

GROUND FISH ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT
ON THE FISHERY ECOSYSTEM PLAN FIVE-YEAR REVIEW

The Groundfish Advisory Subpanel (GAP) reviewed the Briefing Book material relevant to this agenda item, including the Ecosystem Workgroup (EWG) report ([Agenda Item E.1.a, EWG Report 1, September 2019](#)). Because of the scheduling of this agenda item, the GAP did not have the opportunity to be briefed about the contents of the EWG report or the rationale for the suggestions made by the EWG. In part because of the limited ability for advisory bodies to review the materials, it is our understanding that the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) action at this meeting is likely to be limited to simply adopting the suggested revisions in the EWG report for public review; narrowing and refining the potential revisions to the Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) will occur at a subsequent Council meeting. Based on that understanding, the GAP suggests the Council consider sending the information contained in the EWG report out for public review with several caveats.

First, in their report the EWG requests “comment from the [SSC] on whether July Goal 2 and Objectives 2a through 2e seem useful in the near term for providing the Council with a framework for considering ecosystem overfishing.” The GAP agrees. More generally, the GAP thinks that Council consideration of the information in the EWG report would benefit from SSC review and comment – for example, how Council decisions could benefit from the suggested additions to the Council management process; what the current (and/or future) availability is of the data necessary to support the suggested vision, goals, and objectives; who would do the work associated with these suggestions, and what the current capabilities are (or lack thereof) within the current technical/management teams to incorporate the results of this suggested work.

Second, the EWG’s suggested revisions will require infrastructure (i.e., staff and a technical committee) to be meaningful to the Council management process. The GAP notes its concern that, while doing this work could be useful to the management process, without dedicated staff and funding the project will take time and resources away from an already over-taxed Council management process. The GAP is concerned that, without additional resources, an expanded FEP will add significant work to the current teams, impeding their ability to get their core work done.

Specific to the FEP, the GAP continues to support the original purpose of the FEP, which is contained in the appendix of the EWG report: “The purpose of the [FEP] is to enhance the [Council] species-specific management programs with more ecosystem science, broader ecosystem considerations, and management policies that coordinate Council management across its [FMPs] and the California Current Ecosystem (CCE). An FEP should provide a framework for considering policy choices and trade-offs as they affect FMP species and the broader CCE.” The GAP also highlights that the original FEP purpose stated explicitly: “The FEP is meant to be an informational document. **It is not meant to be prescriptive relative to Council fisheries management.** (emphasis added)” The GAP thinks this original intent is the most appropriate use of the FEP.

The EWG report contains “three alternative Vision Statements, a Purpose Statement, and alternative Goals and Objectives.” The GAP reviewed alternatives A-D and provides the following comments. The first three alternatives (A-C) appear to comport with the original intent of the FEP. However, they seem redundant in that all three say essentially the same thing and seek to accomplish relatively the same goals. Alternatives A-C each rely upon the themes of sustainable fisheries, dynamic relationships, climate change/variability, and ecosystem services to current and future generations. Conversely, Alternative D appears to go beyond the original intent of the FEP by mandating the Council use “precautionary harvest policies.” The GAP highlights that the Council already uses a science-based decision-making process, is mandated to heed the advice of the SSC, and spends an inordinate amount of time accounting for uncertainty in deciding annual harvest levels and managing fisheries. The GAP suggests that Alternative D be removed or revised because it appears inconsistent with the original purpose of the FEP in that it prescribes how the Council would make management decisions.

Specific to the various goal statements provided in the EWG report, the GAP thinks that the March 2019 goals 1-4 are consistent with the original purpose of the FEP and would provide benefit to Council decision-making. The GAP supports moving these forward for public review. July 2019 goals 1-3 also appear consistent with the original purpose of the FEP, and contain, generally, the same themes and information described in the March 2019 goals.

In contrast, July 2019 Goal 4 seems like an outlier both in the scope of the work (for example, how would the Council “Assess whether changes in ocean chemistry or other environmental factors affect managed species’ functional habitat such that species’ historical habitat becomes smaller or unusable?” Moreover, in the groundfish context, July 2019 Goal 4 appears to ignore the Council’s broad and comprehensive Essential Fish Habitat review that was recently completed, that is, Objective 4b -- “When developing or modifying habitat protection and other fisheries closed areas... consider protections for diverse types of marine habitat, ensuring that closed areas are appropriate in size and location to the needs of managed species and fishing communities” – has been (and continues to be) done for groundfish. July 2019 Goal 5 is also currently part of the Council management framework through the Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultation process. It seems unnecessary to include this goal in the FEP because it is redundant to ESA requirements. It is also inconsistent with the original purpose of the FEP in that it prescribes how fisheries are to be managed. Finally, July 2019 Goal 6 seems a worthy goal and appears consistent with the ongoing work of the Climate and Communities Initiative.

In summary, the GAP supports sending the visions, purposes, goals, and objectives contained in the EWG report out for public review with several important caveats. Most notably, (1) SSC review is critical to ensure revisions to the FEP are meaningful to Council decision-making, (2) the need for (and availability of) additional resources needs to be carefully considered when defining the scope of work embodied in the FEP, (3) Vision Alternative D should be removed or revised, and (4) July 2019 goals 4 and 5 appear to be unnecessary because they are redundant to current essential fish habitat and ESA mandates; the latter is also inconsistent with the original intent of the FEP.

PFMC
09/13/19