

Report of the Northeast Regional Coordinating Council Meeting

SAW Discussion

April 24, 2002
Gloucester, MA

Participants:

ASMFC - V. O'Shea, B. Beal, L. Kline

NEFMC - P. Howard, T. Hill, C. Kellogg, E. Smith

NERO - P. Kurkul, G. Darcy, D. Morris, J. Witzig

MAFMC - D. Furlong, R. Savage, R. Smith

NEFSC - M. Sissenwine, F. Almeida, J. Boreman, F. Serchuk, P. Smith, T. P. Smith

The Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC) met in Gloucester, MA, April 23-25, 2002, to discuss a number of regional coordination/planning issues among the NMFS, New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

Part of the agenda related to the Northeast Regional Stock Assessment Workshop (SAW) process. Material provided at the meeting relevant to the SAW discussions were: a SARC Scheduling Worksheet, a Discussion Paper "What is a Peer Review" by Drs. Sissenwine and Smith, some notes from a recent SARC evaluation by the Center for International Experts (CIE), the SAW/SARC Assessment Species Spreadsheet, a January 29, 2002 memo "Assessments to be reviewed at June 2002 SARC", Draft General Terms of Reference for Stock Assessments (amended 3/2), and two discussion papers ("Towards a More Comprehensive Stock Assessment Process in the Northeast Region" by Dr. Emory D. Anderson and "The Northeast Regional Stock Assessment Model Workshop Model: A New Perspective" by Dr. Terrence Smith).

This report deals only with that part of the meeting that dealt with SAW business.

SAW Scheduling

SAW 35 (June 2002)

The SARC for SAW 35 will take place at the NEFSC's Woods Hole laboratory June 24-28, 2002, and will review benchmark assessments for summer flounder and scup. In addition, the NRCC agreed to schedule a peer review of the newly developed methodology that allows for formal rebuilding plans/stock biomass trajectories for stocks which have index-based assessments. Beyond a vetting of the new methodology, the NRCC would look for

two or more example simulations, perhaps using the two stocks for which benchmark assessments are being prepared. The Coordinating Council also suggested the addition of a presentation from the research group currently doing silver hake stock identification work via genetic markers. This would provide for a review of the research to date, suggestions for fine-tuning future research, and a means of providing some interpretation of results as it might relate to the NEFMC's future whiting management actions/amendments.

SAW 36 (December 2002)

Candidate stocks to be assessed and reviewed at the December 2002 SARC (SAW 36, December 2-6) include Southern New England and Mid-Atlantic yellowtail flounder, Cape Cod yellowtail flounder (with particular focus on yellowtail flounder stock identification issues), Gulf of Maine winter flounder, Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic winter flounder, striped bass, and northern shrimp. The ASMFC would be responsible for preparing the assessments for the winter flounder, striped bass and northern shrimp stocks. The timing of the northern shrimp survey, and subsequent data availability make it difficult to prepare an assessment in time for the fall SARC, but delaying the assessment to spring 2003 is even less attractive. ASMFC staff advised that it should be possible to meet these timelines, compressed as they are.

SAW 37 (June 2003)

Since the NEFSC surfclam/ocean quahog survey is occurring in May/June of this year, the MAFMC asked for a benchmark assessment review for these two stocks. A surfclam assessment review had previously been scheduled for SAW 36 with an ocean quahog review to take place in SAW 37. The NRCC elected to postpone these two assessment reviews one cycle. Thus, a surfclam assessment will be reviewed by the 37th SARC. A bluefish assessment review remains on the agenda. In addition, illex (short-finned squid) was added to the agenda as was spiny dogfish. Issues associated with a nascent hagfish fishery warrant a peer review of an assessment for that stock and review by a June 2003 SARC. The NRCC also discussed assessment reviews for pollock and Atlantic herring. A herring assessment and peer review is scheduled to take place in the Transboundary Resource Assessment Committee (TRAC) venue in the spring of 2003. A pollock assessment still awaits development from the Canadian side and since the preponderance of the stock is in Canadian waters it would be desirable to postpone the assessment until it can be done jointly with Canada. Also included on the agenda for the 37th SARC is an assessment review for witch flounder..

SAW 38 (December 2003)

Stocks tentatively listed for assessment development and review for the fall of next year include ocean quahog, black sea bass, red hake, Gulf of Maine haddock and sea scallops. The ASMFC requested that American Shad and sturgeon be on the agenda. In addition the ASMFC would like to schedule a peer review of the striped bass/bluefish/menhaden multispecies assessment model that has been developed by a sub-group of the Management and Science Committee.

SAW 39, 40 (2004)

In terms of longer-term planning, the NRCC recommended that butterfish and tilefish be assessed and reviewed in one of the 2004 SAW cycles.

Research Recommendations

At its last meeting, the NRCC discussed the fact that the SARC routinely provides research recommendations for work to be completed in support of future assessments for the stock under discussion, or, more generally, for improvements which would benefit multiple assessments.

Those recommendations appear at the end of each stock section in the Consensus Summary of Assessments SAW document but there is no mechanism for reviewing, prioritizing and acting upon those recommendations.

The NRCC asked for further information on this issue so that they might be able to provide advice on how these recommendations might be integrated into the regional management system.

To that end, Frank Almeida (NEFSC) compiled the research recommendations offered on SAW 19 through 34. Some 716 recommendations were developed over this period (1994-2001). All recommendations are contained in a spreadsheet file (available from Mr. Almeida) categorized in a number of dimensions including relevant stock, type of research recommendation, and completion status.

