

Update on the Social Science Planning Team and the Data Gap Analysis

Staff Memo¹
11/12/2025

At its October 2025 meeting, the Council requested an update on the Data Gap Analysis (DGA) that has been in development by the Council's Social Science Planning Team (SSPT). This request was made in conjunction with its recent action to remove the regulatory requirements for Economic Data Reports and ongoing discussions on staff resources and capacity. This document provides a short overview of the SSPT's mission, current membership, as well as the remaining work and required capacity to complete the DGA. In deciding whether and how to proceed with completion of the DGA, the Council is presented with a linked question of whether and how to proceed with the SSPT.

The SSPT is a Council plan team created to facilitate and enhance the use of social science data in the management process. The Council uses plan teams to solicit targeted advice on science and management issues, with members generally originating from agencies or organizations that have a role in research and/or management of fisheries, although independent experts are sometimes also appointed. The SSPT is charged with strategizing medium- and long-term improvements in data collection and analytical methodology, allowing the Council to better meet its own program objectives as well as Limited Access Privilege Program (LAPP) review requirements defined in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and recommended in National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) guidelines.²

Mission Statement adopted by the Council in 2017:

The SSPT is established to improve the quality and application of social science data that informs management decision-making and program evaluation. The SSPT is constituted of representatives who will strategize medium- and long-term improvements in data collection and analytical methodology, allowing the NPFMC to better meet its own program objectives as well as LAPP review requirements defined in the Magnuson-Stevens Act and recommended in NMFS guidelines. The SSPT will identify data needs, make recommendations regarding research priorities, and advise analysts in efforts to improve analytical frameworks when possible. The SSPT will support the collection and aggregation of social science data in a manner that cuts across Fishery Management Plans and specific management programs within the North Pacific region.

1 Creation of the SSPT

The SSPT was formed in June 2017, based on a proposal developed by SSC members and Council staff.³ The Council's interest in the SSPT has multiple origins. First, the SSC has repeatedly noted in its minutes that certain aspects of social science data collection and social impact analysis could be

¹ Prepared by Sarah Marrinan, NPFMC.

² SSPT Terms of reference can be found: https://www.npfmc.org/wp-content/uploads/SSPT_TOR_12.18.pdf

³ Proposal: <https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=f261978b-2156-4ee2-ac1e-e7f287224a2f.pdf&fileName=B1%20Social%20Science%20Planning%20Team%20Proposal.pdf>

For definition of acronyms and abbreviations, see online list: <https://www.npfmc.org/library/acronyms>

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improved through efforts that occur over the medium- to long-term; those efforts need not be driven by specific policy actions. Second, the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) held a Human Dimensions Workshop in June 2016 where attendees discussed the utility of an advisory body that is charged with long-term strategic planning to improve the flow of social science information that supports analyses. Finally, the Council saw the SSPT as a way to respond to staff, NMFS Alaska Regional Office (AKRO), and the AFSC discussions about how to better align AFSC’s research program with the Council and NMFS’s management priorities, and how to deliver products that inform topical policy issues in a format that is timely, practical for analytical staff, and applicable across a variety of Council action items.

2 Membership

SSPT members are appointed from public organizations and academic institutions and are experts across different social science disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, and human geography. The terms of reference states that normally, the SSPT will include at least one member from the Council staff, NMFS AKRO, AFSC, the Council’s SSC, AKFIN, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G). The Council may also consider members who are tribally-affiliated (defined as being nominated by a tribe or Alaska Native organization), as well as from North Pacific Research Board (NPRB) and other agencies or institutions as appropriate.

As the SSPT has not convened since 2023, it would be important to reaffirm or refresh membership if the Council intends to reinitiate SSPT tasking. Several members have changed employment or roles and may be interested in stepping down due to adjusted workload priorities or retirement. Additionally, the group has had some previous turnover in membership with unfilled vacancies, and there is currently no tribal representation or Traditional Knowledge holders on the plan team. Prior to affirming ongoing membership or solicitations for new members, it would be helpful for the Council to articulate the intended SSPT scope of work and prioritized level of staff support, so that staff can communicate about the expected time commitment from members.

The SSPT’s current membership is as follows:

Member	Agency/org	Membership start
Caroline Brown	ADF&G	2021
Courtney Carothers	UAF	2018
Kate Haapala	NPFMC	2020
Mike Fey	AKFIN	2018
Mike Downs (Co-Chair)	SSC	2018
Seth Macinko	URI	2017
Scott Miller	NMFS AKRO	2020
Marysia Szymkowiak	AFSC	2017
Sarah Wise (Co-Chair)	AFSC/ SSC	2023
Sarah Marrinan (Coordinator)	NPFMC	2017

3 Data Gap Analysis

The DGA is a document conceived by the SSPT that highlights gaps in available social and economic data that are necessary to understand changes in net benefits and direct/indirect impacts of fishery management decisions in the North Pacific. This document is being developed in light of the SSPT's mission which is to improve the quality and application of social science data that inform management decision-making and program evaluation. The intent of the DGA is to highlight these data gaps so that the Council may better meet its own program objectives as well as the requirements defined in the MSA and other legal requirements. The SSPT has also envisioned the Council may use the DGA to prioritize and address these data gaps in the future, if it wishes to do so.

The first version of the DGA was produced by Steve Kasperski (former AFSC economist and SSPT chair at the time) and Marysia Szymkowiak (AFSC social scientist). This draft was made available for SSPT members and public for consideration in May 2018.⁴ This document organizes relevant social and economic fisheries data gaps into 12 distinct categories. There are 12 corresponding sections in the DGA, each of which summarizes the unavailable data for some or all fisheries off Alaska, often contrasting it with what data are available.

