

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

This document outlines the continued evolution of the Research Track (RT) – Operational Assessment (OA) process, beginning with the May 2018 SEDAR Steering Committee (STC) review of the SEFSC proposal (Attachment 6d). A summary of the development of the process prior to the May 2018 discussions may be found in Attachments 6b and 6c.

May 2018: STC reviewed the updated RT-OA process as outlined in the SEFSC proposal (dated March 2018). From the proposal:

*“The proposed improvements are
Designate two types of assessments: Research and Operational. This is expected to increase quality, and increase throughput by 10-20%.*

Research Assessments allow for innovation and new ideas to be built into the assessment models. Such assessments would occur as needed to provide a first assessment of a stock or to improve existing Operational assessments, or to establish a data source or procedure that can be implemented in many assessments (e.g., SEDAR Procedural Workshops). Research Assessments are vetted through fully independent review (e.g., CIE), and if the innovations are found to be acceptable, the new methodology would be used subsequently in Operational Assessments. Research Assessments have much in common with the current Benchmark approach, however it is more efficient because data providers will not be asked to provide the most recent data in multiple formats as they are now in Benchmarks. More importantly, we can expect that quality will be improved because analysts will have the time for more rigorous, expansive analyses without the constraints of producing immediate results for management. Without the pressure to meet hard deadlines for management advice, Research Assessments would encourage increased stakeholder involvement during the development process and through cooperative research projects.

Operational Assessments provide management advice. They are designed to be timely and efficient, and address the deficiencies of the current SEDAR process. The Operational Assessment schedule puts key stocks into a regular assessment cycle. These key stocks include those that have already been through a Benchmark or Research Assessment, and for which the Councils desire regular and timely ABC advice. The frequency of that advice will depend on the number of stock assessment analysts and the number of key stocks, and could also reflect expected annual rates of changes in abundance (e.g., a short-lived species like black sea bass could be assessed more frequently than a long-lived species like tilefish). Operational Assessments are similar in scope to the current SEDAR Update Assessments, taking a previous Benchmark or Research Assessment and updating all relevant data, but making no or minimal change to methodology.”

The Committee supported the overarching concept of the Research Track – Operational Assessment – Key Stock – Interim Analysis approach, with Scamp for both regions being the pilot RT species. The Research Track and Operational Assessments are SEDAR activities, while the Key Stocks and Interim Analyses will be addressed between the SEFSC and each Cooperator. The Committee’s discussion and recommendations included the following:

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

- It is important to maintain transparency and thoroughness in the Research Track component, where assessment tools are developed. It was noted that the constituent involvement is most effective and efficient at the data workshop step.
- Research Track (RT) and Operational Assessments (OA) can be used to provide guidance on what will be updated through Interim Analyses.
- Long term assessment planning and a regular schedule for Interim analysis are critical to the success of these changes. The assessment schedule should provide for some ‘reserve capacity’ to address unforeseen circumstances and allow flexibility to address developing issues.
- The Committee acknowledges that increasing assessment productivity may result in some decrease in transparency. Given the critical need for increased productivity, this is a necessary trade-off at this time.
 - There will be less transparency in the Interim Analyses than is now provided through SEDAR benchmark and standard assessment processes. Reasonable transparency will be maintained by considering Interim Analyses approaches during RT and OA steps, and by review of the findings at SSC and Council meetings.
 - Operational Assessments may be conducted similar to the current update or standard processes. Therefore, the level of transparency provided will vary for each operational project.
- Stock ID should be addressed for most stocks as the first step in the RT, using webinar meetings as needed.
 - By default, stocks will be divided by council management jurisdictions or existing, accepted boundaries. The burden of proof lies in justifying deviation from existing or council boundaries.
- Clear and detailed TORs are required for OAs, particularly to address any changes to be made in response to peer review comments, deviations from the tool developed through the RT, or changes identified during a prior OA or Interim Analysis review.

September 2018:

- The SEFSC requested the Committee begin using the term “Operational Assessment” in place of “Standard and Update Assessments” for planning of assessments beginning in 2020.
- The Committee agreed to change the preliminary information request for operational assessments to a “Scope of Work” rather than “Terms of Reference” to avoid confusion with current “Terms of Reference” usage.

