



Learning, Evaluation, and Planning

Discussions from the 2018 Forum

October 15–16, Monterey, CA
Katie Latanich and Kim Gordon

FISHERIES
Leadership & Sustainability
FORUM



Learning, Evaluation, and Planning Discussions from the 2018 Forum

October 15–16, Monterey, CA

CONTENTS

Introduction and Forum Objectives	3
Strategy in the Council Process: Crosscutting Themes	3
Instilling Strategy in the Council Process	5
Strategy and Institutional Capacity	12

Summary

The 2018 Forum convened by the Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum (Fisheries Forum) explored the role of learning, evaluation, and planning in the regional fishery management council process. In the increasingly complex federal fisheries management process, councils must use their finite resources strategically to achieve their goals and objectives. The Forum explored methods for instilling strategy into the council process through short-term planning, setting goals and objectives, evaluation, and long-term planning. Discussions also examined opportunities to build strategic capacity at the individual and institutional levels.

The 2018 Forum was the 16th and final forum hosted by the Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum. From 2008–2018 the Fisheries Forum convened a series of forums for council members, council staff, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries staff. Each forum focused on a topic with regional and national relevance. The forums were a unique opportunity for managers to explore emerging issues and questions and to share ideas and information across management regions.

Author Affiliations

Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum

Citation

Katie Latanich and Kim Gordon. 2018. "Learning, Evaluation, and Planning in the Regional Fishery Management Council Process: Discussions from the 2018 Forum, October 15–16, Monterey, CA." [NI P 19-01]. Durham, NC: Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum, Duke University.

Acknowledgements

This meeting was funded through support from the regional fishery management councils in partnership with NOAA Fisheries and by the Walton Family Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The Fisheries Forum would also like to acknowledge participants at the 2018 Forum, October 15–16, 2018.

Published by the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions in 2019. All Rights Reserved.

Publication Number: NI-P 19-01

INTRODUCTION AND FORUM OBJECTIVES

The growing complexity of the U.S. federal fisheries management process requires the eight regional fishery management councils to manage their time and resources strategically. The 2018 Forum convened regional fishery management council members and staff to explore the topics of learning, evaluation, and planning in the council process, and to consider how councils can develop their capacity to operate strategically.

The council process has dramatically increased in complexity since implementation of the 1976 Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) in response to new requirements, advances in science and technology, emerging issues, and many other factors. Councils have finite capacity to meet these growing demands and must allocate their resources efficiently and strategically to achieve their goals and objectives. Councils can infuse strategy into their decision making through the steps of the council process, and by building strategic capacity at the individual and institutional levels. Forum discussions explored these complementary aspects of strategy through the following objectives:

- Share examples of regional approaches for setting priorities, engaging in short-term planning, and managing the workloads of council members and staff.
- Examine the role of goals, objectives, and long-term planning in the council process, and consider opportunities for evaluation and reflection.
- Discuss the value of ongoing learning within the council process and identify opportunities to support the professional and leadership development of council members and staff.
- Consider opportunities to continue learning, sharing experience, and strengthening connections within the federal fisheries management community, following the conclusion of the Fisheries Forum program.

The Forum featured informal talks, roundtable discussions exploring regional practices, and full and small group discussions. Materials from the 2018 Forum including the final agenda, presentations, and links to council resources related to learning, evaluation, and planning are available at www.fisheriesforum.org.

The 2018 Forum was the 16th and final forum hosted by the Fisheries Leadership & Sustainability Forum. The Fisheries Forum program concluded in the winter of 2019. Materials from past events and collaborations are archived on the program's website.

STRATEGY IN THE COUNCIL PROCESS: CROSSCUTTING THEMES

The overarching focus of the 2018 Forum was the role of strategy in an effective and efficient council process. During Forum discussions participants used the term “strategy” to encompass the activities of learning, evaluation, and planning, as well as to describe the qualities of people and institutions that support strategic efforts.

The 2018 Forum was a timely opportunity to reflect on strategy as a uniting theme of the Fisheries Forum's mission and body of work over the past 10 years. The Fisheries Forum's projects, including 16 forums as well as regional and national collaborations and meetings, have all supported fishery managers in taking a deliberate and thoughtful approach to working through challenges and making the most of finite resources. Across these projects and meetings, conversations have consistently circled back to strategy-oriented topics that include setting goals and objectives, evaluating progress, learning from experience, and planning for the future. The 2018 Forum provided the opportunity for a focused examination of these recurring themes.

The Forum's focus on strategy also acknowledges the growing demands placed on the council process. During Forum discussions and the planning conversations leading up to the Forum, fishery managers identified several aspects of the management process that are increasing in complexity and driving the need for strategy in the council process:

- **Management foundations:** The foundations of management have become more complex through reauthorization of the MSA, new mandates and implementation guidelines, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries policy directives.

- **Scientific foundations:** Corresponding to the growing complexity of fisheries management and policy, there are ever-increasing demands and concurrent advances in the scientific information and technology that support fisheries management.
- **Council actions:** Council actions are increasing in complexity and number as councils continue to develop and refine their management strategies, with a corresponding increase in the volume of information, analysis, and documentation required.
- **Participants and perspectives:** The diversity of stakeholder interests and voices involved in the management process has expanded over time.
- **Emerging issues:** Councils face an array of growing challenges including changing ecosystem conditions and emerging ocean uses that demand a more comprehensive perspective on fisheries and the ocean environment.

