

Staff White Paper on Formats for Council Advisory Body Meetings

Introduction

In April 2022, the Council directed staff to bring forward recommendations to improve Council operational efficiency, prompted by changes in the way Council meetings were conducted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (exclusively online from April 2020 through November 2021, subsequently in a hybrid in person-online format). The return to in-person meetings in 2022 was seen as a good juncture for a broader scale examination of Council operations. Executive Director Merrick Burden delivered a staff white paper to the Council in September 2022. The Council had a fulsome discussion of the many issues and ideas raised in the white paper, supplemented by input from its advisory bodies, and directed staff to return with a more detailed examination of the tradeoffs associated with meeting formats. This near-term objective of exploring the feasibility and appropriateness of different meeting formats was supplemented by a longer-term objective to strategically consider other aspects of Council operations. This white paper focuses on the first, near-term task.

Meeting formats

As described above, an initial objective of the Council is to investigate different meeting formats and assess their utility for the kinds of meetings hosted by the Council. To start, we offer these definitions of possible meeting formats:

- In-person meeting: All meeting participants are physically present in the same location.
- Remote (online) meeting: All meeting participants use technology to participate from different locations. A variety of applications are in use for online meetings including [Zoom](#), [WebEx](#), [GoToMeeting](#), [Google Meet](#), and [RingCentral](#), which is the Council's chosen platform. The Council began using such platforms to host some advisory body meetings as far back as 2014.
- Hybrid meeting: A combination of in-person and remote participation during a single meeting. Another way to look at hybrid is that one node of an online meeting hosts a group of people physically present in the same location. Typically, the balance of participation leans to in-person with just a few people joining online. The hybrid format has been used for Council floor sessions to allow participation in its meetings by the public, presenters, staff, and some Council members.
- Live broadcast meeting: An in-person meeting can be streamed or broadcast to a wider audience with limited or no audience participation. This can overlap somewhat with the hybrid format if, for example, limited public comment opportunities are provided. For the wider public, Council meetings work this way: "attendees" can only listen to the proceedings.

In-person interaction facilitates interpretation of nonverbal cues, allows side conversations that can be brought back to the main meeting, fosters collegiality, can be better for addressing sensitive or conflict-laden issues, and reduces the tendency to get distracted by what is going on in the background. The main advantages of remote meetings are lower cost and greater convenience, because participants don't need to travel to a meeting location. The subject matter of the meeting and the nature of participation are important factors in considering whether a meeting can work online or needs to be held in person.

Meetings that feature unstructured discussion, involve negotiation, and benefit from side conversations to resolve issues can suffer in an online setting. The salmon season setting process that occurs at the Council's March and April meetings displays all these features. Speaking to the Chairs of the Salmon Advisory Subpanel (SAS) and Salmon Technical Team (STT), those committees found that online and hybrid formats did not work well for their meetings. Their meetings feature a lot of discussions with stakeholders, or forging agreements between parties and the STT resolving specific technical issues not involving the entire committee (but which are brought back to the full committee and the Council). Discussions between the two groups are also important. The STT models the feasibility of season structures that underpin negotiation within the SAS on tradeoffs among user groups. All of this occurs in a dynamic, fast-moving process where these committees need to bring refined proposals before the Council. Spontaneous face-to-face conversations are an important feature of an effective process.

For other advisory bodies and management processes, online and hybrid formats may be more effective, and even desired by some participants. The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) is one example where the way it conducts its meetings is more conducive to the online or hybrid format. Its meetings are more formal, its members are generally more computer savvy, and it covers issues across the Council's Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) prompting broader interest in its deliberations. For that reason, Council staff is endeavoring to host SSC meetings in a hybrid format on a trial basis in 2023.

We must also recognize that for society as a whole, online and hybrid meetings are now the new normal. Companies and government agencies have struggled bringing employees back to the office, with significant pushback on required in-office days. This likely spills over into the Council process where participants question the need to travel to in-person meetings if remaining at home and participating online could be an option. For nearly two years, the Council did its business online and has transitioned to mixing in-person, online, and hybrid formats for the Council itself and its committees. Beyond the expectations of participants, online and hybrid meetings will likely be a reality going forward because of the current budget environment and the limited number of hotels that can host meetings that are as large as ours. Therefore, the format will be another consideration when planning advisory body meetings.

Online and hybrid meetings can also facilitate broader public participation, because individuals do not have to travel to the meeting location for what might be just a few minutes of public testimony. Since some Council stakeholders live in remote coastal areas this is of especial value, although internet bandwidth limits in rural areas can be a constraint. Broader participation by diverse voices

is welcome and should be fostered however possible. In September 2022, the Council was briefed on the development of an equity and environmental justice (EEJ) strategy by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), which is consistent with priorities of the Biden administration. Building relationships with underserved communities (Outreach and Engage Equitably) and providing meaningful involvement to underserved communities (Inclusive Governance) are among the objectives identified in the strategy. Online participation by the public in Council and advisory body meetings supports these objectives by fostering broader, more diverse participation in the Council process.

