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2026

NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Ecosystem Committee REPORT

May 8, 2026; 8:30am - 5:00pm; NPFMC Office and Zoom

Committee members in attendance: Linda Behnken, Shannon Carroll, Craig Chythlook, Cathy Coon (NMFS AKR), Jennifer Ferdinand (NMFS AFSC), David Fluharty, Nicole Kimball (Co-chair), Krystal Lapp, Nate Pamplin (Co-chair), Ernie Weiss, Caitlin Yaeger, Katie Latanich (Council staff coordinator)

Members absent: None

Council and NMFS staff in attendance: Anne Marie Eich, Kate Haapala, Maurice Goodman, Stephani Zador, Kalei Shotwell, Bridget Ferriss, Angela Abolhassani, Dana Hanselman, Grace Roskar, Mallarie Yeager, Lis Henderson, Sarah Wise, Jodi Pirtle, Kerim Aydin, Sara Cleaver, Diana Stram, Kirstin Holsman, Molly Watson

Others in attendance: Landry Price, Ivonne Ortiz, Heather McCarty, Jamie O'Connor, Megan Williams, Emily Scott, Tiffany Agayar, Spencer Weinstein, Curry Cunningham, Lauren Hynes, Susie Zagorski, Mateo Paz-Soldan, Paul Wilkins, Carlton Burnside, Karen Gillis, Ruth Christiansen, Austin Estabrooks, Karla Bush, Lisa Hillier, Lisa Ellanna, Loretta Brown, Terese Vicente, Megan O'Neil, Sarah Webster, Maggie Mooney-Seuss, Anne Vanderhoeven, Daniel Auerbach, Fabio Prior Caltabellotta, Andrea Keikkala, Nick Jacuk

The Ecosystem Committee (EC) held a full day hybrid/in person meeting at the Council offices in Anchorage, Alaska and via Zoom, and discussed two items that will be taken up by the Council at its upcoming June 2026 meeting.

Climate Work Plan and Harvest Control Rule discussion paper

Climate Workplan

Dr. Diana Stram, Council staff, began with an overview of a tracking tool developed by Council and NMFS AFSC to communicate progress toward implementing the Council's Climate Resilience Work Plan. The work plan was established by the Council in December 2024.¹ The work plan provides a plan for incorporating climate information into the Council process focusing on four key elements, of which the Harvest Control Rule work is one. The Council could identify additional priorities in the future.

The EC did not have specific feedback on the Work Plan tracking tool at this time.

Harvest Control Rule discussion paper

Dr. Stram provided an overview of a discussion paper that summarizes the current treatment of risk and uncertainty in the groundfish and crab harvest specifications process, and considers changes to some harvest control rules (HCRs) as a means to advance climate resilience. Harvest control rules are the formulas used to calculate a fish or crab stock's overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC), which are required to be set by the SSC under the Magnuson Stevens Act. The Council is considering modifying some HCRs to better incorporate and respond to changing ecosystem conditions, which are increasingly affecting stock status. The Ecosystem Committee's discussion focused on 1) reviewing objectives for modified HCRs in order to evaluate their performance and 2) opportunities for effective communication and public engagement related to this work.

¹ D1 Council [motion](#), December 2024

The EC reviewed the draft objectives provided in the document (Section 4.3). Dr. Stram clarified that these objectives do not need to be ranked at this time; more important would be identifying additional objectives that should be considered. Biological objectives including long term sustainability and avoiding overfishing are already directed by MSA requirements, but additional input is needed on other types of objectives that could be considered (e.g. socioeconomic and community-level outcomes).

The EC supported the objectives provided in the discussion paper and recognized the Council is building on a strong foundation through the current harvest specifications process. The group also discussed that some objectives may be more important for different stocks and species; for example, age structure as a primary objective of an HCR may be more important for longer-lived species such as sablefish and rockfish. **EC members were interested to know when the public would be able provide input on objectives and performance metrics for particular stocks.**

Additional topics of discussion included the following.

