COUNCIL STAFF REPORT ON AGENDA TOPIC PRIORITIZATION METHODS

Introduction

The Committee of the Whole (COTW) recommended that Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) staff bring forward ideas on how the Council could prioritize topics when considering items to add to (or remove from) future Council meeting agendas. The COTW identified core Council activities as those enumerated in the Magnuson-Stevens Act, specifically related to the preparation and amending fishery management plans and pursuant regulations; protected species related actions directly affecting Council-managed fisheries, and Tribal relations. The COTW indicated that these core activities or actions should be considered obligatory. This leaves a swath of agenda topics in what may be considered a non-core category, but a portion of the those – such as agenda planning, appointments, and budget planning – represent ongoing administrative items; while they cannot dropped from meeting agendas entirely, as discussed in the Executive Director Report (Agenda Item C.2, Attachment 1), their frequency or time devoted to them could be reduced. Thus, a prioritization exercise would focus on a smaller subset of topics.

Task prioritization and time management are challenges for virtually any organization and there are a variety of principals, methods, tools, and commercial applications that can used. Likewise, the Pareto principal is often invoked when considering prioritization. This posits that 80 percent of consequences come from 20 percent of tasks. In simple terms it suggests that prioritization should consider what gives you "the most bang for your buck." This could be another part of any effort to prioritize tasks taken up the Council.

Any Council effort at prioritization entails particular complications. First, there are tasks that must be completed regardless of benefit (presumably those have been taken off the table by defining our core obligations) and second, the Council represents an array of constituencies with varying and sometimes competing priorities. When possible, the Council strives to make decisions by consensus, but given the varying priorities of constituents (and Council members) explicit task prioritization may be impossible without overriding the priorities of particular constituents.

Thus, a threshold decision is whether the Council wants to engage in an a formal, structured prioritization process. An alternative would be to size the container and fill it accordingly; in other words, the length and/or number of Council meetings would be shortened and the Council would then continue with an incremental, ad hoc approach – through the current agenda planning exercise – to decide what non-core items to add to future agendas. At the level of individual agenda items, the Council could exert more discipline to keep them to a specified time limit by, for example, curtailing the number and length of advisory body reports or limiting Council discussion.[1]

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[1] Roberts Rules of Order establishes limits to debate on a motion. "Unless the other members give permission to extend it, a member's speaking time must stay within the limits set by the rules of the board. If the board has no rules on the length of speech, Robert's sets the limit at 10 minutes" (Control the debate, control the meeting: Answers to

If the Council does want to take a more deliberate approach, it would be necessary to develop a list of tasks to prioritize, agree to a method to prioritize them, and establish a process by which such an exercise would be carried out.

Identifying Agenda Topics Subject to Prioritization

As indicated above, the COTW suggested that there are various core functions of the Council and topics related to these core functions cannot be eliminated from meeting agendas. There are also a variety of administrative functions on agendas that cannot be eliminated (although perhaps they could be handled differently so as to consume less agenda time). Unless the Council wants to extend a prioritization exercise to core responsibilities, this means a relatively small proportion of agenda topics, and floor time, would be subject to such an exercise.

Council staff evaluated 2023 agenda topics and concluded that about two-thirds of Council meeting floor time was devoted to what may be (generously) categorized as core activities as shown in Table 1. Items falling under a fishery management plan (FMP) heading in the agendas (including Pacific Halibut) were listed as core, except for items that could otherwise be characterized as a report (e.g., National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reports) or recommendation (e.g., exempted fishing permit reviews). Outside of these core tasks, Table 1 distinguishes between administrative items (including the open public comment agenda item), agenda items principally involving the presentation of reports from agencies or other entities, and the remaining non-core tasks.

Table 1. Council meeting floor time in 2023 by category.

