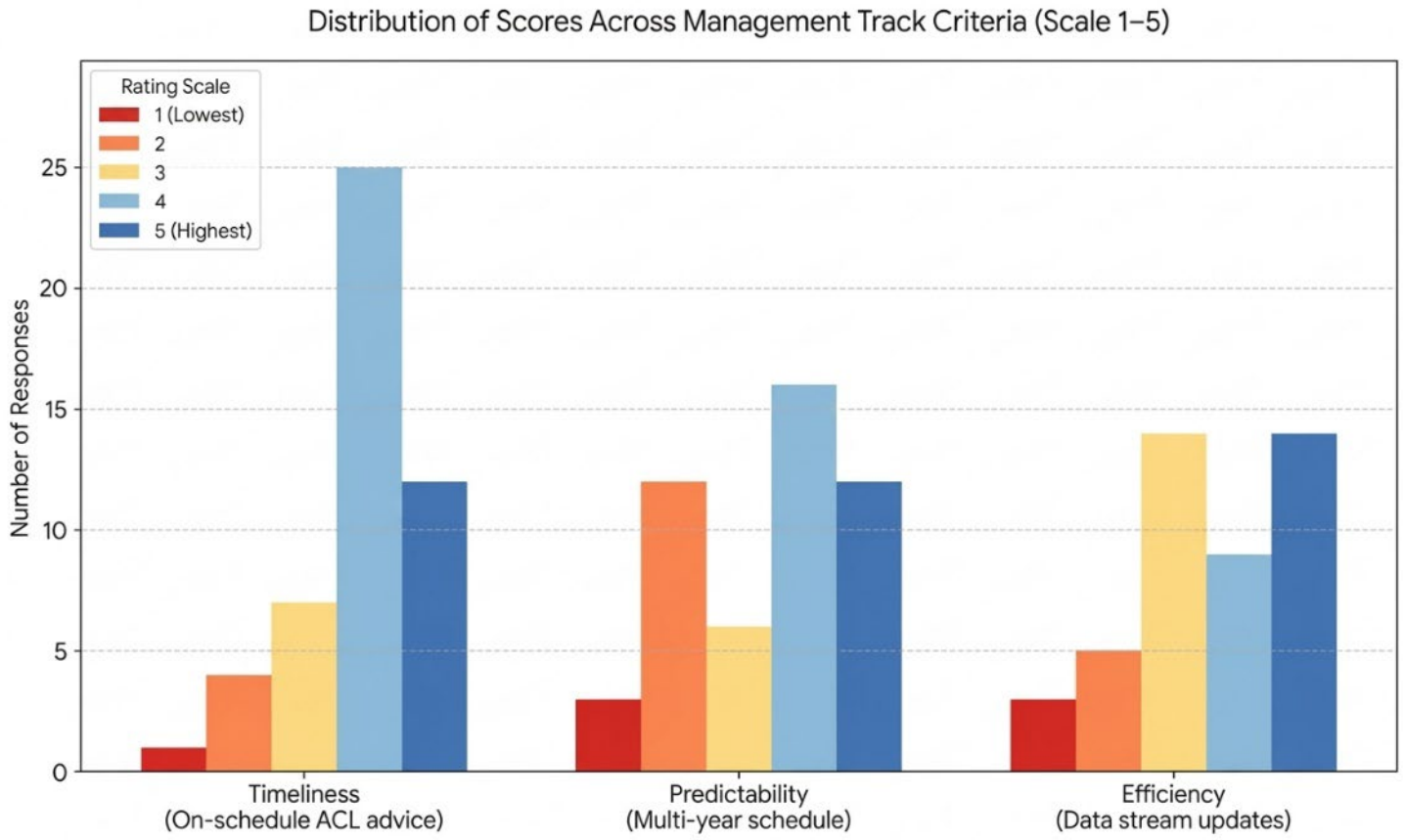


Ensure early partner and stakeholder engagement

Management Track Assessments

