



2012 Independent Program Review Panel Report

Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program

10 October 2012

Introduction

The ACCSP is a state-federal cooperative partnership between twenty-three agencies responsible for fisheries management, and fisheries data collection on the Atlantic Coast. Partner signatories to the ACCSP Memorandum of Understanding include the 15 Atlantic coast states and District of Columbia, two federal fisheries agencies (NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service and Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), three regional fisheries management councils (New England, Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic), the Potomac River Fisheries Commission, and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC).

The program was established in 1995 to address deficiencies in the data available for fisheries management along the Atlantic Coast. By establishing and maintaining data collection standards and providing a data management system that incorporates state and federal data, ACCSP strives to ensure the best available statistics are used for state, federal, and interstate fisheries management. The Program is funded through an allocation of the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act apportionment provided to the ASMFC for ACCSP activities, with NOAA distributing the funding through their grants process.

The ACCSP is managed collaboratively by committee. The Coordinating Council, comprised of high level fisheries policy makers, is the governing body. The Operations Committee provides guidance in standards setting and funding priorities. An Advisory Committee provides industry and stakeholder input into the process. Several other technical committees provide input into various aspects of the process.

Review Process

The Program Design of the ACCSP (November 2004 edition, p. 12) calls for external a peer review, at least every five years, to evaluate the program's success in meeting the goals and mission of the program and needs of fisheries managers, scientists, and fishermen. A Working Group (Appendix A) was appointed in November 2010 to provide guidance and oversight of the review for ACCSP. An Independent Program Review Panel (the Panel; Appendix B) was constituted in November 2011 to administer the review.

Terms of Reference for the Review (TOR) were arrived at early on by the Working Group with input from the Panel. The TOR is found in Appendix C. Recommendations that follow in this Report are tagged with the relevant Term of Reference(s).

In April, SRA International, Inc. (SRA) was contracted to support ACCSP and the Panel in this five-year independent review by collecting broad stakeholder feedback on the program.

This Panel Report is the result of SRA's stakeholder engagement activities, including an online survey of 41 mid-level scientists, fishery managers, and other ACCSP customers, as well as 26

interviews with upper management officials and their staff from state and federal fisheries organizations. Additional information was solicited from experts who were asked to provide more in-depth 'drill downs' of specific topics. White papers examining successes, challenges and recommended next steps were provided by 15 professionals. The Independent Review Panel convened a workshop (hereafter referred to as Workshop), on September 5-6 to receive the ACCSP staff's evaluation of program successes and challenges. The SRA Report (Appendix D), expert drill downs, and staff programmatic evaluation greatly informed the Panel's deliberations and findings.

Program Mission

The Program Mission category encompasses all themes related to ACCSP's progress toward accomplishing its mission, which is to "Produce dependable and timely marine fishery statistics for Atlantic coast fisheries that are collected, processed and disseminated according to common standards agreed upon by all program partners." There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Panel that the ACCSP is "widely perceived as a valuable entity that is capable of serving a critical mission."¹

The Program is making significant strides toward fulfilling its mission. (TOR 1) The Panel endorses the interview analysis that:

- ACCSP serves as a unifying entity across multiple states and can provide the mechanism to connect government, science, and data collection together, and yield impactful results.
- ACCSP serves a valuable role in standardizing and providing consistency in data collection along the East Coast.
- There is a universal need for a one-stop-shop for fisheries data. The ACCSP Data Warehouse will become increasingly valuable as it is further adopted and its datasets become more complete.
- For states with few resources, ACCSP provides the opportunity to collect data that would otherwise not be collected.

The standardized data housed in ACCSP are being used by scientists, fishery managers, and the fishing industry in the course of managing fisheries along the Atlantic coastal states and federal waters. (TOR 6) Ultimately the Program should be broadly recognized by all stakeholders as the "one-stop shop" for sufficient reliable data provided by partners in a standardized format. The end result is good decision-making by managers, scientists, and the industry for sustainable fisheries for our nation.

Achieving the ACCSP mission depends upon sufficient consistent, reliable funding of the Program to achieve its goals. There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Panel that "*Inadequate funding is the most significant barrier to the continued success of the ACCSP program.*" The review panel endorses the interview analysis that:

¹ Independent Program Review: Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program, SRA International, Inc., Strategy and Performance Group, August 8, 2012, referred to herein as Interview/Survey report.