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

- The Committee requested that Cooperators submit Scope of Work information for 2020 assessments to SEDAR staff by March 1, 2019, for submission to the SEFSC. This will allow the SEFSC to evaluate data demands for 2020 assessments in support of discussions at the next Steering Committee meeting. In the future, scope of work information should be provided 2 years in advance

May 2019: The Committee was informed that the Scamp research track will be delayed by about 9 months to reduce delays in other projects from the 2019 government shutdown.

- Research Track Chair - The Committee supported assigning a scientist to chair the research track process. One individual will chair the DW through AW stages of the research track. The Chair will be recommended by the research track planning team and appointed by the lead analytical agency (e.g., SEFSC or FL FWCC). Peer Reviews will be chaired by an SSC representative, per current practices.
- The Committee also reviewed the planning process and the expectations of each Cooperator for SEDAR Project Scheduling:

Appendix 1. SEDAR ASSESSMENT PROJECT PRIORITIES & TIMING

1. Cooperators develop their project priorities.

Timing: ongoing, 2-5 years in advance of Steering Committee discussions

2. SEDAR Steering Committee reviews preliminary Cooperator requests.

Timing: 2.5 to 3 years in advance

Outcome: Preliminary projects list, ready for further consideration through the next steps

*3. Cooperators develop **Scope of Work** for each of their assessments on the preliminary list.*

Timing: approximately 2 years before assessment

Submission: To SEFSC (Director and designees), 2 months prior to the Spring Steering Committee Meeting (typically will be around March 1)

NOTE: Scope of Work is required for OPERATIONAL assessments only. Research Track process uses a planning team to develop a schedule and TORs to meet project needs

Contents: The following topics should be considered in SOW development

- *Years of data to be updated (may provide a specific terminal year)*
- *Additional datasets or research findings to be included and evaluated*
- *Peer Review or SSC recommendations to be included and evaluated*
- *Process recommendations (ie, webinar or in-person meeting needs)*

4. Steering Committee finalizes assessment priorities at the Spring meeting.

Timing: Priorities are finalized 2 years in advance (2022 projects finalized in 2020)

Considerations: Analytical and data workload and resources

Outcome: Final assessment project list for the year

5. SEDAR/SEFSC planning meeting to address the approved project list.

Timing: 2-3 months following the Steering Committee meeting (typically by August 1)

Outcome: Project milestones and suggested workshop dates

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

6. *SEDAR drafts initial TORs and schedules for Cooperator review and consideration*
Timing: 1-3 months following the planning meeting
Considerations: based on the milestones developed through the planning meeting
SEFSC (lead analysts) consulted on initial draft.
7. *SEDAR Steering Committee issues resolution.*
Timing: Fall Steering Committee meeting
Outcome: Address any issues with fulfilling the project list that arose during the initial planning process.

May 2020: While the pandemic forced modifications for interactions with participants, the pilot RT for scamp moved forward.

- Assessment Development Team issues: The ADT component of the Research Track process was implemented to ensure there was a core group of individuals who were involved and responsible for the decision-making in all stages of the assessment process, in the hopes of having some consistency between stages. While identifying individuals willing to serve on the ADT was initially not a challenge, having the appointees actually be available to participate for the whole process has become difficult. The RT process is very long, and other responsibilities are making it difficult for ADT members to fulfill their roles.
- Chair Porch provided the Committee a brief overview regarding the Science Center's original intent in proposing the Research Track (RT) and Operational Assessment (OA) approaches.
 - Research Track assessments were most similar to previous benchmark assessments, but with a more flexible timeline and no requirement to produce management advice.
 - Operational assessments are based on previous benchmark or research-track assessments that have already undergone independent peer review. Therefore, unless there is a justified reason for making changes to the model or data, Operational Assessments should normally be limited to updating the existing assessment framework with the most recent data and only minor modifications in the framework and supporting information.
- The SEFSC did not anticipate having Assessment Panels for every OA. However, increasingly panels and in-person meetings are requested by the Cooperators. The SEFSC notes that the panels and workshops result in OA assessments taking much more time than originally anticipated.
- The SEFSC recommended eliminating "Assessment Panels" for all future Operational Assessments. Instead, Topical Working Groups (TWG) would be convened as necessary to discuss and provide recommendations to the analytic team on specific topics regarding data or modeling approaches, that are identified for evaluation and consideration through the Terms of Reference. The need for TWGs and the topics to be considered will be outlined in the SoW for each assessment.

