



New England Fishery Management Council

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**New England Fishery Management Council
Approval Process and Content Guidelines for Written Communications
6/21/2011**

I. Identification of Issues

In April 2011, the Council directed its staff to develop a document that: 1.) Clarifies issues that are generally acceptable to discuss in Council press releases and other major forms of mass communications distributed to the media; 2.) Discusses who approves text before communications are distributed; and 3.) Provides suggestions about how the Council as an organization might present its views to the public via the media, pending further Council discussion.

II. Background

The Public Affairs Officer routinely communicates with the media via press releases, letters to the editor, and through the Council's newsletters, and other written materials as well as phone calls and emails. At the direction of the NEFMC's Executive Committee, the staff has more aggressively responded to negative press articles and editorials that have mischaracterized the Council's intent or actions on a range of issues.

Largely because of the ongoing frustration expressed by many in the fishing industry about NEFMC and NOAA programs, several Council members have questioned the appropriateness of the subject matter and verbiage used in some recent Council communications to the press. Based on the discussion at the April 2011 Council meeting, members requested an outline of the process used to determine who speaks on behalf of the Council and who approves the final text in its communications.

III. Approval Process

There is a long-standing process in which the Public Affairs Officer (PAO) works with the appropriate technical staff member to ensure that Council-related issues are accurately described in any external mass communications that target the media and public. These take the form of press releases, letters to the editor, opinion pieces, and Council newsletters, as well as web content, occasional articles, fliers and brochures. The PAO is responsible for the tone, quality and relevance of the materials, while the Executive or Deputy Director provide final approval. During Council meetings, the Chairman and Vice Chairman often provide feedback and approval of press releases.

The Executive Committee has recently become part of this process, reviewing and revising press releases or letters to the editor as necessary. When referring to the "Council leadership" as the source of written comments to the press, permission is sought from each Executive Committee member and that group of individuals gives final approval to such communications.

III. Current Practice

NEFMC communications are intended to promote a better understanding of the Council's charge to conserve and manage fisheries, educate the public about the process it employs to achieve that end and encourage stakeholder participation and buy-in to Council decisions. The staff follows a number of broad guidelines in crafting its communications to the public.

1. Communications are based on and support approved Council actions and positions.
2. Because the Council uses majority votes to make its decisions, communications are generally written to reflect the rationale used by the prevailing side and provided in Council documents, public testimony and Council member comments.
3. All forms of Council communications should be fact or policy-based. Speculation about the outcomes of Council votes should always be avoided. Staff can still be helpful to the media by presenting the major issues, both pro and con, associated with any Council action and the reasons an action is moving through the Council process.
4. Council members are often asked to speak to the media on behalf of the Council. This is generally a responsibility that is assumed by the Chairman, but can and does include others – for example, Oversight Committee Chairs or Council members who also are local fishermen or state directors and are recognized as sources of information to local media reps. The Public Affairs Officer and staff also serve in this capacity.
5. Individual Council members are free to express themselves to the media as they see fit, but they should be clear about speaking for themselves or their own institutions and not the Council.
6. When press releases are necessary, but concern issues that are highly controversial, or address interim reports or other actions that are otherwise not final, particular care must be taken to ensure these types of communications are fair, balanced and clearly acknowledge all sides of an issue. Examples of these would include issues that relate to safety, as well as economic, social and community impacts.
7. Council communications should not include verbiage that expresses personal opinions unless they are consistent with approved Council positions. If included, they should be appropriately attributed to a voting Council member, such as the Chair, Vice Chair, Oversight Committee Chair or Executive Director.
8. Opinion pieces written by members on behalf of the Council and by staff on behalf of the Council should also be consistent with Council positions. Communications of this nature may concern a range of issues, correct the record or more fully describe Council actions, as well as address other fishery matters. Opinion pieces written independently should clarify that the writer is speaking on behalf of him or herself, and not for the full Council.

9. As a matter of course and in keeping with most professional guidelines, press releases should be written for general consumption, although they should include enough information to make them useful to stakeholders and interested members of the public. They should be objective and contain facts that are relevant to the subject matter.
10. The Council should keep in mind that the issuance of a press release, letter to the editor or opinion piece does not guarantee publication. In New England, Council press releases are more likely to be picked up by local fishing community or trade publications than by larger print media outlets that cover issues with greater news impact. Of course, groundbreaking decisions or very high profile issues are an exception to this, as well as timely, relevant letters to the editor that are of regional interest.
11. The Council should be aware that websites, RSS feeds (Really Simple Syndication) --- a family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated works such as blog entries, news headlines, audio, and video in a standardized format --- and social media will be of greater importance for external outreach as print media outlets continue to consolidate or diminish.

People obtain information, education, news, etc., by electronic media and print media. Social media are distinct traditional media, such as [newspapers](#), [television](#), and [film](#). They are relatively inexpensive and accessible to enable anyone (even private individuals) to publish or access information, compared to industrial media, which generally require significant resources to publish information.