The 2018 Forum provided a structured, step-by-step examination of the role of strategy in the council process. Forum participants often identified similarities and linkages among the topics of learning, evaluation, and planning. The group's discussions illustrated the following broad and crosscutting themes regarding the role of strategy in the council process.

Strategy Can Be Instilled in Many Ways

Forum discussions revealed that there is no one size fits all approach to instilling strategy in the council process. Strategy can be embedded in small, routine tasks and advanced through big ideas and initiatives such as visioning and strategic planning. Council strategy can be articulated in the form of focused, actionable steps and through broad goals and aspirations. Learning, evaluation, and planning can add value at multiple levels, from strategic efforts focusing on specific issues and fisheries to comprehensive efforts that encompass the entire council process. Strategy lives in many places within the council process, including formal guidance and planning as well as informal practices, council culture and norms, and individual behavior and leadership styles. Finally, the outcomes of strategic efforts can be implemented through regulatory actions and through nonregulatory means such as coordination, communication, and outreach.

Strategy Can Be a Beneficial Investment in All Scenarios

Forum discussions demonstrated that there is not necessarily a right time to invest in strategic efforts, and that councils can effect positive change in response to a wide range of drivers. Councils strategize to work toward positive outcomes that include improving efficiency, enhancing performance, and making progress toward ambitious goals and aspirations. Councils also strategize to avoid negative outcomes and work through challenging situations or crises. Forum participants shared different perspectives on the optimal conditions for investing in strategic efforts, acknowledging that circumstances differ among councils. For example, some felt that councils benefit most from planning when circumstances are generally favorable (i.e., when stocks are healthy and councils are not facing immediate crises). Others felt that planning can be a valuable tool for working through short-term crises as well as long-term or chronic challenges such as stock rebuilding and ecosystem change.

Strategy Is a Shared Responsibility

Strategic activities involve the entire council community of decision makers, support staff, advisors, and stakeholders. Council leadership and executive directors serve the critical function of overseeing council strategy and operations. Others, such as staff and committee or plan team leads, play crucial roles in project oversight, coordination, and follow-through. Forum discussions demonstrated that the momentum and creativity behind strategic efforts can arise from many sources. Participants also emphasized that strategic efforts, particularly evaluation and long-term planning, are most successful as collaborative exercises with broad council and public participation. Although councils may enlist outside consultants to support strategic efforts, participants also emphasized the value of grounding this work in the council context and drawing on the knowledge and skills of council staff. Finally, strategic efforts can create a shared frame of reference, strengthen relationships, and improve communication among councils, stakeholders, and other management partners.

Strategy Is an Ongoing Commitment

Forum discussions emphasized that strategic efforts are most effective when they actively guide and inform a council's work over time. Participants noted the importance of follow-through, including referring back to goals and objectives and strategic plans, and observed that council staff can help refer back to this guidance and link it with council decision

making. Strategy also involves continuity over time. The group observed a strong linkage between evaluation and looking backward, and leveraging this knowledge to look ahead and plan for the future. Finally, discussions of learning, leadership, and institutional knowledge emphasized that building the strategic capacity of individuals is an ongoing commitment in light of turnover in council membership.

Strategy Requires Focus and Resources

Forum participants recognized that councils can find it challenging to dedicate time and resources to learning, evaluation, and planning. Some actions such as catch share program reviews are required by law, and others including short-term planning and priority-setting are embedded within routine council operations. In contrast, strategic efforts including program reviews, visioning, and strategic planning are discretionary. Undertaking these projects requires a substantial investment of resources and council bandwidth over time. Forum participants also recognized that learning, evaluation, and planning involve dedicated discussions that differ from council business as usual. The group shared examples of building time into busy council schedules as well as boosting council capacity through additional meeting sessions and by enlisting contractor support.

Strategy Is Not Easy

Forum discussions acknowledged that learning, evaluation, and planning can be challenging and uncomfortable at the individual and council level. Participants observed that strategic efforts often involve taking a critical look at what is and is not working well, accepting constructive criticism, and considering significant change. In addition, activities such as developing goals and objectives and long-term planning involve sharing individual preferences in a context that is different from typical council discussions. Forum participants emphasized that strategic efforts benefit from respectful dialogue within the council community, inclusivity, communication, and willingness to compromise and acknowledge one another's priorities.

Strategy Is a Tool for Navigating Emerging Challenges

Forum participants considered the emerging issues and challenges that will continue to drive the need for learning, evaluation, and planning within the council process. New challenges can add to the demands of short-term planning and workload management, but they can also catalyze councils to engage in long-term planning, build capacity, and share their experience. The group reflected on the emerging issues and challenges that will shape their council's process in the next five to ten years, including the following:

- Climate change
- Data availability and continuity
- Governance and coordination
- Demographic changes (e.g., the “aging of the fleet,” barriers to entry, participation in the council process)
- Other ocean uses (e.g., offshore energy development, aquaculture)
- Ongoing priorities (e.g., implementation of ecosystem-based fisheries management)
- Intensification of existing challenges (e.g., allocation, bycatch and retention, legal challenges, and protected species interactions)
- Regional challenges (e.g., loss of Arctic sea ice, harmful algal blooms)

INSTALLING STRATEGY IN THE COUNCIL PROCESS

Forum discussions explored procedural opportunities to infuse strategy into the council process, including four specific activities: (1) setting short-term priorities, (2) setting and referring to goals and objectives, (3) evaluating performance and identifying opportunities for improvement, and (4) engaging in long-term and strategic planning. These processes may be undertaken separately but are often linked and mutually reinforcing.

