

Summary Report of Feedback from NMFS Science Centers on the Office of Science & Technology's Stock Assessment Program

NMFS Office of Science & Technology (ST) is hosting an independent review of their stock assessment program on September 9 – 12, 2014 in Silver Spring, MD. The review focus is on ST's national coordination of an assessment enterprise that is implemented regionally in NMFS science centers. To provide the review panel with a regional perspective of ST's national coordination, ST initiated a survey that was distributed to each Science Center Director. The survey questions are all within scope of the Terms of Reference established for the program review. A response was received from each of the six science centers and a summary of responses is provided below. Overall, the regional view of ST's stock assessment program is generally positive, with strong emphasis on the importance of the program's responsibilities and the effectiveness of most activities. It was noted several times that any changes in size or scope of the program should result from recommendations provided by NMFS Science Board. A few specific recommendations for improvement include better coordination of multiple RFPs, establishment of a national training program for assessment scientists, improving metrics of tracking and communication of assessment activities and capacity, and increasing the role of the Assessment Methods Working Group and/or creating pools of experts to address key assessment decisions.

Survey questions and responses:

- 1. In general, the stock assessment activities conducted by ST significantly contribute to maintaining and advancing NMFS' national stock assessment enterprise.**

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	4	67%
Agree	1	17%
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
I am not familiar enough with ST's assessment activities to answer	1	17%

Please feel free to provide comments that explain your answer:

National coordination enables us to step back and look at contemporary issues from a broader perspective which can generate efficiencies. Monitoring progress toward national goals helps provide important feedback that guides decisions in budget formulation within the Administration and Congress.

ST is integral for facilitating agency wide coordination on common issues through workshops and working groups. ST's ability to focus resources and funding on priorities established by the Chief Scientist and Science Board is effective in making progress on these issues.

At the **FSC funding for DAS has always been an issue. Over half of our DAS are on charter vessels, which requires funding with sufficient lead time to procure the necessary contracts. The recent transfer of funding on a permanent basis has greatly improved our situation regarding the logistics of funding DAS on charter vessels, especially under the constraints of annual CRs (ie., quarterly spending limits).

Available RFPs are appropriate and well-targeted.

2. In general, the stock assessment activities conducted by ST effectively support, and help to maintain and advance the stock assessment program at my center.

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	2	33%
Agree	4	67%
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
I am not familiar enough with ST's assessment activities to answer	0	0%

Please feel free to provide comments that explain your answer:

ST's provided critical coordination on science program reviews and followed through to provide additional funding to support implementation of resulting recommendations. Directed funding provided by S&T for technology transfer allowed our Center to transition research instrumentation *** into annual surveying operations used to inform the *** stock assessment.

There is a difficult trade-off within NMFS regarding flexibility and permanence in funding annual research/assessment programs. Flexibility is important in terms of responding quickly to regional or Congressional issues. This requires S&T to control a relatively large pool of money that is allocated to Centers on a temporary basis. Permanence is important because the Centers need permanent money to hire new FTEs and a minimum of 3 years of money to commit support for a graduate student. In addition, NMFS has a difficult tradeoff in deciding how to allocate temporary money to process type studies (eg., FATE) and assessment surveys. Both are needed to address decadal level decision making; typically only the latter is needed to address issues raised by Congress. It might be time to consider setting aside block funding at S&T to support rotating NRC post-doctoral fellowships, where Centers could identify the optimal role for such positions.

Generally agree. Assessment Methods working group could be more active in support of a national program of methods development, i.e. linking efforts in each region.

3. The suite of stock assessment-related RFPs administered by ST contributes to the overall advancement of NMFS stock assessment science.

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	2	33%
Agree	2	33%

Neither agree nor disagree	2	33%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
I am not familiar enough with ST's RFPs to answer	0	0%

Please provide any comments or recommendations that may improve ST's stock assessment-related RFPs and RFP process (e.g., increase/decrease funds, add/remove individual RFP themes, changes to the process, etc.). Also, please feel free to comment on the utility of the RFP products to your region:

We have concerns about the large number of RFPs and the coordination of RFP programs. It would be useful to coordinate scheduling of the RFPs and then distribute the schedule a year in advance. We understand that there is uncertainty about funding availability and levels, but this would allow for better planning. We would also like to preserve the ability to fund more focused and longer term initiatives.

