

Addressing Capacity Constraints through Operational and Management Efficiencies – Brief Summary of Council and NMFS Leadership Discussions

1. Executive Summary

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) West Coast leadership and Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council, PFMC) leadership convened a series of discussions beginning in summer 2025 to address a shared and increasingly acute challenge: the need to better align fishery management workload with available staff and financial capacity.

This issue is not new; however, it has been made more acute by recent constraints, including staffing reductions within NMFS and increasing process complexity. As a result, the historical level of analytical support, process engagement, and scientific output that has underpinned Council decision-making is no longer sustainable.

These discussions have focused on identifying practical, durable approaches to “right-size” the system. In doing so, these meetings have had an eye to ensuring that core statutory responsibilities are met while maintaining the long-term health of West Coast fisheries and the legal defensibility of management actions.

This briefing document:

- Describes the nature of the capacity challenge;
- Acknowledges steps already taken by the Council to improve efficiency;
- Summarizes key themes emerging from NMFS–Council leadership discussions;
- Identifies broad categories of workload demand across Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) which may help in determining how demands can be changed; and
- Outlines potential pathways forward, along with near-term next steps.

2. The Core Problem: Aligning Workload with Capacity

The West Coast fishery management system is currently operating beyond sustainable capacity. Several factors contribute to this imbalance:

- NMFS Capacity Constraints: NMFS West Coast Region and Science Centers have experienced substantial staffing reductions (approximately 40% for the Regional Office and 30% for the Science Centers), compounded by hiring constraints and internal

reprioritization. As a result, NMFS has necessarily prioritized workload to the Administration objectives, and core statutory responsibilities over discretionary or lower-priority efforts.

- **Council Process Demands:** Council workloads have remained steady or increased in complexity, while turnover among Council staff and Advisory Body members has increased administrative and coordination burden and reduced efficiency of associated work due to loss of institutional memory and other factors.
- **Process Complexity and Review Requirements:** Increased levels of national-level review and procedural requirements have extended timelines and increased the number of analytical and administrative “touchpoints” required to complete actions.
- **Baseline Conditions:** Even prior to recent constraints, the system was widely recognized as operating at or beyond sustainable levels. Current conditions exacerbate this imbalance.

Importantly, efforts to address this issue are not intended to “free up” capacity for new work. Rather, they are intended to right-size ongoing work to align with available resources.

3. Progress to Date at the Council Level

The Council has already taken meaningful steps to improve efficiency and streamline operations.

Through its 2024 Committee-of-the-Whole process, the Council:

- Identified opportunities to reduce unnecessary workload and redundancy;
- Began implementing changes to improve meeting efficiency and agenda management; and
- Initiated broader discussions about prioritization and discipline within our process.

4. NMFS Capacity Changes and Implications

Recent changes within NMFS have direct impacts on Council processes and expectations.

Key considerations include:

- A reduced ability to support the full range of historical activities, including extensive Advisory Body and Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) engagement at prior levels;
- Constraints on the production of complex, highly detailed analytical documents;
- A need to prioritize core statutory mandates over discretionary work; and
- A shift toward more targeted, efficient modes of engagement (e.g., project-based support as opposed to iterative and lengthy support through the SSC or Management Teams).

5. Sources of Workload Demand Across FMPs

Workload demands within the Council process arise from several recurring sources across FMPs:

- Stock assessments and related review processes
- Management requirements that stem from emergencies (e.g., surprising or controversial stock assessment results, greater than expected catch or bycatch, etc.)
- Regulatory and statutory mandates
- Discretionary and Incremental Work (“Bells and Whistles”)
- Process-Driven Workload (layers of review and/or iteration)
- Customary posture within the PFMC to strive for consensus through multiple iterative discussions and decision-making attempts

Together, these sources of demand exceed what current staffing and resources can support at historical levels.

6. Potential Pathways to Alignment

A. Simplification and Prioritization within FMPs

- Focus management and analytical effort on the most ecologically and economically significant stocks;
- Consider removal or reclassification of lower-priority stocks from FMPs;
- Simplify management frameworks where possible (e.g., simplification of the groundfish rationalization program).

B. Streamlining Council Operations

- Reduce the number of meetings and/or steps required to complete actions;
- Consider replacing formal Advisory Body or workgroup meetings with smaller Council project teams;
- Eliminate redundant review layers;
- Adjust expectations regarding NMFS participation in Advisory Bodies and the SSC.

C. Prioritization of Core Work over Discretionary Efforts

- Greater focus on statutory mandates and time-sensitive actions;
- Limit or defer discretionary initiatives;
- Re-evaluate ongoing projects and committees, especially those that have been ongoing for substantial amounts of time.

D. Cultural and Decision-Making Considerations Towards Transformation

- Gain greater comfort with decision-making through formal votes rather than consensus;

- Accept a “strategic sufficiency” standard (i.e., do only what is necessary to achieve an objective, not more);
- Recognize that not all desirable work can be completed.

7. Next Steps

Spring 2026 (April Council Meeting)

- Introduce big picture outcomes of leadership discussions;
- Receive initial Council feedback.

Late Spring 2026 (May CCC)

- Consider and potentially incorporate national-level discussions around stock prioritization (e.g. the risk/value prioritization effort).

Summer 2026 (June Council Meeting)

- Present options for moving forward to align capacity and workload demands;
- Identify Council priorities from within these options or others.

Fall 2026

- Develop and begin implementing selected changes, including updates to Council Operating Procedures (COPs) and Regional Operating Agreement (ROA).

8. Conclusion

The need to align workload with capacity reflects a difficult reality rather than the presence of temporary constraints. Addressing this challenge will require coordinated action by both NMFS and the Council. The discussions to date represent an initial step toward a greater alignment between capacity and workload demands.