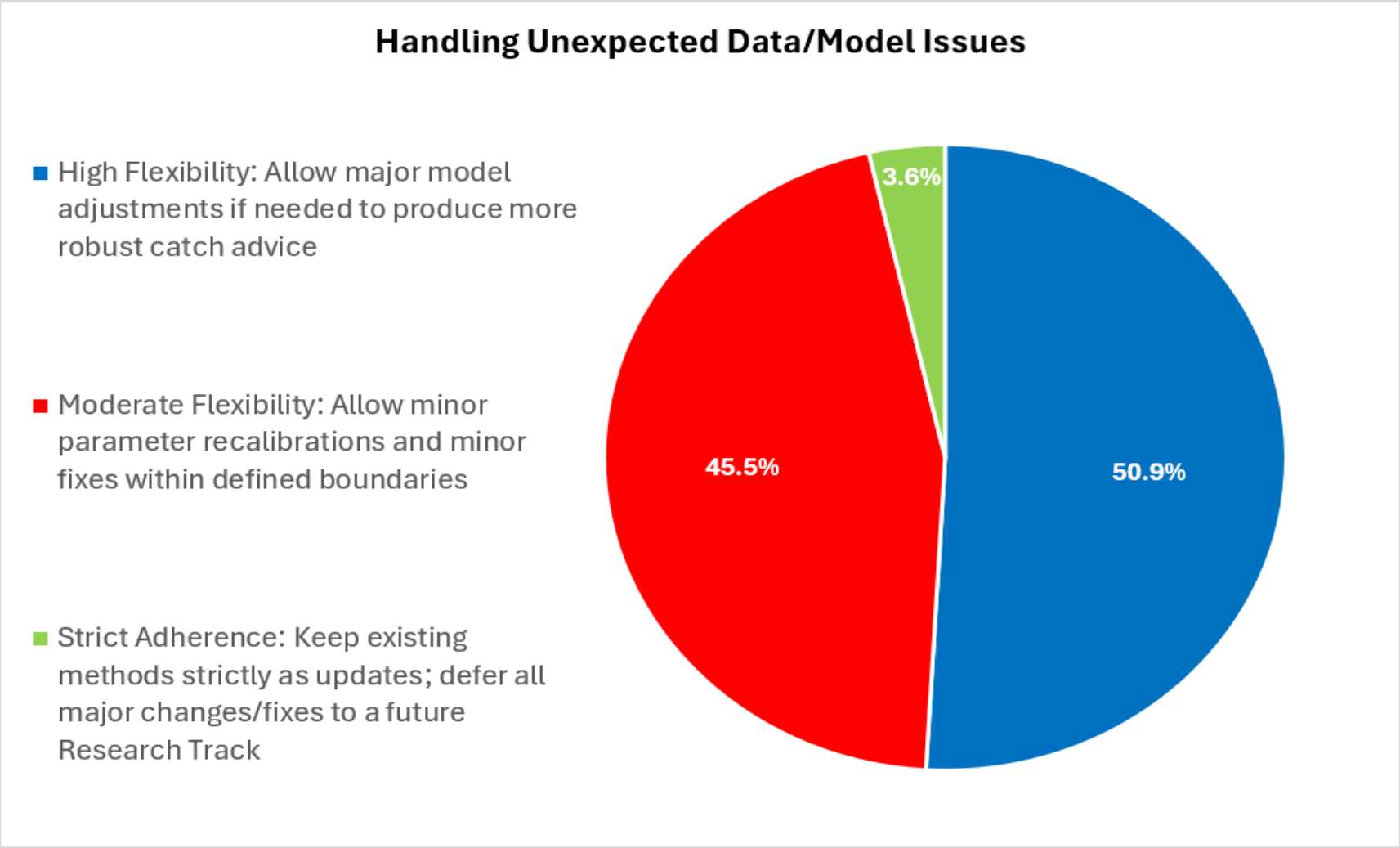
How effectively do Management Track assessments achieve the following:

