

DRAFT Ecosystem Committee Minutes 8/7/2013

June 4, 2013 10:00am – 5:00pm
Sustainable Fisheries Conference Room
Federal Building
Juneau, AK

Committee: Bill Tweit, Stephanie Madsen, Jim Ayers, Dave Benton, David Fluharty(online), Steve Ignell, Jon Kurland, John Iani (online), Steve MacLean (staff)

Absent: Tim Towarak

Others attending included: Jon Warrenchuk, Merrick Burden, John Henderschedt, Megan Peterson, Raychelle Daniel, Jackie Dragon, Verner Wilson, Amanda Stern-Perlot, Dave Martin, Kris Balliet, John Hocevar, Donna Parker, Jim Cannon, Paul MacGregor, Frank Kelty, Mike Sigler, Chris Rooper

Managing Our Nation's Fisheries 3 update

The Managing Our Nation's Fisheries 3 (MONF3) conference occurred in Washington, DC in May, 2013. Mr. John Henderschedt provided a summary of "findings" from the MONF3 conference (available at <http://www.cvent.com/events/managing-our-nation-s-fisheries-3/custom-21-94ddf325198f4501996ccc62aa396aa2.aspx>) related to the development and advancement of Ecosystem Based Fishery Management (EBFM). The findings are summaries of ideas that were presented at the MONF3 conference, and do not indicate consensus or agreement by conference participants. The findings will be published in the conference proceedings. Mr. Henderschedt noted that his presentation was his own comments and are not part of the conference proceedings or majority view.

During the presentation, Mr. Henderschedt answered questions from the committee members and some discussion occurred for some of the findings. One finding from MONF3 suggested creation of a separate SSC for each council to consider EBFM. There were questions about what role a new SSC would have, membership, and the bureaucratic role of a new SSC.

Mr. Henderschedt reported that there was a lot of overlap in the sections of this session and in other MONF3 sessions. Findings from the Climate Panel, in an ecosystem sense, included three questions that were raised by Phil Levin:

1. Is the ocean healthy?
2. How is the ocean vulnerable?
3. How can we trade off uses of the ocean to respond to those vulnerabilities?

Overall, there was discussion about what is a regional perspective of a healthy ocean, and how do we balance multiple uses of the ocean in management tradeoffs? Mr. Henderschedt, in response to questions from the committee, noted that climate changes introduce much uncertainty into managing our oceans. A precautionary approach is warranted in response to that uncertainty. Some climate changes may have impacted stocks or habitats that may make current rebuilding or other management goals unreachable, and some changes to those goals may be necessary.

Discussion about the findings from the Habitat panel at MONF3 focused on the development of measurable conservation objectives when considering habitat management. The chairman noted that the NPFMC has, generally, not yet taken the step to identify measurable conservation objectives for habitat management to ensure that actions are having the intended effects. It was noted that some of these objectives are funding limited, and measuring effects would require additional research to identify forage fish impacts, climate impacts, etc. There was discussion about the NPRB's BSIERP and NSF's BEST program in the Bering Sea, and hopes that the results from those studies would provide a baseline to

identify climate related, fishery related, and other changes to the Bering Sea ecosystem, and provide a way to differentiate those changes. It was noted that these questions are central to the Ecosystem Committee's role in helping the Council address ecosystem questions.

Bering Sea Canyons

The Committee received a presentation from Dr. Mike Sigler on behalf of himself and colleagues summarizing their report on the Bering Sea canyons (Agenda Item C-7(a)), as requested by the Council in April 2012. The report addressed five questions:

1. Are the canyons unique habitats?
2. Are the canyons homogeneous habitats?
3. What are the fish associations with habitat features?
4. What is the vulnerability of the canyons?
5. Are benthic habitats vulnerable?

The Committee also received a presentation from Dr. Diana Stram summarizing the Council staff report to the council identifying fisheries activities in the Bering Sea canyons areas (Agenda Item C-7(b)).

The Committee questioned Drs. Sigler and Stram about some parameters that were used in their analyses, and received clarification on the applicability of the predictive models and next steps for model development and groundtruthing model predictions.

