

# Council Coordination Committee Communications Group

## Meeting Summary: February 15-17, 2023

### Introductions

Dr. Carrie Simmons, Executive Director of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, convened the meeting by welcoming attendees and thanking everyone for the time and effort undertaken to attend. Ms. Emily Muehlstein, the Public Information Officer for the Gulf Council, led the group in an icebreaker activity (*Change 5 Things*) that set the stage for using the group as a resource to assist, not only in the success of Council Coordination Committee (CCC) communications, but also in individual Council communications endeavors.

### Public Comment

In advance of the meeting, each Council answered a series of questions on [current Council public comment practices](#). Three quarters of the Councils use a public comment management system. The North Pacific and Pacific Councils use a shared system and the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils use the same system. The following six Councils have official public comment guidelines or policies:

[SAFMC](#)

[GMFMC](#)

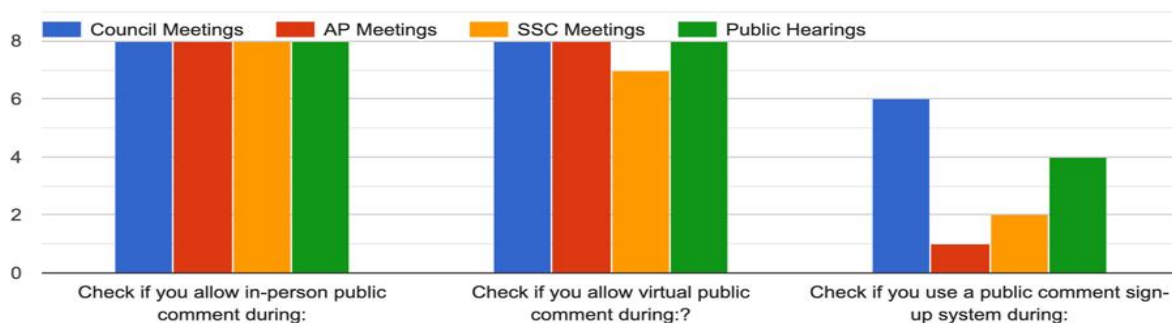
[NEFMC](#)

[WPFMC](#)

[NPFMC](#)

[PFMC](#)

All Councils allow in-person public comment during Council, Advisory Panel (AP), Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), and Public Hearing meetings. Virtual comment is also allowed during all of those meetings across all Councils, with the exception of the Pacific Council during SSC meetings. The use of a public comment sign-up system is not consistent across meeting types.



Maria Davis (NPFMC) began the session by giving a brief [presentation](#) on the North Pacific's public comment practices. Each Council handles public comment at the Council meetings differently. Many of the Councils allow comment for each committee, some allow comment for each motion, and some only allow comment once when Full Council convenes. This difference is based on several factors, including the average number of commenters and the meeting structure itself (i.e., if committees are held together or separately from Full Council).

The group discussed how virtual comment and hybrid meetings have changed public comments. Some Councils reported that the quality of comments has degraded and that the tone is more aggressive, while some Councils noted no discernible difference. The Pacific Council noted that since deploying its electronic sign-up for virtual comment, the quality of the comments has improved; the commenters are more educated and remain on point.

