

Fishery Ecosystem Plan and Red Tide Fishery Ecosystem Issue Communications Plan Outline January 2024

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) has been developing a Fishery Ecosystem Plan that defines a systematic approach to fisheries management that aims to improve resilience and sustainability of the ecosystem by considering the physical, biological, economic, and social interactions among fishery related components of the ecosystem, including humans. The Fishery Ecosystem Plan functions primarily through Individual Fishery Ecosystem Issues which will be selected by the Council and worked on through the Loop outlined in *Figure 1*.

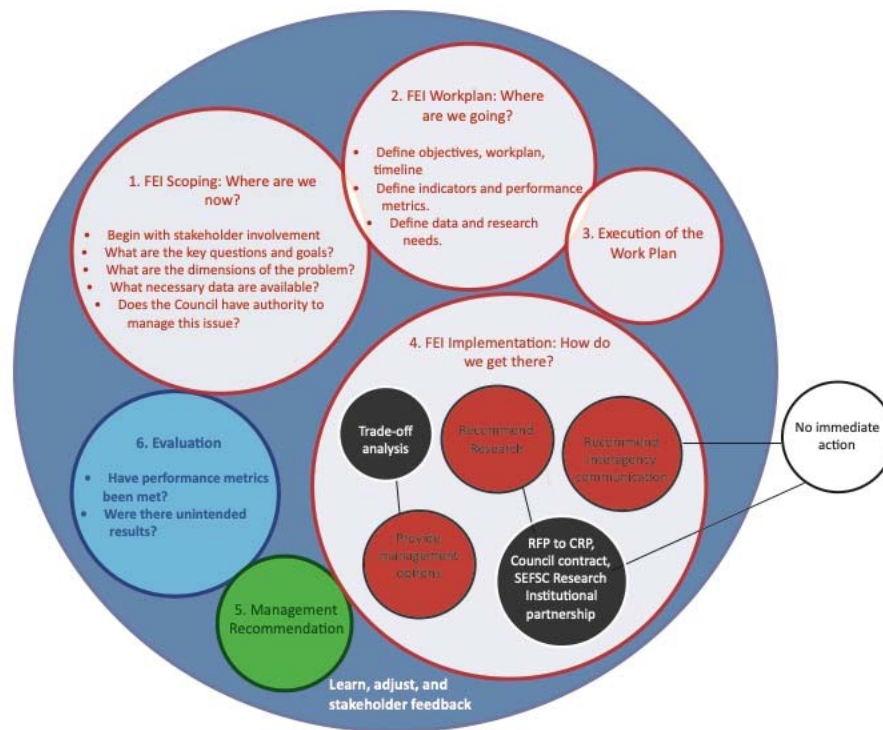


Figure 1: Fishery Ecosystem Issue Loop

Successful execution of the Council’s Fishery Ecosystem Plan depends on communicating the Council’s overall objectives of the process, expected time period, clearly framing expectations, and collation and inclusion of stakeholder feedback, as applicable. As such, a robust communications plan must be outlined and executed as an integral part of the Fishery Ecosystem Plan and approach. The following Fishery Ecosystem Plan and Red Tide Fishery Ecosystem Issue Communications Plan Outline have been informed by the Council’s Ecosystem Technical Committee (ETC) and the Outreach and Education Technical Committee (O&E).

General Fishery Ecosystem Plan Communications

While most stakeholder engagement efforts will be concentrated around individual Fishery Ecosystem Issues, there is still a need to communicate broadly about the Fishery Ecosystem Plan process, high level objectives, and expected outcomes. It is crucial to temper expectations of outcomes and clearly communicate timelines from the Fishery Ecosystem Plan process because it differs from the Council's typical regulatory process, which typically addresses issues on a single-species basis. Because the Fishery Ecosystem Plan process is so complex and nuanced, forward-facing communications should be simple and speak to a broad audience, while providing opportunities for users to explore more complex resources.

Action item:

- Redesign and maintain the Fishery Ecosystem Management webpage on the Council's website – This webpage should house relevant materials and explain the Fishery Ecosystem Plan/Fishery Ecosystem Issue processes in a simple and visually engaging manner. The webpage should include language that tempers expectations by making the public aware of expected timelines, funding limitations, and outcomes of the Fishery Ecosystem Plan process.