- In the current austere budget environment, both State and Federal funding is being cut. The future of critical data collection, analysis, and dissemination efforts is at risk.
- ACCSP does not adequately articulate its value nor does it clearly distinguish its efforts from those of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Science Centers.

The Panel endorses the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- PM-01. ACCSP must clearly define its value and continue strategic outreach and communications that articulate that value. (TOR 4, 5e)
- PM-02. State partners should communicate ACCSP's value to their congressional delegations in order to effectively advocate for future funding. (TOR 5e)
- PM-03. The Coordinating Council should aggressively pursue funding, including non-appropriated funds and non-traditional funding sources. (TOR 2)

The Panel also recommends the following:

- PM-04. The ACCSP Coordinating Council should revitalize and task a Legislative Committee with responsibility of seeking funding, including through non-traditional funding sources (e.g., NGO's). (TOR 2, 5e)
- PM-05. State partners should communicate ACCSP's value to their Executive Branches and Legislatures in order to secure state funding for maintenance level data collection. (TOR 2, 5e)
- PM-06. Constituent partners who do not have federal lobbying prohibitions should participate in the next MSFCMA reauthorization and be supportive of ACCSP funding. (TOR 2, 5e)
- PM-07. ACCSP should develop a well-defined and strategic process to address budget shortfalls, both anticipated (congressional budgets) and unanticipated (within fiscal year rescissions). (TOR 2)
- PM-08. An annual review of ACCSP's budget, objectives, and milestones should be conducted to evaluate planned vs. actual accomplishments in relation to costs (earned value management). (TOR 2,7)
- PM-09. The Program should more clearly communicate ACCSP's mission and goals, and Partner responsibilities, to better align each and to align with the Program's technical capabilities and resource capacity. (TOR 1, 5e, 6)

The Interview/Survey Report notes that "*ACCSP has taken on too many initiatives given its current staffing and funding levels. Consequently, execution and results are not being achieved at the level they could be for core mission activities.*" The Panel endorses the interview analysis that:

- ACCSP is not always realistic about what it can and cannot accomplish.
- In an effort to become a one-stop-shop for fishery data, ACCSP commits to projects outside its core mission.

- Fishery data is highly complex and nuanced. Without a strong core of fisheries specific subject matter expertise in-house, ACCSP underestimates the requirements for implementation of fisheries data solutions.

We further endorse the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- PM-10. ACCSP should focus resources on critical business functions and priorities that demonstrate return on investment. (TOR 7)
- PM-11. As part of an ongoing strategic planning process, the original ACCSP objectives and priorities should be examined to determine if they are equally valid now and address the most pressing needs of fishery managers, scientists, and fishermen today. (TOR 5, 6)
- PM-12. ACCSP should continue to collect and incorporate stakeholder input on what products and services are most valuable to ACCSP customers and how existing products and services can be improved. (TOR 1, 3, 5d, 5e,)

The Panel additionally recommends the following:

- PM-13. ACCSP should strengthen its relationship with the ASMFC to leverage their fisheries specific subject matter expertise co-housed with ACCSP. (TOR 5b, 6)

Organization

The Panel examined the ACCSP's organization, which encompasses the Program's organizational structure and ACCSP staff. While there is overlap with the Program Management Section of this report, the Panel has chosen to separate the broad overarching organizational management in this section from the programmatic and operational management internal to the Program found in the latter section.

The ACCSP staff received high marks in this review. There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Panel that "ACCSP staff is very helpful and responsive to its program partners and customers." The following findings, endorsed by the Panel, support that conclusion:

- ACCSP staff works quickly and effectively to resolve partner issues.
- There are good working relationships among ACCSP and partner staff.
- ACCSP staff participation in data workshops for stock assessments and the SEDAR and SAW/SARC processes has been very useful.
- There is continued risk of staff turnover and loss of valuable institutional knowledge.

The Panel also submits the following observation:

- Staff members frequently go above and beyond the call of duty, and salutes staff for their dedication and expertise.

