

Transboundary Resource Assessment Committee (TRAC)

Structure and Process for July 11-14, 2017

Table of Contents

Overview	2
Structure	2
TRAC Co-Chairs.....	2
General Process for TRAC Meetings.....	3
Oversight of Process:	3
Formulation of the Remit:.....	3
Preparation of Assessments:	3
Benchmarks, Assessments and Interim Updates:	3
Communication of TRAC Results:.....	3
Proposal for the Annual Assessment Review Process (Eastern Georges Bank Cod and Haddock and Georges Bank Yellowtail)	4
Timing of Review Meetings:	4
Meeting Chair:.....	4
Assessment Lead:.....	4
Reviewer:.....	4
Stakeholders and Other Meeting Participants:.....	4
Process of Review:	4
Initial Review:	5
TRAC Status Report (TSR) Review:	5

Overview

Since 1998, the Transboundary Resources Assessment Committee (TRAC) has reviewed stock assessments and projections necessary to support management activities for shared resources across the USA Canada boundary in the Gulf of Maine-Georges Bank region. These assessments are necessary to advise decision makers on the status of these resources and likely consequences of policy choices. When TRAC was established, it was recognized that its work, processes and documentation would evolve in order to adapt to new realities and would build on experience. The first significant change in process arose with the formation of the Transboundary Management Guidance Committee (TMGC) in 2000 and the development of arrangements for consistent management and allocation sharing of Georges Bank yellowtail flounder, and Eastern Georges Bank cod and haddock. Since the formation of TRAC, there have been changes in the policies and legal frameworks related to resource assessments and management through amendments to legislation such as the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/laws_policies/msa/documents/msa_amended_2007.pdf) and the development of a number of policies by the Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat (<http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas-sccs/process-processus/index-eng.html>). These changes have placed new demands on the TRAC process and for TRAC documentation, specifically in relation to Georges Bank yellowtail flounder, and Eastern Georges Bank cod and haddock. As a result, some changes in the TRAC process were required. The revised process and the documents necessary to fulfill requirements in the near future are described here. Initially, this process will be used for the annual TRAC meetings; in the future, it may be adopted or modified for use at TRAC benchmark assessments.

Structure

TRAC is the scientific arm of the Transboundary Management Guidance Committee (TMGC). TRAC advice to the TMGC for the transboundary shared resources across the USA Canada border is provided in the TRAC Status Reports (TSRs).

TRAC Co-Chairs

NMFS and DFO appoint one person each to act as TRAC co-chairs. The co-chairs administer the TRAC review process including providing a draft of meeting Terms of Reference (remit) for TMGC to consider, the publication of product documents and the scheduling of TRAC review meetings. They chair TRAC intercessional meetings and arrange for the appointment of a meeting chair for the annual review of the assessments for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder, and Eastern Georges Bank cod and haddock.

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General Process for TRAC Meetings

Oversight of Process:

NMFS and DFO appoint one person each to act as TRAC co-chairs. The co-chairs administer the TRAC review process and the publication of product documents and schedule TRAC review meetings. The co-chairs also arrange for the appointment of a meeting chair for the annual review of the assessments for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder, and Eastern Georges Bank cod and haddock.

Formulation of the Remit:

The remit is a succinct statement of the analyses and review that is requested of the TRAC. The TMGC, in consultation with the TRAC co-chairs, edit and approve the remit (Terms of Reference). The remit outlines the required products of the TRAC along with the timelines.

Preparation of Assessments:

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and Fisheries and Oceans, Canada (DFO) designate co-experts, one from NMFS and one from DFO, for each management unit reviewed at TRAC. The co-experts are responsible for coordinating data preparation, leading the conduct of analyses, facilitating the preparation of working papers for TRAC and their presentation at TRAC. TRAC may also invite and review assessment analyses or working papers conducted by others, including non-NMFS and non-DFO staff, and this work must be coordinated with the TRAC co-chairs.

Benchmarks, Assessments and Interim Updates:

The TRAC provides three different levels of peer review. The most extensive evaluations of alternative models, data, and assumptions occur in periodic benchmark assessment reviews. Less extensive evaluation of models occur as required, generally on an annual schedule, and typically involve simple application of previously approved benchmark assessment frameworks to new data in order to provide the peer reviewed assessment of the resource status to resource managers. Based on discussions at TRAC and at the discretion of the TMGC, an annual assessment review may be replaced by an interim update which relies on indicators and indices that have been agreed to ahead of time, rather than conducting the full assessment.

It is considered preferable to conduct benchmark assessment reviews during meetings dedicated to that task rather than in conjunction with an assessment review or interim update. The aim is to conduct benchmark assessment reviews well enough in advance of assessment reviews to permit incorporation of a new framework in the assessment.

Communication of TRAC Results:

The TRAC co-chairs (or their designees) are responsible for presentation of the TRAC results, e.g. TSRs, highlights of proceedings, summaries of new analyses, etc., to the TMGC. TRAC co-chairs and stock co-experts may be called upon by the TMGC to make presentations at public consultations.