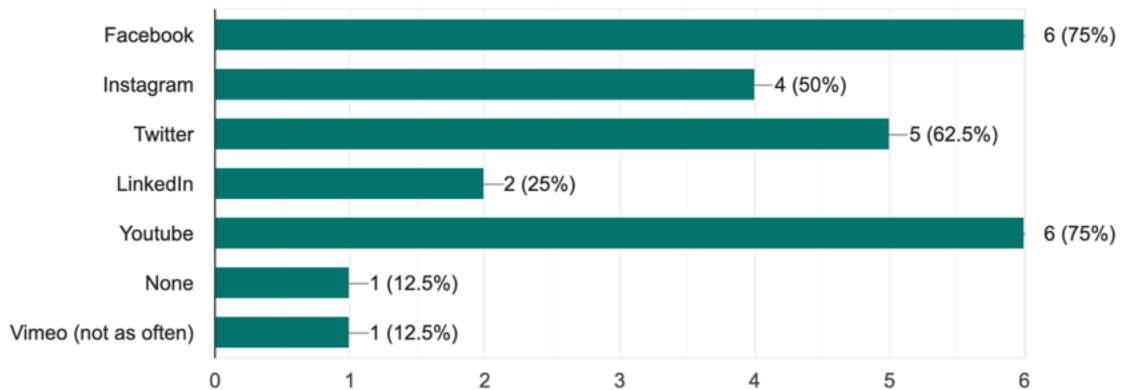
The group also discussed how written public comment is collected and communicated to the Council. The lead time given to the public to submit comments is dependent upon how Councils host their committees. Some Councils require comments to be submitted far in advance of Council meetings while other Councils open opportunities to comment a day or two in advance of a meeting. All Councils add written comments to Council meeting briefing materials. Gulf and South Atlantic Council staff summarize and present comments to the Council on each amendment before final action is taken.

### **Social Media**

In advance of the meeting, each Council answered a series of questions on [current Council social media practices](#). All of the Councils, with the exception of the New England and North Pacific Councils, engage in some type of social media, with Facebook and YouTube being the most popular platforms. The [Gulf](#) and [Western Pacific](#) Councils have official social media guidance/policy documents. Councils typically use social media platform analytics or Google Analytics and community feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of reaching intended audiences. Social media managers identify popular posts and try to replicate the content to improve impressions/interactions.

## Which social media platforms does your Council utilize?

8 responses



Amy Vandehey (WPFMC) led the session, which began with a brief discussion on the most appropriate platforms for reaching Council audiences. Facebook reaches Council audiences most effectively for two reasons:

- User demographics align with the typical demographics of Council audiences.
- App allows content managers to add web links in posts and there is no character number limit.

Instagram was identified as another effective platform because it reaches a younger audience. However, Instagram does not allow for direct links in posts to more effectively drive users to Council content. Twitter is mostly ineffective because anglers are not typically engaged as users and LinkedIn is mainly useful for sharing employment opportunities. WhatsApp was mentioned to be an effective tool in the Caribbean and Western Pacific because it is commonly used in communities outside of the mainland United States.

Although a majority of the Councils utilize YouTube as a medium to share video content, few actively produce engaging content. The Gulf Council discussed its recent implementation of YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels which have dramatically increased the amount of impressions reached on those platforms. The South Atlantic Council noted that Instagram stories highlighting its Council Meeting agendas have helped recruit new participants.

It was noted that you 'get out of social media what you put into it.' If done properly, it can be an incredibly effective mechanism for spreading awareness of the Council, sharing Council news, and encouraging participation in the Council process. However, if done poorly, it can have the opposite effect. The group also discussed a fear that if the Councils don't participate in social media, then in their absence, advocacy groups will control the narrative.

The group discussed the staff time commitment required to effectively run social media accounts. The Western Pacific Council contracted a company that suggested and helped to initiate a social media account organization system (SocialPilot) that reduces the time required to maintain the content and provided tips and tricks for effectively reaching audiences in each platform. The Caribbean Council estimated it takes 25-30 hours of staff time per week to create content in Spanish and English for its social media accounts. The North Pacific Council does not engage in social media because it doesn't have the bandwidth to properly run the accounts. The South Atlantic Council exclusively uses social media to provide content but does not engage in back-and-forth conversations. The Gulf Council uses social media as a customer service tool and is deeply entrenched in its use. The North Pacific Council recognized that engaging in social media will eventually prove useful. The Pacific Council currently posts plain links on its social media and recognized that the content could be improved with dedicated staff time. Generally, the group concluded that if you have the staff bandwidth to engage in social media, it can be an incredibly effective communication tool.

The group also discussed the prevalence of negativity on social media platforms. It was noted that if social media is recognized as a customer service tool, then the negativity is expected and opportunistic because it provides learning opportunities. People don't typically contact customer service to tell them they're doing a good job. However, customer service complaints that are handled properly (and publicly on social media) have the potential to turn skeptics into advocates and effective partners. The Gulf Council shared individual post analytics to prove that despite negative comments on the post, the overall reach of the content is always an order of magnitude larger than the negative responses.

