

	<p>Council</p> <p><i>Alternative Ways of Conducting NASCO Business</i></p>	<p>CNL(22)11</p> <p>Agenda item: 4g</p>
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Alternative Ways of Conducting NASCO Business

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide information about the action taken by NASCO and other RFMOs to enable business to continue during the Covid-19 pandemic. This provides a basis for considering how NASCO's business might best be conducted in future.

Decision

Council may wish to consider:

- the format of future NASCO Annual Meetings;
- general principles for determining the format of inter-sessional meetings;
- whether inter-sessional correspondence should be used prior to the NASCO Annual Meeting and / or inter-sessional meetings; and
- whether changes to communications / papers should be considered to improve the functioning of NASCO in the post-pandemic working environment.

Background

In March 2020 the World Health Organization declared a Covid-19 pandemic. Governments around the world adopted measures to reduce the spread of the virus, such as banning large events and implementing travel restrictions. As a result, in 2020, for the first time ever, and again in 2021 the NASCO Annual Meeting could not be conducted face-to-face. Alternative arrangements were put in place.

In 2020, the representative of the NGOs acknowledged the efforts made to conduct the Annual Meeting when face-to-face meetings were not possible, [CNL\(20\)51rev](#) (paragraph 8.1), and the potential benefits of these alternative arrangements, particularly in the context of increased environmental awareness. The Council agreed to add an agenda item to the next face-to-face meeting to discuss if and how any of the procedures developed during the pandemic could be incorporated into NASCO's future operations. The Council asked the Secretary to prepare a paper to support this, drawing on the practices of other RFMOs during the pandemic.

The Secretary discussed these operational matters with several RFMOs throughout the pandemic. She invited six of them to provide information for this paper. At the time of writing, four (ICCAT, IWC, NEAFC, PSC) had responded. Additionally, the Secretary has had discussions with the IP / APR Review Group (the Group that has met the most, virtually, over the last two years) on the merits of meeting virtually. NASCO's NGO Co-Chairs also provided their perspective to the Secretariat. The insights from the RFMOs, IP / APR Review Group and NGOs are included in each section, where relevant, below.

Meetings via Video Conference

In both 2020 and 2021, the face-to-face NASCO Annual Meeting was cancelled. In 2020, Webex was used to host a video conference, allowing delegates to 'meet' in a single virtual space and take the required decisions. In 2021, a more sophisticated platform was used (the Remo conference application facilitated by PSA technicians) where tailored virtual spaces were created to mimic the rooms and layouts of a face-to-face NASCO Annual Meeting. In both years a virtual platform was used, together with inter-sessional correspondence for each

meeting (inter-sessional correspondence is considered in the next section). The aim was to keep the video conferences short and focused, with an emphasis on the formal decisions to be taken and to encourage written discussion to take place via inter-sessional correspondence.

In 2022, the Annual Meeting will be held face-to-face (all being well), with virtual access for some delegates.

Other RFMOs reported using virtual meetings during the pandemic. A number of platforms have been used. Zoom, Webex and the Remo conference application facilitated by PSA technicians have been the platforms utilised most widely. RFMOs have informed the Secretariat that there is ongoing consideration of when to use a virtual meeting format and when to use a face-to-face format. Some RFMOs have also had experience of organising hybrid meetings. All RFMOs have confirmed that they are likely to continue to use virtual meetings in the future. Additionally, the NASCO NGO Co-Chairs have noted that:

‘While there may be an argument for the main players and close advisers to meet face-to-face once a year in future, it is frankly unnecessary for so many people to physically attend – sometimes up to 120 at past annual meetings. We also believe that at least some inter-sessional meetings should be held entirely by video – especially IP / APR reviews.’

The section below discusses virtual and hybrid meeting formats in more detail. It draws on information provided by the RFMOs, NASCO’s NGO Co-Chairs and the experience of the Secretariat.

Advantages of Holding Meetings via Video Conference

- **Reduced Financial Costs:** all RFMOs and the NGOs noted that conducting meetings via video conference (with no face-to-face element) can reduce costs. The table below gives indicative financial costs to NASCO of Annual Meetings from 2020-2023. Additionally, there are also reduced costs for the Parties (traveling, accommodation, per diems etc.).