Overall the RFP process has led to improvements/enhancements of many aspects of entire process leading to a SA. I suggest that we consider a national 'Internal Grants' program to improve individual scientific competency, promote innovation, and improve staff morale. The RFP would not be topic focused and would encourage innovative projects in the range of 50K per year for up to 2 years. At the **FSC we found this to be a very effective and well liked program. We have a Tech Memo completed on the history and accomplishments. These small grants have yielded new areas of research, allowed generation of initial data to foster getting additional support and improved skills of junior scientists in preparing competitive proposals.

**FSC has been competitive and has benefitted from the various RFP products, e.g. Assessment methods, Habitat, FATE, etc. New RFP Information to Support and Conduct S.A. will also greatly help fill some critical gaps. Funding for Cooperative Research, which should also support S.A., has been unbalanced across the regions, and has gotten worse in that regard in recent years. Efforts should be made to 'rebalance' that funding.

4. The training and capacity building activities implemented by ST are successful in helping to develop future stock assessment scientists.

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	3	50%
Agree	2	33%
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0%
Disagree	1	17%
Strongly Disagree	1	17%
I am not familiar enough with the capacity building activities to answer	0	0%

Please provide any recommendations you may have on changes ST should consider in their capacity building program (e.g., increase/decrease in faculty supported and/or fellowships, add/remove activities, changes to the process, etc.), and whether your center has or will likely benefit from these activities by employing one or more of these scientists:

The joint NMFS/Sea Grant fellows program has been a good investment. I do find it odd to see the RTR Program listed as an ST activity. It is not. [It is currently faced with] budget shortfalls so would like to discuss your interest in going national with this one.

We invest a considerable amount of funding to support faculty positions and we are aware of efforts to start to evaluate output and products. One area that has decline precipitously in the past decade is the training investment that we make in our existing staff. We used to bring in experts for multi-day or week long courses where we could simultaneously train a dozen or two dozen in software products or statistical approaches. If ST could identify areas of common need and utilize funding to develop training courses that would rotate around the country - that would be very helpful.

During our assessment review the lack of training, particularly at the national level, came up several times. I am not aware of any National SA capacity building program within ST. One of the recommendation from **FSC to ST was the development of a national training program. To the best of my knowledge this went no where.

The **FSC has not benefited as much as other Centers have. The **FSC did not receive additional funding to support faculty at ** or ** to train stock assessment scientists. ** is arguably the best academic institution in the country for stock assessment scientists. The lack of support from S&T requires discretionary research dollars from the **FSC to be diverted to help support the position at UW. Similarly, it would have been very helpful for S&T to provide support for a new stock assessment faculty at **, where a majority of their Ph.D.'s in stock assessment are hired by either **FSC or ***. **FSC would very much benefit from at least support from S&T for a faculty position at **.

**FSC would like to see strong support for C-STAR along with CAPAM. Both programs fill needed gaps. C-STAR has a long history of supporting NMFS S.A. needs by turning out high-quality S.A. scientists. CAPAM is evolving to do the same.

5. **The stock assessment reporting and communication conducted by ST accurately represents the stock assessment enterprise and communicates program needs both within the agency and to key stakeholders.**

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	2	33%
Agree	0	0%
Neither agree nor disagree	2	33%
Disagree	1	17%
Strongly Disagree	1	17%
I am not familiar enough with the communication activities to answer	0	0%

Please provide any recommendations regarding stock assessment communication and reporting conducted by ST. Also, feel free to comment on the role ST plays and/or should play in facilitating communication regarding stock assessments across science centers:

We had trouble with this question. We think that the agency has been very effective in communicating stock assessment needs with Congress and the Administration. We had trouble identifying where ST was playing an independent role in facilitating communication to key stakeholders.