Short-Term Planning: Getting It All Done

The Forum began with a discussion of the approaches councils follow to set their priorities, manage workloads, and use council and staff bandwidth efficiently. Forum participants reflected on what works well about their process as well as challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Regional Approaches to Setting Priorities

Short-term planning begins with the processes councils follow to set their priorities. Councils have adapted different priority-setting processes to meet their regional needs. Some engage in an annual priority-setting process and others update their priorities on an ongoing basis.

Councils that set their priorities on an annual basis, including the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils, begin planning in the summer and fall for the subsequent calendar year. Some Forum participants felt that an annual process is structured, predictable, and helps outline the timelines for moving council priorities forward. They noted that planning on an annual basis can help illustrate tradeoffs, manage expectations regarding what can be accomplished in a year, and provide a framework to adjust when unexpected issues arise.

Other councils plan and set priorities on more of an ongoing basis; for example, by reviewing their priorities and workload at every council meeting while also planning for the longer term (e.g., the next several council meetings or calendar year). Some Forum participants felt that an ongoing planning process enables their councils to be flexible and responsive to changing needs in the short term, while also accounting for regular or recurring processes (e.g., stock assessment cycles) and longer-term planning needs.

Forum participants identified additional attributes of their council process that shape their approach to short-term planning, including the following:

- **Meeting structure:** The format and frequency of council meetings can affect how and when councils engage in priority-setting and planning discussions.
- **Committee structure:** A council's use of committees can shape the process a council follows to identify priorities and negotiate tradeoffs. Some councils maintain standing fishery and issue-specific committees composed of council members and others do not.
- **Fishery management plan structure:** The structure of a council's fishery management plans (FMPs) by fishery and region can affect how priorities and tradeoffs are framed. Most council regions have a multispecies FMP that demands significant time and resources.
- **Long-term planning structure:** Some councils maintain a longer-term strategic plan that informs their annual priorities. Many regions also have recurring annual or biennial processes that provide structure to their short-term planning. In addition, all councils engage in planning related to the five-year cooperative agreements through which council operations are funded by the federal government.

Steps to Setting Council Priorities

Across council regions, short-term planning involves the following steps.

Identify Potential Priorities

Council planning begins with identifying the range of action items a council is considering and distinguishing between requirements and discretionary priorities. Forum participants described taking a systematic approach to identify and compile potential priorities by fishery management plan and issue area (e.g., ecosystems, communications, and outreach). Other priorities may derive from cross-regional topics of interest, such as legislative activity related to MSA reauthorization and the work of the Council Coordination Committee. Council executive directors and staff often provide the starting point for establishing priorities by taking stock of a council's current and upcoming tasks.

Refine and Prioritize

All councils provide opportunities for individual council members to communicate their priorities. In some regions priority-setting discussions primarily occur as a full council; in others priority-setting is an iterative process with additional discussion at the council committee level. Several regions use a rating system to assess the relative importance of

council items and rank potential priorities. The importance of an item can reflect council members' individual priorities and preferences as well as the urgency of moving a priority forward. Council priority-setting is also responsive to public input.

Align Workload with Capacity

A critical step in council workload planning involves aligning priorities with available bandwidth. The staff time and workload needed to support a council action such as an FMP amendment or framework can depend on its complexity and the information, analysis, and staff expertise required. Councils must also consider how to allocate their time among concurrent priorities over multiple council meetings and relative to the timeline required by the regulatory process. Forum participants noted that dialogue among council members, council, and NOAA Fisheries staff and others is valuable for assessing progress, coordinating responsibilities, and appraising the workload and timeframe required to complete an item. Most councils maintain a standing committee that is tasked with oversight of executive, administrative, and financial responsibilities and plays a key role in aligning priorities with council resources and finances.

Monitor Progress

Councils continually assess their progress toward priorities through the council meeting process, and in some regions through formal discussions of priorities and staff tasking. Councils also use a variety of documents to outline timelines, deliverables and responsibilities; monitor progress; and keep track of emerging and unscheduled items. Forum participants shared the following regional examples.

- **Master lists:** The New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils each develop a master list of annual priorities, tasks, and deliverables by fishery and issue area.
- **Annual calendars:** The Pacific and Gulf of Mexico Councils each maintain annual calendars (termed year-at-a-glance matrix and action schedule, respectively) to show the anticipated timing of major council actions and tasks over a yearlong time frame.
- **Tracking documents:** The North Pacific and South Atlantic Councils use tables and spreadsheets to indicate staff leads and tasks related to current and upcoming council priorities.
- **Three-meeting outlooks:** The New England and North Pacific Councils maintain a three-meeting outlook to indicate anticipated council meeting agenda items.

Challenges and Considerations to Short-Term Planning

Forum participants identified several shared challenges to short-term planning, reflecting an operating environment of competing demands, limited resources, and changing context.

Setting Priorities Requires Councils to Make Tradeoffs

Setting priorities requires councils to allocate time and resources toward some issues at the expense of others. Councils must also consider how many issues to undertake concurrently, and balance long-term and challenging priorities with short-term and simpler tasks. Forum participants identified factors that contribute to competing priorities and demands including the attributes of a region's fisheries (e.g., the number of species, stock status, data availability), and the geographical distribution of fisheries, participation, and infrastructure within a region.