	Floor Time		No. of Items	
	Hours	Percent	Count	Percent
Administrative	23.22	13%	33	21%
Reports	23.84	13%	31	20%
Core	102.46	57%	68	43%
Non-core	30.44	17%	25	16%
Total	179.96	100%	157	100%

Council actions can play out over several Council meetings. In fact, Council Operating Procedures 9 and 11 describe multi-meeting cycles for decision making on harvest specifications and fishery management plan amendments. This suggests moving beyond a solely agenda-focused approach. The groundfish workload and new management measure prioritization exercise the Council periodically undertakes offers an example of this sort of topic focused approach. A broader exercise could start by compiling a list of future agenda topics that would be subject to prioritization. (This could be elaborated by attaching floor time estimates to each topic.)

To suggest what such an inventory of tasks subject to prioritization might look like, Table 2 shows 2023 agenda items that staff categorized as non-core including all those identified as report

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your parliamentary questions. Nancy Sylvester. *Bar Leader*, Vol. 26 No. 34, Summer 2012). The Council could also establish its own rules to limit discussion.

presentations. To consolidate the table, items with the same (or substantially the same) titles are listed once with the number of occurrences noted. These can be considered recurring items, although unlike decision making cycles specified for FMPs they do not cumulatively lead to a final decision and conclusion. As shown in Table 1, items tagged as non-core comprised 17 percent of 2023 floor time while reports add an additional 13 percent.

Table 2. Non-core agenda items (including reports) in 2023. Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of times that item appeared on a 2023 agenda.

Non-Core
Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary Designation
Cordell Bank Conservation Area Revisions Scoping
Current Habitat Issues (4)
Exempted Fishing Permits (4)
Greater Farallones and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuaries Coral Restoration and Research Plan - Scoping
International Management Activities (3)
Marine Planning (5)
National Marine Fisheries Service Geographic Strategic Plan
National Standards 4, 8, 9 Considerations and National Standard 1 Technical Guidance
Regional Implementation of the National Equity and Environmental Justice Strategy
Fishery Ecosystem Plan Initiative 4 (3)
Reports
California Current Ecosystem Annual Report
Council Coordination Committee (2)
Drift Gillnet Bycatch Performance Report
Driftnet Modernization and Bycatch Reduction Act Transition Update
Groundfish Endangered Species Workgroup Report
Klamath Dam Removal Update and Status of Removal Project
Klamath River Fall Chinook Workgroup Progress Report
National Marine Fisheries Service Report (15)
NMFS 2023 Accomplishments and 2024 Priorities
North Pacific Fisheries Commission Update/Report
Report of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries
Trawl Catch Share Cost Project Update
Trawl Cost Recovery Annual Report
USCG Annual Report

As discussed above, to force prioritization one option would be shorten each Council meeting by a day, which represents a roughly 20 percent reduction in overall meeting time. If the Council wants to retain all the core items on its agendas, that implies cutting time allotted to all the remaining items by half. If the non-core and report items account for one-third of floor time, this suggests cutting the overall length of time for those items by two-thirds. That could be accomplished either by eliminating items of this nature from agendas, identifying techniques to shorten the amount of time spent on them, or consolidating certain items. The latter strategy might be considered for reports. For example, NMFS Reports could be taken as read with a single question and answer period across all FMPs or topics.

As noted above, for this exercise the definition of core items on 2023 agendas was interpreted broadly to include almost all items falling under an FMP heading (including Pacific halibut). A narrower definition of core responsibilities could be used so that some items falling under the FMP headings are under consideration. Some items under the FMPs, such as periodically adjusting harvest specifications and management measures, are effectively mandatory tasks that must be accomplished according to a set schedule and are thus easy to flag as core functions. However, it is unlikely that any blanket set of criteria could be arrived at to make such an a priori division of items that are at the margins of mandatory versus discretionary. It may be easier to simply consider all candidate agenda items up for grabs with the concept of core functions implicitly factored into a prioritization effort.

Potential Prioritization Methods

Three examples of how tasks could be prioritized are offered here, representing different levels of complexity.