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

- As noted above, the SEFSC is responsible for making technical decisions regarding the assessment in consultation with members of the TWG. Those decisions should be documented by the analytic team, along with a summary page of all data sets. The SSC, during their usual process of developing scientific advice for the Council will consider whether any changes made to the assessment, in accordance with the statement of work, constitute an improvement over a strict update of the previously approved assessment framework.
- The SEFSC believes that this change back to its original intent will reinforce the intent to focus on new issues within OA assessments, rather than a broad review of all aspects of the assessment, and that the name change will help achieve the role change.
- The Committee supported the implementation by the SEFSC of Project Managers for all the assessments lead by the SESFC. The inclusion of a summary page in the report documenting the data sources and technical decisions was also supported.
- Statements of Work Template and Timing: The Committee reviewed a proposed template for preparing Statements of Work of Operational Assessments (Appendix 4). Topics for inclusion in the SoWs were accepted, while the proposed template itself will be revisited at the next Steering Committee meeting after Cooperators have an opportunity to use it for the 2023 assessment SoWs. The Committee also updated the timing for submitting SoWs (October 15th) and for the SEFSC to provide feedback to the Cooperator (February 1st).

October 2020: The Committee discussed the SEFSC's new approach to Operational Assessments (OA), with most of the discussion focusing on the use of Topical Working Groups (TWGs) in place of the existing Assessment Panels.

The need for this change in approach was questioned by some on the Committee. Chair Porch reiterated the Center's belief that this change will streamline the process and increase throughput overall.

- Having TWGs focus on specific topics will eliminate Assessment Panels "re-reviewing" the entire assessment, which is not necessary given the OA is working from a previously approved assessment.
- The change of name from Assessment Panel to Topical Working Group should help clarify the role of appointed participants within the assessment process and was supported by the Committee.
- Chair Porch indicated that a TWG will need to review any new information being considered for an OA, so there will be an opportunity for public input in this process.

The Committee expressed some concerns regarding how to handle issues that may arise after the SoWs and ToRs are approved, either before the assessment begins or after it is underway.

- Chair Porch stated that this should be an infrequent problem but highlighted the need for advance planning.

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

- There is a process to potentially incorporate additional data or assessment requests after the assessment is underway but will require discussions between the Center and the Cooperator. This is similar to how this is handled in the existing process.
- It was also pointed out the option exists for the Center to discuss new issues with the Cooperators or SSCs during the assessment process if needed.

One of the main concerns raised by the Cooperators was the perceived lack of transparency and opportunities for stakeholder involvement in the redefined approach. The Committee discussed what is missing regarding transparency and how this concern can be addressed.

- It was noted that there is often some confusion and lack of understanding whenever a new process is implemented.
- Continued, and possibly expanded, education and outreach regarding the redefined approach is needed as the process is rolled out.

It was noted that while there will be TWGs for some OAs, those groups may be focusing on technical issues which many stakeholders may not feel they can contribute to. Additionally, some OAs will not have any TWGs and it was not clear how stakeholder input would be gathered. The Committee discussed a possible option for more stakeholder-friendly opportunities for input.

- Hold a focused webinar for stakeholders during an assessment where the Center could provide a presentation with little jargon and specific, focused questions to promote discussion.
- A similar approach could be applied for OAs with no TWGs.
- Cooperator assistance will be required to get the word out if these approaches are implemented.
- SEDAR Staff will work with Center and Cooperator Staff to work out the details for this proposed option.

The Committee requested that SEDAR Staff continue to refine the details for OAs that were presented in Attachment 3 and passed the following motion:

“The SEDAR Steering Committee requests the SEFSC and SEDAR staff develop a guidance document for the Operational Assessment process including the use of Topical Working Groups ‘TWG’ to ensure the process will remain transparent while still meeting the needs of SEFSC to streamline the current process. The guidance document should be presented to the Committee at the Spring 2021 meeting.”