The Panel endorses the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- ORG-01. The Program should employ methods and best practices to ensure continuity of institutional knowledge in the case of staff turnover. (TOR 2,8)
- ORG-02. The Program should continue to build project and database management expertise among ACCSP staff. (TOR 2,4,8, 9)

In addition, the Panel recommends the following:

- ORG-03. Program managers should develop methods to positively reward staff and recognize accomplishments, including staff behind the scenes as well as those who are the public face of the Program. (TOR 2)

The ACCSP Program is built on various levels of Committee discussion and consensus and ultimately approval by the Coordinating Council comprised of all program partners. Committee (Operations and their technical committees and Advisors) structure and participation appears strong, with improved participation, strong work ethic, and value-added products. There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Panel that the ACCSP *"structure and committee system is a logical and effective decision making framework with the potential for continuous improvement."* A crucial challenge remains in maintaining the enthusiasm and involvement of all partners to continue advancing the program forward at a pace that matches management and data needs, and assures appropriate oversight and support to the Program's Administrative staff.

The Panel concurs with the survey/interview findings that:

- ACCSP's committee system is sensibly organized with a reasonable hierarchical approach to decision making.
- While the general structure is good, the challenge is ensuring that partners attend ACCSP meetings consistently.

The Panel also submits the following observation:

- The Coordinating Council is not optimally engaged, although it has overall accountability for the Program. Its Executive Committee is currently under-utilized.

The Review Panel endorses the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- ORG-04. Revisit the timing and frequency of ACCSP Coordinating Council meetings to improve attendance and focus. (TOR 5c)
 - Avoid scheduling the meeting on the final day of ASMFC meetings
 - Conduct annual in-person meetings with quarterly webinars

The Panel also recommends:

- ORG-05. The Coordinating Council should be strengthened through re-energized Executive and Legislative Committees. The partner Memorandum of Agreement should be reviewed to clarify the composition of the Executive Committee. (TOR 5c)

- ORG-06. Given its financial stake in the Program, NMFS must be an active participant on the Coordinating Council's Executive Committee. (TOR 5)
- ORG-07. Strategies to improve continuity of program oversight should be implemented, including a review of the leadership term on the Coordinating Council. (TOR 5c)
- ORG-08. The Program should undergo a governance review. The Panel realizes that the situation today is very different than 1995, when the ACCSP was created. ACCSP needs a better relationship and interface with ASMFC, and linkages established and strengthened. Consideration should be given to placing ACCSP as a program under ASMFC, which could possibly re-engage the state directors. There are issues of economy of scale and potential improvements to efficiency that could be gained, working relationships strengthened, resources leveraged, etc. (TOR 2, 4)
- ORG-09. Given the potential for resource shortages and increased workload in the future, streamline the number of technical committees and leverage virtual meetings to reduce the burden on partner staff members, while at the same time optimizing partners' engagement. (TOR 2, 4)
- ORG-10. Consider an ACCSP hosted annual or bi-annual conference where key issues are discussed, keynote speakers are invited, and all those interested in fisheries data can network and share ideas. (TOR 4, 5b, 5c, 5f)

The ACCSP Program structure has remained unchanged although the ASMFC Executive Director has not been actively working with the ACCSP Director in providing feedback and assisting in performing annual reviews. The Survey/Interview Report notes that "*There are conflicting perceptions on the level of accountability and oversight that is needed for ACCSP.*"

The Panel concurs with the following analysis:

- To some partners, ACCSP's degree of reporting to partners and the Coordinating Council provides an adequate level of insight into the program.
- Other partners believe that ACCSP could benefit from additional guidance from the Coordinating Council around program priorities.
- The Coordinating Council itself is not dedicated enough to provide adequate oversight. Coordinating Council members have many responsibilities in their other roles and not all members can dedicate adequate time to ACCSP tasks.

The Panel endorses the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- ORG-11. Regular communication should be enhanced between ACCSP staff and the Coordinating Council and its leadership. (TOR 2)
- ORG-12. The Coordinating Council should consider utilizing the executive committee or forming an administrative oversight committee (a subset of the Coordinating Council) to more frequently track the performance of ACCSP and its staff. (TOR 2, 5c)

Partner Projects

The partner projects category encompasses all themes related to ACCSP's partner grants and the partner funding process.

The Coordinating Council has charged the Operations and Advisory Committees to review proposals and make funding recommendations to the Coordinating Council, prior to final project funding approval by the Coordinating Council.

The current Strategic and annual Operations Plans are used to guide the determination of annual project funding priorities. Prior to issuing the Request for Proposals, the Coordinating Council approves the annual funding criteria and allocation targets. These are used to rank projects and allocate funding between maintenance and new projects. The documents, *Funding Decision Process*, May 2012, and *Guide for Ranking Proposals*, FY2013 Edition, were drafted by the Operations Committee and approved by the Coordinating Council. This formal funding decision process has been developed and revised in 2012 and 2013 to assist the Program committees in deliberations on funding of proposals intended to enhance timely implementation of the Program, as well as, help partners in preparing their grants for ACCSP funding.