The Committee received public testimony from Jon Warrenchuk (Oceana), Jackie Dragon (Greenpeace), John Hocevar (Greenpeace), and Verner Wilson (WWF) before beginning its discussion of the Bering Sea canyons. The Committee discussion proceeded, loosely, on four main components that were identified by one committee member: (1) Areas that we know now that may warrant protection in the near term, but may need additional information to refine; (2) whether or not to recommend to the Council a process to look more specifically at the slope ecosystem in a structured manner; (3) identifying and setting research priorities; and (4) funding priorities and cycles. With regard to component (1), the Committee agreed that there are areas where the models now predict to be areas of high coral abundance, including areas inside and outside the canyons. The Committee, however, disagreed on the necessity of groundtruthing those predictions: some areas have already been truthed via trawl survey data, some areas correspond to observed coral bycatch, and some areas are modeled only. One member of the Committee also expressed concern that selection of areas for additional action (conservation, research area, etc.) would be limited to those areas of known coral distribution.

The Committee also generally agreed that enough information now exists to consider thinking about the slope area as a distinct ecosystem and consider development of a Slope Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP), similar to the AI FEP developed earlier. Dr. Steve Ignell indicated that the AFSC is interested in the process to develop a Slope FEP, but funding issues may preclude immediate action toward that goal. A question was raised whether the Committee was comfortable expanding the scope beyond the canyons, as originally requested by the Council, to considering the entire slope. It was noted that it is necessary to consider the entire slope when addressing ecosystem impacts, that the canyons are integral parts of the slope ecosystem, and that it would be impossible to develop FEPs for each canyon or inter-canyon area. After extensive discussion, the Committee agreed on the following motion:

- 1) The Ecosystem Committee recommends the Council continue to look at those areas in the canyons identified in the analysis with known localized concentrations of corals that might warrant protection in the near term. As part of this, we recommend the Council:

- a. Request the Sigler et al. model be run to look solely at deep sea coral species (ie: without sponges etc.) to determine distribution of deep sea corals. (ref MSA Sec. 303 (b) (2) (B) and (C); and
 - b. Take subsequent action to identify sites where there is a high level of confidence for known concentrations of deep sea corals, and take further action as appropriate, including habitat vulnerability analyses; and
 - c. Request continued work to improve and verify the model predictions, as well as the vulnerability index.
- 2) The Ecosystem Committee recommends the Council consider proceeding with preparation of a Fisheries Ecosystem Plan for the BS slope. This FEP would be modeled after the AI FEP and be used to identify processes and features that help shape the slope environment, identify appropriate ecosystem indicators, and eventually become a tool to assist the Council in developing appropriate research questions and possible adaptive management approaches as may be warranted.
- 3) When considering research priorities, The Ecosystem Committee recommends that the Council consider the funding trajectories for NOAA and research funders such as NPRB; and with regard to NPRB call its attention to research needs in the BSAI and GOA as a high priority and ask that NPRB consider the effects of decreasing funding and the potential impact of potential new NPRB programs on these high priority research needs for the BSAI and GOA.

The Committee was in agreement that there are areas of high predicted coral concentration, and that some of those areas have been verified by trawl survey data. However, there are also areas where more data are needed to verify the modeled findings. The Committee was not able to reach consensus about whether more habitat assessment (groundtruthing predicted areas of high coral concentration) is necessary *before* the Council considers protections for predicted areas of high coral concentration in the Bering Sea canyons.

Ecosystem Committee Workshop

The Committee discussed planning for a proposed Ecosystem Committee Workshop tentatively scheduled for late-summer 2013. Council staff will continue to work with Committee members to identify an available time for the workshop (likely mid- to late-September), identify pre-workshop committee member assignments, and to develop a workshop agenda.

The committee discussed the tentative list of agenda items that had been distributed previously (after March 19 Ecosystem Committee meeting) and agreed that they were still appropriate for the workshop. Those include:

- Current goals and objectives relative to EBM, expressed in existing Council actions
- Next steps for AI FEP implementation
- Next steps for Arctic FMP implementation
- Other FEP tools (esp PNW)
- Use Fluharty framework to focus on NPFMC gaps/workplan

- EBM goals/objectives – consider whether a Council ecosystem vision statement would be useful, discussion of how might be linked to specific initiatives
- Further discussion of FEPs for other areas

Additional topics for the workshop include further discussion of the Bering Sea slope FEP concept (if approved by the Council), discussion of potential areas that could serve as closures to provide research control areas, additional findings from MONF3, and outputs from BSIERP/BEST to establish quantitative measures of a “healthy” Bering Sea ecosystem.

The Committee adjourned at 4:50 pm.