Council staff is only now coming to grips with some of the logistical challenges of mixing different meeting formats. For example, running both online and in-person advisory body meetings during the same Council meeting can be challenging for staff, who also have other duties such as briefing the Council. Similarly, some individuals are members of more than one Team or Subpanel, and switching between different formats during a single Council meeting can prove challenging. As we evolve our approach, holding some online advisory body meetings in advance of a Council meeting to balance staff workload should get a critical look. Similarly, there are a variety of strategies that can make online and hybrid meetings more effective. As an example, the Council has generally discouraged meeting participants from turning on their video, to reduce bandwidth demand; and many participants may not want to turn it on either to maintain a sense of privacy. However, this eliminates visual cues that are part of what people recognize is a big benefit of in-person interaction and the partial anonymity could reduce trust among participants. (Other forums require participants to turn on their video when speaking as a compromise across these issues and concerns.) Over time, Council staff will have to build a new skill set, and the Council may need to refine its policies and practices, in service of more effective online and hybrid meetings.

To conclude, from experience during the pandemic Council staff has gained a sense of the tradeoffs between in-person and remote meetings and has proposed guidelines for meeting formats in 2023:

- Each advisory body will meet in person at least once per year. This is important to foster and sustain collegiality within a group.
- Topics that are complex, controversial, and need ongoing exchange among groups should be in person.
- Recognizing these factors, remote meetings will be encouraged to address budget shortfalls and potential issues concerning hotel availability.
- The Council will continue to monitor Covid transmission rates and adjust meeting formats and protocols, as appropriate.

Heretofore, online and hybrid meetings formats have been discussed in tandem. While sharing common features, hybrid offers its own unique benefits and challenges. Since the Council wants to explore the feasibility of extending the hybrid meeting format to advisory body meetings, this topic is explored in more detail below.

Issues with Deployment of the Hybrid Meeting Format

Since the Council resumed in-person meetings in 2022, the hybrid format has been used in a limited way for a few advisory body meetings. Greater use of the hybrid format has been constrained in the first instance by the equipment available to enable such meetings. Council staff has used three types of equipment thus far. These are:

- [Meeting Owl® device](#): These devices include 360° in-room video and audio and computer vision to automatically focus on whoever is speaking. Two devices can be paired to accommodate larger groups (more than 10 but generally not more than 20). These devices currently retail for about \$1,000. These devices have proved moderately successful in certain settings. They work best for small meetings (5 to 10 people) where participants are close to the devices. In larger, high-ceiling rooms and with larger groups, they do not pick up the in-person discussions very well. A benefit is that this is an all-in-one solution that is relatively easy to set up and run.
- [Mini Council ballroom set up](#): Council staff tested the use of a small mobile mixer, spare microphones, dedicated laptop, and a PA speaker at a couple of advisory body meetings. This was intended to replicate, on a smaller scale, the Council ballroom setup. The total cost to create this setup is about \$3,000. Staff discovered that initially setting the sound levels on the mixer without subsequent monitoring and adjustment did not work well. It was very difficult for the staff officer supporting the meeting to deal with the equipment on top of their regular meeting duties. Although this setup could provide high quality sound to online participants, it would require a dedicated person to run the equipment.
- [AnkerWork SR500 Speakerphone](#): This is a lower cost alternative to the Owl device (\$219 per device) that does not include video but has similar sound filtering technology to pick up the speaker in a group setting. It also easily integrates with online meeting applications. This device has been used for morning state delegation meetings and Council staff has hosted two advisory body meetings with it (one at the Council office, one at a hotel). These devices suffer from the same limitations of the Owl device when used with larger groups and rooms. The lack of video further limits the opportunities to enhance remote participation. Adding video equipment to the setup would incur additional costs and complexity.

Hybrid meetings offer the promise of combining the benefits of in person and online. So far, the overarching constraint to effective hybrid meetings is technology and related staffing demands. As alluded to above, hybrid in a way involves adding a group of people in one location to an online meeting. Capturing the audio (and potentially video) from that group creates challenges due to environmental noise and the different locations of the people in the in-person setting. As described above, the solutions we have tried so far require either manual oversight (i.e., the mixing board setup) or advanced signal processing built into the equipment. The equipment we have tried so far has performed poorly or moderately well, depending on the meeting size, setting, and structure.

Such poor performance can hinder the Council process as it fosters disappointment, frustration, and lack of trust in meeting outcomes when such hybrid formats do not work well.