- The EC reviewed the role of risk tables for documenting concerns not otherwise captured in the stock assessment or tier system, and informing reductions from max allowable ABC. The EC found staff clarification helpful that alternative HCRs (and thus approaches to generating max ABC) could reduce the reliance on qualitative risk tables, but not necessarily eliminate the need for risk tables in all circumstances. In other words, some of these considerations could be shifted from risk tables directly and more quantitatively into assessments and/or HCRs. The EC recognized there is a tradeoff between the transparency provided by this approach, and the flexibility of the current approach of considering ecosystem and other factors via risk tables.
- The EC also raised concerns about current and future data availability and mechanistic understanding of ecosystem effects on fish stocks. Dr. Stram clarified that the current focus is identifying which candidate HCRs may meet stated objectives for different stocks, understanding that the mechanisms for switching to alternative HCRs need further development. This discussion also emphasized the need for AFSC scientists to communicate about the skillfulness of forecasts and prediction tools, and understand decisionmakers' confidence in relying on this information.
- Another topic raised was whether the Council has or needs a working definition of climate resilience to provide a common frame of reference. Staff noted the Climate Readiness Synthesis² prepared by the Council's Climate Change Task Force includes working definitions of climate resilience and adaptation. Additionally, discussions at the Council's Climate Scenarios Workshop explored the attributes of resilience while recognizing it can be individual, place, and fishery specific. The Council is also defining resilience through the actions and products in the work plan, and through identifying objectives for HCRs. The EC held different perspectives on whether it's important to begin with a clear definition of climate resilience or whether one is emergent through the Council's work, and whether the EC could have a role in developing this definition.

Regarding outreach and communications, the EC commented that further simplification is needed to communicate not only the current system to set harvest specifications, but the need or impetus for moving to an approach that can better incorporate ecosystem effects on a stock.

The EC recommended making information about the harvest specification process and the incorporation of uncertainty more publicly accessible and available on the Council website, and requested use of the Council's Inflation Reduction Act funding to support additional public-facing outreach products such as short 1-2 page flyers. The EC recommended they have a role in review and refinement to help products be in a form that the public understands. EC members also expressed their willingness to support distribution to the public.

EC members also discussed a broader need, not specific to HCRs, to provide information that can help the public understand where and when to provide information (Plan Teams, SSC, Council, etc.), including

² [Climate Readiness Synthesis](#), prepared by the Climate Change Task Force. NPFMC 2022.

LKTK and ecosystem trends or observations, at different points in the assessment process. Annual AFSC Preview of Ecosystem and Economic Conditions (PEEC) meetings were mentioned as an early opportunity for public participation in this process. The EC requested further discussion on this topic.

Groundfish Management Policy Review

Katie Latanich, Council staff, provided an overview of the Groundfish Management Policy Review document, which will also be presented to the Council at the June 2026 meeting. The Management Policy consists of a Management Approach statement, 9 goals, and 45 objectives and is used as general guidance in the BSAI and GOA Fishery Management Plans.

Staff reviewed the purpose and discussion points provided in the paper, noting the Council's work during the review period continues to generally align with and support the Management Policy as written, and staff did not identify any strong concerns or mismatches between the Management Policy and current Council practices. The EC's discussion focused on the wording of goals and objectives that the staff paper highlighted as potential opportunities for updating (Section 3).

The EC recommended the Council consider modifying the existing Groundfish Management Policy, as resources allow and recognizing that an FMP amendment would be necessary to make these changes. The Committee also recommended the Council not finalize changes to the policy in June by initiating an FMP amendment, to allow for additional EC discussion on specific revisions, particularly for Goal 3: Preserve Food Web and Goal 8: Increase Alaska Native Consultation. Specific suggestions from the EC and additional discussion are provided in a redlined version of the Groundfish Management Policy as Appendix 1 to this report.

In addition to specific revisions, the EC addressed the following cross-cutting topics.

