

SEDAR Hybrid Meeting and Informal Communications Discussion Document

Introduction

There is growing interest for and acceptance of virtual meeting participation in the post-COVID era. There is also renewed appreciation for the value of in-person interactions in certain situations. SEDAR has long used both virtual and in-person meeting approaches to balance workload and program demands with limited time and financial resources. Further, while SEDAR has made accommodations for virtual participation when individuals cannot attend an in-person meeting, so far it has not adopted a ‘hybrid’ meeting approach in which individuals can decide, based on personal choice or convenience, to not attend in-person meetings. Given extensive use of virtual meetings, the Steering Committee is asked to consider updating program policies to accommodate hybrid meetings for Research Track/Benchmark data and review workshops.

Another related development is increasing reliance on ‘informal communication’ during in-person meetings. While off the record discussion is not prohibited, caution must be exercised to ensure transparency is upheld and the record is complete. The Steering Committee may develop guidance on informal communication to ensure appropriate record keeping and equal treatment of all participants.

The Steering Committee is asked to consider two items:

- 1) The role of hybrid meetings in the SEDAR Process
- 2) Guidance on managing informal communications during in-person workshops

The Role of Hybrid Meetings in the SEDAR Process

Current SEDAR Policies and Practices

- In-Person Activities
 - Research Track (Benchmark) Data Workshops
 - Extensive and broad participation – 40+ individuals
 - Frequency: Current, and planned for next few years – 1-2 per year
 - Location: Cooperator HQ or center of the fishery
 - No broadcasting of any portion
 - Research Track Review Workshops
 - Limited participation – 12 individuals
 - Frequency (current and next few years): 1 -2 per year
 - Location: Lead analyst base (Miami, Beaufort, Panama City)
 - No broadcasting
- Virtual Activities
 - Research Track/Benchmark Assessment Development
 - Operational Assessment Topical Working Group meetings
- Participation Expectations
 - Appointed Panelists and Observers attend in-person for all workshops for which an in-person workshop is convened
 - Key players – working group leaders, lead analysts, ADT members– attend in person
 - Those who have contributions to make to the entire process, or are part of the decision making, should be appointed Panelists

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HYBRID MEETING ALTERNATIVES

- Does the Committee support conducting HYBRID meetings (which will result in SEDAR broadcasting the meeting)? If so, appointed panelists and observers will be allowed to participate fully, whether remotely or in person. The method of participation will be at the discretion of the individual.

If YES, there are other considerations for the process:

- Will this approach be applied to all Data Workshop components?
 - Working groups
 - Plenary
- Will a hybrid approach be allowed for a Review Workshop
- Key participants – Does the Committee consider some appointed panelists critical, and expected to attend in person? (i.e.: working group leaders, lead analysts, ADT members)
- Will non-appointed individuals be allowed to participate remotely? For which components of the process?
 - Data Workshop
 - Working groups
 - Plenary
 - Review Workshop
- Should there be limits on the level of non-appointed individual participation?
 - Provide a comment/clarification
 - Give a presentation
 - Participate without restrictions
- Does the committee support allowing presentations by non-appointed individuals (like an outside presenter at an SSC meeting)?
 - Should such presentations be allowed during plenary, working groups, or both?
 - Should such presentations be scheduled in advance, to the extent possible given the nature of workshop workflow?
- Will public comment be allowed both in-person and remotely under a hybrid process?

If NO, other potential options, and considerations:

- Does the Committee support broadcasting of in-person workshops? – View only, non-interactive
 - Data Workshop
 - Working groups
 - Plenary
 - Review Workshop
- Does the Committee wish to require appointed panelists and observers to attend an in-person meeting to participate?

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Guidance on Managing Informal Communications During In-person Workshops

SEDAR Workshops are part of the open, public process to develop stock assessments. Appointed Panelists and Observers having expertise in the stocks being assessed attend in-person workshops to discuss the available data (during the Data Workshop stage) and review the completed assessment (Review Workshop). While it would be ideal to have any individual with information attend the workshops, that is usually not possible, so informal communications between appointed panelists and observers and others not in attendance has often been a component of these workshops, especially during the data stage.

Issue: Increasing reliance on informal communication within working groups

- Concern with documenting the record with increased informal communications, and increased number of participants in an informal communication process (i.e., large numbers of individuals on a google meet)
- Concern with transparency - lack of access to everyone - on an informal meet that becomes the primary source of discussion for a working group
- Concern with individuals participating with a workgroup, informally, during most of the workgroup meeting time.
- Steering Committee should have policies to ensure an open, fair, and transparent process.
- NOAA General Counsel provided the following legal guidance
 - These informal communications are allowed
 - Outcome must be documented in the official open meeting record
 - This option of communication must be available to all panelists equally
 - These informal communications are initiated and conducted by individuals
 - They should be limited in scope and usage
 - The Committee may set up expectations and guidance, and should, so that all panelists are treated equally
 - Multiple, simultaneous groups can be disruptive and threaten transparency and record creation
- Informal communications are already a component of the process
 - Data Workshop Workgroups meet informally: sessions not recorded but recommendations are documented through reports and presentations to the plenary
 - Appointed panelists and observers reach out to others for clarifications, additional information, etc.
 - Method of communication is irrelevant (in person conversation, telephone, text, email, web-based)
 - These discussions are helpful, as they serve to gather additional information on topics being discussed by workshop attendees.

