

COUNCIL EFFICIENCIES: PROGRESS, OUTCOMES, AND NEXT STEPS

The Pacific Fishery Management Council's (Council) efficiency measures are achieving their intended objectives, including shorter meetings, reduced in-person Advisory Body participation, and meaningful budget savings, while maintaining the Council's ability to make timely and well-supported decisions. Experience implementing these changes has highlighted areas for continued refinement, particularly managing Advisory Body workload, improving meeting sequencing and report practices, and retaining flexibility to adjust meeting formats and schedules when warranted. Longer-term opportunities, including Advisory Body structure and alternative Council meeting formats, may merit future consideration but are not proposed for action at this time.

For this agenda item, the Council is asked to finalize the proposed Council meeting schedules for considering Fishery Management Plan (FMP) matters (see *Refinements and Requested Actions* below and Attachment 3). Based on Council direction, staff would update the FMP schedules in the relevant Council Operating Procedures (COPs) to reflect the revised meeting schedules. The revised COP text would be brought forward at a future meeting for Council adoption.

Feedback on the Advisory Body meeting formats proposed in Attachment 3, particularly for coastal pelagic species (CPS), highly migratory species (HMS), habitat, and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), is also appreciated. The proposed formats would inform future hotel contracting and, once established, would be communicated to Advisory Bodies as long-term meeting expectations and reflected on the second page of the Year-at-a-Glance.

Reflections on Implementation

The Council's efforts to improve efficiency and address budget constraints have produced intended results: meeting length has been reduced, fewer advisory bodies are meeting in-person at each Council meeting, and the Council's structural deficit has narrowed considerably. Throughout this transition, the Council has continued to make timely and well-supported decisions. The ability of this Council to make good decisions is the ultimate marker of success.

As we have shortened meetings, this has required the Council to sequence major decisions more carefully and deliberately compared to our previous structure. Significant agenda items generally cannot be scheduled early in the meeting since Council members benefit from time to review the full suite of information and perspective before taking up consequential decisions. In addition, Advisory Bodies (including the SSC) need adequate time to develop recommendations and submit reports. The Council continues to manage this alongside COP 1's guidance to avoid placing too many weighty issues near the end of the agenda, and to intersperse major items where possible.

Advisory Bodies have provided feedback on the cumulative effects of the relatively compressed process and the increased reliance on their remote meetings. This feedback is weighed against the budget and scheduling constraints that were the impetus for "council efficiencies" initially. In response to this feedback, we have been able to attain efficiency and cost reduction objectives while building in flexibility to adjust as needed. This has entailed things such as shifting Advisory Body meetings from remote to in person when necessary and adding meeting days where the

complexity of a meeting warrants such a change. We intend to continue monitoring the cumulative effects of these changes and adjusting as we go forward. While we should acknowledge the strain these changes have caused, these strains call for needed flexibility in our approach as opposed to fundamentally reconsidering the approach and outcomes from the Committee of the Whole process.

While the efficiencies implemented to date have successfully reduced meeting time and costs, they have not resulted in a corresponding reduction in the underlying Advisory Body workload. It is helpful to consider these events as a sequence, with workload management being next in a sequence of events intended to improve efficiency and workload within the Council process. Several initiatives are underway that can help with this challenge. For example, stock assessment prioritization for groundfish and CPS can help align workload with available resources by focusing assessment capacity on stocks with the greatest management need. Identifying priorities in advance also allows agencies to better plan supporting work, while consideration of assessment frequency can help balance the need for timely scientific information with available capacity.

Additionally, developing a broader range of alternatives and using programmatic environmental analysis¹ and biological opinions² that anticipate foreseeable future actions can reduce the need for additional analysis or consultation as subsequent Council actions are considered. The use of programmatic approaches is also consistent with NOAA and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) guidance encouraging broader environmental reviews and consultations, where appropriate, to reduce duplicative analysis and streamline subsequent actions. Management frameworks that provide flexibility for subsequent actions or reduce the need for Council action, such as reducing the Council meeting requirements for FMP amendments, automatic actions including If, Thens (see Agenda Item C.5) may similarly streamline future decision-making and implementation. Council staff will continue to coordinate with NMFS staff to identify opportunities for additional streamlining.

Additional workload savings may also be gained through greater automation of routine analysis and report production. Examples include the groundfish harvest specifications database and SSC's Spex Checker Shiny App for error checking specifications; automations associated with the Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation reports for HMS, CPS, and groundfish; and automations associated with the annual salmon reports. Council staff will continue to work the Advisory Bodies to identify additional areas for automation.

Implementation and Refinement Underway

The Council has encouraged Advisory Bodies to meet in advance of Council meetings when possible, providing them additional time to develop their reports and allowing more time for Council consideration. In practice, the Briefing Book publication timeline (roughly two weeks before the Council meeting) sets a window for advance Advisory Body meetings (unless those

¹ Examples include the 2015-16 and Beyond Groundfish Harvest Specifications and Management Measures Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which is being updated under the Specifications Flexibility action. Additionally, the 2025 Highly Migratory Species EIS considered a range of exempted fishing permit options which facilitated streamlined Council consideration and NMFS implementation.