Relationships with other entities and legal requirements: The Committee agreed no changes are needed to the Management Policy's current approach of restating the MSA National Standards and other requirements, and recognizing relationships with other agencies and entities (Section 3.1). EC members commented that the National Standards reflect core tenets of management, and the Council can communicate how its work meets these requirements if they are left in.

Role of FMP guidance: EC members questioned whether goals and objectives are intended as a "to-do" list of items that are meant to be completed, or to provide longer term goalposts. Another question was whether goals and objectives should drive the Council's current work, or whether they serve as more general benchmarks of where the Council has been in the past and what it considers "in bounds." Ms. Latanich clarified that the Council did initially use goals and objectives to communicate management actions it intended to consider following adoption of the Management Policy. Members also suggested the interpretation of an objective could be changed, rather than the wording itself, though they questioned how this could be documented and did not offer a suggested solution.

Outreach and communication: EC members emphasized the importance of Council outreach and communications and building a baseline understanding of fisheries science and management, particularly given the loss of AFSC's communications capacity. Effective communication and supporting engagement in the Council process are especially important in a time of rapid change, and EC members emphasized clearly communicating why planning for climate resilience is important and how it meets the goals of the MSA. This is important to Council process participants as well as a broader audience (e.g., elected officials and staff).

The EC recommended the Council task the EC with a role in developing and reviewing plain language materials related to the Council's climate resilience work, including the HCR work described in the previous section. EC members suggested this as a topic for a future EC meeting.

Members also expressed their interest in using the EC to groundtruth materials to ensure their accessibility, and offered to support the distribution of materials among their networks.

Public testimony

Two members of the public (Terese Vicente, Kuskokwim Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, and Loretta Brown, Salmon State) provided testimony, and one written comment was received.

Next meeting

The EC suggested holding future meetings in person as members' schedules allow. The group did not discuss future meeting dates, which depend on Council tasking. **Appendix: Redline suggestions to the current Management Policy**

Appendix 1: Redline text and additional discussion of the Groundfish Management Policy

Management Approach

The Council's policy is to apply judicious and responsible fisheries management practices, based on sound scientific research, ~~and~~ analysis, and advice, proactively rather than reactively, to ensure the sustainability of fishery resources and associated ecosystems for the benefit of future, as well as current generations. The productivity of the North Pacific ecosystem is acknowledged to be among the highest in the world. ~~For the past 25 years~~, the Council management approach has incorporated forward looking conservation measures that address differing levels of uncertainty. This management approach has in recent years been labeled the precautionary approach. Recognizing that potential changes in productivity may be caused by fluctuations in natural oceanographic conditions, fisheries, and other, non-fishing activities, the Council intends to continue to take appropriate measures to insure the continued sustainability of the managed species. It will carry out this objective by considering reasonable, adaptive management measures, as described in the Magnuson-Stevens Act and in conformance with the National Standards, the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and other applicable law. This management approach takes into account the National Academy of Science's recommendations on Sustainable Fisheries Policy.

As part of its policy, the Council intends to consider and adopt, as appropriate, measures that accelerate the Council's precautionary, adaptive management approach through community-based or rights-based management, ecosystem-based management principles that protect managed species from overfishing, and where appropriate and practicable, increase habitat protection and bycatch constraints. All management measures will be based on the best scientific information available, **which includes local knowledge and traditional knowledge**. Given this intent, the fishery management goal is to provide sound conservation of the living marine resources; provide socially and economically viable fisheries for the well-being of fishing communities; minimize human-caused threats to protected species; maintain a healthy marine resource habitat; and incorporate ecosystem-based considerations into management decisions.

This management approach recognizes the need to balance many competing uses of marine resources and different social and economic goals for sustainable fishery management, including protection of the long-term health of the resource and the optimization of yield. This policy will use and improve upon the Council's existing open and transparent process of public involvement in decision-making.

Discussion: The EC felt the Management Approach statement, including the reference to the precautionary approach, is generally durable over time and continues to be relevant to the Council's work. The group recommended adding local and traditional knowledge as a component where the policy refers to best scientific information available. Another suggestion was to add the word "advice" to the phrase "scientific research and analysis" to account for standalone products including risk tables that inform the Council's management recommendations.