The recent GAO report highlights the lack of adequate representation of assessment capacities and capabilities within the agency.

The metrics used to assess NMFS stock assessment production are too coarse to reflect changes in stock assessment efficiency or improvements. Additional metrics are needed. For example, if the **FSC were to skip a stock assessment for the ** fishery, there would be no impact on the NMFS index used to evaluate its stock assessment program. If the **FSC were to improve significantly its stock assessment approach to any of the large ** fisheries in **, there would be no change in the NMFS index.

The fisheries S.A. reporting process is mature and we believe does a fair job of communicating our fisheries S.A. enterprise. In general, we believe S.A. communication that has to go on between Centers should happen at that level, unless there is a problem. We are less clear, about how the fisheries S.A. reporting process communicates our program needs within the agency and to stakeholders. On the new NMFS reporting requirement for Marine Mammal S.A.: This new requirement makes little sense as it is currently done. It is difficult to do the full update on current MM stock assessments without doing the entire exercise for all 60+ stocks, which generally takes a while. This request is awkward for several reasons - that only part of the original information is provided and if they are looking to mirror how fish stock assmts are updated on a "real-time" basis, this is not the way. We update those when the stock assessments are complete, we don't make projections, let alone update the projections. The way this request is structured may not yield "actual" statuses, which the intent described.

6. In general, ST should pursue new stock assessment activities and/or expand the scope of current activities to improve coordination and management of the national stock assessment program.

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	1	17%
Agree	3	50%
Neither agree nor disagree	2	33%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
I am not familiar enough with ST's assessment activities to answer	0	0%

Please provide any comments you have on new ideas or expansions, and why you think these developments are important:

Any changes in scope must be as a result of a discussion within the Science Board. If we all see mutual benefits in expansion of operational scope then you'll have buy in. Unilateral decisions for expansions would result in competition for very coveted funding.

We would not be supportive of an expansion of stock related staffing in ST if it comes at the expense of pushing funds out into the field. We think that the current staffing and infrastructure is appropriate, but would like to have a better understanding of roles and responsibilities of current ST staff involved in stock assessment activities. A short document outlining assignments and portfolios of current staff would be useful.

It isn't clear what this really means but any improvement in coordination and management

would be appreciated.

Not new expansions, but continue to bolster the S.A. Methods Improvement working group. In general, we believe ST has an appropriate set of RFPs targeting S.A. that don't need to be expanded, especially since any expansion would come at the cost of permanent funds to the field that could be used to fill stock assessment, data management and life history positions critical to completing stock assessments.

- 7. In general, ST should discontinue certain stock assessment activities and/or limit the scope of certain activities to improve coordination and management of the national stock assessment program.**

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	1	17%
Agree	1	17%
Neither agree nor disagree	2	33%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	1	17%
I am not familiar enough with ST's assessment activities to answer	0	0%

*1 center did not answer

Please provide any comments you have on which activities should be eliminated or reduced and why you think these changes are important:

Can't think of an activity we should abandon.

Consolidation of the number of RFPs and better coordination, as previously discussed.

Again, it isn't clear what this really means.. What would be lost and what would be gained (with regard to the above). That said, any improvement in coordination and management would be appreciated.

Agree only in that we believe ST stock assessment activities should be reviewed by the Science Board annually. No specific recommendations at this time.

- 8. The staff and resources currently available to ST are appropriate given the current national suite of stock assessment activities being conducted.**

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	1	17%
Agree, but they could be increased	1	17%
Agree, but they could be decreased	1	17%
Disagree, they should be increased	0	0%
Disagree, they should be decreased	0	0%
I am not familiar enough with current resources or assessment activities to answer	2	33%

*1 center did not answer

Please comment if you feel that ST's staff and resources available for managing current assessment activities should change (how should it change and why). Similarly, if you feel that increases or decreases in activities are warranted, should overall staff and resource capacity respond (if so, how):

Again, changes envisioned to the scope of ST's role in stock assessments should be as a result of deliberations by the Science Board.

Decreased is not what I would suggest, but rather consider realignment.