After the initial draft, the analysis was intended to become a collaborative product of the SSPT. No further drafts have yet been made public as they are in working form, with individual members' unresolved comments and some ideas for improvement still outstanding. The revisions focused on ensuring that the accounting of data gaps is interdisciplinary and relatively complete.

Progress on the DGA analysis was last discussed with the SSPT in November 2019 and with the Council during an SSPT report in February 2020.⁵ At that time, the Council directed the SSPT to refocus its immediate work on recommending revisions to the current EDR requirements. While the SSPT typically meets annually in May, its annual May 2020 meeting was canceled due to COVID-19. Efforts were redirected to the EDRs through the organization of stakeholder workshops and SSPT meetings in the fall of 2020 and in the spring of 2021, culminating in recommendations made for Amendment 52 (April 2021).

Since 2021, the SSPT has not continued to meet regularly on its annual schedule. The reduced engagement is the result of multiple converging factors: the absence of specific tasking from the Council, the resignation of the SSPT Chair with no immediately obvious successor, and the prioritized tasking of the Council staff SSPT coordinator.

In response to the SSC's need for Council Plan Teams' input on developing triennial research priorities for the Council, the SSPT convened again in October and November 2023. Since the SSPT did not have a Chair at that time, the group also elected Sarah Wise and Mike Downs as co-Chairs and discussed potential next steps for the SSPT. Members continued to express support for the mission of the SSPT and felt that there is still work to be done in achieving that mission. Members also raised concerns about how to be most productive with this time together, given other work obligations and what level of commitment should be expected (number of meetings, outside work,

⁴ Link to first version of the DGA: <https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=6e186d4c-0def-4e06-8070-95bfc9aa66b1.pdf&fileName=Data%20Gap%20Analysis%20v1.pdf>

⁵ SSPT minutes from November 2019, presented at the Feb 2020 Council meeting: <https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=657f0df4-db02-4840-a32c-d13db6070a3f.pdf&fileName=D6%20SSPT%20Report.pdf>

etc.). It was noted by members that there has been value generated in having space for discussions across agencies and disciplines, promoting better awareness and incorporation of new and relevant social science in the management process.⁶ Specifically, completion of the Data Gaps Analysis, which intended to address the groups' mission statement, was highlighted as one of the groups' top priorities.

Additional Effort Needed for DGA Completion

If advanced in its most recently proposed format, completion of the DGA would require SSPT members to commit working hours to complete the analysis, and at least one SSPT member leading the effort.

- There is a moderate/ considerable amount of work remaining. For instance, this effort would include sufficiently describing the data gaps around non-economic benefits derived from commercial fisheries, continuing to build out sections on recreational and subsistence data gaps, identify data gaps at different units of analysis (e.g., individual, tribe, entity, nation, etc.) and develop summary tables for each section.
- Since the DGA was last discussed in depth by the SSPT in November 2019, changes in legal mandates and available information will also require substantial updates to the draft:
 - The analysis begins by describing the legal mandates that necessitate social and economic data. Recent revocations of former Executive Orders and the implementation of new EOs have resulted in a change to legal mandates, so this section will need to be updated.
 - In October 2025, the Council recommended removal of the A80, Crab Rationalization Program, and A91 EDRs. While this action has not yet been implemented, the DGA will ultimately need to be updated to reflect this reduction in available information. In particular, EDRs have been one of the sole sources of fleet-wide operational cost data and provide unique depth to crew member community connections. One section of the most recent version of the DGA provides a summary of the Council's history of developing economic data collections which will also need to be revised in light of recent action.
 - There may be changing data needs to consider based on changing environmental, social and economic conditions.

4 Points for Consideration in Council Action

The Council's motion from October 2025 states an intent to consider DGA tasking following this update. Given the additional effort needed to complete this analysis, as noted above, the Council could choose to pursue this work through a reaffirmation of the SSPT and its membership and soliciting for any vacancies. In considering this decision, it may be important for the Council to take the opportunity to review the SSPT's mission statement (as highlighted above), scope of the group and expected level of commitment from members. This mission should be considered in the context of the resources the Council would be dedicating to this effort. For example, as a Plan Team, the

⁶ In March 2021, a staff presentation on 'SSPT next steps' highlighted some of the topics the group had covered up to that point (slide 19): <https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=1b20da4e-c4a1-432e-b6e9-cf560e9e6e96.pdf&fileName=LKTKS%20and%20CEC%20update%20for%20SSPT%20and%20SSPT%20next%20steps.pdf>

Council pays travel for non-Federal members, commits the Council staff time as SSPT coordinator, and in some cases as members.

Thus, if the SSPT is reaffirmed, the Council may wish to consider whether to define any expectations around the scope of the commitment. For instance, the original proposal highlighted one-meeting in person meeting per year. The benefits of this format were highlighted as aligning with membership bandwidth, travel budgets, and the many fishery-related meetings that compete for interested stakeholders' time. While work can certainly be done offline between meetings, the tradeoff is that this annual meeting format may not be as conducive to addressing a particular Council request or tracking a Council action. In the completion of the DGA – more frequent ad hoc virtual meetings may be beneficial. With these features were defined, the staff coordinator would canvass current membership to understand continued interest and vacancies could be identified. Once membership and commitment has been reestablished, additional work on the DGA could take place.