

FISHERIES
Leadership & Sustainability
FORUM

**Innovation at the Regional Fishery Management Councils:
A Compilation of Practices**

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Introduction

The Fisheries Leadership and Sustainability Forum is pleased to share its first compilation of innovative practices in fisheries management. **Innovation at the Regional Fishery Management Councils** is intended to encourage discussion and share ideas from across the United States.

The report describes a new public scoping process in the South Atlantic, management areas in the Pacific designed to protect depleted rockfish stocks, treating council members as executive decision makers in New England, and developing an allocation policy in the Gulf of Mexico—all with links to additional information.

The Fisheries Forum held its inaugural workshop for council members at Stanford in the fall of 2008. The workshop provided council members an opportunity to network, exchange ideas, and learn from the experiences of council members in other regions. Participants asked the Fisheries Forum to compile descriptions of unique or successful management approaches from around the country. This compilation is our initial effort to facilitate an exchange of information from one region to another. We anticipate collecting additional practices and releasing updated reports regularly.

Forum staff wrote the report based on suggestions made by council members with the assistance of council staff. The report includes brief descriptions of the management practices with links for additional information.

We welcome feedback on the examples that follow, and suggestions for future topics. Please contact:

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More information about the Fisheries Forum can be found at our website: www.FisheriesForum.org.

The views presented in this document do not reflect those of the Forum, its staff or partner institutions. The information presented here is for the sole purpose of highlighting different approaches to fishery management issues that may be useful examples for other regions.

A Unique Approach for Scoping Meetings at the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

In early 2008, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council embarked on a new format to public scoping meetings: a fishery management “road show.” The council sent a group of staff members to conduct information sessions and gather informal public comment through interactive small-group discussions on several management issues. This is in contrast to traditional scoping hearings where one staff member gives a presentation and then accepts public comment.

“It’s a new approach for an age-old problem: how to get fishermen and other members of the public involved with fisheries issues at the *beginning* of the process before decisions are made,” wrote Public Information Officer Kim Iverson in the *South Atlantic Update*, the council’s quarterly newsletter.

The idea for the new format arose from discussions during the December 2007 council meeting. The council, recognizing that fisheries are interconnected, found that a management decision for one fishery may affect another. In this case, seasonal closures for the snapper grouper fishery had the potential to increase effort in the king mackerel fishery. At the same time, the 2006 amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act required the council to address annual catch limits, accountability measures and allocation. Therefore, the council bundled these related management issues for consideration during a series of public scoping meetings held from Miami, Florida, to New Bern, North Carolina, in early 2008.

The goal of the new approach was to inform the public about the scoping issues and to allow for substantive public input. The council sent seven staff members to each scoping meeting. This included the deputy director, a staff economist, two fishery biologists, a stock assessment coordinator, a public information officer (PIO), and administrative staff. The PIO greeted the public as they entered, distributing information packets and directing people to the appropriate staff person based on their interests. Technical staff members were seated at small tables where the public could ask questions or receive additional information on the scoping issues. After staff answered their questions, members of the public gave comments to the local council member on the scoping issue. The comments were recorded and distributed to all the council members. The staff and council members were available for four hours starting in the early afternoon, giving the public flexibility to arrive at a convenient time.

The council staff admits that they are still refining the system. As with any new approach, it takes time to work out the unexpected events and fine-tune the process. However, the new approach appears to be a big hit. “While we may not always agree with the message, I think this is one of the best meetings the council has had,” said Jim Busse, owner of Seafood Atlantic in Port Canaveral and participant in the new scoping process. The process allowed fishermen to talk directly with council members and staff and engage in conversation. This allowed both sides to understand the other’s perspective.

Since the original road show, the council repeated the process in May of 2008 and expanded the format to include both public scoping and a public hearing. The third road show is scheduled for early 2009 and will again cover both public scoping and public hearing issues.

For more information, contact Kim Iverson, Public Information Officer at South Atlantic Fishery Management Council: kim.iverson@safmc.net

Sources:

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s South Atlantic Update, Winter 2008: www.safmc.net

Telephone Interview with Kim Iverson, Public Information Officer at South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (December 12, 2008).

