



NOAA FISHERIES

Alaska Fisheries Science Center

AFSC Priorities and Annual Guidance for FY2014

Purpose:

The Alaska Fisheries Science Center's Science Plan defines our vision, goals and objectives. The purpose of this Guidance Memo is to focus the AFSC on the coming year's programmatic priorities through our FY14 Implementation Process by balancing the Center's mandates and stakeholder priorities with the fiscal outlook. In addition, this guidance will help position the Center for out year (2-5 year) challenges and opportunities.

FY13 in Review:

Looking back at our level of fiscal support since FY11, I am struck by the reflection of the challenges that the 11% cut in total support at the AFSC between FY11 and FY12 presented, the tough choices we made, and the impressive accomplishments achieved nonetheless. As we approach the end of FY13, it is more evident than ever that your dedication, professionalism, and pride in the AFSC's mission will carry us through this difficult year, resulting in another notable list of achievements.

The final FY13 budget held unanticipated reductions in key budget lines, in addition to across-the-board cuts stemming from the government-wide sequestration. The overall impact to NMFS was nearly a 4.5% reduction in Operations, Research, and Facilities (ORF) funding and, like all NOAA Line Office, NMFS implemented dramatic reductions to spending to absorb these cuts.

An additional challenge to the AFSC was the unprecedented number of retirements at the end of the calendar year. Although everyone did as much as possible to prepare, these departures left the AFSC with reduced capacity in nearly all the Divisions. These losses were felt more acutely as key vacancies have gone unfilled as lengthy and unpredictable changes in NOAA's Office of Workforce Management policies and procedures led up to a hiring freeze across all of NOAA.

Despite these challenges, the AFSC was able to accomplish the following, among much more:

- produced a full suite of groundfish and shellfish stock assessments for the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC);
- produced a full suite of marine mammal stock assessment for Alaska, as well as for some marine mammal stocks that occur along the US West Coast;
- implemented a restructured, partial-coverage observer program to collect fishery-dependent data on previously unobserved fleets;
- provided the Department of Commerce/NOAA perspective on the "Managing for the Future in a Rapidly Changing Arctic: A Report to the President"¹;
- carried out our commitments to further the Gulf of Alaska Integrated Ecosystem Research Program (GOA IERP);
- completed the majority of the groundfish stock assessment surveys, preserving critical data series while scaling back when possible;
- conducted major surveys for marine mammal abundance; and
- carried out ecosystem process studies in the Bering Sea to link environmental features to pollock recruitment.

As was the case in FY12, the AFSC's research portfolio was heavily augmented by partnerships both inside and outside the agency to provide operational funding for critical research needs. These alliances continue to enable nearly all our high-Arctic investigations, accelerating the collection of Arctic baseline data including habitat and living marine resource data critical for decisions made regarding the 2012 drilling in the Chukchi Sea.

¹ <http://www.doi.gov/news/upload/ArcticReport-03April2013PMsm.pdf>

FY14 Budget Outlook

The FY14 President's Budget Request for NOAA recognizes the importance of science-based stewardship of living marine resources and the need for information to support sound decision-making for human, ecological, and economic health. The budget request provides key investments to support sustainable fisheries, protected resources, and habitat conservation and restoration across the nation and in Alaska specifically, including increased funding to:

- advance sampling technologies, including acoustic and optical data collection methods and multibeam sonar;
- improve stock assessment capacity;
- restore Alaska groundfish monitoring, including snow and Tanner crab, rockfish, and pollock;
- restore core support for research in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands groundfish fishery;
- increase at-sea observers used for targeted bycatch reduction efforts;
- advance research and development of new fishing techniques and gear modifications designed to lessen environmental impacts of federally managed fisheries; and
- restore the Loss of Sea Ice initiative work, including increasing *in situ* remote observing systems and expand survey work to assess the impact of changing ocean conditions on the distribution of commercially important fish, shellfish, and ice-dependent marine mammals.

"Science is the foundation upon which sound management of ocean and coastal resources is based," Office of Science and Technology Policy Director John P. Holdren

The FY14 President's Budget Request is only the first step in a long appropriations process. At the AFSC we are undertaking a series of planning scenarios, which will include the President's Request and any Congressional budget marks that are released as well as FY13 levels with a continued sequester.

FY14 Priorities: Research, Collaboration, Partnerships, and Outreach

Our general priorities are to maintain support for the two AFSC core research foci, namely: (1) maintain the information and capabilities needed to support the assessments required for the federal management of fish, shellfish, and marine mammal stocks; (2) provide ecological and socioeconomic information to the NPFMC and Alaska Regional Office (AKR) to inform and evaluate management decisions and support quota monitoring and analyses required by legal and regulatory processes.

2010 NOAA Grand Science Challenges include:

- *Understand and characterize the role of the oceans in climate change and variability and the effects of climate changes on the ocean and coasts*
- *Assess and understand the roles of ecosystem processes and biodiversity in sustaining ecosystem services*

To further our continued focus on core assessments, we must prepare for the future. To do so, we will better align ecosystem process studies with stock assessments. Additionally, we will emphasize improvement on our science programs by continuing efforts to incorporate environmental effects into selected stock assessments and providing improved observational methods through the use of advanced sampling technologies.

