

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Ecosystem Technical Committee
Meeting Summary
September 21, 2023
Tampa, FL

The Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Ecosystem Technical Committee (ETC) was convened at 8:30 am EDT on September 21, 2023. The agenda for this meeting was approved as modified to include a discussion on Regional Management Councils' Climate Resilience Funding (IRA) Opportunity under Other Business. The minutes from the April 19 – 20, 2023 meeting were approved as written.

Gulf Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP)

Council staff presented an update on the status of the Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP), and the steps to modify the initial draft developed by LGL. The ETC deliberated on how ecosystem considerations could be incorporated within the fisheries management process and discussed how a FEP would be developed to achieve this goal. The ETC agreed that including opportunities to review and potentially reassess Fishery Ecosystem Issues (FEI) and the FEI loop was crucial to success of the FEP. The group discussed the merits of revisiting the FEI list annually. An ETC member stated that annually canvassing the public for input on the FEI list may entail substantial workload and suggested a three to five-year assessment period would be more appropriate. Another ETC member mentioned that the Pacific Fishery Management Council revisits their version of a FEI list every two years and considers modifying the FEP every five years. The ETC agreed that an annual update to the Council would be beneficial to not only report out progress of the FEP but also receive feedback from the Council on any modifications of the FEI list.

The ETC strongly agreed that continued work with the Council's Outreach and Education (O&E) Technical Committee was needed. This collaboration would be a complementary effort since the O&E has the expertise to engage stakeholders and the ETC has the scientific knowledge to develop experimental designs to assess the FEP process. Council staff provided an overview how the O&E would operationalize an FEP/FEI Communications Plan before, during, and after each FEI loop was completed. The ETC was supportive of the proposal and was specifically interested in the portion of the Communications Plan that would evaluate the outreach approach after each FEI loop and inquired how success would be measured. Council staff stated that metrics, such as webpage views that measure reach, can be used as a proxy to evaluate effectiveness of communications. More quantitative social science methods could be used to directly measure efficiency of an outreach initiative. Staff suggested that directly asking stakeholders how a FEI would impact them could help ascertain the number of stakeholders affected by a FEI and the magnitude of impact that FEI is having on stakeholders.

The ETC stated that it will be crucial to temper expectations to the public on FEI outcomes. There may be FEI recommendations that are not within the Council’s purview under the Magnuson-Stevens Act; and therefore, not actionable directly by the Council. An ETC member suggested that the FEP/FEI process should be effectively communicated to the public, so they understand what may or may not be feasible. Council staff stated that the O&E is aware of layers of stakeholder participation in the existing Council process. Those who participate in advisory panels have a good understanding of the legal limitations of the Council while other may not be as aware, and the O&E can create outreach materials with that variability in mind. Additionally, the group agreed that a persistent feedback communication approach with the public is ideal. This approach can incentivize stakeholder input and create accountability for the management process.