- Stack ranking. This method has many variations and a checkered history (in a previous incarnation as an employee evaluation tool). It doesn't involve the application of objective criteria. At its simplest, an individual lists tasks by perceived priority. One variation is a pairwise comparison where two tasks are voted on until all tasks have been compared. Ranking is achieved based on the number of positive votes. Several or many people can be asked to carry out the exercise with the final assessment reached by taking an average score. Still another variation, which may be relevant to Council task prioritization, is top-n ranking. This essentially involves applying a cutoff to the prioritized list. For example, if the Council decided that 'n' agenda items (or amount of floor time) be allocated for the coming year only those items above the cutoff (or whose summed estimated times fall within the cutoff) would be added to coming agendas.
- Prioritization matrices. These methods involve assigning tasks to one of four quadrants based on two attributes. The Eisenhower matrix is a popular example where the two dimensions are importance and urgency. But a matrix can be constructed according to other attributes such as impact/effort, or benefit/cost. Tasks are assigned to one of the four quadrants according to, for example, high impact/low cost, high impact/high cost, low impact/low cost, or low impact/high cost. Assigning tasks within a matrix may not lead to a strict prioritization or ranking but helps to consider how to tackle various tasks. Some can be prioritized for immediate attention (e.g., those with high impact and low cost or high importance and urgency), others tackled as time permits, and some dropped from consideration entirely.
- Scoring systems. These methods offer a quantitative approach to determining priority using one to several dimensions or attributes. Council tasks could be scored according to various cost attributes (e.g., amount of floor time, analytical complexity, scope of staff/advisory body involvement) and benefits/salience (e.g., relationship to core mission, conservation benefits, fishing community benefits). Responses could be elicited using a survey method such as the Likert Scale, which asks respondents to rate an attribute across a point scale (typically 1-5 or 1-7) reflecting an assessment of an attribute. This can come in the form of statement with a response scale about agreement with the statement. For rating Council tasks this could be refined by using statements or questions related to resource

commitment, amount of time required, centrality to core mission, conservation or socioeconomic outcomes, etc.

For the sake of illustration and discussion, an example of a survey-based prioritization tool is described in the appendix to this paper.

Process: How Would the Council Engage in a Prioritization Exercise?

The methods outlined above typically involve some sort of collaboration. For example, members of a team would complete the exercise and an average or aggregate result is then tallied to facilitate group consensus. In the Council context it is less clear who would actually undertake such an exercise. The default expectation is that it would be Council members themselves, although it is not something that could be easily carried out as part of a floor session. Also, depending on what attributes are being assessed, Council members may not be in the best position to provide an informed response. For example, particular agency staff would have a better sense of the regulatory complexity of a particular action. One approach would be to organize such an exercise as an online survey of some kind. (Many related applications are offered online.) In developing a methodology along these lines particular groups of respondents could be polled about attributes they would be most knowledgeable about. Results could be aggregated and presented to the Council to aid in a floor discussion or negotiation about what items to schedule on future agendas.

In addition to figuring out the mechanics of a prioritization exercise, its timing also needs to be considered. This kind of task prioritization is better approached as a strategic exercise, perhaps looking out over a year's worth of coming meetings. (The aforementioned groundfish prioritization exercise notionally happens once a year, although it is not focused on scheduling items on agendas.) On the other hand, issues can crop up at any time, forcing a recalibration of agenda topics. This is often the case with non-core tasks we characterize as commenting. Commenting is essentially reactive; NMFS may come up with a new policy or set of guidelines, for example, with a discrete comment window. In cases like these the decision is essentially binary since the comment opportunity can only be tackled at one particular Council meeting. This could be addressed in a periodic strategic exercise by reserving a certain amount of unallocated floor time for these unanticipated tasks. Of course, this is an implicit prioritization, because less agenda time would be available for the list of anticipated tasks. Alternatively, the Council could devise and adhere to a set of rules about what kinds of tasks (and their total duration) that can be added to agendas during the strategic planning period.