Year	Format	Platform	Indicative Cost
2020	virtual	Webex	£5,000
2021	virtual	Remo conference application	£11,000
2022	hybrid	Face-to-face component*, and Remo conference application component	£43,000 (in budget) £22,500
2023*	face-to-face	Face-to-face only in Edinburgh	£45,000 (in budget)

* estimated. Please note that extra costs were incurred in 2020 and 2021 with the loss of the hotel deposit in both years.

- **Reduction in Carbon Emissions:** the RFMOs and the NGOs noted that virtual meetings mean reduced carbon emissions. The NGOs stated that:

‘Given that climate change is quickly becoming the major overriding threat to wild salmon... it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify the extensive travel-related carbon footprint associated with doing NASCO business.’;

- **Increased Participation:** the RFMOs that provided their perspective noted that virtual meetings can allow greater participation. The table below shows the number of participants at recent NASCO Annual Meetings:

Year	2018	2019	2020*	2021	2022**
Number of Participants	99	111	101	154	in-person = 79 virtual = 8

* Webex had a limit of 100 participants. ** number registered at the time of writing. However, the delegation from the Russian Federation is not yet included in the virtual numbers. Further, the Secretariat is aware that some delegates have yet to receive a travel authorisation to attend the Annual Meeting and have not, therefore, registered yet.

- **Effective for Some Business:** RFMOs have noted that virtual meetings are effective for some types of business, such as ‘technical discussions’ and ‘information sharing’. The NGOs view was that ‘...little has been lost in the past two years by meeting virtually’;
- **Better for Workload:** RFMOs have noted that virtual meetings allow more time for other work since less time is spent away, travelling. However, NASCO virtual meetings have been conducted over a longer time period than would be the case for a face-to-face meeting, because of the need for careful scheduling to take account of different time zones. Further, the use of inter-sessional correspondence increases the time delegates need to devote to a NASCO meeting; and
- **Improved Work / Life Balance:** virtual meetings may contribute to achieving better work / life balance for the participants, in particular those with caring responsibilities.

Disadvantages of Holding Meetings via Video Conference

- **Less Effective for Some Business:** a number of RFMOs reported that virtual meetings were less effective for conducting some business. For example, it was noted that virtual meetings lead to ‘a loss of depth of discussion’, that the ‘format heightens rather than resolves differences’ and that it is ‘less effective for analytical work meetings’;
- **Less Personal:** virtual meetings are less personal and RFMOs have said that they are ‘less conducive to positive working relationships’. One RFMO also noted that it is ‘difficult to arrange bilateral or in-the-margins talks’ which help in addressing challenging issues. Another RFMO noted that in-person meetings are important for ‘greater collaboration, informal discussions and relationship building both within and across delegations’ and ‘greatly facilitate sensitive negotiations and consensus-based decision-making...’;
- **Connection Challenges:** virtual meetings require good internet connection for the host and delegates. One RFMO noted that ‘some delegates struggled with insufficient internet speeds and agency firewall limitations, but these did not cripple progress.’ For other RFMOs this had clearly been more of a challenge. Although NASCO has been faced with the occasional technical issue, it appears to have coped reasonably well in this regard; and
- **Time Zone Issues:** given the time difference between Parties of up to eight hours, NASCO virtual annual meetings have been scheduled for the afternoon (UK time). This meant that the Annual Meeting was extended over more days than a face-to-face meeting normally would occupy. It has also required delegates to work both very early and very late in their day. However, as pointed out by the NGOs this challenge ‘can be overcome with judicious planning of agenda items’.

Hybrid Meetings

There is increased interest in hybrid meetings both in NASCO and other RFMOs, where some delegates attend in-person and others join virtually. One RFMO noted that hybrid meetings ‘could meet many ... needs for cost containment, scheduling, and broad participation.’

However, a distinction should be drawn between hybrid meetings where virtual observation is available, and hybrid meetings where virtual participation is available.

In terms of observation, one RFMO noted that smaller face-to-face meetings with key delegates attending in-person that were live streamed on YouTube were a low cost means of allowing wider observation of proceedings.