Rockfish Conservation Areas Established by the Pacific Fishery Management Council

In 2000, the Pacific Fishery Management Council began an area management strategy to significantly reduce exploitation of overfished groundfish species, consistent with its Groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP). A network of areas closed to fisheries that incidentally take overfished groundfish on the continental shelf and slope of the Pacific coast, termed Rockfish Conservation Areas (RCAs), is the centerpiece of this strategy. These closed areas protect overfished stocks from being incidentally caught at rates higher than prescribed in rebuilding plans by fishermen targeting healthy stocks. The Pacific Council recognized that most of these overfished rockfish stocks were extremely vulnerable to fishing pressure. RCA management was found to be the best strategy that would reduce mortality sufficiently to rebuild the populations without wholesale closure of fisheries.

The Pacific Council faced some difficult decisions in 1999. A new stock assessment indicated that the cowcod rockfish population had been depleted to just seven percent of its unfished biomass. A growing understanding of cowcod's biological characteristics—as a long-lived, late-maturing, and slow-growing species—showed they were particularly vulnerable to overfishing. The Pacific Council felt dramatic changes to the fishery were necessary to reduce mortality and rebuild the stock. Given the species' sedentary nature, closing the areas where cowcod are predominantly found seemed to be a promising solution and more favorable than shutting down the entire fishery. In 2000, the Pacific Council closed over 4,300 square miles of fishing grounds to protect cowcod.

By 2002, the Pacific Council had established RCAs covering extensive areas of the Pacific coast to protect seven overfished species of rockfish, and two overfished species with more productive life history characteristics. The seven overfished rockfish species have similar biological characteristics to cowcod, which made area management an ideal tool to control mortality. The conservation areas are core elements of rebuilding plans and have already demonstrated their success as a management tool. The two overfished non-rockfish species, lingcod and Pacific whiting, have been rebuilt to target levels due in large measure to RCAs.

The RCAs closed areas that included depths where depleted populations predominantly live. Core areas remain closed year-round, while the inshore and offshore boundaries change by season through in-season adjustments made by the Pacific Council that reflect seasonal distributions of overfished species and an evaluation of incidental catches of these species in affected fisheries. The RCA boundaries also vary by sector and gear type, based on known interactions with the depleted stocks. The shifting areas provide an optimal mix of fishing on healthy stocks while keeping mortality low on depleted populations.

An expression of the Pacific Fishery Management Council's commitment to rebuilding depleted populations is the case of the widow rockfish. An early assessment estimates the stock had been depleted below B25% (i.e., 25% of unfished biomass), the threshold for determining if a stock is overfished. Since then, two stock assessments—in 2005 and 2007—indicated that the stock never dropped below B25% and therefore was never overfished. "When this was brought to the attention of the Pacific Fishery Management Council, they decided to maintain the adopted rebuilding plan since the widow assessment (and all marine stock assessments for that matter) have a high degree of uncertainty," said John DeVore, groundfish staff officer at the Pacific Fishery Management Council. Scientists projected that widow rockfish would be fully rebuilt by this year. The council will conduct another stock assessment later this year to confirm the population's status.

While the closed areas initially met resistance from the affected fishermen, the RCAs have largely been viewed as a success. The results can be seen on the water and in the stock assessment. The main index in most Pacific coast stock assessments for rockfish is a scientific trawl survey conducted by the National

Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). From the survey, it is clear that the populations are increasing in the closed areas. In addition, the stock biomass on all the rebuilding rockfish populations has shown an upswing in their trends since RCA implementation. The council projects that more species will be removed from the overfished list in the next few years. By making difficult decisions early and maintaining a strong commitment to rebuilding depleted populations, the council is seeing rockfish populations recover.

For more information, contact John DeVore, Groundfish Staff Officer at the Pacific Fishery Management Council: John.DeVore@noaa.gov

Sources:

Telephone Interview with John DeVore, Groundfish Staff Officer at the Pacific Fishery Management Council (December 16, 2008).

National Marine Fisheries Service, Northwestern Regional Office. Groundfish Closed Areas website (description of and coordinates defining the RCAs):

http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Groundfish-Halibut/Groundfish-Fishery-Management/Groundfish-Closed-Areas/Index.cfm#CP_JUMP_30272

Pacific Fishery Management Council's maps of current and past RCA configurations:

<http://www.pcouncil.org/groundfish/gfcurngmt.html>

Pacific Fishery Management Council website: www.pcouncil.org

Council Members as Executive Decision Makers at the New England Fishery Management Council

More than a decade ago, the New England Fishery Management Council established innovative ways to support council members and the decision making process. Three specific initiatives help to keep the council on track: providing region-specific training to new council members, setting annual priorities, and preparing decision documents for council meeting. Together, these initiatives support informed and focused decision making.

“We treat council members as executive decision makers, providing them with the training and tools to make effective decisions,” says Paul Howard, Executive Director of the New England Fishery Management Council.