Goal 1: Avoid Overfishing

1. Adopt conservative harvest levels for multi-species and single species fisheries and specify optimum yield.
2. Continue to use the existing optimum yield cap for the GOA groundfish fisheries.
3. Provide for adaptive management by continuing to specify optimum yield as a range.
4. Provide for periodic reviews of the adequacy of F40 and adopt improvements, as appropriate.
5. Continue to improve the management of species through species categories.

Goal 2: Promote Sustainable Fisheries and Communities

6. Promote conservation while providing for optimum yield in terms of the greatest overall benefit to the nation with particular reference to food production, and sustainable opportunities for recreational, subsistence, and commercial fishing participants and fishing communities.
7. Promote management measures that, while meeting conservation objectives, are also designed to avoid significant disruption of existing social and economic structures.
8. Promote fair and equitable allocation of identified available resources in a manner such that no particular sector, group or entity acquires an excessive share of the privileges.
9. Promote increased safety at sea.

~~Goal 3: Preserve Food Web~~ **Revise to focus on ecosystems, potentially including climate resilience** (see discussion)

10. Develop indices of ecosystem health as targets for management.
11. Improve the procedure to adjust acceptable biological catch levels as necessary to account for uncertainty and ecosystem factors.
12. Continue to protect the integrity of the food web through limits on harvest of forage fish species.
13. Incorporate ecosystem-based considerations into fishery management decisions, as appropriate.

Discussion: The EC recommended updating and revising Goal 3 to focus on ecosystems, and potentially to capture the Council's objectives relative to the Climate Resilience Work Plan. The group considered that climate resilience objectives could be embedded within multiple goals, but generally felt a revised version of Goal 3 would provide the best fit. EC members suggested focusing this goal and objectives to also tie in healthy fisheries and communities as a part of EBFM and climate resilience. The Council's Ecosystem Policy could provide ideas for rewording this goal, and it would also be important to ensure the Ecosystem Policy and Groundfish Management Policy are complementary.

A revised Goal 3 could also include a revised version of Objective 42 (see further discussion under Goal 9) that would emphasize the role of applied science for supporting Council management recommendations. EC members commented that an updated research objective could capture the importance of research and monitoring to maintaining and promoting biodiversity.

With regard to Objective 12, the EC felt the term "fish" should be added, in keeping with the Council's current practices of maintaining a forage fish species category, a forage fish assessment, and limits.

Goal 4: Manage Incidental Catch and Reduce Bycatch and Waste

14. Continue and improve current incidental catch and bycatch management program.
15. Develop incentive programs for bycatch reduction including the development of mechanisms to facilitate the formation of bycatch pools, vessel bycatch allowances, or other bycatch incentive systems.
16. Encourage research programs to evaluate current population estimates for non-target species with a view to setting appropriate bycatch limits, as information becomes available.
17. Continue program to reduce discards by developing management measures that encourage the use of gear and fishing techniques that reduce bycatch which includes economic discards.
18. Continue to manage incidental catch and bycatch through seasonal distribution of total allowable catch and geographical gear restrictions.
19. Continue to account for bycatch mortality in total allowable catch accounting and improve the accuracy of mortality assessments for target, prohibited species catch, and non-commercial species.
20. Control the bycatch of prohibited species through prohibited species catch limits or other appropriate measures.
21. Reduce waste to biologically and socially acceptable levels.

Goal 5: Avoid Impacts to Seabirds and Marine Mammals

22. Continue to cooperate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to protect ESA-listed species, and if appropriate and practicable, other seabird species.
23. Maintain or adjust current protection measures as appropriate to avoid jeopardy of extinction or adverse modification of critical habitat for ESA-listed Steller sea lions.
24. Encourage programs to review status of endangered or threatened marine mammal stocks and fishing interactions and develop fishery management measures as appropriate.
25. Continue to cooperate with NMFS and USFWS to protect ESA-listed marine mammal species, and if appropriate and practicable, other marine mammal species.

