

Ecosystem Committee Minutes

June 2, 2005 1-4 pm

Ballroom Section C, Alyeska Prince Hotel, Girdwood, AK

Committee: Stephanie Madsen, Dave Benton, Jim Ayers (teleconference), Jim Balsiger, Dave Fluharty (teleconference, as of 1:40 pm), John Iani (teleconference), Doug DeMaster (teleconference), Chris Oliver (staff), David Witherell (staff), Diana Evans (staff)

Others present included: Bill Wilson, Kurt Fredriksson, Jon Kurland, Earl Krygier, John Gauvin, Pat Livingston, Linda Kozak, Tom Gemmell, Cathy Coon, Kristy Despars, Lisa Lindeman, McKie Campbell, Ben Enticknap, Donna Parker, Glenn Reed, Dorothy Childers, Sue Aspland, John Olson, Sandra Moller, Ed Luttrell, Doug Hoedel, Erica Amman, Heather McCarty, Dave Benson

The Ecosystem Committee discussed the three items on its agenda.

1. Update and discussion on the ecosystem approach to management (EAM) proposal, to co-host a workshop with NMFS and the State of Alaska to explore setting up an ecosystem council or forum for the Aleutian Islands

Ms Madsen updated the Committee on her initial contact with the State of Alaska to discuss their interest in co-hosting a workshop to explore regional ecosystem councils. Two Commissioners from the Governor's recently established Subcabinet on Ocean Policy discussed the State's position with the Committee. Mr Fredriksson, Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation, gave a synopsis of the Subcabinet's ocean policy mission, which has three principal components: governance, stewardship, and research. The Subcabinet is in the early stages of developing ideas on an ecosystem approach to management in response to the US Commission on Ocean Policy report, and the Bush Administration's Ocean Action Plan, and is currently grappling with many of the same issues as the Ecosystem Committee. As a result, the Ecosystem Committee's partnership approach is timely. Mr Fredriksson expressed that the State of Alaska intends to move forward with some kind of ecosystem management structure, and is definitely interested in exploring a partnership with the Council and NOAA. The Subcabinet has invited Ms Madsen to attend their next meeting, later in June.

The Committee discussed some of the EAM issues raised in the staff discussion paper with Mr Fredriksson and Mr Campbell, the Commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game. Mr Fredriksson indicated that the State envisions taking a lead role in any marine ecosystem management initiative, and prioritizes the need to maintain regional flexibility to develop a process that is appropriate for Alaska and Alaskans. Determining the scope of any ecosystem council will be an important issue. The State favors taking a deliberative approach to setting up a process of public participation.

Following the discussion, the Committee developed a recommendation for the Council to move forward with the ecosystem approach to management project, as outlined in their minutes from April 4, 2005. With one objection, the Committee recommends that the Council consider the variation of Option 2 developed by the Ecosystem Committee, which is depicted on page 19 of the staff discussion paper, as the preliminary preferred model for a regional ecosystem council, acknowledging that this option is likely to be modified as a result of public input. The Committee recommends that the Aleutian Islands be used as a potential test case for developing an EAM process. As a next step, the Committee recommends that the Council charge the Chair (Ms Madsen), working with NOAA Fisheries and Council staff, to coordinate with the State of Alaska to set up a process for a workshop. This would include logistical discussions of

the format of the workshop, when it should occur, and how best to incorporate broad public participation. At a minimum, this coordination would occur prior to the October Council meeting; if possible, the resulting workshop may also occur before then.

The Committee discussed at length the issue of public, non-governmental participation in any development of an EAM process. The Committee was clear that, for its part, it does not intend that any of the public be excluded from participating in development of the ecosystem council idea, and clarified that the purpose of preliminary State and Federal coordination is to develop a logistical framework for the development process and initial workshop. The Committee also reiterated that its preferred option represents a starting point to focus public discussion, not an end product.

The Committee also provided a rationale for selecting the Aleutian Islands as a test case, that the suite of issues and players in the Aleutian Islands is more manageable than in other eligible areas. Other areas, such as Southeast Alaska, would necessarily involve more jurisdictional agencies due to the additional activities that occur there, and the increased importance of upland impacts on the marine ecosystem. Mr Fredriksson noted that the Subcabinet has not specifically considered the issue of using the Aleutian Islands as a pilot case, and suggested that it be a subject of discussion with Ms Madsen at the upcoming Subcabinet meeting.