Effective Short-Term Planning Requires Flexibility

Forum participants discussed the importance of flexibility to short-term planning, acknowledging the difficulty of planning for the unexpected. Councils are frequently faced with unanticipated challenges that demand a response, such as unexpected stock assessment results; changes in fishery distribution and participation; rapid environmental shifts and natural disasters; human-caused disruptions; and delays in receiving information or in the implementation of an action. Unexpected issues often require councils to redirect their bandwidth and resources, which can strain council capacity and impact other priorities.

Effective Short-Term Planning Requires Boundaries

Forum participants felt that although flexibility is important, councils should also be mindful of the focus and scope of established council priorities. New priorities may emerge over time and council actions can expand in scope and complexity. These changes can demand additional council and staff capacity, cause the focus of an action to drift, and

draw out the timeline for completing an action. Councils follow different approaches to manage expectations for short-term planning; some may try to accommodate new priorities and others may enforce tradeoffs such that adding a new priority requires postponing an existing one.

Planning Benefits from Ongoing Communication and Coordination

Forum participants emphasized that ongoing communication and coordination are critical for assessing council and staff bandwidth and assessing tradeoffs among competing priorities. Councils' ability to advance their priorities depends on the technical support provided by council staff and NOAA Fisheries regional office and science center staff. The group identified shared needs that include aligning workload with available capacity and expertise, establishing mutual expectations, and communicating about the roles and responsibilities, time frame, and deliverables involved in the development and implementation of a council action or other priority.

Goals and Objectives: Setting the Guideposts

Goals, objectives, and other guidance provide the guideposts for council planning, and the benchmarks against which councils can assess their performance and progress toward desired outcomes. Forum participants reviewed the following terms, adapted from the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's strategic planning process.

- **Vision:** Describes an ideal future state
- **Mission:** Articulates an organization's purpose
- **Goals:** Broad, long-term aspirations that stay relatively consistent over time
- **Objectives:** Short-term goals with clearly defined milestones and metrics
- **Strategies:** Specific action items or tactics to achieve goals and objectives

Goals, objectives, and other forms of guidance in the council process can be explicit or implicit, and differ in format, longevity, and relevance. Forum participants identified the following examples.

- **National:** The purpose and process for federal fisheries management are embedded within the requirements of the MSA and the values expressed through the 10 National Standards. Direction is also provided through other applicable federal laws including the National Environmental Policy Act.
- **Council:** Councils may adopt high-level guidance in the form of strategic plans and vision statements, council mission statements, policy statements (e.g., related to ecosystem-based management, risk, and other considerations), and statements of core values and principles.
- **Fishery/FMP:** Councils may establish overarching guidance at the fishery level through FMP goals and objectives, fishery-specific strategic and long-term planning, and for the implementation of management programs. The MSA requires councils to specify goals for the implementation of catch share programs.
- **Council action:** Councils state the intent of a council action in the form of a purpose and need statement that may be narrative in format or include specific goals and objectives.
- **Individuals:** Council members and stakeholders have individual goals, preferences, and perspectives.

Forum participants considered the attributes of goals and objectives, particularly in the context of FMPs and council actions, that make this guidance meaningful to the council process. The group felt that goals and objectives at the FMP level are most useful when they are clear and actionable, reflect the current status and operations of a fishery, and are referenced regularly. Goals and objectives also serve as a valuable reference point for the future by capturing the intent behind a council's action.

The group reflected on their experience developing goals and objectives for council actions, primarily in the form of purpose and need statements. Councils may discuss goals and objectives explicitly, or council staff may be tasked with developing purpose and need statements based on council discussions. Some felt that their councils struggle to articulate goals and objectives, particularly for contentious issues, and noted the challenge of developing goals and objectives that

are specific enough to provide guidance yet broad enough to generate support. Some felt that it is valuable to establish purpose and need statements early in the development of a council action while others felt that this guidance can be flexible to evolve with the focus and scope of an action.

Evaluation: Stepping Back and Taking Stock

Councils engage in evaluation, reflection, and review to assess the performance of a program or process and identify opportunities for improvement. Evaluation involves gauging performance relative to established guideposts, such as goals, objectives, terms of reference, or other guidance. Evaluation can also provide the starting point for strategic efforts including short- and long-term planning. Forum participants explored the following regional examples of evaluation.

Regional Examples

New England Fishery Management Council Program Review

The New England Fishery Management Council recently completed a program review to assess the Council's past performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and consider opportunities for improving the council process. The New England Council is the only council to have undergone an external program review, a practice which has been adopted by other management bodies including international regional fishery management organizations. This project was initiated in 2017 by the Council's Executive Committee and took approximately one year to complete, with support from a steering committee, Council staff, and two external contractors. The program review addressed detailed terms of reference (TOR) focusing on three broad topic areas: (1) the scientific and policy foundations of management, (2) the New England Council's process and operations, and (3) the Council's performance, based on a subset of recent management actions.

The Council engaged a review panel of three scientists and three managers who were knowledgeable about U.S. federal fisheries management but not directly involved in the New England Council process. The review panel met for a four-day meeting in March 2018 that included briefing presentations, panel discussions, public comment, and public and closed review-panel working sessions. The review panel's discussions were also informed by extensive briefing materials including council documents and summaries of input from stakeholders, managers, and scientists. The meeting was led by the review panel chair, who coordinated the review panel's findings and final report to the Council in May 2018. The review panel developed approximately 50 recommendations and recognized several overarching themes, including the value of forward thinking and visioning and the benefit of learning from the experience of other councils. These recommendations were discussed by the Council's Executive Committee and will be considered through the Council's priority-setting process.