Mr. Almeida presented summary sheets as well as a number of copies of the complete recommendation list.

The NRCC reviewed and discussed the material and suggested that the compilation be referred to the appropriate species technical teams (PDT, monitoring committees or technical committees) for evaluation and comment.

In addition, the NRCC suggested that the recommendations be further categorized to identify research topics that would be amenable to internal or external research. For the latter category, sub-categorization would be appropriate and could include the suitability of referring the recommendations to cooperative industry research programs, the CMER grant programs or Sea Grant (or the like) programs.

SAW Process Review

The balance of the day's discussions was devoted to a critical review of the current SAW process. The discussion can be summarized via a number of component topics including: issues, challenges and perceived problems; peer review definitions; the current SAW process which includes documentation and presentation of results; and education/outreach efforts to better inform the Councils and the public. The endpoint of the discussion was to provide some recommendations for revisions to the system which might better serve the Region's partners.

In terms of the general discussion the following points are useful.

- Council members should become more familiar with the SAW process and the general structure of peer reviews. This is an education/outreach issue. Discussion focused on the definitions of peer reviews offered in the discussion paper on that topic. It would be desirable to set aside some time on a Council meeting agenda to provide an informational presentation on the SAW process, peer review and how/why the SAW is structured as it is.
- Assessment results and management advice provided by the SARC tend not to accurately reflect "real time" observations. That is, there is a lag between the date at which data were 'cut off' to provide for a formal assessment analysis and the time at which the results are presented to the industry who may be interpreting the advice relative to what they observed on their most recent fishing trip. This lag is, in general, at least one year, and, in some circumstances, can reach two years or more.
- Another issue is the ownership of working papers and the change of ownership from the working group to the SARC. This issue is especially important in the case of assessments developed by the ASMFC as additional ownership issues arise post-SARC as the assessment subcommittees present results to their parent technical committees and, ultimately, species management boards. It is not clear how to resolve this issue, but some view the current situation as unfair to the working groups.
- The public workshops need to involve more scientific presence and more time allotted to discussion. It was mentioned that the present peer review system falls into the category of an integrated review. A sequential peer review may have less bias.
- One characterization is that there are perceived problems with respect to choices (benefits and risks), credibility (acceptance of the end result), participation (not enough state and outside representation), and decorum (quality of presentations should be more professional).

And, in terms of integrating and responding to these comments.

- Recent changes of the biological reference points has led to more focus on the credibility of the system where the question of “credibility” rises from whether or not the answer is accepted.
- Is there change necessary to the SARC model? If so, then credibility, communication, relationship between the processes and effect of the workload on Council/Center staff would be involved. This needs to be evaluated.
- There is a need for an array of reasonable choices which would lend to better credibility rather than one firm statement. However, it is not the managers’ job to make a science based decision on a SAW report.

Some points that emerged from the discussion of the discussion paper on types of peer review.

- The integrated reports prepared represent the scientific perspective and the answers that one gets from a sequential perspective must be objective.
- SAWs provide high quality peer review and institutionalizes individual staff workload commitments.

Given these discussions the SAW could be ‘redesigned’ to reflect the following.

- The Working Group meetings, which develop the assessment to be reviewed, could involve more representation from the industry, academia, Councils, States, and Federal government for a more in-depth peer development of an assessment. That is, involve more ‘outside’ panelists at the working group level. This should provide for a better quality assessment, all else equal, and more ‘closure’ with respect to the assessment.
- The resulting assessment report would be peer reviewed by a separate, perhaps smaller, panel of outside experts (perhaps all from the CIE). They would accept or reject the assessment or, more simply, pass judgment that the assessment provided an acceptable basis for determining stock status and providing management advice.
- A third group (Council staff, management experts from the Center, Regional office, outside) would receive the report of the working group and peer review panel and interpret the results relative to existing management plans and provide an advisory report to managers (which could take the form of the current advisory report or some other form).
- This tri-part model is not, in overview, any different than the current SAW model

which provides for a sequential/integrated review. What is different is a clearer distinction between the steps of assessment preparation, peer review and the crafting of management advice. This difference is manifest in some partitioning of the panel structure and some separation of meetings.

- It is not clear, at this point in time, exactly how this would work, particularly with respect to the issue of the transition between ‘panels’ so that no information is lost while still providing for a more compact sequential series of reviews/report preparation..
- The NRCC agreed to continue work on the details of such a change and committed to implementing change along these lines in the fall 2002 SARC (SAW 36).

Actions

With respect to changes in the SAW process, several tasks must take place. The two fishery management councils and the ASMFC should schedule some time (an hour or two) on the agenda to talk about the current SAW process in general - discuss peer review models, solicit feedback and talk about new approaches.

Replacements to the traditional SAW Public Review Workshop need to be developed and discussed. This could include team presentations, presentations to the oversight or management committees, and the like.

The three phase assessment development, assessment review, management advice model needs to be further developed and specific recommendations for changes that could be incorporated into the SAW 36 cycle need to be provided.

The SAW chairman will be responsible for further development of these points, but it will likely be necessary to involve the NRCC in further discussion/decisions in the next several months.

As mentioned at the meeting, a group internal to the NEFSC is also looking at recommendations for change. It will be important that the internal review and recommendations dovetails with the NRCC-led efforts.