Even with a fully effective technical solution, there are social-psychological issues that likely would have to be addressed to make hybrid meetings truly effective. We expect that the ratio of online to in-person participation will slant heavily to the latter. In the near term at least, remote participation in a hybrid meeting will be limited to exceptional circumstances where a committee member cannot travel due to personal or health reasons. (Hybrid also allows the public to listen in and participate through limited comment.) Without extra effort, this imbalance can make the online participants feel excluded or unengaged. They also miss out on the informal and spontaneous side interactions, either between committee members sitting at the table or on the margins of the meeting, that the in-person attendees benefit from. As mentioned above for online meetings, Council staff likely will need to acquire new skills and establish new meeting practices to address these deficiencies.

As discussed in the prior paragraphs, the success of hybrid meetings relies on the right combination of factors, as shown Figure 1: a tightly choreographed structure, narrowly delineated objectives, low environmental noise, and effective technology.

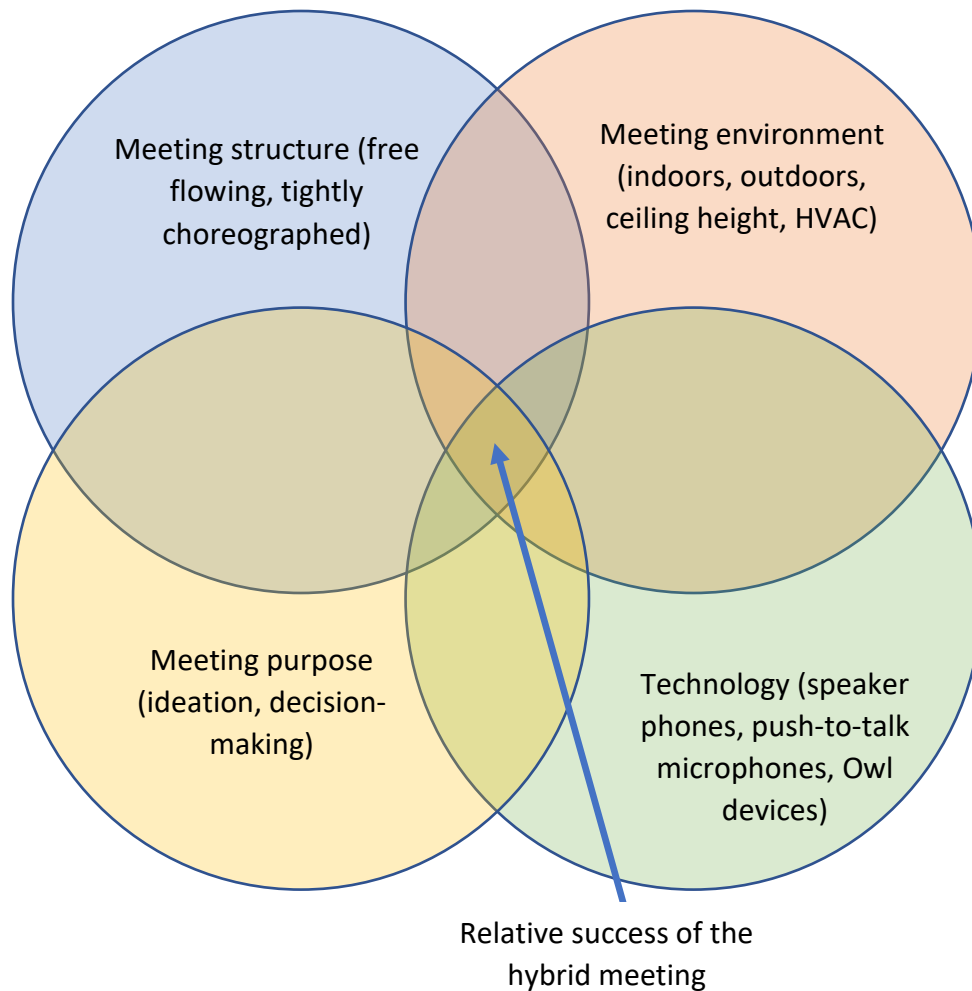


Figure 1. Factors affecting the efficacy of hybrid meetings.

Based on research so far, we estimate it would cost about \$15,000 per installation for equipment that overcomes the technical constraints of hybrid. Such an installation includes noise cancellation and advanced signal processing combined with microphones for each meeting participant. Aside from the equipment costs, there are also operational costs. Additional staff time would be needed to set up, troubleshoot, and maintain the equipment during and in between use. Wide deployment across the number of advisory bodies that typically meet at a Council meeting would require full-time support by either a dedicated Council staff person or contractor. An intermediate solution posed by Council staff would be to set up one or two hybrid meeting rooms during a Council meeting. Since advisory body meetings do not completely overlap, the room or rooms could be “hot swapped” among committees to maximize use – whether for full days or for parts of a meeting. If the Council wants to pursue wider use of hybrid at Council meetings, staff could develop a specific proposal for managing hybrid for at least some of the advisory bodies planned for in-person meetings. We would scope this within a specified budget limit and take a critical look at the anticipated number of in-person and online advisory body meetings planned for upcoming Council meetings with an eye to which in-person meetings could be converted to hybrid.

