



## Research Steering Committee

November 16, 2021  
Webinar Meeting Summary

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Research Steering Committee met on Tuesday, November 16, 2021 from 10:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. The purpose of the meeting was to review proposed updates to the Council's Five Year (2020-2024) Research Priorities document and to also develop the objectives and agenda for a planned in-person workshop regarding the potential redevelopment of the Council's Research Set-Aside (RSA) program. The agenda and all meeting materials can be found at: <https://www.mafmc.org/council-events/2021/research-steering-committee-nov16>.

**Research Steering Committee Attendees:** M. Duval (Committee Chair), A. Nowalsky (Committee Vice-Chair), C. Batsavage, P. Risi, K. Wilke, R. Silva, M. Luisi (Council Chair), B. Beal

**Other Attendees:** A. Loftus, L. Anderson, M. Holliday, Y. Jiao, J. Holzer, G. DePiper, B. Muffley, J. Kaelin, P. Rago, E. Hasbrouck, A. Bianchi

### **Biennial Review of 2020-2024 Research Priorities Document:**

Council staff gave an overview of the biennial review process, the recommended modifications to species-specific priorities, a summary of the key review and monitoring progress findings, and potential considerations for future reviews. Following the presentation, the Committee and other participants on the call, including members of the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Economic Work Group, offered input regarding the review and proposed modifications.

Overall, the Committee was very supportive of the review process and recommendations and found the marked-up version of the research priorities list and the summary justification/rationale table in the staff memo to be a useful way to visualize and understand the proposed changes. There are 34 recommended modifications to the research priorities list and the Committee supported all of the recommendations except for one. Priority #29 under black sea bass was recommended for removal but the Committee supports retaining. The existing priority focuses on the development of a fishery-independent index that effectively samples in black sea bass habitat. The Committee noted that while there was an analysis conducted during the last benchmark assessment regarding the sampling effectiveness of trawl gear, there is likely important information that could still be collected with different gear in structured habitats and the Council may not want to close the door on these opportunities. In addition, this issue may become more critical with offshore wind development which will add structured habitat and may reduce the sampling ability of trawl gear. The Committee also recommended some language modifications to this priority in order to add some flexibility and change the scope of the research away from developing a fishery-independent survey to consider or investigate new methods that effectively sample in black sea bass habitat.

Following the discussion of the document and the suggested modifications, the Committee made the following consensus statement:

*Support the proposed modifications to the 2020-2024 Research Priorities document as modified by the Research Steering Committee today.*

The marked-up version of the priorities list (Appendix 1) will be included in the December 2021 Council meeting briefing book and has been updated to reflect the recommended modifications made by the Committee. Those recommended edits are highlighted in **turquoise**.

The Committee then discussed and offered feedback on the review process and potential future review considerations. Below are Committee thoughts and suggestions for the continued review and development of the research priorities document:

- The biennial review, including the comprehensive review process and supporting documentation, are very helpful and valuable for the Council to revisit priorities to ensure they are reflective of Council needs and to see what is being addressed.
- Since this is the first time going through the new biennial review process, the Committee did not have a strong opinion on the appropriate frequency of future reviews. The Committee thought that conducting a review every 2-3 years seemed to be appropriate.
  - The Committee recommended continuing the review process as specified in the current research priorities document and revisit in 2024 when developing the next 5-year priorities document.
- The Committee also offered a couple of suggestions to consider in the updated comprehensive list of research priorities.
  - Add a table at the end of the list that would include all priorities that are removed from the list. This would allow the Council to keep track of those priorities that have been addressed and ensure those priorities are not lost.
  - When tracking progress in addressing priorities, separate out those priorities that are in progress of being addressed versus those that are complete.

In addition, Dr. Rago (SSC) inquired about the Committee, or Council, philosophy regarding the goals and role of the research priorities identified in the document. Specifically, how might the Council use the document to support different types and opportunities to address priority research. Depending on the philosophy, the Committee and/or Council might consider how the list of priorities could be used to support opportunistic research (e.g., *Illex* ageing work), research that provides the biggest bang-for-the-buck and advances management issues, or potentially for research that provides immediate critical information but might also serve as “seed” money to help support a longer-term, more expensive projects (e.g., tilefish longline survey). The Committee indicated these specific discussions have not occurred and would be worth further consideration but noted the current research priorities document does try and prioritize projects in both short-term/small scale and long-term/larger scale categories. The short-term/small scale priorities are meant to provide a tactical approach to answer specific scientific and management questions and the types of projects the Council would focus its attention on. In addition, the new review process currently being conducted allows for the priorities list to be adaptive and modified to consider these types of goals to ensure the document is reflective of the Council’s current needs.