Proposal for the Annual Assessment Review Process (Eastern Georges Bank Cod and Haddock and Georges Bank Yellowtail)

Timing of Review Meetings:

Unless otherwise decided, the annual TRAC review meeting for Eastern Georges Bank cod and haddock and Georges Bank yellowtail flounder shall be held in the second week of July. If other species or stocks are considered under the TRAC process, the dates of review meetings will be determined by the TMGC in consultation with the expected meeting participants.

Meeting Chair:

An independent meeting chair will be sought by the TRAC co-chairs to facilitate the meeting and ensure that the process is adhered to by all participants. The independence of the meeting chair is important to avoid any perceived conflict of interest. The logistics of contracting and paying for the independent meeting chair will alternate between NMFS and DFO.

Assessment Lead:

The role of the assessment leads at the assessment review meeting is to present the assessment for which they are responsible, answer questions on their work, and conduct further analyses when appropriate. They are also expected to provide a working paper to the TRAC co-chairs at least two weeks in advance of the assessment review meeting, a draft TSR at the review meeting, and a completed reference document within four months after the conclusion of the review meeting. Assessment leads do not review their own work, but may contribute to the review of other assessments.

Reviewer:

The TRAC co-chairs will identify reviewers who are independent of the assessments and who bring particular knowledge and experience to the table. Reviewers bring an outside perspective to the scientific review, but are not charged with approving the assessment results. In instances where a lack of consensus stalls progress on scientific issues, the meeting chair may use the reviewers' opinions to move the meeting forward. After an assessment is presented, the reviewers will be called upon first for their questions and comments. The reviewers may also be asked to provide a brief summary of their review for each of the assessments. These summaries will be included in the Proceedings.

Stakeholders and Other Meeting Participants:

All participants are encouraged to comment and constructively challenge the science presented as well as to contribute additional information that is relevant to the assessment. Stakeholders and other meeting participants are expected to work with the whole group to inform conclusions during the meeting. Their role is to participate as objective, knowledgeable individuals on the subject matter under review, not as advocates or representatives of any interest group.

Process of Review:

The mandate of the assessment review is to provide updated and peer-reviewed assessment advice regarding the current status of the stock, typically by applying the benchmark assessment framework to fishery, survey and biological data acquired since the last assessment. Participation in this process by both assessment scientists and stakeholders with particular insights into the fisheries and stocks being evaluated is encouraged to foster interpretation, communication and understanding of the results. The country hosting the TRAC will arrange for alternative means to connect to the meeting for offsite participants (webcast, teleconference line, e.g.). Notice of the meetings will be widely disseminated and posted on TRAC websites.

Initial Review:

In the interest of transparency and in order to avoid any perceived conflict of interest, the initial assessment review for each stock be divided into two parts:

1. Presentation of the assessment by the assessment lead, followed by scientific and technical review by the science assessment staff, designated reviewers and two identified resource managers (one from the U.S. and one from Canada). At the completion of this section of the meeting the chair will summarise the discussion and any initial conclusions.
2. Review and contributions by all meeting participants. This includes stakeholders from the fishing industry, representatives from non-government organizations (NGOs), and representatives from other levels of government (State, Federal, and Provincial) as well as the general public. The science assessment staff, reviewers, and resource managers will use this additional discussion and input to inform the development of final conclusions and catch advice, adjusting their initial conclusions if appropriate and necessary. At the completion of this section of the meeting, the chair will again summarise the discussion and conclusions and identify any changes from the summary from part 1. This information will then be taken by the assessment leads and incorporated into the draft TSR.

The Proceedings will reflect the two part process described above to ensure transparency regarding the engagement and decision-making process.

TRAC Status Report (TSR) Review:

When multiple stocks are assessed, the review of all TSRs will be conducted at the end of the meeting, after all assessments have been presented and reviewed. The lead for each assessment or update review will prepare a draft TSR in advance of the discussion. The TSR will be reviewed by all participants. Comments, edits and suggested changes will be indicated as comments on the draft document.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the TSR “editorial board” will meet and revise the specific wording of the TSR to capture the comments from the full group discussion. Other interested parties may attend as observers. The TSR editorial board will consist of the assessment review meeting chair, the TRAC co-chairs, the assessment leads and primary contributing science staff, the designated reviewers, one DFO and one NOAA resource manager, one New England Management Council representative and one CSAS representative. The purpose of this part of the process is to ensure that there is no perception of conflict of interest in the wording of the TSR, but that the substance of the document will properly reflect the full review discussion. It will also avoid the inefficiencies of editing grammar and spelling as a larger group. New information or issues that were not discussed at the full review of the TSR may not be included in the document at this point. Should the editorial board discover a substantive error in the analyses while reviewing the TSR, TRAC participants will be notified and provided an explanation before the TSR is published.