In terms of participation, another RFMO reported that their:

‘2021 Annual Meeting was held in hybrid format with 60 attending at ... HQ in person while others attended online via the same Remo Conference application. The use of panning cameras operated by technicians greatly enhanced the hybrid experience. This hybrid format was also considered a success by attendees, with no major technical problems and no COVID transmission reported following the meeting’.

However, RFMOs reported challenges related to hybrid meetings which aim to allow virtual participation. One noted that:

‘those who join remotely cannot join sidebar conversations or after-hours camaraderie and this could create two classes of participants: those who can benefit from in-person meetings and those who cannot.’

Another was keen to ensure that during hybrid meetings...

‘all participants - whether attending in person or virtually - have appropriate opportunities to participate. Moreover, that care should be taken to ensure transparency in decision making, meaning that where decisions are taken in the room there is sufficient transparency and clarity for those who are attending virtually (not in the room).’

RFMOs also mentioned the cost of hybrid meetings. As set out above, smaller face-to-face meetings with key delegates attending in-person that are live streamed on YouTube can be low in cost. However, another RFMO stated that ‘virtual / hybrid meetings are not ‘free’ as there are additional costs for bandwidth, video, support etc’.

The first table above indicates that a hybrid meeting can involve significant costs for the face-to-face element and, also, potentially significant costs for the virtual element. This is particularly the case for a hybrid meeting held in a venue (such as a hotel) where technical equipment must be brought in and installed and operated temporarily. However, a hybrid meeting could be held in a venue where the required technical equipment is already in-situ, which may be less costly. For example, the inter-sessional meeting of the West Greenland Commission in April 2022 was held in the Greenland Representation in Copenhagen, thanks to an offer from Denmark (in respect of the Faroe Islands and Greenland). This venue had equipment in-situ (such as cameras, microphones etc.) and technical staff available to assist. This enabled some delegates to participate in person, others to participate via Webex and another group of delegates to observe via Webex. However, it should be noted that the meeting room was small, in-person participation was limited to around 20 people and very little technical equipment was, therefore, required.

Decisions on Future NASCO Meetings

Decisions on Future Annual Meetings

Council may wish to consider whether future Annual Meetings:

- continue the pre-pandemic practice of inviting all delegates to attend an in-person meeting with no virtual element;

- allow the President and Vice-President, the representatives of each Party as per the Rules of Procedure of the Council and the respective Commissions, the Board and FAC members, the Commissions, Board and FAC Chairs and the NGO Co-Chairs (i.e. the ‘top table’ for each meeting) to attend a face-to-face meeting. Such a meeting could be available for other delegates to *participate* virtually, or to *observe* virtually;
- are fully virtual using a tailored platform (for example, the Remo conference application) or a generic platform (for example, Webex).

Decisions may be made on a year-by-year basis, at least two years in advance of the meeting. However, the agreement of a one-year regulatory measure in the West Greenland Commission in 2021 indicates that flexibility and agility may be important.

Decisions on Future Inter-Sessional Meetings

Council may also wish to agree that, when organising inter-sessional meetings, the Chair and the Secretary start from the basis that such meetings are conducted virtually. However, the Chair and the Secretary should consider the following, to determine whether an in-person or hybrid meeting would be more appropriate:

- the need for face-to-face communication to increase the effectiveness of the meeting;
- financial, environmental and time resource issues; and
- the ability of each member to attend and the implications for the equality of participation.

Inter-Sessional Correspondence

In both 2020 and 2021, Parties agreed that the majority of discussion of agenda items would take place via inter-sessional correspondence, prior to the formal virtual meetings. A process was developed which aimed to ensure transparency, avoid unnecessary bureaucracy, avoid overwhelming inboxes and enable recording and reporting of the communication. Agendas were adopted at the beginning of the period, so that the inter-sessional correspondence was, formally, part of the Annual Meeting. The Secretariat collated all inter-sessional correspondence and published it on the website and in the Annotated Agendas (available to all delegates) prior to the meetings.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Inter-Sessional Correspondence

The use of inter-sessional correspondence in 2020 and 2021 appeared, successfully, to enable questions to be asked and answered prior to the meeting. This left the virtual meetings free for more challenging issues to be discussed and for formal decisions to be taken. It has also been noted that this procedure allows those responding to questions to provide a more considered and well-researched response compared to when ‘put on the spot’ during formal meetings.