Approved by consensus

May 2021: The Committee reviewed the Research Track/Operational Assessment/Topical Working Group Guidance Document and discussed the following topics:

- Need for a Public Webinar for an OA which has no Topical Working Groups: The Committee agreed that there was no need for any public webinars for OAs which had no TWGs. Holding a webinar under those circumstances seemed inappropriate since any

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

comments received would not be included in the current assessment, but rather listed as part of Research Recommendations for the next assessment. Public comment opportunities will be available when the assessment is reviewed by the Cooperator's technical bodies, and while it is being considered for management action. The Committee also endorsed the use of Procedural and Special Topics Workshops as an alternative way to receive and incorporate public comment.

- **Difficulty in Identifying Chairs for Research Track Assessments:** It was noted that it continues to be difficult to identify qualified individuals willing to serve as Chairs during the Data and Assessment portions of the RTs. While the lead agency is responsible for appointing a Chair, it will be necessary for all parties involved to work together to find appropriate individuals to serve. This remains an ongoing issue that everyone will need to continue to work on resolving.
- **Timing of OAs Following a RT:** Discussion regarding the timing of an OA which immediately follows a RT clarified that the OA should be completed within 4-6 months of the Cooperator's technical body review. It was acknowledged that it may take longer for a first-time assessment, as there may be more topics to address once the feedback from the Review Panel and Cooperator technical body is received. It was also noted that it may not be possible to address every issue raised by the review bodies in that time frame.

October 2021: The Committee discussed the expectations of the product to be delivered and approved during the Review Workshop process.

- The Committee affirmed that a solid base configuration should be provided to the Review Panel (RP) for their consideration and the Review Panel should recommend a base model at the end of its review process.
- While it is understood that there may be some issues that cannot be rectified during the RW meeting, many tasks should not remain that need to be incorporated for the Research Track to be considered successful.
- The RP-approved base configuration is what should be used as the foundation for the following Operational Assessment, and the OA should be mostly limited to adding additional years of data to the RP-approved base configurations.
- The completion of the Review Process represents the end of the Research Track Process.

The Committee expressed its thoughts on the expectation of receiving OAs immediately following a RT within 6 months.

- Chair Porch and the Committee confirmed that completing OAs within 6 months of completing the research track is reasonable when the base configurations (model and data streams) accepted during the research track are adopted without further modifications.
- OAs following RTs should have priority for scheduling data deadlines given the need to get those quickly to enact management, though this may be difficult to do given all the interacting parts

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

- It should be possible to reach out to all data providers before the RT is finished to provide them notification of upcoming OA.

The Committee discussed a process for reporting out on data delays in a timely fashion, including the previous Outstanding Tasks Memos (First memo in 2007 for S14) that used to be submitted by the SEDAR Coordinators.

- SEFSC has taken over data management of projects for which they are the lead agency, so SEDAR coordinators are not as involved in communicating directly with data providers as in the past.
- SEDAR Coordinators will work with SEFSC Project Managers to discuss how keep the data delivery information flowing to those who may be able to help resolve issues.
- Council Staff expressed a willingness to assist in resolving data delays however possible.

Chair Porch indicated that the Committee may need to consider whether data not submitted on time should be excluded from the assessment.

- This decision will need to be determined based on the type, amount, and value-content of these data
- It was suggested that the SSCs be involved in these discussions in relation to the importance of various data sets.
- More discussion will be needed if the Committee wishes to consider this approach in the future

Chair Porch clarified that the process for incorporating new data sets into assessments requires the data sets be fully reviewed and vetted through the SEDAR assessment Topical Working Group process.

May 2022: The Committee got an update about the issue of assessment data inputs not being delivered by the deadlines. The SEFSC indicated that if they are informed that data sets will be late, they would reach out to the relevant Cooperators so that they may aid in outreach to get the data. Additionally, the SEFSC will come up with a set of criteria to determine which data will be necessary to wait for and what data the assessment can move forward without.