2. Update on the Council Chairs-Executive Directors annual meeting and the Council-NOAA Fisheries working group to develop national guidelines for an ecosystem approach to fisheries

Mr Oliver presented the Committee with an excerpt of the Council Chairs' position paper on Magnuson-Stevens Act reauthorization issues, addressing "Ecosystem Approaches to Management". Mr Oliver also summarized the most recent meeting of the Council-NOAA Fisheries *ad hoc* Working Group. At that meeting, an interim report was presented by NOAA Fisheries on the Agency's progress in developing Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) provisions/guidelines. Mr Oliver explained the Working Group's discussion of whether the ecosystem guidance should be issued as strategic guidance or as formal FEP provisions that would be included in amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The Council Chairs position paper supports the development of guidelines, but not statutory requirements for FEPs. The Committee discussed the issue, and will continue to track the Agency's progress.

3. Review discussion paper that considers area-specific management in the Aleutian Islands, and consider recommendations on: a) purpose and need statement, b) next steps for Council, c) any other recommendations

Ms Evans presented an overview of the Aleutian Islands discussion paper. The Committee recommends that the Council proceed with Option 3 of the discussion paper, to further examine the development of an Aleutian Islands Fishery Ecosystem Plan. The Committee also recommends that the Council include an element of Option 2, to create an Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Plan Team. The Committee anticipates that staff will begin by outlining some of the issues associated with developing a FEP, such as elements of the document, how the process would work, and how a plan team might be established. Staff should also consider the draft Fishery Ecosystem Plan provisions/guidelines being proposed by NOAA Fisheries. The Committee recommends that staff should present their progress on the Aleutian Islands FEP action to the Committee before presenting it before the Council.

The Committee discussed the implications of the previous agenda item, NOAA Fisheries guidelines or suggested Magnuson-Stevens Act amendments, on the Aleutian Islands area-specific management action. Given the national-level Agency momentum to require Fishery Ecosystem Plans, the Committee felt that developing a test Aleutian Islands FEP would be a timely and useful exercise to demonstrate the

workability of the concept relative to the FEP provisions (or guidelines), before restrictive regulations are imposed.

However, the Committee clarified that the recommendation to proceed with development of a Fishery Ecosystem Plan should not be taken to indicate the Committee's endorsement or tacit support of legislative amendments to require Fishery Ecosystem Plans. The Committee's recommendation is consistent with the Council Chairs' position paper on ecosystem approaches to management.

The Committee also noted that the Programmatic SEIS and recently revised groundfish FMPs already satisfy many of the requirements of a Fishery Ecosystem Plan, as described in the 1999 Ecosystems Principles Advisory Panel Report to Congress. The Committee expects that development of an Aleutian Islands FEP will rely heavily on existing sources of information.

As described in Option 3, the Committee envisions that an AI FEP would be a source of strategic guidance for the FMPs in the Aleutian Islands area, and would provide an information base for the Council's decisions. The Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Plan Team would oversee the updating and maintaining of the ecosystem document. Regulatory changes that the Council may wish to make based on information resulting from this process would continue to occur through the normal Council/NOAA Fisheries FMP and regulatory amendment process.

The Committee proposes the following purpose and need statement for this action:

The Council recognizes that an explicit Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) is a desirable process for future management of the marine fishery resources in the Alaskan EEZ and therefore is a concept that it wishes to continue to pursue and further implement. A primary component of an EAF is the development of ecosystem-based fishery planning documents, and the Council intends to move forward with such development on a pilot basis. The Council recognizes that the Aleutian Islands ecosystem is a unique environment that supports diverse and abundant marine life, and a human presence that is closely tied to the environment and its resources. The Council believes that in light of these features, EAF could be a useful guide for future fishery management decisions in the Aleutian Islands area. Adopting an ecosystem approach to fisheries in the Aleutian Islands could allow the Council to better focus on the unique features of and interactions within the Aleutian Islands ecosystem area.