The group discussed insight gained from New England's program review and process, including the importance of focusing the scope and TOR, allowing adequate time, gathering public input through both open-ended and quantifiable methods, and structuring review panel membership to ensure that the panel's recommendations align with the TOR and are within a council's purview.

Pacific Fishery Management Council Groundfish Trawl Catch Share Program Five-Year Review

The Pacific Fishery Management Council recently completed a five-year review of the groundfish trawl catch share program, fulfilling the MSA requirement to conduct regular reviews of catch share programs. The Pacific groundfish trawl fishery is a complex fishery that includes a shoreside sector managed using individual fishing quotas (IFQs) and mothership and catcher-processor sectors managed under fishery cooperatives. The catch share program, implemented in 2011 with subsequent trailing actions, aims to achieve a broad range of social, economic, and conservation outcomes including stability, utilization, and individual accountability.

The five-year review process was initiated in 2016 and began with a round of public hearings. The review document was developed in collaboration by Council staff and NOAA Fisheries regional office and science center staff. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee and a stakeholder Community Advisory Board provided additional review and advised the council on potential follow-on actions. The review analyzes the program in terms of economic, community, environmental, and program management performance. The executive summary addresses questions focusing on four topics: (1) changes in net benefits to the nation, (2) financial outcomes for fishery participants, (3) distribution of cost, revenues, effort, and net benefits among fishery participants, and (4) changes in species utilization rates. The Council

reviewed the report in late 2017 and made recommendations that included prioritizing six follow-on actions to address in the short term and identifying others that the Council may consider in the near future.

Participants observed that catch share program reviews are a before-and-after comparison rather than a cause-and-effect analysis, and that it can be difficult to draw concise conclusions. The group also considered whether there could be different ways of structuring reviews to add value: for example, by using socioeconomic information to explore stakeholders' concerns and perceptions of program performance.

Evaluation in the Council Process

Forum participants reflected on the New England and Pacific Council's experiences with evaluation and the role of evaluation in the council process.

Evaluation Can Be Defined in Different Ways

Some Forum participants viewed evaluation as an inclusive term that encompasses many forms of reflection, review, and planning. The group identified examples of periodic checkpoints built into the council process, such as the preparation of annual fishery performance reports by the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic Councils, biennial planning cycles in the Pacific Council, and the development of regional operating agreements between councils and NOAA Fisheries. Others defined evaluation more narrowly as the process of assessing performance against metrics, and questioned whether program reviews and catch share program reviews meet this definition. The group held different perspectives on whether undertaking an evaluation or review process obligates a council to respond to findings.

Evaluation Supports Short-Term and Long-Term Planning

Evaluation enables councils to take a comprehensive perspective and think strategically about how to invest their time and resources to improve a program or process. Forum participants observed that evaluation can support efficiency in short-term planning. For example, the Pacific Council's five-year catch share program review enabled the Council to address program adjustments and follow-on actions as a package. Evaluation also supports long-term planning by prompting councils to consider whether or not and when to address specific findings and outcomes. Participants observed that evaluation can provide a strong foundation for strategic planning by identifying key tradeoffs, opportunities, and challenges. Evaluation is also an iterative process; evaluations can highlight information gaps and past evaluations can inform subsequent ones.

Evaluation Enhances Learning and Preserves Institutional Knowledge

Evaluation can be a vehicle for councils to document and share institutional knowledge, including how councils conduct their operations as well as challenges, successes, and lessons learned from experience. Forum participants observed that reviews help build knowledge of council management programs, particularly as council composition changes. Evaluation and review also provide a reason to revisit goals, objectives, and other forms of guidance to assess their timeliness, relevance, and how they interact with one another.

Long-Term Planning: Looking Ahead

Councils may engage in long-term planning to identify actionable short- and long-term steps toward achieving strategic outcomes. Some councils, including the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic Councils, have undertaken formal strategic planning efforts. Forum participants explored the following regional examples of strategic planning and reflected more broadly on the role of long-term planning in the council process.

Regional Examples

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Visioning and Strategic Plan

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council is the only council that operates under a comprehensive strategic plan encompassing all of its managed fisheries. The Council initiated its strategic planning process in 2011 with a stakeholder-driven Visioning Project, intended to reengage the Council's stakeholders and elicit input on opportunities and challenges. This process included broad public outreach and feedback through surveys, position letters, and port meetings, and resulted in a detailed stakeholder input report. This report provided the basis for the council's strategic planning process, which was carried out by a working group of council members, management partners and stakeholders. The Council enlisted consultants to support the Visioning Project and the strategic planning phase of this work.

The Council adopted its 2014–2018 strategic plan in 2013. The Council’s overarching vision is “healthy and productive marine ecosystems supporting thriving, sustainable marine fisheries that provide the greatest overall benefit to stakeholders.” The Council also identifies six core values of stewardship, integrity, effectiveness, fairness, competence, and clear communication. The strategic plan identifies four goal areas of communication, governance, science, and management in support of the council’s vision, and outlines objectives and strategies within these categories. The strategic plan is carried out through annual implementation plans that serve as planning and evaluation tools, identifying deliverables by FMP, and in support of long-term initiatives including implementation of the region’s Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management. The Council is currently working with a consultant to develop the next iteration of its strategic plan for the years 2020–2024.