Gathering and Ranking Fishery Ecosystem Issues

As on-the-water experts, stakeholders are a rich source of information and can be deeply impacted by Fishery Ecosystem Issues. As such, they are well positioned to identify Fishery Ecosystem Issues and play a role in ranking their priority. The Council should provide a pathway for stakeholders to identify Fishery Ecosystem Issues and allow stakeholders an opportunity to rank the importance of issues under consideration before the Council reviews and selects a Fishery Ecosystem Issue to begin developing.

Action Items:

- Develop a Fishery Ecosystem Issue Identification Tool - An online tool should be developed that allows stakeholders to identify Fishery Ecosystem Issues. This identification tool should be continuously open for responses as the Council continues work through the Fishery Ecosystem Plan. This identification tool should be housed on the Fishery Ecosystem Management webpage and can be advertised through established Council communication pathways. Special advertisement will be done closer to the period when the Fishery Ecosystem Issue List will be revised and ranked by the Council.
- Develop a Fishery Ecosystem Issue Ranking Tool - An online tool should be created that allows stakeholders the opportunity to rank potential Fishery Ecosystem Issues before the Council reviews and selects future Fishery Ecosystem Issues. This ranking tool should allow users to provide a qualitative measure of how much impact potential Fishery Ecosystem Issues have on the community and associated fisheries. The ranking tool will be deployed incrementally in advance of Council Fishery Ecosystem Issue review, and should be open for temporary increments of time immediately before the Council review. This ranking tool can be housed on the Fishery Ecosystem Management

webpage and can be advertised through established Council communication pathways.

General Fishery Ecosystem Issue Communications

Once a Fishery Ecosystem Issue is selected, the stakeholder engagement will play a pivotal role in identifying the effect that the issue has on fishermen and associated communities. As such, communications materials will draw awareness to the Council's work on the Fishery Ecosystem Issue. Materials will define the Fishery Ecosystem Issue, outline relevant information known on each Fishery Ecosystem Issue, and communicate the process and potential outcomes of the Fishery Ecosystem Issue. Throughout the development of each Fishery Ecosystem Issue, a list of engaged and impacted stakeholders should be curated to encourage a feedback loop that benefits the Fishery Ecosystem Issue process and impacted parties. Finally, there should be an evaluation of the effects each Fishery Ecosystem Issue has on associated fishing communities. A measurement of sentiment from stakeholders and a measurement of social and economic effects should be taken to gauge both the depth and range of impacts of each Fishery Ecosystem Issue. While the former can be addressed through outreach, the latter should be measured through established social and economic indicators.

Action Items:

- Create a dedicated webpage on the Council's website for each Fishery Ecosystem Issue – A webpage outlining each selected Fishery Ecosystem Issue should be created and linked to the Fishery Ecosystem Management webpage. Each webpage should outline relevant information on each issue and have a timeline of expected deliverables.
- Curate a list of involved stakeholders - For each Fishery Ecosystem Issue, a list of stakeholders that are impacted by or interested in the specific issue should be created. Staff should allow members of the public to self-identify as an interested party, and should ask extra-jurisdictional agencies for help identifying appropriate contacts. Staff should use this list for targeted Fishery Ecosystem Issue-based communications.
- Measure stakeholder sentiment - An online tool should be used to gather general feedback relative to each Fishery Ecosystem Issue. Responses to this tool should be analyzed for sentiment and should compare responses by fishing sector and location.

Red Tide Fishery Ecosystem Issue Communications

Since red tide is not an issue that can be effectively controlled by direct Council regulatory action, communications can be the most useful way to insight positive outcomes from the Fishery Ecosystem Issue effort. Not all fisheries issues can be solved with fishing regulations and this provides a good opportunity for the Council to display its intentions to improve the sustainability of fisheries in light of factors outside of the Council's jurisdiction.

Action Items:

- Host a Red Tide Symposium – Host a symposium that brings together a range of affected stakeholders, extra-jurisdictional agencies, media, and other groups that have a stake in red tide impacts to collaboratively address the issue in a holistic manner.
- Produce a Federal Fisheries Red Tide Report – Since there are a range of existing groups that already address red tide, the Council should develop a report that summarizes the social, biological, and economic impacts that red tide has on federal fisheries and share them with existing groups on a regular basis.

Evaluation

After each Fishery Ecosystem Issue is completed, the Council should ask stakeholders for feedback on how it performed in an effort to improve future Fishery Ecosystem Issue communications.

Action Item:

- Have deeply engaged stakeholder groups ask their constituents for feedback on how Fishery Ecosystem Issue communications were executed.