

Transboundary Resource Assessment Committee (TRAC) - Overview, Structure, and Process

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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. Given these changes, a small committee of Science staff and resource managers suggested changes to the TRAC process, which were subsequently approved by the TRAC and TMGC with some modifications. 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 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

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and Fisheries and Oceans, Canada (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 intersessional 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, including the publication of product documents and the scheduling of 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 (Terms of Reference) is a succinct statement of the analyses and review that are requested of the TRAC. The TMGC, in consultation with the TRAC co-chairs, edits and approves the remit. The remit outlines the required products of the TRAC along with the timelines.

Preparation of Assessments:

NMFS and DFO designate co-experts, one from NMFS and one from DFO, for each stock reviewed at a TRAC review meeting. The co-experts are responsible for coordinating data preparation, leading the completion of analyses, facilitating the preparation of working papers for TRAC and presenting those working papers at TRAC review meetings. 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 assessment advice and associated peer review. The most extensive evaluations of alternative models, data, and assumptions occur in periodic benchmark assessment reviews. Less extensive assessment reviews 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. To date, Eastern Georges Bank haddock is the only stock with an interim update.

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 to the TMGC:

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 and Steering Committee. TRAC co-chairs and stock co-experts may be called upon by the TMGC to make presentations at public consultations.

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, which balances timing of surveys, available data, and federal holidays in the two countries. 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 be negotiated on an annual or bi-annual basis by the TRAC co-chairs, with the goal of equitable contributions by NMFS and DFO over time while taking advantage of any efficiencies in contracting.

Assessment Leads:

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.

Reviewers:

The TRAC co-chairs will identify reviewers who are independent of the assessments and who bring particular knowledge and experience to the table, typically selecting at least one reviewer from each country. 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 welcome to participate in meeting discussions by asking questions, raising concerns, or sharing additional information and context 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. Public comment opportunities for stakeholders and other meeting participants will be provided and facilitated by the Meeting Chair.

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.

Assessment Review:

In the interest of transparency and in order to avoid any perceived conflict of interest, the assessment review for each stock will be divided into three 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 may summarise the discussion and any initial conclusions, as is necessary.
2. Review and contributions by all meeting participants. This would include 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.
3. The science assessment staff, reviewers, and resource managers will use this additional discussion and input from part 2 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.

The TRAC Status Report will describe the final outcomes of the scientific review, as informed by any intervening stakeholder or public comments. . The Proceedings will include a summary of the scientific review and decisions, as well as the stakeholder and public engagement and comments. The purpose of documenting the full discussion through the Proceedings is to ensure transparency regarding the engagement, information shared, and decision-making process.

TRAC Status Report (TSR) Review:

When multiple stocks are assessed, it is proposed that the review of all TSRs 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. Note that comments and edits to the TSR at this stage will be focused on clarification, not revisiting decisions made during the assessment review.

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 TSR review. 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 Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat 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 assessment and TSR review. It will also avoid the inefficiencies of editing grammar and spelling as a larger group. New information or issues that were not discussed

during the TSR review 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.