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Snapper Grouper Vision Blueprint

In 2015 the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council adopted the 2016–2020 Snapper Grouper Vision Blueprint, a strategic plan that informs the Council’s management of the snapper grouper complex. The Council supported the development of the Vision Blueprint project by convening half-day council Visioning Workshops at each meeting beginning in 2012. The South Atlantic Council also drew on the Mid-Atlantic Council’s experience to develop their process. In 2014, the South Atlantic Council conducted a visioning project in which council staff held a series of facilitated port meetings to elicit stakeholder feedback on challenges and potential solutions for snapper grouper management. This feedback informed the Council’s development of a vision statement: “The snapper grouper fishery is a healthy, sustainable fishery that balances and optimizes benefits for all.”

The 2016–2020 Vision Blueprint translates this vision into actionable steps for the Council to consider and was developed through Council meeting workshops and with additional public input. The Vision Blueprint is organized into four strategic goal areas that include science, management, communication, and governance. Within each of these goal areas the Council prioritized objectives, strategies, and priority actions the Council could take in support of the Vision. The Vision Blueprint also includes an implementation schedule organized by action item to support the Council’s planning and evaluation, and an evaluation plan with an annual, biennial, and comprehensive reviews that enable the Council to assess progress toward implementation. The Council has supported the Vision Blueprint through two dedicated Vision Blueprint amendments addressing seasonality and retention in the commercial and recreational components of the snapper grouper fishery, the development of a citizen science program, and other strategies.

Discussion: Long-Term Planning in the Council Process

Forum participants shared their personal reflections and lessons learned from participating in strategic planning, and considered how long-term planning intersects with other aspects of council strategy including short-term planning and evaluation.

Strategic Planning Supports Short-Term Planning

Strategic planning can help councils balance their short-term priorities with longer-term aspirations and provide transparency in terms of how councils manage priorities and tradeoffs over time. In particular, Forum participants felt that strategic planning can enable councils to shift away from reactive management driven by short-term challenges toward proactive management guided by goals. Long-term planning also enables councils to invest and lay the groundwork for emerging challenges (e.g., climate change) and ambitious goals (e.g., data improvements, implementing ecosystem-based fisheries management). The group noted that strategic planning is not the only vehicle for long-term planning. Participants identified other examples of long-term planning, such as the North Pacific Council’s development of a Programmatic Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the groundfish fishery.

Long-Term Planning Creates a Shared Frame of Reference

Long-term planning provides continuity to link a council’s past, present, and future. Forum participants remarked on the close relationship between strategic planning and evaluation, noting that strategic planning begins with taking stock of past and present challenges to plan for the future and develop goals, objectives, and metrics for progress. Strategic plans and supporting documents (e.g., annual implementation plans) can also serve as a reference for a council’s body of work and help capture institutional knowledge for the benefit of current and future participants in the council process.

Strategic Planning Is an Active Process

Forum participants observed that a strategic plan is most useful as a living document that is actively referenced and informs council operations. Demonstrating progress is also important; both regions' strategic plans include strategies for evaluating and communicating progress toward goals and objectives. Forum participants noted that it can be especially challenging but important to demonstrate progress toward goals and objectives related to communication, governance, and strategic outcomes (e.g., simplifying regulations).

Stakeholder and Council Engagement Are Essential

The Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic Councils' strategic planning efforts included extensive stakeholder outreach to build trust and ground their strategic plan in public input. Public participation can be an objective as well as a characteristic of a strategic planning process. The group also recognized the value of focused council engagement and shared ownership in a strategic planning process. Both councils actively involved council members and staff in the strategic planning process.

Strategic Planning Is a Versatile Tool

Forum participants observed that strategic planning is a versatile tool under all scenarios. Challenges and crises can provide the impetus for long-term planning, but positive circumstances can be a driver as well. For example, the Mid-Atlantic's strategic planning process framed the Council's transition from an era of stock rebuilding toward a broader vision of long-term sustainability. Other regional factors such as stock status and data availability also influence the drivers and context for strategic planning.

Strategic Planning Is a Process and Not an Answer

Forum participants reflected on managing expectations for a strategic plan. Engaging stakeholders and council members to craft a shared vision does not imply consensus, and individuals will have conflicting perspectives on how to achieve goals and objectives. Strategic planning is also a significant investment and a long-term commitment. Participants commented on the importance of establishing a clear process that includes defined roles, responsibilities and milestones, engaging and communicating with constituents, and considering how a strategic plan intersects with the responsibilities of NOAA Fisheries and other management partners. The group also recognized that the energy and momentum generated by strategic planning may diminish over time, particularly among stakeholders, and that the important work of implementation is a long-term process.

STRATEGY AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Forum discussions considered how councils can enhance the capacity of individuals and institutions to support a high-functioning and strategic council process. The group explored four related topics including: (1) learning the council process, (2) leadership, (3) institutional knowledge, and (4) building collaborative capacity.

Learning the Council Process

Council Training and Resources

Incoming council members and council and NOAA Fisheries staff encounter a challenging learning curve. To participate effectively in their roles, they must build their understanding of the legislative foundations of the MSA and other federal laws, the fundamentals of fisheries science and management, regional context and management practices, council operations, and other topics. Forum participants reflected on their introduction to the council process, and identified resources and experiences that have positively impacted their ability to function in their council role as new and experienced participants.