² The 2017 Endangered Species Act Consultation on the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery evaluated a range of future fishery and management conditions, providing a framework that has supported subsequent changes to the fishery without requiring consultation on each individual management adjustment.

meetings are for the purpose of producing Briefing Book material). The Briefing Book is published approximately two weeks before the Council meeting and Advisory Body members need sufficient time to review materials and prepare for their discussions. Most advanced online meetings occur during the week immediately preceding the Council meeting. Holding Advisory Body meetings in person before the Council meeting must be done selectively by weighing available hotel and meeting-space and travel costs, relative to the value of in-person discussion. Council staff will continue to work with Advisory Body Chairs and Vice Chairs to identify opportunities for improvement in this area.

Several operational efficiencies have been successfully implemented but could benefit from further refinement. Consistent with the Council's 2024 guidance and COP 1, summarizing Advisory Body reports rather than reading them in full has helped preserve Council floor time while allowing Advisory Body representatives to highlight key recommendations and respond to questions. Development of standardized Advisory Body report templates, including clearly identified recommendations or executive summaries, could further support this approach. Guidance from NOAA General Counsel on administrative record requirements could help clarify what information needs to be captured in Advisory Body reports, potentially allowing for a more streamlined approach. Progress on this effort has been delayed by competing workload demands and the need to address related matters before moving this work forward. Similarly, handling routine agency updates through written informational reports rather than verbal updates has helped preserve agenda time for Council discussion and action. While this practice has been successfully implemented in many cases, some agency reports continue to be read on the Council floor even when they were included in the advance Briefing Book and do not require Council action. Further consistency in treating these reports as informational, with agency representatives available to respond to questions as needed, could provide additional efficiencies. Continued refinement of these practices offers an opportunity to gain additional efficiencies.

Longer-Term Opportunities for Council Consideration

Implementation of the Council's efficiency measures has also highlighted broader questions about Council operations and decision-making. These issues are not proposed for resolution as part of the September discussion, but identifying them now may help inform whether and how the Council wishes to consider them in the future. Given the productive discussions and outcomes of the January 2024 Committee of the Whole, a similar forum could provide an effective approach for considering these broader issues.

One consideration is whether the charge and composition of the Advisory Bodies remain aligned with the Council's current workload and needs. Under COP 9, this evaluation is expected to begin in June 2027, in advance of the next three-year Advisory Body terms (2028-2030). There may be benefit in coordinating this review with development of the next grant (2029-2032), which begins in 2028. Aligning these efforts would provide an opportunity to consider Advisory Body structure in the context of anticipated funding and to more comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of the revised meeting formats (proposed in Attachment 3). The outcome of these discussions may also inform revisions or clarifications to the roles and responsibilities of Advisory Bodies as described in the COPs and Regional Operating Agreement.

Further exploration could be given to the Council's earlier guidance to consider holding one meeting each year, or every other year, remotely (Attachment 1). A remote meeting would need careful consideration would need to be given to the anticipated complexity and controversy of the agenda, recognizing that some issues benefit substantially from in-person discussion. Based on the routine Council agenda items identified in COP 9, June of odd-numbered years and September of even-numbered years appear, at first glance, to have comparatively lighter or less complex agendas. Council and NMFS staff, in conjunction with Advisory Bodies, could do a detailed evaluation in advance of the discussion to evaluate whether such meetings maybe be candidates for remote meetings.

Another concept could be to evaluate the effectiveness of the shorter June and September meetings relative to the five-day meetings, including whether the shorter format provides sufficient time for Council business given the fixed costs associated with in-person travel. This evaluation could inform consideration of alternative meeting structures, such as eliminating one shorter in-person meeting and redirecting a portion of the savings to extend another meeting to five days and accommodate a larger agenda. These concepts are not proposed changes at this time, but illustrate potential approaches that could be explored as the Council gains more experience with the current meeting structure and continues to evaluate its meeting and budget needs.

Refinements and Requested Actions

Building on the Council's June 2024 guidance ([June 2024 transcripts](#), page 17), subsequent Council discussions, and Advisory Bodies feedback, the Council should finalize the proposed Council meeting schedule and Advisory Body meeting formats (Attachment 3). Where the Council did not provide a clear final recommendation, staff have proposed an approach, shown in red underline. The Council should review the staff proposals and adopt a preferred approach. Staff would then incorporate the approved meeting expectations into the relevant Council Operating Procedures (COP) for consideration and final adoption at a future meeting. The COP would represent the expected regular schedule, recognizing that changes may be made on an ad hoc basis as needed under Workload Planning. Documenting these expectations in the COPs would provide greater predictability and clearer communication to Advisory Bodies, the public, and other participants about when FMPs are expected to be on the Council's agenda and when Advisory Bodies are expected to meet in person or remotely. Additionally, this certainty allows hotel contracting to occur further in advance, helping to reduce costs.

