



New England Fishery Management Council

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Research Steering Committee May 27, 2009 Ferncroft Hotel, Danvers, MA Meeting Summary

The Research Steering Committee (RSC), chaired by Council member David Goethel, met on May 27, 2009 at the Ferncroft Hotel in Danvers, MA. Other committee members at the meeting included Council members Dana Rice and David Preble, fisherman Curt Rice, Michael Pol of the MA Division of Marine Fisheries, Dr. John Hoey of the National Marine Fisheries Service's Cooperative Research Program (CRP) and Dr. Fred Serchuk from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC).

The Chairman introduced the newest members of the RSC --- Dr. Bill DuPaul, professor emeritus at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and David Beutel, fisheries and aquaculture coordinator at the RI Coastal Resources Management Council. CRP staff member Dr. Earl Meredith also was present along with New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) staff member Patricia Fiorelli.

The audience included CRP staffer Carolyn Woodhead, as well as Ryan Silva and Allison Murphy from the National Marine Fisheries Service Regional Office (NMFS/RO), Gulf of Maine Research Institute staff Dr. John Annala and Laura Taylor Singer, Rachel Feeney from the Northeast Consortium, Cape Cod MA gear technologist Ron Smolowitz and researcher David Gallagher.

Overview of Agenda

The Council staff briefly reviewed several RSC business items including final project reviews and the schedule for future meetings. The CRP staff provided members with a budget overview, including the relationship between newly announced \$6M in supplemental funds for cooperative research and the strategic plan discussed at last RSC meeting.

Before undertaking discussions about plans for spending research monies, the RSC discussed a list of final cooperative research projects that have not yet been reviewed by the committee, but which have received technical reviews by either the Northeast Consortium or NMFS for CRP-funded projects. The committee agreed to meet over the summer and conduct a management review for all projects on the list with the exception of a number of Scallop RSA-funded projects. Those that will not be reviewed by the RSC have already been, or are about to be used in management decision-making and were vetted through the Scallop PDT and/or the SAW/SARC process. In general, the committee acknowledged that this will be the case with scallop RSA projects, particularly those that address assessment-related topics because use of the information is time-sensitive.

To kick off the subject of cooperative research and possible new or extended initiatives, Laura Singer Taylor summarized the process and results of the strategic planning effort conducted by GMRI on behalf of NOAA Fisheries.

As an outcome of reviewing the strategic planning powerpoint presentation, the committee extensively discussed the idea of collaborative networks, or a single network in New England to better take advantage of researchers expertise and reduce the emphasis on competition between principle investigators. Although the idea is still under development, CRP Director Dr. John Hoey added that the existing coordinating mechanisms (Council and RSC) would still be central to the cooperative research process, although the addition of an industry panel is recommended.

Dr. Hoey went on to describe the guidance that NMFS has been given, by both the agency leadership and members of Congress, about spending the newly announced funds. Improvements in fish stock surveys and an emphasis on the development of fishing gear that targets healthy stocks were identified along with studies of fish survival rates and analyses of the cost effectiveness of different monitoring strategies, and video monitoring in particular.

Dr. Hoey deconstructed the plan further for other RSC members and the audience. Recapping, he said \$10 million dollars will be directed toward the development of sectors specifically, while \$6 million will support broader research that includes three areas:

- Surveys and survey research - (about 20% of the funds) including:
 - Industry-based fishery independent surveys and survey research – suggestions included a non-trawl survey that will reach areas not currently surveyed by the *FSV Bigelow* and/or the state surveys, perhaps a bottom longline survey or a gillnet survey in “non-trawlable” habitat;
 - Survey research – industry suggested shadow surveys to the NOAA Administrator as well as sweep comparisons and testing the use of rockhopper gear vs. cookies;
 - Follow-up workshops to promote industry input and involvement.
- Expanded conservation engineering - (about 48% of the funds) including small challenge grants to fund proof of concept projects, as well as larger studies and the adoption of new technologies; and
- Gear technology transfer to improve stock monitoring and the transition to annual catch limits/output control management - (for example, support for fishermen and communities to use proven gears that might otherwise not be affordable (Ruhle trawl, topless shrimp trawl with dual sorting grids and devices such as catch sensors).

Other types of projects that might fall outside of the above-mentioned categories, including ongoing efforts such as the Marine Resource Education Program and the ME-NH Inshore Trawl Survey, would likely be supported by CRP’s base funds.

Committee members were assured that there is flexibility in the structure of the above programs and how the funds are allocated, depending on further guidance from key members of Congress and NOAA. Money must be obligated by the end of the fiscal year, according to Dr. Hoey. This means the end of September or early October with the first competition occurring this summer.

It was suggested that because of the timing issue, some type of infrastructure would need to be set up to facilitate needed research, but still allow for a full vetting of the issues, an exercise that may take more time.

RSC and audience members recommended ideas such as funding flume tank testing, conducting species complex/area/high density surveys over a period of several years; gear comparison studies for different purposes, such as by area and species complex, and comparing otter trawls versus gillnets versus dredges to determine optimal harvesting methods by species, season, area and gear.

As the discussion continued, committee members pointed out that the resource surveys in the region, whether state, federal, or IBS, are not calibrated with each other. Others added that this type of work may not be necessary. It was added that if net sweep comparisons are planned and undertaken, a clear rationale should be developed, beyond the current public misperceptions that consider such investigations pivotal to good science. While habitat considerations could be one reason, it was agreed that questions related to consistency of survey results should be fully explored before spending research funds on the issue.

As a sidebar, members also noted that the NEFSC has developed an index to convert survey results between the *Albatross* and *Bigelow*. Whether the method is adequate will be the subject of a peer review at a calibration workshop scheduled for this August. During that session other solutions may be recommended that do not involve gear comparisons but perhaps a different time series, a survey for flatfish, or a winter survey using a disk sweep, for example.

Bycatch reduction in Southern New England in the small mesh fishery was identified as a very pressing issue that could be resolved with a conservation engineering solution, particularly with respect to winter flounder. Committee members discussed the promising work already conducted with drop-chains and the possibility of physical separation from species to be avoided, possibly through information sharing by study fleet participants.

Carefully designed discard mortality studies were suggested for a number of groundfish stocks, although the expense of this type of work was cited as a potential problem. Others suggested testing for optimal tow times for some species during particular seasons and/or with specified gear types or testing day versus night catchability for winter flounder.

The committee ended its discussions with a request for more attention to outreach and education, including better two-way communication.