- May have to leave the decision to delay an assessment up to the analytic team, as they will be best suited to know if the missing data is critical for that particular assessment.
- Very difficult to put hard and fast rules in place.
- Decision criteria may be based on “data types” rather than specific data sets. The Center will work with ASMFC and FWC to come up with a list for review at the Fall Steering Committee meeting.

The Committee received a report on how TWGs have been functioning. Chair Porch stated that the goal should be to minimize TWGs for any given assessment. The Center will let the Cooperators know the impact of adding TWGs on the time to complete the assessment and the number of assessments that can be done when they review the SoWs.

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

- Chair Porch stated that a TWG should be formed primarily to address outstanding issues not previously handled by the analyst or which are beyond the SSC's capacity to review when the OA is brought to them for consideration. The Committee expressed concern with this suggested approach.
- The issue of participants of the TWGs needing to be appointed was discussed. For someone to participate in both the publicly noticed and non-noticed TWG discussions, they must be appointed by a Cooperator. Chair Porch will continue discussions with NOAA General Counsel to ensure SEDAR is following the policy correctly.

- **Research Track Technical Chair Discussion**

The Committee discussed the continued difficulty in identifying someone to serve as the technical Chair for the Data and Assessment portions of the Research Track Assessments. Moving forward, SEDAR Coordinators will chair the Data and Assessment portions of the RTs. It was also agreed that if a Cooperator feels the need to find an outside individual to chair part or all of a specific RT, that option will exist.

- **Discussion of the Role of SEDAR in Management Procedures (MPs)/Management Strategy Evaluations (MSEs)**

The assessment process continues to get more complicated. The Center believes this is largely due to the increasing number data sets and partners that are being included. To increase the number of assessments that can be produced, it is necessary to look at other options such as simpler assessment models, use of interim analyses between assessments, and Management Procedures (MPs) with empirical harvest control rules.

SEDAR should have a role when MSEs are conducted to vet MPs with empirical harvest control rules. Any new tool that being developed or applied for the first time to provide the scientific information needed by the SSC to recommend a catch level should be reviewed through the SEDAR or equivalent review process. The SEDAR Peer Review process is the preferred approach for reviewing first applications of a tool (MSEs, MPs).

The Committee requested that the Center produce a document outlining what the Center envisions as the path forward, specifically the role of SEDAR in the process, and including the separate roles of SEDAR, the SSCs, and the Cooperators. The document should be provided for the Fall 2022 SEDAR Steering Committee meeting.

- There is a growing concern regarding the length of time that elapses between the terminal year of data to the completion of the assessment. The current system has not realized the expected increase in throughput possibly owing to the increasing number of data sets and partners involved. Post-assessment analyses are also continuing to take more time, along with other Cooperator requests.

While there is considerable flexibility in how OAs are configured, throughput can be increased if changes and modifications to OAs are limited, and OAs are developed similar to previous assessment updates. It was noted that the SA Cooperator has two OAs scheduled for 2022/2023 which have no TWGs, but both are slated to take more than 11 months, so it is not clear that the TWGs are the underlying issue. It was pointed out that the calculation of 11

SEDAR Research Track – Operational Assessment Approach Development

May 2018 to August 2022

months starts with the data scoping call and does not reflect the length of time it takes to conduct the assessment. On the other hand, given that data and data processing are regularly cited as a significant bottleneck in the process, any discussion of increasing throughput must include consideration of the data component.

The Councils are more concerned about the increasing lag between the terminal year of data and delivery of the assessment to the SSC for review (regularly 3-4 years currently) than with increasing the number of assessments produced. The Committee noted that getting the management program “pretty good information sooner” is a high priority. The expectation is that if the assessment begins in the second half of the year, then the TY would be the previous year. This has not been the case in recent years and has contributed to this TY lag issue.

Simplifying the assessment models might aid in speeding up the process, along with finding better ways to integrate all the pieces of information. Additionally, there may need to be a shift in the mindset of the participants regarding their thinking about if every piece of data is influential and necessary to the assessment.

It is important that the vision of the process discussed during the Steering Committee be filtered down to the workshops and the analysts. There is sometimes a disconnect between the guidance provided at the Steering Committee level and the complexity that is requested during the workshops and webinars.