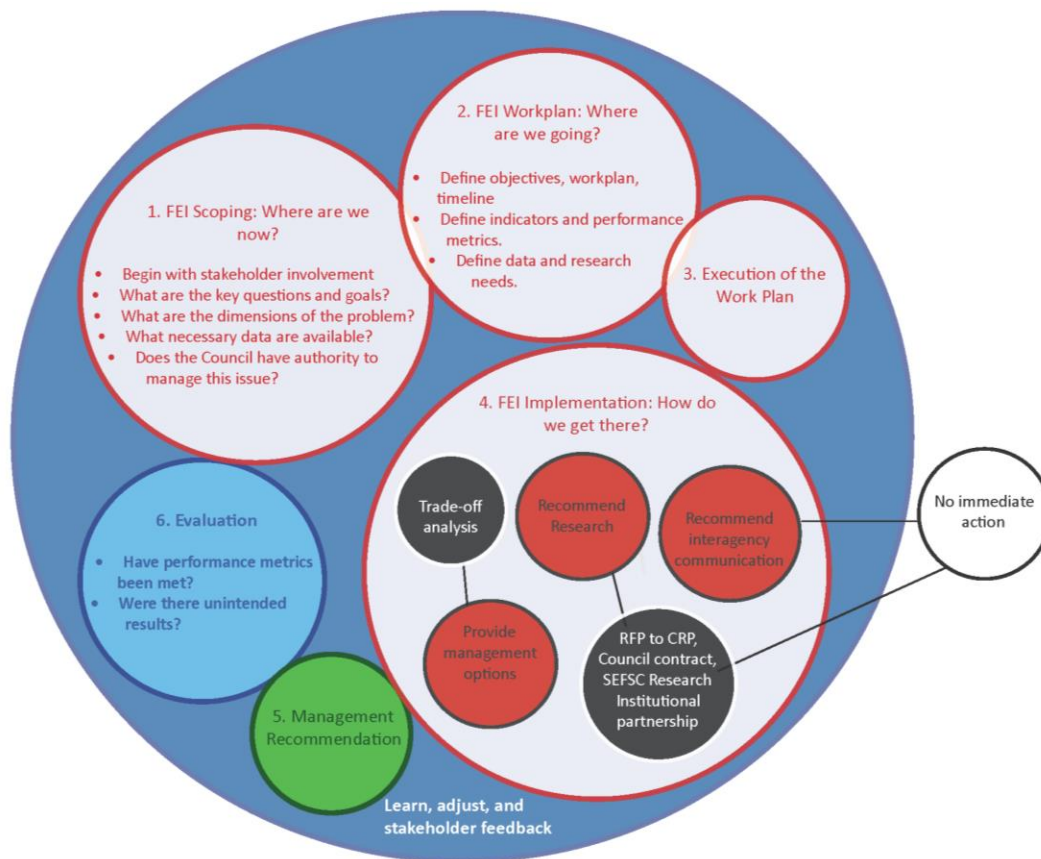
For the FEP, the ETC generally approved the proposed document structure. They recommend that an additional section (either chapter or appendix) be added to the document that would introduce the initial FEIs. This would help communicate the prioritized FEI to the public and create a space within the FEP that explicitly document which FEIs are being considered. An ETC member suggested building out the FEP and running through a test of the FEI loop would help better inform next steps for the ETC. Below is the draft outline agreed upon by the ETC:

	Content
Ch 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to national guidance to implement Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management Efforts into the Council process • Gulf Council’s EBFM efforts • Overarching Goals and Objectives
Ch 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to FEP • Introduction to FEIs • Protocol for prioritizing FEIs • Protocol for addressing extra jurisdictional issues
Ch 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications Plan
Ch 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intro to FEI Loop • Specifications of what information would come out of each step within the loop
Appendix	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List of FEIs on the docket. The list would be revised at an interval determined by the Council. (e.g., annually, biannually)
Separate Modules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each FEI would have its own hyperlink or document outlining the issue and outcomes from each step of the FEI Loop. This would live within the Council’s <i>Ecosystem</i> webpage

Draft Fishery Ecosystem Issue Loop

Council staff reviewed the initial FEI loop included in the current draft provided by LGL, and the updated draft which adopts a circular representation inclusive of continuous stakeholder

feedback, learning, and adjustments. Box 1 was revised to state that there must be strong stakeholder involvement, consideration of whether the Council has authority to address the issue, and clear guiding principles. An ETC member thought it was important to be opportunistic to available funding to link factors to a FEI in an actionable way. Staff replied that noting the availability of resources could be added to Box 2. Another ETC member noted that the full scope of research needs might not be known until investigations begin. Thus, issues would need to be identified before determining if funding was available. An ETC member thought that funding availability should interplay with the FEI ranking, as FEIs that cannot be addressed due to lack of resource support should not be overprioritized compared to those which could be addressed in the present. Under Box 3, “recommend management actions” was changed to “provide management options”, and the loop includes exit routes that lead to recommendations, if it becomes clear that the initial objectives are not likely to be achieved. An ETC member asked whether an execution path from Box 2 to Box 3 needed to be explicit, to note where the workplan is occurring; other ETC members agreed. Under Box 5, focus on achievements and other performance metrics was stressed, recognizing that some issues will not be fully resolved. Box 5 also explicitly identifies the portions that need stakeholder involvement and the kind of information needed from the user groups. An ETC member commented that evaluations could take considerable amounts of time, depending on the FEI. Council staff stated that the revised FEI loop would be edited as discussed and input into the document.