## **Development of February In-Person RSA Workshop Agenda:**

### *Review of input from Workshops #1 – #3*

Andrew Loftus gave a presentation summarizing some of the key outcomes and findings from the three RSA workshops (Research, Funding, and Enforcement) held in 2021. The presentation also introduced some potential questions and structure the Committee may want to consider as it begins to develop the February workshop agenda. The Committee and other meeting participants had an initial discussion on some broader outcomes and/or questions and issues that remain from the workshops. The goal was not for the Committee to explicitly resolve these questions or issues, but to raise them for additional consideration when identifying potential topics and questions that may need to be addressed at the February workshop. Some of the topics discussed included:

- The ability for states to opt-out of participating in the RSA program to minimize enforcement and administrative burdens.
  - Likely need enforcement and General Counsel input regarding any National Standard considerations? What about state versus federally permitted vessels? What are the implications for researchers in state that may decide to opt-out?
- The implications of “bad debt” on research (i.e., not enough funds generated or vessels not making payments) and the administrative burden for researchers to continually track payments from various vessels.
- There is a strong need to address some of the fundamental issues early in the workshop in order develop details on how a revised program might operate. Identifying key priorities for the program should be relatively straightforward but thinking through how an auction will be conducted (anticipating this would likely be the funding approach given different value of many Mid-Atlantic stocks) with appropriate sideboards and controls while minimizing the administrative burden will be challenging.
- Some of the workshops mentioned the appropriateness of funding, or not, “long-term monitoring projects” – defining what a long-term project means is needed.

### *Strawmen Objectives*

Staff gave a quick overview of the memo included as background material that identified potential draft RSA program objectives for Committee consideration. Objectives help define program goals and outline the details of how the program would be structured to achieve those goals. Specifying draft program objectives can illustrate how their selection shapes the structure of the program itself and will help focus the discussion on core considerations at the February workshop.

The group noted the general premise of the RSA program is fairly straightforward in that it’s a competitive grant process to generate research to support Council management; however, the objectives and goals to implement the program are much more diverse and challenging. It was suggested the Committee consider developing a decision-tree or program design playbook that would allow the Committee/Council to understand what decisions need to be made and, depending upon the decisions, what an RSA program might look like. The objectives and goals would help inform the playbook and depending upon the objectives and goals selected, the appropriate attributes of the program could then be identified.

After reviewing the list of draft objectives in the memo, the Committee determined that the list contains a mixture of broader objectives and specific goals that could apply to the different objectives. In addition, it was suggested that the list may be missing an objective that the RSA program benefit and enhance the Council's understanding of the managed resources. The Committee spent some time reworking the list to identify broad program objectives and goals that would fit under each objective. Below is an initial draft list of four objectives identified by the Committee:

1. Ensure effective monitoring, accountability, and enforcement of RSA quota (Enforcement and Administration)
2. Generate resources to fund research projects that align with the priorities of the Council (Funding)
3. Foster collaboration and trust between scientific and fishing communities and the general public
4. Produce quality, peer-reviewed research to maximize benefits to the Council and public (Research)

These draft objectives will be further refined by the Committee prior to and during the February workshop.

#### *List of Agenda Topics*

The group spent the rest of the meeting reviewing a draft list of potential February agenda topics and questions associated with each workshop theme (i.e., research, funding, enforcement/administration). The goal was to step through each theme and determine how important it might be to collect information, provide answers, or identify alternatives for the different topics prior to, or at, the February workshop. Fleshing out some of this information can also help with the development of a decision tree/design playbook.

The Committee supported nearly all of the draft topics and questions proposed. Below are some additional Committee comments and considerations regarding potential topics for the February workshop.

#### Research:

- The basic framework on running a competitive grant program already exists, just need to refine some of the specifics and ensure flexibility.
  - Details on the review criteria and proposal process should be provided at the workshop.
  - This topic is more straightforward and likely don't need to spend as much time on this theme at the workshop.
- Under proposal evaluation, may want to add a metric that considers the level of collaboration between researcher and industry.
- Need to identify and define what projects are most appropriate to support (e.g., short versus long-term monitoring).

#### Funding:

- Amount of funding is a continuum and need to consider policy trade-offs associated with different funding decisions.
  - Also need to consider the cost/benefit associated with the research and need to collect the information to evaluate in future.
- Need a discussion and decisions as to what species would include an RSA set aside and should funding from one species be used to support research for another?
  - The bundling of species quota may not be needed nor practical.
- Requiring payment in-full at time of purchase at an auction is unreasonable and would likely limit participation.
- Highlighting the pros and cons of decoupling RSA quota from the research being funded should be provided.

#### Enforcement and Administration

- This theme will likely need to be a key focus for February workshop. The overall structure of the program will be predicated on addressing these questions and issues.
  - All questions identified for this theme are relevant and need answers.
- The workshop needs to address the larger topics and sideboards of the program, the nuanced details can be developed at a later time.

Finally, the Committee discussed an alternative RSA proposal that was reviewed at length during Workshop #2. This proposal would represent a considerable change in how the RSA program historically operated. During the review of the alternative proposal, a number of concerns and questions were raised, and additional details and information were requested from the proposal author. No new or additional information was provided for the Committee to consider; therefore, with insufficient information and numerous deficiencies, the Committee agreed the proposal will not be considered in the future.

It was recommended that another Committee meeting is needed prior to the February workshop to address any remaining issues and review and work through the draft decision tree/program design playbook to develop some potential alternatives to consider at the workshop.