

SUMMARY OF MAY 2025 COUNCIL COORDINATION COMMITTEE MEETING

The Council Coordination Committee (CCC) met from May 13 – 15, 2025 in New Bedford, MA. This report provides a summary of noteworthy items from that meeting. An official report of the meeting will be made available on the CCC website.

The May 2025 CCC meeting was organized slightly differently than meetings past. Since last fall, the Council Executive Directors have been discussing how to take better advantage of these meetings. This was amplified by recent developments regarding NOAA staffing and funding, recent Executive Orders (EOs), and the possible implications these have to U.S. Federal fisheries management. The CCC meeting agenda and briefing book items reflect an enhanced degree of intention and purpose around these topics, as do the meeting outcomes.

There were several key matters that were discussed at the meeting including: 1) recent Executive Orders, 2) NOAA staffing, capacity, and implications for science and management 3) funding levels, and 4) aligning Council and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) priorities in the latest context of capacity limitations. Other matters were discussed but are not summarized in this report.

Executive Orders

Mr. Sam Rauch briefed the CCC on recent EOs, including the “10 for 1” order, which requires the removal of 10 regulations before adding 1 new regulation, and the EO to restore American seafood competitiveness. Mr. Rauch indicated that many regulations developed and passed by Councils can be viewed as deregulatory. He also indicated that, due to the overlap with EO 12866, that many regulations wouldn’t count toward the 10 for 1 EO. These regulations and actions can be considered “routine” actions that tweak existing management (such as harvest spex). When discussing how the 10 for 1 order would be counted, Mr. Rauch indicated that accounting for regulatory removals and additions may be done at a national level rather than a regional level and that this would tend to allow Councils to bundle some deregulatory actions with other Councils. He further indicated that NOAA is prepared to work with the Councils to figure out how to navigate this EO and that the process surrounding the 10 for 1 order would be the same as the previous 4 for 1 order from the first Trump Administration.

On the matter of the Seafood Competitiveness EO, Mr. Rauch focused on national level statistics regarding domestic seafood production. Whereas the U.S. used to land 9 billion pounds of seafood annually on a consistent basis, that number has declined to roughly 8.5 billion pounds in recent years. He indicated that achieving the intent of the EO could be viewed through the lens of “why has U.S. seafood production declined?”. Where regulations or trade considerations have led to a decline in seafood landings, one could conclude that remedying those factors in order to boost seafood production would meet the intent of this EO. In addition, the President has asked for a list of the most highly regulated fisheries in the U.S. That list was developed by NMFS and sent to the

Secretary of Commerce shortly after the CCC meeting. As of the date of this summary, that list has not been provided to the Council.

Management and Science Capacity

NOAA leadership began this discussion by highlighting that the U.S. Federal fisheries management system currently includes over 500 stocks. NOAA has concluded that managing this many stocks under the current management and science framework is not possible. One implication is that Councils may need to drop stocks from their Fishery Management Plans, however the meeting did not conclude that this is the only pathway. Additional discussion considered the framework for managing fisheries, and how we may need to take more risks in terms of what and how we manage. What this looks like was not immediately clear, but it was stressed that a substantial amount of cooperation would be needed between NOAA and the Councils to pivot to potentially new ways of doing things and/or more closely align on priorities.

The NOAA science update covered several topics of interest to the Councils, and continued the theme of reduced capacity and the implications that a capacity reduction will have to NOAA's fishery management and science systems. The items that Councils requested specific updates on, and that were discussed at the meeting, are captured in the bullets below.