Discussion: As part of the EC's discussion of research-oriented objectives, the group recommended retaining Objective 24 as worded to recognize the connection between marine mammal research and MSA authorities.

Goal 6: Reduce and Avoid Impacts to Habitat

26. Review and evaluate efficacy of existing habitat protection measures ~~for managed species~~.
27. Identify and designate essential fish habitat and habitat areas of particular concern pursuant to Magnuson-Stevens Act rules, and mitigate fishery impacts as necessary and practicable to continue the sustainability of managed species.
- ~~28. Develop a Marine Protected Area policy in coordination with national and state policies.~~
29. Encourage development of a research program to identify regional baseline habitat information and mapping, subject to funding and staff availability.
30. Develop goals, objectives and criteria to evaluate the efficacy and suitable design of ~~marine protected areas and no-take marine reserves area-based management~~ as a tools to maintain abundance, diversity, and productivity. ~~Implement marine protected areas if and where appropriate.~~

Discussion: The EC suggested removing the phrase "for managed species" from Objective 26 to reflect that the Council and NMFS have implemented habitat protection measures for non-target species including corals.

The group agreed the term "Marine Protected Area" in Objectives 28 and 30, and the reference to no-take marine reserves in Objective 30, are outdated and not often used in the Council process. The more appropriate and broader term is Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measure (OCEM), a term defined by the Convention on Biological Diversity, or Area-Based Management. The EC recommended removing Objective 28 and updating or modernizing the wording of Objective 30. Updating this language in the Groundfish Management Policy would be consistent with the Council's use of a wide array of area-based management tools including static closures as well as more dynamic area closures or restrictions, and reflect that the use of area-based management can involve strategies other than closing areas to fishing.

Goal 7: Promote Equitable and Efficient Use of Fishery Resources

31. Provide economic and community stability to harvesting and processing sectors through fair allocation of fishery resources.
32. Maintain the license limitation program, modified as necessary, and further decrease excess fishing capacity and overcapitalization by eliminating latent licensees and extending programs such as community or rights-based management to some or all groundfish fisheries. *EC members had different perspectives on revisions; see discussion*
33. Provide for adaptive management by periodically evaluating the effectiveness of rationalization programs and the allocation of access rights based on performance.
34. Develop management measures that, when practicable, consider the efficient use of fishery resources taking into account the interest of harvesters, processors, and communities.

Discussion: EC members shared different perspectives on the wording of Objective 32, focusing on the phrase “further decrease excess fishing capacity.” Some members felt managing overcapacity is no longer a driver of the Council’s work to the extent it was when the Management Policy was first adopted, and that this should no longer be included. Another perspective was that this language is dated and may not be an objective the Council is actively working toward, but provides a benchmark for the Council’s past work and can be interpreted in the context of current conditions. EC members also commented that inclusion of the term “excess” capacity in this objective (rather than simply “decrease capacity”) allows for flexibility in interpretation. The definition of excess can change over time, and EC members questioned whether this could allow, for example, increasing capacity to support stable fishing communities and processing sectors.

Goal 8: Increase Alaska Native ~~Consultation~~ Engagement

35. Continue to incorporate local and traditional knowledge in fishery management.
36. Consider ways to enhance collection of local and traditional knowledge from communities, and incorporate such knowledge in fishery management ~~where appropriate.~~
37. Increase Alaska Native participation and consultation in fishery management.

Discussion: Goal 8 and Objectives 35-37 were a substantial focus of the EC’s discussion, and driver of the committee’s recommendation that the Council not finalize changes to the goals and objectives in June, to allow more time for EC input on revisions. This would also provide more opportunity to review the LKTKS Protocol and draw on the work of that Taskforce to develop revised language.