- **Timeliness:**
  - Delivering management advice on schedule for setting annual catch limits
- **Predictability:**
  - Maintaining a clear, multi-year assessment schedule for regional planning
- **Efficiency:**
  - Updating data streams without excessive workloads



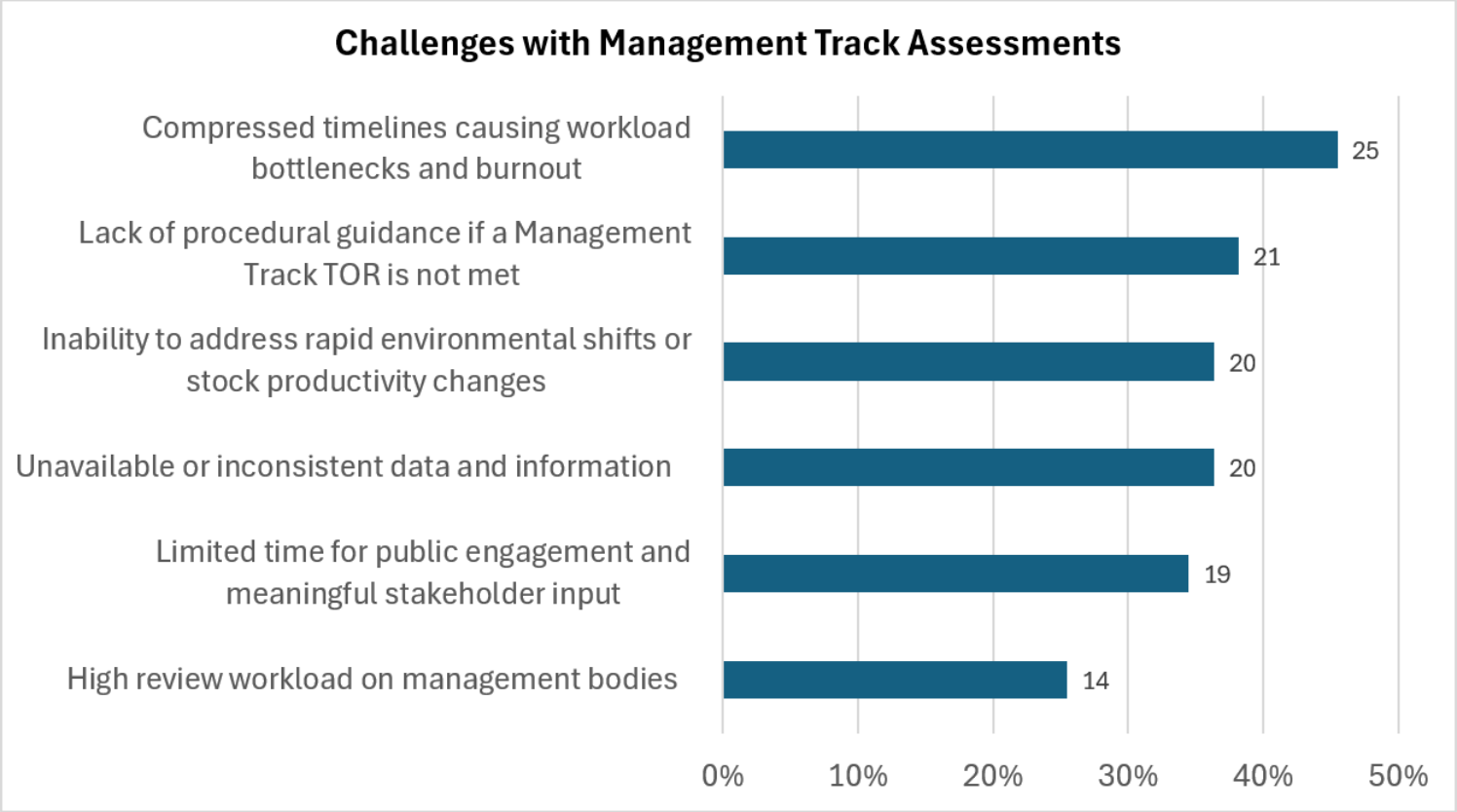
Management Track Assessments

How much flexibility should assessment teams have during a Management Track update when unexpected model performance issues or data anomalies arise?



