



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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MEMORANDUM

Date: February 19, 2021
To: Mid-Atlantic SSC
From: Brandon Muffley, staff
Subject: Update on Council Research Priorities

Background:

In December 2019, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) approved the Five-Year (2020-2024) Research Priorities document that aligns science needs with the management objectives and resources identified in the Council's 2020-2024 Strategic Plan and Five-Year Cooperative Agreement. Required by the reauthorization of Magnuson-Stevens Act in 2006, this document provides a comprehensive review and identification of the Council's science and data needs across all its fishery management plans (FMPs). With advice and input from the SSC, the 2020-2024 document was re-organized and prioritized to develop a more useful, tactical, and strategic document to effectively advance scientific and management information by the Council and NOAA Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC).

This memo provides an overview on a number of updates and upcoming activities intended to track, monitor, and improve the Council's research priorities document to ensure its successful implementation. The completed 2020 update and the planned 2021 comprehensive review (each discussed later on the memo) address Objective 8 "*Identify and prioritize the Council's research needs*" and Strategy 8.3 "*Develop a process to better track progress toward addressing the Council's research priorities and to identify what research has been completed*" identified in the Strategic Plan.

At the March SSC meeting, staff plan to provide a quick update regarding the approach for the 2021 comprehensive review. There is no specific action required of the SSC in March; however, the SSC should keep the new structure and prioritization approach included in the 2020-2024 Research Priorities document when identifying research recommendations as part of the specification/ABC recommendation process for each species throughout the year.

Updated Five-Year (2020-2024) Research Priorities Document:

Prior to the Council taking final action on the research priorities document last year, the Research Steering Committee (Committee) met to review and provide feedback on the draft document. One of the recommendations made by the Committee, and supported by the Council, was to provide additional information on the species-specific priorities and indicate which of the seven broad research priority theme(s) is being addressed by each individual priority. Linking the

broad themes to the species-specific priorities would help ensure the identified research addresses the Council's larger priority themes and needs.

This task could not be completed prior to the Council taking final action, so the 2020-2024 Research Priorities document specified this update should be completed during the comprehensive biennial review of the research priorities, scheduled for 2021. However, Council staff completed this task in 2020 as part of the update to track progress in addressing the Council's research priorities.

An updated 2020-2024 Research Priorities can be found on the Council's website at: <https://www.mafmc.org/research-priorities>. The updated document now links each species-specific research priority with an associated broad research priority theme(s). Each of the seven broad priority themes were assigned a letter (A through G) and the species-specific priority tables (starting on page 11 of the research priorities document) now include a column on the right-hand side that lists the research theme(s) addressed by each individual priority. All species-specific priorities address at least one research theme and many address multiple themes, some as many as five.

Review of 2019 – 2020 Council Supported Projects:

During the development of the current research priorities document, the SSC questioned how the document was used by the Council and NEFSC to allocate resources and inform priorities for funding. To address this question and evaluate the utility and application of the document by the Council, a review of Council-funded science and management projects was conducted and was included for the first time in the current document. The review looked at Council-funded projects from 2015-2018 and considered if a project was identified in the previous five-year (2016-2020) research priorities document and whether it was used to help inform a stock assessment or management action. The review found relatively high overlap with 67% of the Council-funded projects during that time period aligning with either the broad research themes or specific projects identified in the document. In addition, nearly 90% of the Council-funded projects have been, or likely will be in the future, used to support or inform a stock assessment or management action.

As one part of the process to track the progress and implementation of the 2020-2024 Research Priorities document, a review of Council-funded projects was updated here. Projects supported by the Council in 2019-2020 were reviewed in relation to addressing the broad research priority themes and/or species-specific priorities (Table 1). Council staff evaluated the projects by identifying the broad research priority theme(s) addressed by the project and, if applicable, identify the species-specific priority. A total of 14 total projects were supported during this time-period covering six species and all FMPs. All of the projects address at least one broad priority theme, with many addressing multiple themes. "Stock assessment improvements" (theme A in Table 1) is the most commonly addressed research theme with nearly 66% of all projects expected to help improve and inform Council assessments. In addition, half of the projects address 10 species-specific priorities, nearly 10% of all priorities identified in the current research priorities document. Many of the projects covered during this time-period have either recently finished or are currently on-going, so it is difficult to evaluate their application to management or stock assessments at this time.