However, the use of inter-sessional correspondence extends the duration of meetings. This may impact on resources and increase the workload of Parties / jurisdictions and the Secretariat.

Decisions on the Future Use of Inter-Sessional Correspondence

- Council may also wish to consider whether, in general, inter-sessional correspondence should be used prior to the NASCO Annual Meeting and / or inter-sessional meetings.

Communication

A number of RFMOs noted that their usual means of communication were adapted during the pandemic, to enable efficient operations in the (almost exclusively) virtual working environment. One RFMO noted that ‘Communication is key: The pandemic emphasized the importance of clear and frequent communication.’ Another noted that:

‘whether due to the pandemic or just a sign of the times, or both, the communication of key messages...is now falling under the spotlight and efforts are being made to make the dense information provided by science more easily understood in order to make it more effective for the policy makers. Work is ongoing, but the results will likely include summaries of a visual nature and access to real-time data rather than death-by-PowerPoint.’

Similarly, NASCO adapted some practices to better communicate, to focus on important agenda items during meetings and to assist delegates in navigating papers and the business to be addressed, as follows.

Firstly, in both 2020 and 2021 Parties agreed, via a series of Agenda Planning documents, that some items of business that would otherwise be on the agenda, would be postponed or cancelled. Other agenda items were available for consideration through circulated papers only and not discussed during the video conference. This saved time for higher priority agenda items. The following standing Council agenda items were addressed very briefly during the video conference:

- Secretary’s Report (which included socio-economic reports submitted by Parties);
- Report on the Activities of the Organization;
- Announcement of the Tag Return Incentive Scheme Grand Prize; and
- Liaison with the Salmon Farming Industry.

Secondly, with regards to the ICES Advice in both 2020 and 2021 the WGNAS Chair presented a number of Agenda items in one webinar:

- Scientific Advice from ICES;
- New or Emerging Opportunities for, or Threats to, Salmon Conservation and Management; and
- Review of the 2020 / 2021 Fishery and ACOM Report from ICES on Salmon Stocks in the Commission Area (for each Commission).

Even so, the NGOs noted that each year the ICES report is circulated well in advance of the meeting and questioned whether a live presentation, which is more or less repeated for each Commission, is really needed. Additionally, the RFMO comment about science communication may be relevant to ICES Advice:

‘... the communication of key messages...is now falling under the spotlight and efforts are being made to make the dense information provided by science more easily understood in order to make it more effective for the policy makers.’

Thirdly, it has been noted by delegates that some of papers produced by the Secretariat may no longer be required, in light of increased online working during the pandemic. This might include (parts of) the APR Summary and the EPR Action Plan (which may soon be redundant because a new performance review is underway). In the interests of improving focus and efficiency, other papers, such as the Report on the Activities of the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization could be simplified significantly.

Fourthly, whilst some papers may be considered redundant or in need of revision, the Secretariat provided two papers not usually produced, pre-pandemic:

- Explanatory Memorandum on the Agenda: this would usually be provided for the Council only. In 2020 and 2021 it was provided for Council, Commissions, FAC and the Board

meetings. It provided an early indication of how each agenda item would be addressed, the likely decisions to be taken and papers available to support each agenda item; and

- Annotated Agenda: this was provided for Council, Commissions, FAC and the Board to provide a ‘one-stop-shop’ to help delegates navigate each meeting. The Annotated Agenda was provided prior to the video conference and included up to date information such as who would be on the ‘top table’ and the order of business. For each agenda item it provided background information, links to papers, and the decisions likely to be taken. The Secretariat has been asked to provide an Annotated Agenda for each of NASCO’s meetings in 2022.

Decisions on Future Communication Approaches in NASCO

In light of the discussion above, in order to ensure good communication and good time management, Council may wish to consider:

- whether certain agenda items should continue to be addressed only briefly during the meetings;
- how ICES advice should be presented (if at all) during meetings and whether revision of the format of the ICES Advice to NASCO is needed;
- whether any papers are redundant or in need of substantial revision;
- whether new papers, such as an Annotated Agenda, should continue to be provided for all meetings; and
- whether any other changes to communications / papers should be considered to improve the functioning of NASCO in the post-pandemic working environment.

Secretariat
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