For the last decade, the New England Council has provided training to new council members, long before the new requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The training program is specific to New England and places a large focus on meeting key individuals in the region to learn how the process works. Council members spend a day at the council office meeting staff and learning the basics of administrative procedures and updates on council activities. Then, working with the regional administrator, council members spend a day at the National Marine Fisheries Service regional office, meeting key staff and attending briefings on issues ranging from protected species and habitat to law enforcement. Finally, the new council members spend a day at the science center, getting to know scientists who conduct the stock assessments and coordinate the data collection process. The intention is to complete all three trainings before their first meeting.

An additional operational strategy in New England is the annual priority setting process. The council began this process in 1997 to better plan and allocate resources to ensure MSA requirements are satisfied. The council creates a priority and management action plan that clearly defines the council’s work for each committee and FMP over a three-year period. The priority setting process keeps everyone focused on the issues for the year to ensure the funding and resources are available to achieve the most pressing and commonly agreed upon issues.

Finally, council staff began preparing decision documents in 1998. The decision documents provide a short summary of the proposed action and clearly identify the decisions that must be made. The document presents management options, highlights the preferred alternatives, and identifies remaining issues. Recognizing there are thousands of pages of information that must be processed and considered when making decisions, council staff designed the decision documents to assist council members in understanding and processing large amounts of information. The decision documents also help the council focus its discussion and work through the information systematically.

For more information, contact Paul Howard, Executive Director at the New England Fishery Management Council: phoward@nefmc.org.

Sources:

NEFMC. 2008. Final 2009 Priorities and Management Action Plan (November 24, 2008)

NEFMC. Decision Document for Amendment 13 to the New England Multispecies FMP.

Telephone Interview with Paul Howard, Executive Director at the New England Fishery Management Council (January 6, 2009).

Developing an Allocation Policy at the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

In November 2007, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council created an Ad Hoc Allocation Committee to develop principles and guidelines for making allocation decisions. Allocation decisions continue to be contentious and difficult as user groups seek to maintain or grow their share of catches. The council charged the Ad Hoc Committee with developing an allocation policy based on the existing legal and regulatory framework.

Allocation decisions are particularly challenging in cases where the fishery resources are either stable or declining. The situation is compounded with new requirements for sector specific annual catch limits and accountability measures, heightening the divisiveness of resource allocation. Therefore, the Ad Hoc Committee developed an allocation policy to “provide principles, guidelines, and suggested methods for allocation that would facilitate future allocation and reallocation of fishery resources between or within sectors.”

To accomplish this task, the committee compiled specific provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act and the National Standard Guidelines relevant to allocation of domestic fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico. They reviewed allocation formulas and approaches in other areas, as well as existing provisions in their own FMPs.

The result is an allocation policy that outlines procedures for requesting and initiating an allocation or reallocation of a fishery resource. The policy calls for a comprehensive review of allocations within the individual FMPs every five years. Finally, it suggests a variety of methods for determining allocation, including market-based, catch-based, socioeconomic-based, and negotiations based methods.

The Council adopted the Allocation Policy at the January 2009 meeting, along with a revised charge for the Ad Hoc Allocation Committee. The Ad Hoc Allocation Committee will support the management committee’s deliberations on allocation by evaluating information on allocation-related topics and various allocation methods. The first test of the new Allocation Policy will likely happen at the council’s April 2009 meeting.

For more information, contact Assane Diagne, Economist: assane.diagne@gulfcouncil.org.

Sources:

GMFMC Allocation Policy for Review, January 2009. <http://www.gulfcouncil.org>.

Background on the Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum

The Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum is a new program that offers continuing education and networking opportunities for members of regional fishery management councils. The Forum is organized around two programs: the semiannual workshops and ongoing support. The workshops facilitate learning and networking among council members from different regions and provide leadership skills training. Throughout the year, the ongoing support program provides council members access to the cutting-edge scientific research and world-renowned experts. Both the workshops and ongoing support program provide interdisciplinary information to help council members further understand the issues and challenges they face in order to manage our nation's fisheries sustainably.

Mission Statement:

Effective fishery management harmonizes society's needs for ocean conservation, jobs, and healthy coastal economies. To help current and future leaders achieve this goal, the Forum will:

- Build leadership and problem-solving skills
- Increase understanding of fisheries and ocean science, economics, and policy
- Help decision makers learn from successes and challenges in other regions
- Offer ongoing tools, experts, and professional networking to assist participants in their work

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