### **Websites**

In advance of the meeting, each Council answered a series of questions on [current Council website management practices](#). The division of website administration responsibilities varies greatly among Councils. Some Councils divide labor across numerous administrative, IT, and communications staff, while some rely on a single individual with emergency back-up personnel.

Nick Smillie (SAFMC) led the session with an overview of the website redesign process recently undertaken by the South Atlantic Council. The group discussed various methods for archiving meeting materials on websites to avoid content bloat and retain storage. The South Atlantic Council shared a popular feature that shows the most recently uploaded meetings materials on a sidebar. The New England Council uses a separate "E-Agenda" for all its meeting materials and accepts email submissions of public comments. The Gulf Council only hosts 5 years' worth of meetings on its site with the rest stored on a public file server. All Councils agreed that using

a naming taxonomy and maintaining an organized media library on the back end of websites improves the website administration process.

Nick shared the SAFMC website's Fish Rules regulation integration, which prompted discussion on the pros and cons of hosting regulations on Council websites. The Gulf Council noted that it is also creating regulation integration, although it is taking longer than expected. The group identified that it is not the Council's responsibility to share regulations and discussed the heavy workload required to maintain regulation accuracy. However, the vastly different demographics of the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, with large numbers of recreational constituents, potentially justify providing regulations to the public as a courtesy.

The group discussed that rather than housing amendments on Council websites, it's more appropriate to link to the NOAA Institutional Repository version of each document. This will ensure that the final version of the amendment is displayed publicly and will minimize the burden on staff to organize and archive amendments while meeting 508 compliance. However, currently only the North Pacific Council is doing it this way, and not all Councils agreed with this approach.

The New England Council shared a recent challenge it experienced with unsolicited Bot traffic and complete loss of published hyperlinks. The group discussed the importance of owning the website domain, especially to avoid future Bot issues.

The group also discussed using an accessibility widget that allows individual users to modify the colors, font, and contrast of a website for user consumption. Finally, the group discussed the need to ensure that all PDFs uploaded to the site allow Optical Character Recognition that allows text in the PDF to be searchable and readable by a screen reader.

### **Meeting Practices**

In advance of the meeting, each Council answered a series of questions on [current Council meeting practices](#). All of the Councils reported that meeting practices have changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Namely, more hybrid and virtual meeting participation is occurring across SSC, AP, Committee, and Council meetings.

Sandra Mondal (PFMC) led the session with a summary of how the Pacific Fishery Management Council conducts meetings. Each Council operates quite differently regarding how and when APs, SSCs, and Council Committees meet throughout the Council meeting cycle. These differences make it difficult to directly compare meeting structure and set-up.

Staff members involved in setting up meetings vary by Council with some requiring 'all hands-on deck' and some using only core IT or administrative staff. Similarly, each Council handles the recording of motions during meetings differently. Some Councils rely upon a single administrative or IT staff member and some Councils have their technical/analytical staff take on that responsibility.

The group discussed the legal and/or functional requirement for having meeting attendees sign-in each day during Council meetings. There remains the question of whether it's required by law and what utility it serves. All Councils do require public commenters to sign-in as a separate exercise. The group also discussed the requirement to post meeting notices in places beyond website posting and email notifications ((16 U.S.C. 1852 *et seq.*) MSA(302) sections 97-453, 99-659, 101-627 (i) 104-297, 109-479 (2) (C)). Some Councils regularly pay for placements in local newspapers. Other Councils were unaware of the requirement.

### **Engaging the Public in Complex Management**

In advance of the meeting, each Council answered a series of questions on [current Council practices for engaging the public in complex management](#). The products produced by each Council to communicate during different stages of the management process vary greatly across Councils. These variations are in part due to differing audiences and in part due to communication staffing and bandwidth. Some Councils communicate with the public solely via press releases or newsletters, while other Councils produce blog articles, videos, brochures, and other outreach items.