- **People and relationships:** Individuals within the council community, including council members, council and agency staff, advisors, and stakeholders can all share valuable experience, context, and insight. Forum participants emphasized the benefit of learning through asking questions. The group also shared individual experiences of learning from their colleagues, from active mentorship to passive opportunities like observing and sitting next to more experienced council members.
- **Experiences:** In-person and immersive learning opportunities can provide council members with important firsthand experience. Many councils provide office visits, orientations, and staff introductions to incoming

council members. Other opportunities are specific to regions or states. Forum participants shared examples including formal orientation sessions provided by state agencies, and informal pre-meeting discussions among council representatives from a particular state. Some councils hold regular social events in conjunction with council meetings. Individuals can also seek out experience, for example by attending council meetings prior to the commencement of their council terms, attending advisory body meetings, meeting NOAA Fisheries and plan team staff, and attending additional training sessions such as the Marine Resources Education Program workshops.

- **Documents and information sources:** Forum participants described a variety of information products that their councils provide. Some of these are provided specifically to new council members and others are intended for the broader public.
 - General council process and MSA (e.g., Navigating the Council Process guides, lists of Frequently Asked Questions, lists of acronyms)
 - Council operations and logistics (e.g., council staff contacts, operating procedures, meetings, travel and reimbursement policies)
 - Specific science and management topics (e.g., stock assessment)
 - Current issues and council actions (e.g., newsletters)
 - Visuals and multimedia, (e.g., public hearing videos (Gulf of Mexico Council) and story maps (South Atlantic Council))

[Reflections on Learning and Onboarding](#)

Forum participants often described their learning experience as overwhelming and intimidating, given the depth and breadth of knowledge needed to be an active participant in the council process. The group recognized that prior experience can be valuable, but that even those who have already been active in the council process as stakeholders or agency representatives face a significant learning curve. Orientation to the council process is not just about information and regulations, but building relationships, developing a new vocabulary, and understanding the institutional context for the council process. The group shared the following additional reflections.

[Learning Requires Personal Initiative](#)

Council members often take personal initiative to seek out information, build relationships, and ask questions, particularly after the initial orientation phase. Forum participants emphasized the importance of getting to know the council community by becoming acquainted with other council members, staff, advisors, and stakeholders. Some also described seeking out firsthand experience through conversations, demonstrations and on-the-water experience to build their understanding of fishery operations and stakeholder perspectives.

[Mentorship Accelerates the Learning Process](#)

Forum participants felt strongly that peer mentorship helps council members build their knowledge and participate more confidently in the council process. Forum participants felt that the most important quality of a mentor relationship is the opportunity for a council member to seek clarification and ask questions without judgment. Mentorship can take different forms. For example, some Forum participants described outgoing council members helping new appointees transition into their roles. Mentorship can also extend to a broader cohort: for example, state agency representatives may take the initiative to serve as a resource for appointees from their state. Council members may also serve as mentors to stakeholders by helping them understand the council process. Forum participants observed that although mentorship is not currently formalized within the council process, opportunities do exist for council members to provide and seek support from their peers.

[Learning Is an Ongoing Process](#)

Learning the council process is an ongoing responsibility. Forum participants remarked on the value of reinforcing knowledge through different means including written materials, conversations, and in-person experience. The group observed that participation and exposure over time are important to absorbing information and terminology, learning about council procedures (particularly Robert's Rules of Order) and observing behavior, expectations, and interpersonal

dynamics. Forum participants also observed that some experience can only be gained on the job and around the council table. Many described grappling with a shift in perspective as they stepped into a decision making role, from focusing on a specific issue or fishery to taking on a more comprehensive set of responsibilities.

Leadership

Qualities of Leadership

Forum participants reflected on how leadership supports learning, evaluation, and planning in the council process. Individuals reflected on their own experience to describe the qualities of leadership, and how leadership supports an effective council process.

Forum participants first described leadership in terms of personal characteristics and conduct, observing that a good leader is a skilled communicator (e.g., articulate, concise) and an attentive listener. Leadership is also a function of how an individual interacts with a group over time. Forum participants felt that a good leader exhibits patience, respect, and flexibility, and is recognized as approachable and trustworthy. These qualities are important to navigating contentious topics and interactions. Good leaders also recognize their limitations, and are willing to delegate responsibility and acknowledge when they are wrong or are not knowledgeable on a topic. In addition, participants felt that effective leaders are those who are willing to share responsibility and encourage others to develop their leadership potential.

Leadership also involves oversight and stewardship of the council process. Forum participants felt that an effective leader helps facilitate discussion and elicit different perspectives, and is also able to synthesize discussion and help a group make forward progress. These qualities depend on specific skills including knowledge of the council process, the ability to run a meeting, and time management. Leadership also involves fostering trust and respect for the council process, clarifying misconceptions, and communicating the intent and principles of the council and management framework. Finally, the group observed a strong connection between leadership and strategy, noting that effective leaders are those who have a strong grasp of history and institutional knowledge, are proactive and able to help their council navigate challenging issues, and are able to help their council articulate its aspirations.

Cultivating Leadership

Forum participants observed that although some qualities of leadership are innate, others can be cultivated over time. The group highlighted the linkage between leadership and knowledge of the council process. Participants emphasized that staying informed, being prepared for meetings, and building knowledge of foundational terms and concepts is critical for participating effectively in the process, from communicating ideas to serving in a formal leadership capacity.