Our funding priorities in FY14 are: (1) continued success of the full-coverage and partial-coverage components of the observer program and progress with electronic monitoring capabilities; (2) operational funding for AFSC use of NOAA ship time and of pre-paid charter time; (3) sustained stock assessments of groundfish (longline and trawl in BS and GOA), shellfish, and protected species; (4) research on Cook Inlet beluga; (5) western population of Steller sea lion research; (6) Arctic research on marine mammals, fish, and habitat including the Bering-Aleutian Salmon International Survey (BASIS) and our commitments to the Arctic Ecosystem Integrated Survey (Arctic Eis); and (7) fulfilling our commitments to the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management (in support of NOAA permit reviews of oil and gas explorations and development) and the Gulf of Alaska Project research program funded by the North Pacific Research Board (GOA IERP).

Collaboration will continue to be strongly encourage wherever possible, connecting areas of strength across Divisions to increase success in: securing external funds; communication with stakeholders; interdisciplinary, modeling, and synthesis components of research activities; and overall research impact. Examples of research areas naturally disposed to cross-Divisional collaborations include Arctic activities, Steller sea lion research, fishery oceanographic and habitat research leading to improved stock assessments, and ecosystem modeling.

Partnerships and cooperative research will continue to be a mission priority, following the FY13 NMFS guidance to focus on the core NOAA Fisheries mandates for science-based management of living marine resource stewardship by following three overarching principles: (1) focusing limited resources to maximize national benefits; (2) working closely with our partners; and (3) making strategic choices. In support of that, the SD office will continue to advocate for conference travel recognizing that DOC/NOAA conference travel policies are increasingly restrictive.

Outreach will be emphasized his year, fostered through the [hopefully] successful hiring of a Communication Director, as we increasingly communicate our work through various media outlets and work with Julie Speegle at the Alaska Regional Office in our press releases. “In carrying out these principles we will focus on improving communications with partners and stakeholders through face-to-face meetings and the use of social media and other communication tools, and will seek out more frequent, effective venues for collaboration, listening, and learning.”- FY13 NMFS guidance

“With increasing demands on our ocean, we must improve how we work together, share information, and plan smartly to grow our economy, keep our ocean healthy, and enjoy the highest benefits from our ocean resources, now and in the future.” Nancy Sutley, Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality and Co-Chair of the National Ocean Council.

Alignment of Research Activities and Workforce Capabilities

After the current hiring freeze passes, there is a high likelihood that we will be held to labor cost ceilings in future years, being asked to sustain a freeze on workforce costs rather than workforce actions. Given that environment, we will plan to use the following strategies to align our workforce capabilities and research activities.

1. Use of non-competitive reassignments where possible to fill labor shortfalls. Although some future workforce needs will require applicants external to the AFSC, we should be using non-competitive reassignments where possible, as a way to contain labor costs while aligning workforce capabilities to mission needs.
2. Utilize the current AFSC Science and Implementation planning process to provide incentives for this workforce realignment through feedback on the relevancy of AFSC research activities to AFSC priorities and through connecting management support and access to soft funding, ship time, and other research capabilities to AFSC priority research.
3. Develop Divisional organizational charts with reduced mission scope that reflects the assumption of both level budget funding and a level labor cost ceiling for the next three years.
4. Develop options for further reducing facility costs in response to reductions in facilities funding lines.

AFSC Future Vision and Transition Planning

The next several years will be challenging for NMFS as a whole, but these challenges provide an opportunity to more precisely define the key research activities which support the NMFS mission. The AFSC is far ahead of the curve in beginning to define our future and effectively moving toward that future. We are already off to a good start through the development of Activity Plans and following a defined Implementation Process each year. The final steps are to ensure that each activity has the right resources, including staff with the right skills and experience to meet its research mission. By doing so, we will be effectively developing staffing plans at the Activity level, integrating them into Programs and Divisions for management purposes.

Improvements for FY14

The Implementation Process and its resulting products provide a roadmap of how the AFSC will maintain high priority research, resource and conduct new research, maintain infrastructure and support services, and phase out work that is expected to either be completed or that is of lower priority and can no longer be supported. The Implementation Process was expected to be iterative, and several changes have been made between the FY13 and FY14 processes. We will continue to make improvements throughout this fiscal year, including:

- 1) Refining Activity Plan rating criteria to clarify FY14 criteria based on feedback from the AFSC's Board of Directors.
- 2) Seeking input from NOAA Fisheries Management and Budget Office to ensure better information on various hypothetical budget scenarios to provide better insight into the potential scope for scaling the cost of activities.
- 3) Adopting a database for compiling Activity Plans – particularly associated costs and funding type to enable the AFSC to respond more effectively to different budget calls, analyses, and opportunities.
- 4) Improving connections between staff and Activity Plans and developing future staffing needs information.
- 5) Fully incorporating electronic Annual Operating Plan (eAOP) milestones as a critical component of each Activity Plan and exploring other ways to incorporate other NOAA Fisheries requirements into our plans (e.g. prioritizing ship time, populating Headquarters-maintained databases, etc.).