The group recommended changing the term “consultation” in Goal 8 to “engagement” or a similar term, to differentiate between formal government-to-government consultations between the Federal government (NOAA) and Federally recognized Tribes, which the Council is not a formal party to because it is not a government, and Council outreach and engagement. The EC also recommended removing the phrase “where appropriate” in Objective 36 because LKTK is already recognized as part of best available scientific information. EC members felt the phrase is exclusionary and implies a subjective opinion of what is deemed valid and appropriate.

Additional considerations raised by the Committee included the following.

- In addition to increasing engagement, it’s important to emphasize and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of that engagement.
- Revisions could balance the focus of these objectives on Alaska Native participation while also being inclusive of groups (e.g., CDQ) that are not Tribes, and also account for participation of other groups (e.g., rural communities).
- Revisions could reflect that engagement is a two-way process, which also relates to the EC’s discussion of helping the public understand when, how, and what information can be contributed.
- Revised language could reflect that while the Council does not engage in consultations, it is important for information related to consultations to be available to the Council at an appropriate and effective point in the process.

Goal 9: Improve Data Quality, Monitoring and Enforcement

38. Increase the utility of groundfish fishery observer data for the conservation and management of living marine resources.
39. Develop funding mechanisms that achieve equitable costs to the industry for implementation of the North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program.
40. Improve ~~data inputs for evaluation of~~ community and regional economic impact costs and benefits ~~through increased data reporting requirements.~~

41. Increase the quality of monitoring and enforcement data through improved technology.
42. Encourage a coordinated, long-term ecosystem monitoring program to collect baseline information and compile existing information from a variety of ongoing research initiatives, subject to funding and staff availability. *See discussion*
43. Cooperate with research institutions such as the North Pacific Research Board in identifying research needs to address pressing fishery issues.
44. Promote enhanced enforceability.
45. Continue to cooperate and coordinate management and enforcement programs with the Alaska Board of Fish, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and [Division of Alaska Wildlife Troopers Fish and Wildlife Protection](#), the U.S. Coast Guard, NMFS Enforcement, International Pacific Halibut Commission, Federal agencies, and other organizations to meet conservation requirements; promote economically healthy and sustainable fisheries and fishing communities; and maximize efficiencies in management and enforcement programs through continued consultation, coordination, and cooperation.

Discussion: An EC member suggested clarifying that in Objective 38 the term observer information includes electronic monitoring information. However, electronic monitoring information is already defined as observer information under the MSA (16 USC 1802(32)).

The EC suggested revisions to Objective 40. As discussed in the review document, the wording of this objective focuses on increasing economic data reporting requirements, while recent Council actions have focused on balancing data utility with burden and decreasing economic data reporting requirements. EC members felt this objective continues to be relevant; there is a longstanding need for socioeconomic data in the Council process, and that this objective supports National Standard 8. The group felt this objective could be reworded with a similar intent of improving data inputs to support evaluation of costs and benefits, which can include considering costs/benefits and burden. Revising this objective could also be consistent with a shift from program-specific Economic Data Reporting programs toward reliance on other meaningful and cost effective data sources and products (e.g. Ecosystem and Socioeconomic Profiles, the Alaska Seafood Snapshot).

The EC discussed Objective 42 along with other research-focused objectives (Objectives 16, 24, 29, and 42), which are primarily supported through the Council's process of setting long-term research priorities. The EC felt it is important to retain the substance of Objective 42 but possibly move it under Goal 3, to connect NMFS science with Council conservation and management needs, and to state this in a durable, impactful way that is complementary to the Council's research priorities. Some members felt the objective is appropriate as written; other suggestions were to rewording this to include developing applied, actionable science and connecting science with management decisions.

The EC group suggested consolidating multiple research objectives (Objectives 16, 29, and 42)) but retaining objective 24 under Goal 5. They considered which approach would communicate a stronger statement to the Council's research partners, and discussed whether it is necessary to retain research objectives in the management policy given the Council conducts a formal and public process to identify research priorities every 5 years, to balance immediate data needs with long-term strategic goals. One idea would be to place a revised research objective based on the language of Objective 42 under a revised Goal 3 focusing on ecosystems and climate resilience (see discussion under Goal 3).