Emily Muehlstein (GMFMC) led the session beginning with a discussion of each Council's intended audience. The Gulf and South Atlantic Councils explained their need to produce multiple products across different social and traditional media platforms to engage their large recreational audiences in complex management. The New England Council explained that press releases and email announcements were its primary forms of communication. Press releases are amplified by gear shops and auction houses, which print them and share them with crew. In a high-profile move, the New England Council recently paid for two billboards to drive crew attendance for a controversial scallop issue aired at local meetings. That endeavor was successful in an isolated geographic region, but it was both complicated and expensive. The Caribbean Council provides messaging in both Spanish and English and emphasized the importance of proper translation.

The group discussed communication products that are tangential to the management process, but further serve to engage interested parties beyond strictly focusing on management decisions. These products help build rapport with the public and make the Council more

accessible. The Western Pacific Council publishes an annual lunar calendar, the South Atlantic Council hosts a science seminar series, the Caribbean Council created a recipe book, and the Mid-Atlantic Council has published species identification guides.

The group also discussed hosting federal fishing regulations. Both the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils host commercial and recreational regulations on their websites and on mobile applications via Fish Rules. In the Southeast region, regulation information is consistently popular and serves as a primary mechanism for driving people to the Council websites. It was noted that hosting regulations requires dedicated staff time and is a large responsibility. For that reason, it may only be appropriate in regions with large recreational fishing audiences.

The group then discussed how Council staff members build rapport with the public. Some Councils encourage staff to be forward-facing with images published online and social interaction during meetings, while some Councils have little interaction with constituents. The group discussed whether the use of community leaders or influencers was appropriate. The group discussed concerns that it is difficult to control messaging from individuals who are not Council staff members. The South Atlantic has successfully enlarged its community engagement through partnering with some established community leaders to access its audience without relying on them to deliver messages.

The group briefly touched on the Marine Resource Education Program (MREP). In some regions, Council members and staff are highly involved and, in other regions, less so. The group also discussed methods to communicate Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) recreational data calibrations. This issue is more important in regions with active recreational fishing sectors. In all cases, the Councils shared a struggle to effectively explain the calibrations and their implications. Additionally, most Councils felt that there was a lack of appropriate outreach materials to assist with informational campaigns specific to calibrations. The group committed to sharing effective products on the topic as they are developed.

Next, Emily Muehlstein (GMFMC) shared a demonstration on readability. She explained that the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Score is based on two main factors: sentence structure (e.g., active vs. passive voice), and the number of words and syllables per sentence. Ms. Muehlstein demonstrated how to use the built-in tool in Microsoft Word. The group attempted to re-write the introductory paragraph on the Gulf Council's web page to improve its readability to a 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. The group was unable to convert the text to that level without losing its meaning. The group determined that complex fishery management topics may not always be easily simplified for all audiences. To circumvent this problem, the group agreed that it was

reasonable to create simple materials with links to more complex materials for more advanced or involved interested parties.

Maria Davis (NPFMC) did a demonstration on how to use Chat GTP, an artificial intelligence tool that is changing workflow for companies and students across the world. Chat GTP can generate text in any style using open-source information and could be used to assist with developing Council communication products, including meeting summaries, social media posts, and press releases. This could be especially useful for Councils with limited communications staff or resources.

Finally, the group discussed the challenge of getting consistent attendance at public hearings. Generally, attendance is location-based and maintaining high attendance has often been an issue; there might not be an easy solution to ensure attendance on a regular basis. The South Atlantic Council has addressed multiple management issues during public hearings rather than having single-issue hearings, but would not recommend combining too many issues to maintain focus and avoid confusion. The North Pacific Council doesn't hold many hearings because of the remote nature of many of its interested communities. Additionally, within some of the native cultures in the Alaskan region, it's difficult to have structured meetings with agendas, and it is considered rude to fly in, host a meeting, and leave without staying and socializing. The Pacific Council hosts standing meetings each year and those seem to be well attended because they're anticipated.