Over the last two program reviews, the overarching concern of the long term success of the program is inadequate funding. The Final Report of the External Peer Review of the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP), September 2006, stated, "The current funding level is not sufficient to maintain or grow ACCSP programs. Substantial activity and related funding are devoted to maintaining partner programs rather than development of improved data collections. Commitment to both development and maintenance of projects is not sustainable at the current funding level."

This seems to be a recurring issue, especially in our current economic climate. This independent program review had many stakeholders agreeing that given the current economic realities, there is increased need to quantify and justify both the return on investment of ACCSP as a whole, as well as its partner project grants. As throughout government and the private sector, ACCSP and its partners will need to focus and utilize resources efficiently.

This was clearly stated in the Survey/Interview Report, that only 37% of respondents to the survey agreed that ACCSP's funding priorities are appropriate. In explaining their rationale for disagreeing that ACCSP's funding priorities are appropriate, multiple respondents stated that they believe ACCSP's funding priorities are not adequately focused on the core mission of ACCSP. This mission was to provide start-up funding to partner projects that will eventually be taken over and funded independently. The specific observations from the program review survey were:

- Maintenance proposals make up a large percentage of grant proposals each year. Funding priorities favor existing long term maintenance projects at the expense of more innovative research and development (e.g., biological data, bycatch research).
- States who have secured their own funding for data collection are not given equitable consideration in the funding process because of the priority given to maintenance projects.
- For small states with tight budgets, some feel that it is unrealistic to expect that states will take ownership of maintenance funding.

- Many of the same states continue to request maintenance funding because they lack alternative funding sources. There is no incentive or transition plan for states to stop relying on ACCSP funds for long term maintenance projects.
- Politics at the Coordinating Council level influence the allocation of funding towards existing state maintenance projects, which may conflict with funding recommendations from the Operations Committee.

The Panel supports the recommendations derived from the Survey/Interview Report (TOR 8):

- PP-01 ACCSP partners should come to agreement on a new and more rigorous threshold for allocating maintenance funding in order to better balance innovation and maintenance. (TOR 2 and 7)
- PP-02 The partner project process should be reviewed in light of anticipated budget climate and a strategic process developed to respond to potential shortfalls, including reviewing funding formula and ability to fund base-level programs to help prevent degradation of time series data (i.e. backsliding).(TOR 2)
- PP-03 Consider methods to incentivize and leverage additional state or private funding for partner projects (e.g., matching grant program). (TOR 2)
- PP-04 Subject states who return for maintenance funding year after year to a higher degree of review to ensure that the project provides an adequate return on investment. (TOR 2)
- PP-05 Take steps to ensure that politics do not exert undue influence in funding decisions at the Coordinating Council. (TOR 2, 6)
- PP-06 If a data collection need is driven by federal fishery management regulations, states should seek funding directly from NOAA Fisheries (NMFS) to meet those needs. (TOR 2)

Additionally, the Panel would highly recommend the following items to preserve the integrity of ACCSP, its practices and processes, and ensure each partner's commitment and engagement in the Program (TOR 8).

- PP-07 Ensure that ACCSP data management practices and funding processes adhere to NMFS procedural directives and Information Quality Act requirements to provide metadata and data management plans. (TOR 8)
- PP-08 Develop Service Level Agreements between ACCSP and each Partner with set expectations, minimum requirements, and process for how to address when unmet expectations, and maintain annual reviews. (TOR 3, 7)
- PP-09 ACCSP should account for the true costs of Partner specific projects, e.g. FUS, FIS/FOSS, HMS, MRIP and lobster database, that ACCSP has taken responsibility for outside of the Partner project funding process. This will further define those tasks that ACCSP does accomplish on behalf of specific Partners using internal funding from the Administrative Budget. (TOR 2)
- PP-10 Partner projects that are directly supported by ACCSP staff, should provide initial and maintenance resources to support those projects. (TOR 2)

- Those Program constituent partners without lobbying constraints should participate in the next Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSFCMA) reauthorization to attempt to obtain consistent funding and assure of its supporting the Program. (TOR 2, 8)
- There appears to be good feedback to partners relative to proposal rankings, however, feedback from Coordinating Council after final funding decisions and reasons for those decisions could be improved, specifically feedback to the Operations Committee and the Advisory Committee summarizing discussions. (TOR 3)

Data Collection Standards

The Data Collection Standards category includes all themes related to the Atlantic Coast Data Collection Standards. There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Panel that the data standards are *an essential ACCSP initiative that has greatly improved the uniformity of data collection on the East Coast*. In addition, the Panel believes that the data collection standards are among ACCSP's top successes.