Management Track Assessments

What challenges have you encountered with Management Track assessments?



- **Timeline & Burnout:**
  - Nearly half of respondents cited compressed timelines cause burnout
- **Procedural Ambiguity:**
  - Lack of guidance and protocols when TORs are not met
- **Isolation & Stakeholder Input:**
  - Limited windows for stakeholder involvement
  - Full burden on assessment leads and competing analytical demands

Key Takeaways – What's working best?

- Advanced Planning & Scope Control
  - Predictable, regular, and timely advice for setting ACLs
  - Multi-year schedules allow NRCC organizations to plan ahead
  - Scope creep is minimized by standardized reports and defined TORs

- Bridging Science & Management
  - Structured mechanism to adopt incremental advances (e.g., new indices, ecosystem data)



Predictability, planning, and scope control



Operational efficiency



Incremental scientific progress



Pragmatic action over perpetual perfectionism



Key Takeaways – What needs improvement?

- Demystify Internal Process
  - Increased education and outreach around AOP and AWG “black boxes”
- Reporting & Tracking
  - Excessive brevity excludes critical content; include more description and data tables
  - Establish a system to track reviewer/SSC recommendations across all assessments
- Procedural Guidance for Failed TORs



Fix data availability and adjust assessment timing



Expand flexibility during management tracks



Bridge the disconnect between Research Track and Management Track

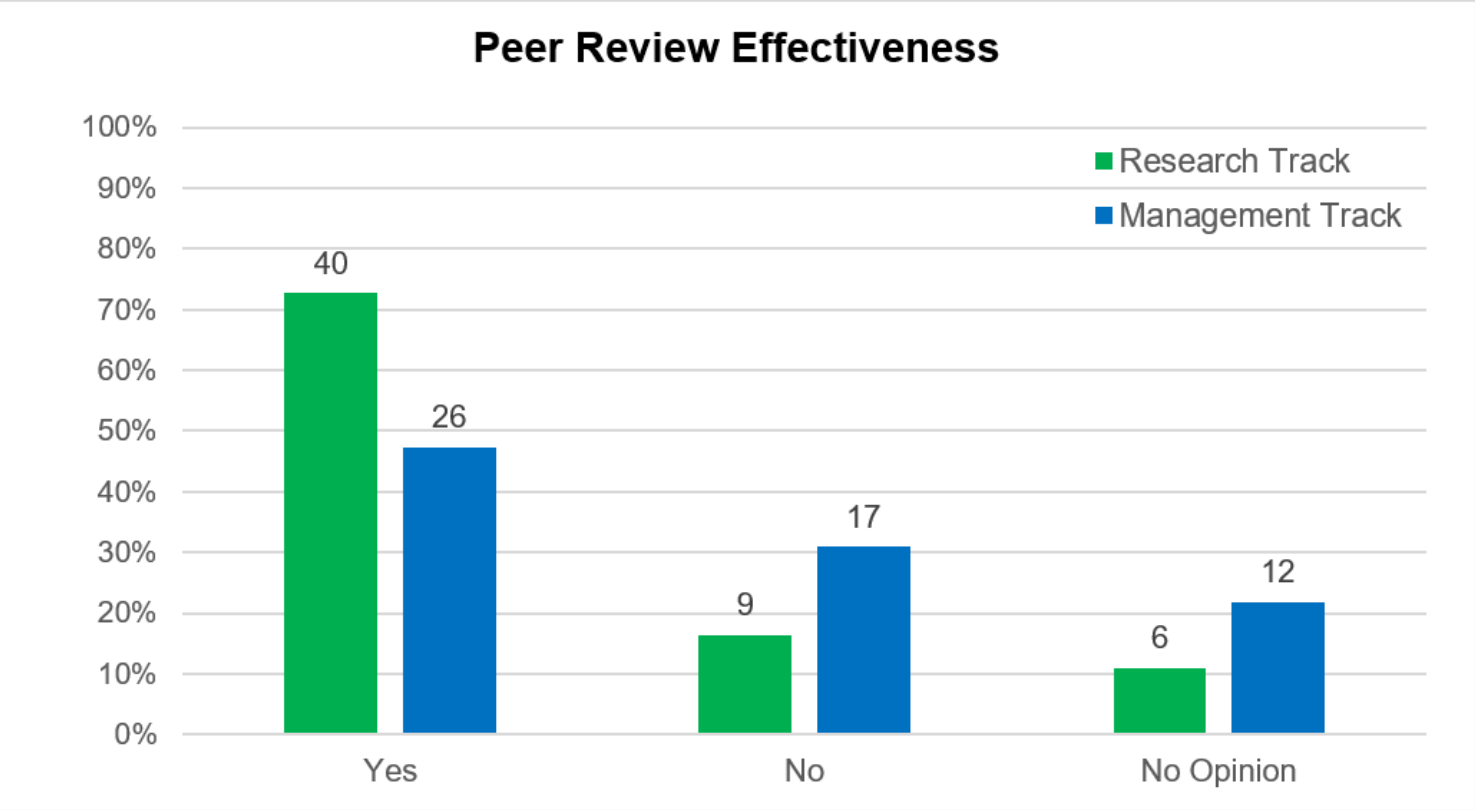


Improve peer review governance and accountability

Peer Review Process

Is the peer review process efficient, objective, and proportional to the level of methodological changes being reviewed?

- **Research Track:**
  - Consensus and high confidence in thoroughness and scientific rigor of in-depth reviews
- **Management Track:**
  - Division about effectiveness of reviews due to compressed timelines and rigid update rules
- **No Opinion:**
  - Smaller pool of respondents familiar with review process, especially Management Track



Key Takeaways – What needs improvement?

