

ECOSYSTEM ADVISORY SUBPANEL COMMENTS ON COUNCIL MEETING PROCESS AND EFFICIENCIES

The Ecosystem Advisory Subpanel (EAS) reviewed the *Council Meeting and Process Efficiencies White Paper* (White Paper; Agenda Item C.3, Attachment 1) as prepared by Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) staff.

The EAS felt the White Paper did a good job of capturing the value of in-person meetings, in particular the merit of non-verbal communication, informal conversation at the margins of the meetings, and the value of building relationships that create solidarity in the Council process. Some on the EAS noted that a large portion of the problem solving at the advisory body meetings takes place in the social hour, and that this is a key part of the process. For all these reasons, meetings in which more complex discussions will take place are more effectively done in person, because participants who aren't in the room cannot functionally represent their interests. The EAS recommends that advisory bodies meet in person at least occasionally, and that any advisory body meetings in which highly controversial subjects will be discussed be an in-person meeting.

As noted in the White Paper, broad deployment of hybrid or only virtual meetings raises technical complications. Ensuring adequate sound quality with multiple people in one room at the same time and others joining remotely requires investment in technology entailing substantial financial and human resources; and even then the technology may not always be reliable. Overall, the EAS agreed that in a hybrid meeting, people who are not present in the room cannot fully participate in the meeting. For this reason, the EAS has concerns that holding hybrid or only virtual meetings creates equity issues. In hybrid or online meetings, the quality of the microphone used can impact the perceived value of the testimony. Also noted was that having only online meetings can shift the demographics of participants as those less 'tech-savvy' may be unable or unwilling to participate.

In many university settings, hybrid classes are discouraged for the reasons mentioned above. Even so, special circumstances may warrant the limited use of hybrid meetings, for example to hear remote presentations or to include specific individuals who are unable to travel. Sometimes a participant may only be able to attend virtually, and this may be less iniquitous than no participation at all in that particular circumstance.

The EAS discussed measures to boost inclusivity, including live-streaming in-person advisory body meetings, and providing public listening stations for live-streamed meetings. This could allow people in rural areas, who may have limited internet connectivity at home, to follow advisory body and Council deliberations. Similarly, if the Council decides to rethink the frequency, duration, and format of its meetings, it should consider holding some sessions in rural areas.

The EAS has the sense that the amount of public comment changed when the Council shifted to online meetings. Although it initially increased, it seemed to have steadily declined in 2021. Now that the Council is back to in-person meetings with the remote public comment option, will public comment be stifled or facilitated?

With respect to information flow, under the current process the public, advisory bodies, and Council staff struggle with deadlines for submission of materials and putting all that material online. The EAS wonders whether a different schedule for submitting reports and analyses would be more efficient for receiving and distributing information. The existing process results in a lot of reports being completed just in time for dissemination, but often not in time for Council members, other advisors, or the public to adequately review and absorb the information.

In general, the EAS applauds the Council's efforts to identify areas that could be improved to increase efficiencies and recommends the Council continue to explore how the process and meeting schedule might change in the future to be more nimble, effective, and efficient.

PFMC
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