We are not certain what 'ST staff and resources available for managing current assessment activities' is currently comprised of, so this was a difficult question to answer. We look forward to seeing the ST documents prepared for the review that might show detailed information on this.

9. ST's responsiveness helps to address emerging and evolving needs identified for my science center's stock assessment program.

Response	Number	Percent
Strongly agree	1	17%
Agree	3	50%
Neither agree nor disagree	1	17%
Disagree	1	17%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
I am not aware of how ST helps my center address needs	0	0%

Please suggest any improvements ST could consider to be more responsive to addressing gaps in your center's stock assessment program and feel free to comment on the process by which ST provides financial support to your center's assessment program (transparency, fairness, etc.):

The process is a work in progress, which I view as a positive thing. It enables an adaptive approach to getting it right.

Most of the top stock assessment scientists are at the Center, as well as the new ST stock assessment position. There should be more reliance on this pool of experts for decision making on how to improve the Agency's stock assessment program. There is also strong regional differences in approaches to stock assessment that results in large differences in the number of stock assessments produced per year. S&T should address this issue vigorously.

Perhaps we should consider 'tiger teams' of some of the best and brightest to take on some of the more contentious stocks. At a minimum if the answer came out the same the agency could say we tried a different approach with 'fresh' SA scientists and got a similar answer. Perhaps it would lead to new insight and improvements to the SA.

CAPAM is a good example of this where **FSC identified a gap in stock assessment method development and ST moved to fund it.

Finally, please provide feedback on what you consider to be ST's most significant strengths, challenges, and solutions regarding the office's role in coordinating a national stock assessment program:

The importance of ST in supporting the Chief Scientist's role as the face of all science, including stock assessment science for interactions up the chain within the administration and on the Hill cannot be overstated. Executing our work regionally is a very good strategy, but requires a hub - ST has served this role well.

Strengths:

- coordination role across the agency
- following through with priorities and direction from the Science Board and Chief Scientist
- distributing resources to address those priorities

Challenges:

- Field personnel need a clearer understanding of ST personnel roles
- Need for better coordination among RFPs

ST facilitates the CIE reviews, and provides the statistics and economic data for the nation. These are all valuable efforts. I am hard pressed to articulate what products are of value to the field vs what ST produces that are of value to the public. ST produces a number of reports and tools (e.g., FOSS) that are valuable to the public. ST works with congress to increase resources for fisheries assessments, for which the field is enormously grateful, but ST also imposes many efforts that are an enormous time sink with little return on investment. However, in ST defense the same can be said for most all HQ offices. We are appreciative of the increase in requesting our input on national matters. The incorporation of that input is hard to see from this vantage point but I like to think it is incorporated and valued.

There appears to be a difference in staffing philosophy at S&T and some Centers relative to other Centers. In a downsizing fiscal environment, some Centers are allowing staff size to decrease to preserve discretionary funding for surveys and process studies by attempting to maintain constant labor costs. This is not a strategy S&T and some Centers have adopted. A review of the last decade of staff levels at all of the Centers and S&T would be helpful relative to trends in total budget and labor costs. Some would argue that S&T and some Centers are over-staffed relative to the optimal staffing level in aggregate at S&T and all the Centers.

Strength is advocating for consistency at a national level that is not constraining. It is also the challenge from what I can see. Other challenge is to work further to bridge the gap between fish SAs and protected species assessments/status reviews/ They are very comparable as we all know but there is a difference in culture in how they are done. Encouraging cross-fertilization by S&T would be positive.

One area where an increase in ST awareness (and available funding) would be helpful is in understanding how the unique S.A. process for some of the ** stocks occurs. **FSC and **FSC ** stock assessments are conducted in the RFMO (international) domain which relies on nations coming together to contribute data and S.A. expertise. The U.S. has considerable influence in the ** on ** S.A. where we are trying to emphasize concepts like science independent from policy and sustainable fisheries, which has real impacts on some of these stocks that have been heavily exploited (**). Very heavy travel impacts budgets and staffing of these critical assessments.