The council community can also cultivate leadership by providing opportunities for professional development, and enabling participants to build their knowledge and confidence to take on new responsibilities. Turnover and leadership transitions are inherent to the council appointment process, and can also result from the retirement of longtime council, state, and federal agency staff. Forum participants observed that advisory panels can serve as a training opportunity for new and young stakeholders to become more active in the council process. Among council and agency staff, professional development can include formally preparing staff to take on expanded responsibilities. Finally, individuals and the council community as a whole can demonstrate and encourage leadership by fostering a positive atmosphere. Forum participants commented that individuals and councils can help reinforce values of trust, mutual respect, and confidence in the council process.

Institutional Knowledge

Institutional knowledge describes the collective experiences and knowledge of individuals and institutions, and provides the foundation for learning, evaluation and planning in the council process. Institutional knowledge can include a council's history and body of work over time, council process, and the stated rationale behind council decision making. This form of institutional knowledge is often explicitly and formally documented. Institutional knowledge can also encompass the knowledge, experience, and perspectives that reside with individuals and is not explicitly stated or documented. Forum participants described this facet of institutional knowledge as the thought process and context underlying the council process.

Councils may formally revisit their council history through the development of council actions, and through the process of evaluation and long-term planning. Institutional knowledge can also be shared informally through conversations, or may not be shared at all. The group noted that institutional knowledge is acquired and often lost as council members, staff, and other participants cycle through the council process, and observed that councils could make a more deliberate effort to capture this experience and knowledge. Participants reflected on their own council history, including the formative experiences that have shaped their region's fisheries and management process, and considered how institutional knowledge can support their work.

Institutional Knowledge Includes Shared and Individual Experiences

Institutional knowledge includes experiences shared by a group, and also includes unique individual experiences and history. Every individual in the council process has a different vantage point. For example, Forum discussions identified the implementation of annual catch limits (ACLs) and accountability measures following the 2006 reauthorization of the MSA as a transformative experience across council regions. Although many long-serving council members and staff view ACL implementation as a defining phase of their career, for newer participants these requirements are simply part of the council process.

History Can Provide a Frame of Reference

Institutional knowledge can serve as a baseline against which a council can manage expectations and interpret change. Forum participants observed that historical context can provide insight into possible future outcomes (e.g., stock rebuilding), and provide a frame of reference for changing environmental and stock conditions (e.g., fluctuations in abundance). The group also suggested interpreting historical trends with caution, noting that past observations do not necessarily reflect baseline conditions.

Institutional Knowledge Is Embedded within the Council Process

Council practices recognize and perpetuate the collection of institutional knowledge through the evolution and documentation of fishery management plans. Forum participants also commented on the close linkage between institutional knowledge and council activities related to learning, planning, and evaluation. For example, implementing a strategic plan, evaluating the performance of a management program, and revisiting goals and objectives all prompt councils to reflect on the events and the rationale leading up to a point in time. Councils document institutional knowledge in real time through their routine communications, including newsletters, meeting summaries, and other multimedia outlets. Councils can also capture history and context through publications specifically dedicated to this purpose, including fishery performance reports, commemorative publications, and the documentation of council staff procedures.

Institutional Knowledge Can Be External to the Council Process

Stakeholders in the council process possess institutional knowledge of their own that can be compiled and contributed to inform fisheries science and management. In some regions, cooperative industry structures and third-party monitors facilitate the collection of catch disposition and other information. Forum participants from the North Pacific region noted the value of cultural and traditional knowledge as a form of institutional knowledge that spans a much longer time frame the council process, and can provide particularly valuable insight into environmental change. The group also identified other types of publications that capture history and context including National Research Council reports, oral histories, and scholarly articles and histories.

Institutional Knowledge Is Closely Linked with Learning and Mentorship

Institutional knowledge is a resource that new participants can leverage to build their understanding of the council process and gain nuanced insight into council issues and dynamics. Forum participants recounted their own experiences of imparting their institutional knowledge to incoming council members and staff by sharing documents or simply by making themselves available. Participants also commented on the value of colleagues who can help translate their experience and institutional knowledge across roles and regions.

Institutional Knowledge Is an Investment

Institutional knowledge is not always readily accessible or formally compiled. Forum participants observed that building their own institutional knowledge can depend on taking the initiative to share and seek out experience and information. The group felt that councils could make a more intentional effort to capture and reflect on their history, noting that institutional knowledge is frequently lost as council members, staff, and others retire. Participants reinforced that institu-

tional knowledge is not just a matter of formal documentation; experience is often shared through interactions including conversations and social events that foster a sense of community and encourage storytelling.

Institutional Knowledge Involves Converting Experience into Knowledge

Forum participants emphasized that institutional knowledge is not a matter of documenting every detail, and that its value lies in extracting insight and lessons learned. The group noted that too much information is overwhelming, and that institutional knowledge contributes differently to each of the steps of the council process including decision making, looking backward, and looking ahead. Participants also felt that there is a balance that involves respecting and learning from experience, without being unduly constrained by the past or unwilling to make changes.

Collaborative Capacity

The 2018 Forum concluded with a final opportunity for participants to reflect on opportunities for councils to continue learning, sharing experience, and building connections within the federal fisheries management community. Councils will continue to navigate new opportunities and challenges that add to the complexity of the federal fisheries management process and drive the need for learning, evaluation, and planning. The 2018 Forum, as well as the 15 previous forums, demonstrate the value of engaging in discussion for the sake of discussion and investing in the professional development of council members and staff. Forum participants considered the steps they could take individually, at the council level, and as a national community to sustain these functions, build institutional capacity, and strengthen the federal fisheries management process. The federal fisheries management community may choose to further explore these opportunities following the conclusion of the Fisheries Forum program.