The Program is making significant strides toward creating a uniform set of standards regarding data collection. The Panel endorses the interview analysis that:

- As more states fully adopt the data standards, the utility of the program will continue to increase.
- The data standards are an essential precursor to a fully integrated one-stop-shop of fisheries data.

During the IPR meeting, the Panel discussed the necessity of periodically reviewing the standards and based on those discussions, the Panel recommends:

- DCS-01 Periodically review the data standards to ensure they are still pertinent and address the needs of program partners and move the program towards full implementation (TOR # 5).

While large gains have been made in developing and implementing the data standards, there is still work to be done by the various program partners in achieving full implementation of these standards. There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Panel that *some program partners still face challenges in fully adopting and implementing the data standards*. The Review Panel endorses the interview analysis that:

- Full implementation of the data standards requires structural changes to state data collection efforts and reporting requirements.
- Some states are unable to fully implement and enforce the data standards due to a lack in funding and/or political will.
- It is difficult to codify the data standards in state regulations.
- The data standards do not align with all of the specific data needs of state and federal partners, including NMFS, which must track Annual Catch Limits and employ accountability measures at a vessel and trip level.

The Panel endorses the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- DCS-02 Continue to facilitate discussion through the Program's committee process to assess, capture, and adjust to the frequently evolving requirements of fisheries data collection coast-wide implementation (TOR 5).
- DCS-03 Examine the costs, benefits, opportunities, and threats inherent in establishing the data standards as compliance requirements in fishery management plans (TOR 5).

Data Management

The Data Management category includes all themes related to the ACCSP data warehouse and its associated products and services. There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Panel that the concept of the data warehouse is *“well founded and has made great progress, but it has not fully established itself as the one-stop-shop for all East Coast fisheries data”*.

The Program is making significant strides toward creating a user-friendly, comprehensive data warehouse and needs to continue to work towards making itself the go to site for East Coast fisheries data. The Panel endorses the interview analysis that:

- The data warehouse is widely utilized among fishery managers and its success is considered to be vital to ACCSP's mission.
- The compilation of many disparate sets of state data in one place saves a great deal of time for fishery management technical staff.
- Within approximately the last 5 years, ACCSP data has become a more prominent source for informing stock assessments. Prior to that time, it was not considered for that purpose.
- Stock assessments must still compile data from several different sources to have the best available data.

The Panel endorses the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- DM-01 Consider utilizing the data warehouse as an online portal to other pre-existing and alternatively hosted datasets (TOR 4, 5).

During the Workshop, the Panel discussed the need for prioritization. There was concern that the warehouse is trying to be *“all things to all people”*. The Program should focus its efforts on meeting the needs of one group (based on who are the core stakeholders of the program) and, once success has been achieved, expand to the needs of other groups. Ultimately, this issue will need to be decided by the Coordinating Council. Based on those discussions, the Panel recommends:

- DM-02 Determine the core data stakeholders based on the Program's mission and prioritize the focus on them by addressing their data needs. This will allow for a more focused approach to ensure success of the program (TOR 4, 5).

While the Program continues to make the data warehouse as user-friendly as possible, there are still concerns about the warehouse. There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Independent Review Panel that *“there are usability concerns in relation to the data warehouse”*. The Review Panel endorses the interview analysis that:

- The interface of the data warehouse appears outdated.
- The requirement to create a log-on credential to access the data warehouse, even for public data, deters some users from the data warehouse.
- State and federal data consumers want access to confidential datasets that are not always available.
- The data warehouse query tools are not as intuitive as they could be and have a steep learning curve. Therefore, not all the rich datasets can be utilized by the average user.
- There is not a clear cadence as to when each dataset within the warehouse is updated.