Appendix

Example Prioritization Tool

A survey instrument could be used to help prioritize Council agenda topics. Such a survey would have two dimensions, "costs" (the amount of time and resources needed) and "need/benefit" intended to capture whether it is something the Council really has to do and/or what benefits would result. The survey would entail a series of questions each followed by a 5-point rating scale. [2] The scale is accompanied by suggestive prompts intended to help interpret the scale. (These prompts should not be interpreted too literally and intermediate values between prompt statements allows more refined judgment in responses.)

Surveys are intended to have multiple respondents to produce a more accurate "mean response." Multiple respondents would also bring a diverse range of expertise to responses. While Council members could be one population, Council staff, NMFS staff, and advisory body members involved in the topic also could be surveyed.

The survey would be conducted by means of an online form. (We have access to several web-based applications that could be used for this purpose.). These applications automatically compile responses, making it relatively easy process the results. Once the survey responses are gathered, mean values for the two dimensions would be calculated. Mean values on the two axes can be converted to a single score by computing the distance to origin across the two axes. Differential weighting of the questions also could be considered based on what surveyed attributes are more important to prioritization.

As noted in the Staff White Paper, to undertake a prioritization process a first step would be to inventory actual and candidate Council agenda topics/tasks that would be subject to the prioritization exercise. [3] The survey would elicit responses for each task. The resulting scores would then be used to rank the tasks. This would be presented in the Council as an aid to periodic strategic planning of future agendas.

Below survey questions across the costs and benefits dimensions are presented. This is by no means a definitive list. If the Council decided to develop such a prioritization tool, focus group testing of a preliminary inventory of questions could be used to refine the survey instrument. Focus groups also could be used to assess how well ranking based on survey results align with perceptions of priority across various stakeholders.

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[2] This survey is modeled after the widely used "Likert scale," which is used to survey opinions or perceptions. It consists of a statement or a question, followed by a series of five or seven answer statements. Respondents choose the option that best corresponds with how they feel about the statement or question.

[3] Groundfish workload planning occurs during March Council meetings and could provide some ideas and lessons for designing a methodology and process. Appendix 2 in this GMT report from March 2023 inventories groundfish actions along with several metrics characterizing the action and work involved.

Costs

1. How much Council floor time is needed? E.g., number of Council meetings, total floor time.

1	2	3	4	5
Approximately 1 meeting, < 2 hours		Approximately 3 meetings, > 5 hours		Approximately > 5 meetings, > 20 hours

2. How much advisory body input is expected?

1	2	3	4	5
None		More than one report over a few (1-2) meetings		Lengthy, complex reports/analyses over many (≥3) meetings

3. What level of supporting analysis will be required (not including advisory body reports)?

1	2	3	4	5
None		One or more documents of moderate length (e.g., ≤25 pages)		Lengthy, complex analysis (multiple drafts of EA/EIS or similar document)

4. How complicated will the implementation process be?

1	2	3	4	5
Discussion only		> 1 comment letter		Ongoing commenting / substantial regulatory process / complex FMP amendment

Need/benefit

1. How necessary is Council action on this topic?

1	2	3	4	5
This item informs the Council on an ancillary topic		Without Council action or a recommendation an important need will be unmet		This action is required by statute and/or conservation mandates

2. What is the conservation benefit to managed stocks?

1	2	3	4	5
This action does not address stock conservation		This action has an indirect beneficial impact on stock conservation		This action is needed to prevent overfishing and/or rebuild a depleted stock

3. What is the benefit to benefit to habitat, protected species, or the broader fishery ecosystem?

1	2	3	4	5
This action does not address these things		This action has an indirect beneficial impact (or prevents adverse impacts)		This action is needed to prevent substantial adverse impacts on these resources

4. What is the benefit to fisheries/fishing communities?

1	2	3	4	5
This action would adversely affect fishing communities		This action would benefit some fishing communities		This action would substantially benefit many fishing communities

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