- Re-evaluating Settled Assumptions
  - Questions about unchanged data preparation or model structures

- Engagement, Preparedness & Accountability
  - Lack of reviewer expertise in specific models and/or diagnostic tests
  - Sense of defensiveness from scientists

- Disconnect between Research Track reviews and Management Track reviews



Relitigating previously accepted decisions



Reviewer qualification and model familiarity



Time constraints and rushed reviews



Disconnect between Research Track methods and Management Track advice



Perceived bias and conflict of interest



Synthesis and Recommendations

- Research Tracks successfully foster scientific innovation and received high approval for thoroughness and stakeholder transparency, but
    - Impose a heavy workload and suffer from a difficult operational transition into routine management advice.
- Management Tracks successfully deliver timely catch advice, but
    - Suffer from unpredictable scheduling, analyst burnout, and rigid operational rules.

Synthesis and Recommendations

- **Bridging Research Tracks to Management Advice**
  - Evaluate catch advice and projections in Research Tracks
  - Tighten and focus Research Track TOR scope
  - Streamline meeting structures

- **Management Track Flexibility and Governance**
  - Allow intermediate model adjustments
  - Predefine protocols for failed TORs
  - Re-align review timelines, especially June peer review

Synthesis and Recommendations

- **Peer Review Governance and Accountability**
  - Screen for model-specific expertise
  - Enforce TOR scope guardrails
  - Maintain reviewer continuity and ensure report integrity

- **Workload Delegation and Regional Partnerships**
  - Dismantle assessment monopoly
  - Automate data compilation pipelines
  - Prioritize cross-cutting methodological issues and challenges

Next Steps

- **NRCC November 2026 Meeting**
  - Questions/discussion
  - Additional analyses requests
  - Consider how to apply information

- **Moving Forward**
  - 5-year assessment schedule
  - Regional Stock Prioritization Matrix
  - Management Flexibility approaches