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- Guidance considerations
 - Should a non-appointed attendee be allowed to present and discuss a working paper and answer relevant questions to a working group?
 - Should a non-appointed attendee be able to have unlimited access to the working group discussions and provide feedback on all topics being discussed
 - Should there be a limit on the number of non-appointed participants who may participate in these informal communications?
 - At some point, do you limit non-Panelist participation because the informal communications are becoming like Panelist discussions?

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Appendix 1: Additional background information on current SEDAR Policies

Participant Categories

SEDAR is a Council process, as such SEDAR groups that meet are recognized as Advisory Panels under Magnuson-Stevens Act. SEDAR has specific definitions for the various roles individuals play in the process. From the SEDAR SOPPS (page 9)

- Workshop participants and attendees include:
 - Panelists: Individuals appointed by a Cooperator to a workshop panel. Responsible for participating in workshop discussions, deliberations, consensus building, and documentation. May also be responsible for submitting data and analyses in support of the assessment.
 - Appointed Observers: Individuals appointed by a Cooperator to observe a workshop and provide guidance as requested by the workshop panel. This group may include Council members, Cooperator staff, and AP representatives. These individuals do not contribute to consensus building or workshop reports.
 - Staff: Individuals providing support to a workshop and SEDAR project.
 - Attendees: Any individual who attends a workshop on their own initiative without any Cooperator appointment.

Appointed Panelists may include database managers, data specialists, and data collectors; life history researchers and biologists; and stock assessment scientists from States, NOAA Fisheries, Interstate Commissions, universities, independent laboratories and institutions; and stakeholders and Council advisory panel (commercial, recreational, and/or NGO) representatives.

The SEFSC Director and SERO Administrator are responsible for designating agency employees to participate on workshop panels to provide expertise, data, and analyses, and represent their offices as appropriate.

The Assessment Development Team (ADT) is a group of Appointed Panelists who participate in both the RT data and assessment stages of the process to provide consistency in decision making process (some may also support the Review Workshop stage). The ADT are appointed by the Cooperators and are a subset of the larger Data and Assessment Panels and is the consensus building body for the data and assessment stages of the process.

Levels of Participation

Data Workshop Participation:

The first stage of the SEDAR process is the most inclusive. Appointed Panelists and Observers participate in all Working Groups and Plenary discussions. Staff and Attendees at the DW are allowed to participate in the Working Group discussions, providing that they are not disruptive to the discussion. They may participate in the Plenary discussions at the discretion of the Chair, to provide clarification to the topics being discussed.

Appointed Panelists and Observers receive draft report sections for comment prior to the workshop report completion. The draft workshop report is not provided to Staff or Attendees for comment.

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Assessment Process Participation:

Appointed Panelists participate in the assessment webinar discussions, providing feedback to the analytic team on model development. Appointed Observers and Staff are available to provide feedback or clarification to the discussions as needed. Attendees may also be recognized to provide additional feedback. Only Appointed Panelists have an opportunity to provide comments on the draft Assessment Process report.

Review Workshop Participation:

Appointed Panelists participate in the assessment review process, interacting with the analytic team. Appointed Observers, Staff, and Attendees are available to provide feedback or clarification to the discussions as requested by the Review Panel. Attendees may also be recognized to provide additional feedback. Only Appointed Panelists have an opportunity to provide comments on the draft Review Panel report.

Types of Meetings

Currently, SEDAR hosts two main types of meetings: In-person and Virtual.

In-person: In this form of meeting, appointed Panelists and Observers gather in the same physical location and discuss the assessment. These meetings typically last 3-5 days and are conducted for the Data and Review Workshops for Benchmark and Research Track assessments. The in-person workshops are open to the public.

Data Workshops are comprised of Plenary Sessions and Working Group Sessions. The Working Groups are divided into topics (Life History, Commercial or Recreational Landings, Indices of Abundance, etc.) where subject matter experts focus discussions and review on the data available. The group prepares recommendations on how the data should be treated, and if it is recommended for use in the assessment. Working groups convene concurrently, to be efficient as possible during the brief time when everyone is present.

During the Data Workshop Plenary Sessions, all appointed Panelists and Observers gather at once to discuss the individual Working Group recommendations. The entire group may ask questions and provide feedback for further analysis. The Assessment Development Team (ADT) is the consensus building body, and they approve the recommendations from the Working Groups. Plenary sessions are recorded for the Administrative Record.

Review Workshops provide an independent peer review of SEDAR stock assessments. The intent of the review is to ensure that the assessment and results are scientifically sound and that decision makers are provided adequate advice that reflects uncertainties in the data and methods. The Review Workshop Panel consists of both independently appointed reviewers from the Center for Independent Experts, and Cooperator-appointed reviewers, usually from the Cooperator's technical body, such as an SSC. All formal discussions happen while the meeting is in session, and all sessions are recorded for the Administrative Record. The workshops are open to the public.

It should be noted that limited allowances may be available for an Appointed Panelist who is unable to attend an in-person workshop for a specific issue (such as a medical emergency) to

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participate remotely. This is a distinction from the accommodation allowing a staff member the convenience of presenting on a specific issue remotely.

Virtual: In a virtual meeting, appointed Panelists and Observers log on to web-based portal to discuss data and modeling questions and provide feedback.

The Assessment Process is conducted via a series of webinars. The ADT is the consensus building body and approves recommendations. The virtual workshops are open to the public.