



MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 29, 2025

TO: Kelly Denit, Director of NOAA Fisheries' Office of Sustainable Fishing

FROM: Regional Fishery Management Councils Executive Directors

SUBJECT: **Aligning Council and NOAA Priorities and Future Planning**

The Regional Fishery Management Councils' Executive Directors met by webinar on August 6, 2025 to continue discussions about aligning Council and NOAA priorities for immediate and future planning. The Executive Directors identified specific needs from NOAA Fisheries in order to continue Council operations and adapt to reduced resources and capacity to support fisheries science and management. The Executive Directors recommend that these needs, detailed below, are considered by NOAA at a national level, but that aligning priorities for science and management should be conducted at the regional level. The Executive Directors do not support development of national level guidance to consider risk and value of managed stocks and emphasize that priorities and implementation strategies must be regionally tailored and Council-driven.

Summarized Council Input

1. Immediate Needs (Triage Phase)

- Transparency and Clarity:
 - Councils need clear and consistent communication from NOAA regarding funding, staffing changes, and operational capacity.
- Budget Uncertainty:
 - Councils need more frequent updates and consistent information about funding for upcoming (FY2026) and future planning.
- Staffing Constraints:
 - Councils need to coordinate with NOAA to identify priority management actions for review and approval; several actions have been delayed due to NOAA staff constraints.
- Planning Disruptions:
 - Uncertainty in Council budgets, NOAA travel, and product deliverables affects critical Council functions like meeting scheduling, contract obligations, and venue retention. Councils need timely information about funding and staffing to plan public meetings, secure meeting locations, and maintain working relationships with regional venues.

2. Short-Term Needs (Next 18 Months)

- Core Scientific Support:
 - Councils urge NOAA to maintain basic and mission critical services: surveys, monitoring, stock assessments, and catch accounting.
- Flexibility and Streamlined Processes:
 - Councils stress the need for adaptive support with clear guidance on NEPA and regulatory reviews, rather than additional procedural directives, especially under current resource constraints.
- In-Person Participation:
 - Attendance by Science Center and Regional Office staff at Council, SSC, SEDAR and other applicable meetings is essential for effective collaboration.

3. Medium-Term Planning (Risk-Value Matrix)

- Recommendation Against Development of National-Level Guidance:
 - Councils support the use of the Risk-Value Matrix when developed and applied at a regional level. Councils are working with regional NOAA partners at Science Centers and Regional Offices to identify management priorities that are aligned with current and expected future capacity.
 - Councils stress that priorities and implementation strategies must be regionally tailored and Council-driven, not uniformly developed and applied from the national level and do not support additional national level guidance on this topic.
- Support for Rationalizing Workloads:
 - Several Councils seek to remove low-priority stocks from Fishery Management Plans but need to consider balancing the workload of removing stocks with maintaining conservation and management measures for priority stocks.
 - Councils request the assistance of Science Center and Regional Office staff to develop actions to remove stocks from a Fishery Management Plan and the analyses required to justify such proposals.
- Improved Data Access and Infrastructure:
 - Some Councils request better access to data, scripts/code, and systems that enable them to update assessments and conduct analyses in-house with less reliance on regional Science Centers.
- Permit System Modernization:
 - Some Councils highlight the need to modernize and automate permit systems to improve management flexibility.

4. Longer-Term Expectations (Post-Triage)

- Mission-Focused:
 - Councils emphasize the need for NOAA to remain grounded in core statutory mandates focused on robust science and effective management to prioritize meeting objectives of the Magnuson-Stevens Act while reducing burdens from other applicable laws (e.g., NEPA, ESA, MMPA, NMSA).
- Regional Alignment Is Essential:
 - There is broad consensus that regional processes should take precedence over top-down national planning.
- Improve Efficiency:
 - Councils support modernizing workflows, automating regulatory analysis, and strengthening data infrastructure and access.