- **Council Research Priorities:** Council priorities are used to inform NMFS scientific priorities. There is variability across regions on how this has been approached in the past. For the future, there is a desire to improve consideration and application of Council priorities. Councils were advised to provide needs that are highly prioritized and focused, with an emphasis on “must do” activities related to statutory requirements, and to update recommendations as needed to reflect changing needs and priorities.
- **Cooperative Research:** The agency recognizes the value of cooperative research and working with industry to obtain needed information and research. There is a desire to leverage cooperative research to meet future needs. Ideas from the Councils are welcome for identifying opportunities.
- **Changing Ecosystems and Fisheries Initiative (CEFI):** The program is expected to continue, focusing on integration with and support of other products such as Regional Ocean Observing Systems and Integrated Ecosystem Assessment activities. Regional Decision Teams are revising work plans to respond to changing priorities and direction.
- **Fisheries Integrated Modeling System (FIMS):** This is the next generation assessment platform. It is intended to provide the main framework for assessment modeling, increasing consistency across regions and flexibility in model selection. Reducing reliance on custom or bespoke models will enable more efficient resource allocation and reduce complexity. Development continues, with a CIE review planned for November 2025.
- **Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP):** The Fishing Effort Survey study is complete and data analysis underway. A final report is expected in July 2025. Plans remain on track for implementing a revised survey design for 2026. Efforts should be underway in regions to plan for implementation of revised values. Meeting future deadlines in contingent on staffing and funding. The 2026 transition to publishing monthly estimates

will not occur due to staffing and funding issues. Work continues on re-envisioning of the state-federal partnership.

- Surveys for 2025: Survey progress was reviewed for October 2024-March 2025. Overall, most surveys were conducted, with the exception of small boat surveys. Four surveys were cancelled, which is not unusual and often occurs due to shifting needs and vessel availability. The CCC asked for clarification on the survey outlook for the next 6 months. At this time the agency is developing an updated fleet plan, and each region should be able to provide information on how its surveys may be impacted.

The presentation concluded with a discussion on aligning science and management within NOAA and also in ways that align priorities with the Councils. Change will be required moving forward, as the agency cannot sustain current science and management of the many managed stocks. Change and simplification will be required in response to a smaller federal government. Simpler and more dynamic management approaches will be required. Science and management engagement with the Councils on the regional level will be critical to success going forward. Increased uncertainty may occur, but should not always result in decreased harvest.

The CCC requested clarification on the connection between reduced harvest and increased uncertainty based on past guidance that indicates increasing uncertainty is usually expected to result in decreased harvest. Dr. Evan Howell indicated that while that is often the case, the intent is to better understand the impacts of reduced data and determine thresholds of data availability that impact uncertainty and harvest levels. There is a need to understand the consequences of losing or reducing individual data sources.

Funding

Emily Menashes, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Operations, provided an overall management and budget update. As of the date of the CCC meeting, there remain limits on travel and spending, fewer staff, and increased review of expenditures and grants. The grants approval process has slowed as a result. Changes in staffing are occurring and the agency is in the early stages of determining all the gaps to be filled. Over the short term some things may not happen as previously planned.

Brian Pawlak, NMFS CFO/CFA Director, provided the budget overview. Uncertainty remains with detailed funding levels for FY2025 because the continuing resolution only addressed an overall “top line” funding level for NOAA. No explanatory direction or specific spending levels was provided and the FY2025 congressional marks are null due to the continuation of the FY2024 budget. At that time the FY2025 budget is being vetted through the NOAA spend plan process, which means that further detail could not be provided until that is resolved. No information was available on FY2026 or FY2027 budgets. An additional funding disbursement for the Councils is under preparation. This will be another partial disbursement.

The CCC asked whether delays in the FY2027 budget process may provide an opportunity for input on the budget. That is a possibility, and Councils were advised to work through their region and Regional Administrator, as well as Assistant Administrator Pinero-Soler to provide input.

Aligning Council and NMFS Priorities

Throughout the meeting, one consistent theme was the need to dedicate energy to better aligning Council and NMFS priorities. This is driven by the reduction in capacity and resources that is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. As part of these conversations, three efforts were identified that will occur over the summer and early fall. One effort will be led by the west coast (Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC), West Coast Region, Northwest Fisheries Science Center and Southwest Fisheries Science Center), a second effort will be led in the Atlantic (Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC), Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office, New England Fisheries Science Center), and a third effort will convene the Council Executive Directors and NMFS Headquarters. These efforts will seek to identify how to more closely align priorities with the capacity that is available. In terms of the west coast effort, the PFMC's recent activities around Council Efficiencies and the Committee-of-the-whole will serve as the basis for the PFMC position on our priorities and operations. The record of that process and the June 2024 Council decision will guide these conversations.