### **Advisory Panels (APs)**

In advance of the meeting, each Council answered a series of questions on [current Council Advisory Panel practices](#). The number and make up of APs vary greatly between Councils. All of the Councils have 3-year terms for AP membership with the exception of the Western Pacific Council, which has 4-year terms. A majority of the Councils do have AP orientation materials, and half of the Councils require members undergo fisheries law enforcement background checks before they can serve.

Kim Iverson (SAFMC) led the session. During discussion, challenges with APs were identified including recruiting qualified applicants, poor meeting attendance, and AP engagement. The North Pacific, Pacific, and Caribbean Councils provide AP members a daily stipend to attend meetings. Several Councils are now using virtual meetings to bolster attendance. In the Pacific, members can appoint an alternate to serve in their place if they cannot attend. This practice is allowed twice per membership term. AP meeting frequency and formats vary between Councils, with some APs meeting in conjunction with Council and SSC meetings, and others meeting separately.



Some Councils struggle to find applicants and to balance interest on APs. A broad range of tools are used to solicit applicants, including news releases, newsletters, and social media. It was suggested that current AP members and Council members be more involved in soliciting qualified applicants. To encourage engagement between the Council and its APs, the South Atlantic requires the committee chair attend the AP meeting to provide updates and rationale behind committee decisions. In the New England, South Atlantic, and Gulf Councils, the chair of the AP provides the AP meeting report to the committee (most often in person) and answers any questions from committee members regarding discussions. The CCC Communications Group agreed on the importance of having qualified AP members and having them better understand their role in the management process.

### **Review of CCC Website *FisheryCouncils.org***

Mary Sabo (MAFMC) led a review of the joint Regional Fishery Management Councils (RFMC) website <http://www.fisherycouncils.org>. The website structure and design has not been reviewed and updated since 2016. The group reviewed recent website analytics, including overall site traffic and most frequently visited pages. In 2022, the website received 10,324 site visits from 7,134 unique visitors, with spikes in traffic coinciding with the May and October CCC meetings. The group also discussed ways to highlight CCC activities (work groups, publications, comment letters, etc.) and make the navigation more user-friendly.

### ***Action Item: The Council Communications Group agreed to improve the RFMC website navigation and make it more aesthetically pleasing.***

The group identified a number of improvements to be explored and developed further by a work group comprised of Mary Sabo (MAFMC), Emily Muehlstein (GMFMC) and Nick Smillie (SAFMC). The proposed changes include:

- Break up text-heavy pages with images of different fisheries from across the country
- Reduce the amount of text on the homepage and transfer some to a new 'About the Councils' page
- Changes to website navigation/organization on the homepage:
  - Remove the *Resources* tab and file each resource on an appropriate page
  - Remove the *Contacts* tab (contacts are already listed on Council-specific pages)
  - Replace the *Meetings* tab with a *Council Coordination Committee* tab, to include the following pages as dropdown options: Meetings,

Correspondence, Scientific and Statistical Subcommittee, Council Member Ongoing Development, and CCC Committees and Work Groups.

- Add an *Issues* tab and create new pages to highlight issues of particular importance/relevance to the CCC (e.g., climate change, forage fisheries, area-based management, monuments, ESA, budget/procedure issues).
- Insert a calendar widget on the homepage below the Council thumbnails
- Add an accessibility widget that allows users to toggle colors and text to improve their own user experience
- Highlight the order of host Council by year on the CCC meeting page

Before updating the site, the work group will perform a quick discovery by asking several non-communications staff to perform certain tasks (e.g., locate meeting pages, find a publication, etc.) on the current website and count how many clicks it takes. Once the updates are made, the same task will be given to the same people and the work group will use their feedback to determine whether the site updates improve the user experience. Finally, the CCC Communications Group subgroup will audit the changes before they are forwarded to the CCC.