An ETC member asked about the composition of the IPT, stating that their vision included multiple stakeholder groups such as Council members, ETC members, advisory panel members, and others. Another ETC member thought that the IPT needed to include those who understand the mechanics of the issue, the legalities, and the downstream effects from implementation of changes. Council staff replied that IPTs typically include biologists, economists, social scientists, regulatory writers, lawyers, statisticians, and others. The ETC member thought that composition should be sufficient. They added that there may be some conflation between the FEP and FEI loops, making the process more complex and requiring specific IPTs. Council staff expressed concern about staff time expectations to work on FEIs, given the continually considerable workload of Council/SERO/SEFSC staff. However, possibilities for funding may allow for specific resource application to FEIs. An ETC member thought some FEIs appeared reactionary, while a few others seemed to be more forward-looking into ecosystem management. Practically, addressing more discrete issues may produce more immediate results for managers. However, just because the realization of results may be delayed does not mean the more forward-looking FEIs should be sidelined.

Prioritization Metrics

Council staff went over the assignment to provide examples on how to rank and prioritize FEIs. Each participant was allowed to go over their recommendation and provide rationale. Common themes involved ranking on a 1 – 10 scale, and the categories of: geographic scope, impact to stakeholders, number of affected species, and Council actionability. The ETC also discussed separating the categories into two groups or axes: one for the socioecological scope of the issue, and another for management capacity. The ETC recognizes the importance of prioritizing an FEI based on the Council's purview to address the issue, but expressed concerns about stifling creativity if there were any limitations on available tools and data to address the issue right away.

Revisiting the FEI List

Council staff presented the current list of potential FEIs that was developed at the April 2023 ETC meeting. Considering the Council's request to recommend the top four FEIs to include in the FEP, the ETC discussed taking a step back and use a FEI as a pilot study. This FEI should have enough data available to go through the entire FEI loop and would help identify areas of improvement for the FEP process, FEI loop, and Communications Plan. The ETC thinks that red tide would be a good candidate to be used as a pilot FEI given the amount of ecological knowledge, stakeholder awareness and buy-in on the issue, and management actions that have already taken place to address a FEI such as this one.

Motion: The Ecosystem Technical Committee (ETC) recommends to select one pilot Fishery Ecosystem Issue (FEI) in order to help develop the Fishery Ecosystem Plan process and the FEI loop procedures. The ETC recommends that Red Tide be the FEI that is initially piloted.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Regional Management Councils' Climate Resilience Funding (IRA) Opportunity

Dr. Carrie Simmons (Council Executive Director) provided an overview of an opportunity for funding under the Inflation Reduction Act. An initial funding amount of \$3 million dollars will be divided amongst the Regional Management Councils to focus on work towards climate-ready fisheries. If awarded, the Council is considering hiring staff to further move forward the FEP and coordinate other climate-related management actions and activities. Dr. Karnauskas also mentioned that the SEFSC will be receiving fund that could help on this endeavor.

An ETC member asked if this funding could move forward a “climate change” FEI. Dr. Simmons replied that it would depend on whether the Council gets awarded any additional funding from phase II of the funding opportunity. The funding could also be used to investigate other things that staff doesn't have the bandwidth to investigate with the current workload.

Meeting adjourned at 2:34 pm.

Participants

ETC Members

Mandy Karnauskas, Chair
Eric Brazer, Jr
David Chagaris
Jennifer Cudney
Michael Drexler
Joshua Kilborn
Matt McPherson
Stephen Saul
Steven Scyphers

Council Liaison

Kesley Banks

Council Staff

Natasha Mendez-Ferrer
Emily Muehlstein
Lisa Hollensead
Camilla Shireman
Ryan Rindone
Carrie Simmons
John Froeschke