CPS

Historically, CPS was scheduled on the Council's agenda in April, June, and November. As part of the Council efficiencies, CPS is now scheduled for two Council meetings a year - April and November. Staff propose an option be provided which could add a June agenda item in years when both Pacific sardine and Pacific mackerel assessments are conducted, with sardine scheduled for April and mackerel for June. June of even years would also be added if the Central Subpopulation of Northern Anchovy framework is triggered (see [COP 9](#)). Staff propose that the CPS Advisory Subpanel and Management Team meet in person in April, when stock assessments are scheduled for adoption, and remotely in November. Advisory Body meeting format (i.e., remote or in person) for June, when scheduled, would be decided based on the complexity and controversy of items scheduled, considering hotel availability.

HMS

Historically, HMS was scheduled at four Council meetings a year (March, June, September and November) to support the FMP's three-meeting biennial specifications and management process (see FMP Section 5.2) and to provide recommendations on international matters. In recent years, the Council has accomplished the three-meeting biennial process at the September and November meetings, with March reserved for final adoption of biennial harvest specifications and other recommendations to NMFS, if needed.

The Council's [June 2024 guidance](#) (page 17) was to schedule HMS on the Council's agenda three times per year, with the ABs meeting remotely for at least one of those meetings. For odd years, the Council recommended scheduling HMS agenda items in March, June, and November and for even years, March, September, and November. Staff recommend that the remote meeting be March of both the odd and even years, with in person participation for the remaining meetings.

In November 2025, however, the HMS Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS) recommended maintaining June in all years to focus on international matters and requested the HMSAS convene in person at those meetings ([Agenda Item D.4.a, Supplemental HMSAS Report, November 2025](#)). The Council agreed with this recommendation and scheduled such meetings in 2026.

Staff recommend maintaining HMS on the Council's June meeting agenda as an important opportunity for the Council to inform U.S. positions ahead of key summer negotiations. Scientific assessments and related analyses often occur in the spring, with Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Northern Committee, and joint negotiations following from late June through the summer. Near and longer-term management issues include long-term Pacific bluefin tuna harvest strategy following stock rebuilding, a new North Pacific albacore stock assessment and potential changes to its harvest strategy, allocation and implementation of the South Pacific albacore harvest strategy, and development of management procedures for tropical tunas.

Implementing the staff recommendation would mean in odd years, HMS is on the Council's agenda three times (March, June, and November) and four times in even years (March, June, September and November). To support the Council's efficiency goals, consideration could be given to varying the meeting format for the HMSAS and HMS Management Team (HMSMT) based on their respective roles and work of each group at each meeting in the even years. Under this approach, the HMSAS could meet in person in June, when the focus is primarily on international matters, with the HMSMT meeting via webinar. In September of even-numbered years, the HMSMT could meet in person to focus on biennial specifications and other HMS management matters, with the HMSAS meeting via webinar. Although having the two advisory bodies participate in different formats at the same Council meeting would depart from typical practice, this approach could better align in-person participation with the respective roles and responsibilities of each advisory body while reducing meeting costs.

Habitat

As part of the Council efficiencies, the Council provided guidance to reduce the number of Council meetings with Habitat on the agenda and to hold at least one Habitat Committee meeting remotely each year. Subsequently, consideration was given to eliminating either the March or April Habitat

agenda item, with the Habitat Committee recommending that March be retained and April eliminated. Consistent with the Council's direction to increase the use of remote meetings where appropriate, staff propose two remote Habitat Committee meetings per year (June and November), while retaining in-person meetings (March and September) when direct interaction with the Council is most beneficial while also maintaining flexibility to address time-sensitive habitat matters as needed.

SSC

Like the other Advisory Bodies, the SSC has been asked to hold one of its five annual meetings remotely, with April serving as the remote meeting in recent years. Identifying the most appropriate meeting for remote participation has been challenging because much of the SSC's work involves evaluating models, methodologies, data, and other complex technical issues that benefit from in-person discussion. Based on recent experience and anticipated workload, staff recommend holding the April SSC meeting in person and identifying June and September as remote meetings starting in 2028 (Attachment 3). Specifically, staff recommend the remote meeting be June in odd-numbered years and September in even-numbered years. The 2027 Year-at-a-Glance proposes that the SSC meet remotely in April 2027 and in person in June to accommodate review of previously scheduled technical materials that are better suited to an in-person meeting.

For odd-numbered years, COP 9 suggests a lighter SSC workload in June and more significant technical work in September, including review and adoption of groundfish stock assessments and associated harvest specifications. While COP 9 anticipates that some groundfish stock assessments and associated specifications may be considered in June, in recent years this work has generally occurred in September. Accordingly, staff recommend a remote SSC meeting in June and an in-person meeting in September. Meeting format for June may need to be reconsidered in years when a Pacific mackerel assessment is conducted, depending on complexity and controversy of the issues and budget.

In even-numbered years, staff recommend that the SSC meet in person in June, when recurring workload includes final groundfish specifications, stock assessment planning and Terms of Reference, as well as consideration of the central subpopulation of northern anchovy framework when triggered. September generally falls outside the major recurring stock assessment and harvest specification cycles and includes fewer scheduled technical science decisions. Although selection of final salmon methodology review topics occurs annually in September, this discussion is generally expected to be well suited to remote participation.