It may be that increasing hybrid meetings would have to be combined with shifting more meetings online (possibly before Council meetings) to find a solution within a realistic budget constraint.

In 2019 the meeting space at the Council office was expanded by 1,200 square feet. This larger space can be subdivided with a collapsible wall. In between Council meetings, hybrid meeting equipment could be set up in these rooms for use during any advisory body meetings occurring outside of Council meetings. The Coastal Pelagic Species Management Team successfully held a hybrid meeting January 24-26 in the Pacific Room at the NMFS Southwest Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, California. This indicates that there are other locations suitable for the hybrid format. An important caveat is that other locations such as this are not under the control of Council staff in terms of availability of the space and technical support. But in general, Council staff could prioritize the Council office and any other suitable locations when considering the need to hold a meeting in the hybrid format.

Staff Recommendations

Council staff have compiled a series of recommendations regarding the various formats that appear to be appropriate per different meeting location type. Inherent in this table is staff's experience with the hybrid set-up and the need to manage any hybrid participation carefully to ensure an effective meeting. Recommendations are spelled out in the table below.

Table 1. Council related meeting format options.

Location	Meeting Format	Team Members	Public	Comments
Council Office	In person w/ web broadcast	Alternates or remote access will be allowed with approval from the ED/DD no more than 2 times per year. a/	Remote public comment allowed	PFMC IT Staff will need to be available to support.
Region or Science Center Office	In person w/ web broadcast	Alternates or remote access will be allowed with approval from the ED/DD no more than 2 times per year. a/	Remote public comment allowed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council staff will not be expected to travel with any equipment and will need some familiarity with the WebEx platform. • For MT meetings, consider additional support from NMFS staff • Includes STAR Panels
	If no IT support, in person only	In person only		
Hotels	In person only for all except SSC (see below)	In person only		Per u&c, remote presenters can be accommodated. Requests for remote participation of AB members will be reviewed by ED/DD.a/

Location	Meeting Format	Team Members	Public	Comments
Hotels	<u>Council Ballroom</u>	Hybrid model, with Council members encouraged to be in person	<u>Remote or in-person</u>	
	SSC	Remote access will be allowed with approval from the ED/DD no more than 2 times per year	Remote public comment allowed	We will test this model for the SSC in 2023 to see if it's sustainable for other ABs
Remote	Remote	All members will be remote	Remote public comment allowed	

a/ The ED/DD will review the request and make a determination based on need and resources available. Currently, Council staff cannot accommodate more than 2 hybrid meetings at a time, in addition to the Council ballroom.

Conclusions

The Council has a long and successful history of using an in-person meeting format. In-person meeting formats are beneficial for a variety of reasons in a public policy process like the Council's. Over the last few years, the Council has become more accustomed to using online meetings, and the use of online meetings accelerated during the pandemic. Online meetings have proven effective, though in certain circumstances the use of an online meeting format can be less conducive to effective discussion and decision-making compared to in-person formats. Recently, the use of online meetings in the Council arena has been more deliberately applied to agenda topics that are considered less controversial and may not need much iteration among members or between different entities (such as between the Council and an advisory body). With the relaxation of pandemic restrictions, the use of a hybrid meeting format has been used by the Council with varying degrees of success. Hybrid meetings are more challenging to administer than either in-person or remote meetings due to the need to develop and run two simultaneous meeting formats. This type of meeting is especially challenging during a Council meeting due to the number of concurrent meetings occurring, which may need both technology and technical support to run effectively with limited amount of staff capacity and resources available.

Moving forward, the Council should focus on two key questions bearing on our use of online meeting technology during Council meetings:

- 1) Does the Council wish to use a mix of concurrent online and in-person meeting formats in the future? This setup would involve the scheduling of some advisory bodies in a remote format, while scheduling the Council in a largely in-person format with a hybrid option. The tradeoffs of this approach involve balancing reduced cost against the limited ability of advisory bodies to interact with Council members. This approach was used throughout much of 2022 with a fair degree of success. An additional consideration relates to the challenge of scheduling in advance those bodies that will be remote with little ability to change those plans later.
- 2) Does the Council wish to use a hybrid meeting format more widely than we have so far, and to invest in the technology and personnel capacity to do so? The hybrid format was used in the Council ballroom successfully throughout 2022. Hybrid formats were also used in several advisory bodies in 2022, with limited degrees of success. Enhancing the quality of hybrid advisory body meetings would entail an investment in technology that the Council does not currently have and would require that we acquire or shift personnel resources so that the level of IT staffing is adequate to run several concurrent hybrid meetings. The cost and impacts of these hardware and personnel changes are not trivial.