Table 1. Summary of Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council supported projects from 2019-2020 used to support science and management needs as identified in the Five-Year (2020-2024) Research Priorities document. Abbreviated research priority themes are: A) Stock assessments, B) Discards, C) Social and economic data, D) Allocation, E) Recreational data, F) Ecosystem tools and EAFM, G) Climate change impacts.

Project Title	Primary Species/FMP	Research Priority Theme	General or Species-Specific Priority
Evaluation of F-based Management for Recreational Summer Flounder	Summer Flounder	B, D, E	NA
Surfclam Species Diagnostics and Population Connectivity Estimates to Inform Management	Surfclam	A, F, G	#1
<i>Illex</i> Age and Growth Sampling	<i>Illex</i>	A, G	#62
Development and Analysis in Support of the <i>Illex</i> Work Group	<i>Illex</i>	A	#63, #65
Assessing Current and Changing Marine Fish Habitat and the Spatial Distribution of Key Marine Fish Species along the Northeast Region	Omnibus	F, G	NA
Investigation of Electronic Trip Reporting in the Tilefish Private Recreational Fishery	Golden and Blueline Tilefish	A, B, E	#39
Implementation of Electronic Vessel Trip Reporting for Commercial Vessel Operators	Omnibus	A, B, D	NA
Updating of Summer Flounder Commercial/Recreational Allocation Study	Summer Flounder	C, D	NA
Evaluating the Importance of Atlantic Chub Mackerel in the Diet of Highly Migratory Species in the Northwest Atlantic	Chub Mackerel	A, F	#10
Risk Policy Management Strategy Evaluation	Omnibus	C	NA
Mid-Atlantic Council Management Strategy Evaluation: Summer Founder Recreational Discards Management Strategy Evaluation Project Facilitator	Summer Flounder	B, C, E, F	NA
Development of an App for Reporting Recreational Tilefish VTRs	Golden and Blueline Tilefish	A, B, E	#39
Fishery-Independent Golden Tilefish Bottom Long-Line Survey	Golden Tilefish	A, B, G	#14, #55, #57
Maryland Recreational Ocean Effort Video Estimation	Omnibus	A, E	NA

Comprehensive Priorities Review in 2021:

As specified in the Five Year (2020-2024) Research Priorities document, a biennial review of all research priorities is to be conducted and the first review set for 2021. The goal is to provide for a broad and comprehensive review to ensure the document is reflective of the Council’s current science and management needs and to evaluate and track the documents implementation. Input on current, and potentially new, priorities for each Council-managed species will be provided throughout 2021. The Advisory Panel will review research priorities as part of their development of the annual Fishery Performance Reports. The Monitoring Committee and SSC will provide

input on science needs when they review or set new catch specifications. Staff will then work with the NEFSC assessment leads to review all input received, as well as peer review recommendations and outcomes from the 2021 management and research track assessments.

Staff will then develop a revised list of species-specific research priorities – deleting priorities that were completed, retaining projects that were not completed but remain a priority, and adding any new priorities. An updated draft research priorities list and a report on the progress made on addressing research needs will then be provided to the Research Steering Committee for feedback in late 2021. The revised document and any Committee recommendations will then be presented to the Council for review and approval.

Continued Future Development

One of the long-term goals identified in the 2020-2024 Research Priorities document was to conduct a more holistic review with greater consideration of research priorities from across the region. The Mid-Atlantic Council, New England Council, and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) each develop their own research priority documents with hundreds of research projects highlighted. All three entities compete for limited fiscal and NEFSC resources. A more comprehensive review, and possible regional plan, would help identify research similarities, highlight differences, and ensure continued communication and coordination to maximize and leverage available resources.

Over the last few years, all three management partners have made substantial changes and improvements to their respective research priority documents to address feedback received to increase their utility and achieve the science objectives outlined in the documents. Later this year, staff plan to hold an initial conference call to discuss lessons learned in developing the current documents and to look across all research priorities to find areas of similarity and commonality. The group will also discuss an approach to conduct a review and identify possible benefits and drawbacks in the potential development of a comprehensive document for the region. Depending on the outcomes of those initial discussions, any ideas and potential concepts will be presented and discussed at a future NRCC meeting to gauge interest and possible direction for future development.