### **Communicating Council Successes and Challenges**

Janice Plante (NEFMC) led this session with a [presentation](#) on the CCC Communications Group's historical efforts. The group began by listing its successes in communicating CCC positions. The group noted that development of the CCC logo was a successful undertaking. The group also discussed how the CCC website has been a perfect repository for all CCC correspondence. The website is devoted to Council business across all regions through a neutral platform and it's a one-stop-shop for fishery management Council contacts and information on species managed by the Councils. The group agreed to the following:

***Action Item: Each Council should highlight the [fisherycouncil.org](http://fisherycouncil.org) website by sharing it and the resources it contains with its communication networks.***

The group discussed planning for the Area-Based Management Subcommittee's final report on the America the Beautiful 30x30 initiative this year. The group agreed on the following:

***Action Item: The host Council will develop a press release with help from the communications counterparts from fellow Councils announcing the final report and publish the report on the [fisherycouncils.org](http://fisherycouncils.org) website.***

The group also discussed how individual Councils have communicated CCC positions. Many Councils have not done this at all, while others have developed press releases. The group agreed on the following:

***Action Item: Each year, the host Council should take the lead on developing press releases to highlight CCC positions and accomplishments. Those releases should then be shared across each individual Council's communication networks.***

The group then discussed how Councils communicate their successes. Many Councils identified that there is room for improvement in how this is done. The group discussed whether there is a difference between Council actions and successes and cautioned that labeling something a 'success' could alienate interested parties that don't agree. The group agreed that communication staff members are responsible for providing the facts and it is important to maintain neutrality. Instead, the group decided to focus on communicating Council actions and outcomes. It also agreed to focus on emphasizing opportunities for public engagement and transparency in the Council process by highlighting individual examples of successful engagement in the management process. For example, the Western Pacific Council produces brochures on its AP successes and the issues the Council is discussing. The group also committed to highlighting ancillary efforts and innovations in the process like Citizen Science, coral grant work, and contributions to the MREP.

### **Annual Host CCC Responsibilities and Onboarding**

The group discussed how difficult it is for the host Council to keep track of the responsibilities and the details associated with serving as the host. This is especially true when staff turns over and historical knowledge of how to perform as host is lost among Council staff members. The group decided it would be appropriate for the Communications Group to develop guidance materials to help with the transition to CCC host each year. The group clarified that the guidance materials should not be overly prescriptive, but should provide guidance to communications, administrative, and leadership staff so that CCC meetings and CCC communications are handled smoothly.

***Action Item: Develop a CCC hosting guidance document that describes responsibilities and provides helpful details to ensure success. Create a shared Google drive with logos, letterheads, and past examples of meeting summaries and press releases.***

Sandra Mondal (PFMC), Emily Muehlstein (GMFMC), Maria Davis (NPFMC), and Mary Sabo (MAFMC) agreed to serve on a work group to develop a draft document for presentation to the CCC.

### **Conclusions and Next Steps**

To wrap-up the session, the CCC Communications Group discussed the incredible value it gained from meeting in person. Part of the important outcomes and collaborations from this meeting were realized in the opportunity to build relationships with peers by sharing meals and building rapport. These relationships emphasize the importance of working with each other to improve individual Council communications efforts and CCC communications needs. The group committed to relying on this professional network to share successes with each other and lean on one another when challenges arise. Each Council faces different challenges, engages different audiences, and brings varying strengths to the table. The group plans to continue to learn from the outreach community and use one other to improve its efforts throughout the year. This group is a perfect venue for professional development. The CCC Communications Group allows a forum of peers that is difficult to replicate because of the unique nature of each individual's roles. Council communications play an integral role in Council success because effective public engagement relies upon education and awareness of a complex management process and subsequent issues.

The group concluded by expressing a desire to meet again next year in person to begin planning a project to roll-out the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the RFMC in 2026. The meeting would also provide the opportunity for professional development as a group. The Alan Alda Communicating Science Program was suggested as an example of an activity that would benefit everyone.

### **Attendees:**

Emily Muehlstein – GMFMC  
Carrie Simmons – GMFMC  
Carly Somerset – GMFMC  
Camilla Shireman – GMFMC  
Mary Sabo – MAFMC  
Maria Davis – NPFMC  
Janice Plante – NEFMC

Amy Vandehey – WPFMC  
Kim Iverson – SAFMC  
Nick Smillie – SAFMC  
Sandra Mondal – PFMC  
Diana Martino – CFMC  
Cristina Olan - CFMC