The Panel endorses the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- DM-03 Focus resources on improving the user interface of the data warehouse through user feedback and user-centered design (TOR 4, 5).
- DM-04 Enhance the query capabilities of the data warehouse to be more accessible to non-technical users (TOR 4, 5).
- DM-05 Provide clear guidance on when and how all datasets are updated with new data in the data warehouse (TOR 4, 5).

During the Workshop, the Panel discussed the issue of confidentiality. For those utilizing the data warehouse who do not need access to confidential data, the program needs to consider creating a non-confidential login for general users that does not require a user account. And for confidential data users, the Program has to address the concern that there needs to be a timelier turnaround for processing confidentiality requests. Based on those discussions, the Panel recommends:

- DM-06 Consider relaxing the log-on credentialing requirement for those requesting access to non-confidential data (TOR 4, 5).
- DM-07 Develop a more timely process for granting access (e.g. institute maximum time period of one week) to information for confidential data users (TOR 4, 5).

The issue of having data available from multiple sites can potentially cause a variety of problems. There needs to be close coordination between the various entities involved to ensure that data queries/requests provide the same results from the multiple sites. Without this coordination, there is the potential to get different answers from each of the sites which can lead to confusion among the users and the public. There is overall consensus among the program review interviewees, survey respondents, and the Panel

that “*there are disconnects between the data provided in the data warehouse and datasets provided by NMFS Science Centers and other partners*”. The Panel endorses the interview analysis that:

- Data enhancements provided by the Northeast and Southeast Fisheries Science Centers add unique and essential value, but are not accessed through the data warehouse.
- ACCSP and NMFS datasets at times appear duplicative and/or have discrepancies in similar datasets.
- NMFS data portals at times pre-empt the data warehouse as the go-to source for federal fishery management analysis and planning. Some data consumers use the NMFS datasets out of habit.
- The data management responsibilities between ACCSP and the Science Centers are not clear, leading to disconnects in quality assurance and quality control.
- Data management errors that lead to quota overages are a worst case scenario that should be avoided at all costs.

The Panel endorses the following recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report:

- DM-08 Increase collaboration among the ACCSP, NMFS Science Centers, and other federal partners, especially at the leadership level (TOR 5).
- DM-09 Define clear data management roles between ACCSP and the NMFS Science Centers and communicate those roles to program partners and customers (TOR 4, 5).
- DM-10 Develop a clear future-state vision for the data warehouse system architecture in relation to other East Coast fishery data repositories to avoid redundancy and ensure that resources among organizations are allocated wisely (TOR 1).
- DM-11 Examine potential cost efficiencies in cloud hosting and virtualization of the data (TOR 4).

During the Workshop, the Panel discussed the issue of synchronization of data. It is imperative that the data in the ACCSP data warehouse and the data from the various partners are routinely compared and that a process is in place to accomplish this task. With the implementation of SAFIS in the Northeast, much work on synchronizing the data has been accomplished in that region although there is still work to be done. However, in the Southeast, there needs to a more defined process implemented to ensure that the data are routinely synchronized. Based on those discussions, the Panel recommends:

- DM-12 Develop process for synchronization of data between ACCSP and the Northeast and Southeast Regions. An emphasis needs to be placed in the Southeast Region since more work needs to be accomplished in that region (TOR 5).
- DM-13 Provide clear guidance on when and how all datasets are updated with new data in the data warehouse (TOR 4, 5).

SAFIS

This category addresses the Standard Atlantic Fisheries Information System (SAFIS). SAFIS can be viewed in two ways: (1) online reporting system for both vessels and dealers (and state partners as data entry staff) to make reports of harvests and landings, and (2) the dataset behind the web form that

consolidates the data from the form as well as other methods of reporting. Data entry is a real-time, web-based reporting system for commercial and recreational harvests and landings on the Atlantic coast. SAFIS consists of four modules, or applications, that were developed over time by the Program Partners to standardize fisheries data collection methods. SAFIS provides up-to-date information on species caught and their impact on fisheries and quotas; allows confidential access to data-of-record by fishermen and dealers; enables fulfillment of State and Federal reporting requirements through online data entry and reporting; and provides management tools that facilitate maintenance of partner-owned data.

It should be noted that the use of SAFIS in its web form currently is restricted to the NE (Virginia-Maine) and not the SE (North Carolina-Florida). However, the system used in the SE is largely the Bluefin Data System. Other propriety reporting systems are also in use by a number of dealers. Most of these data are fed into SAFIS routinely and used within season. This system works right now and is gradually improving.

As noted in the Survey/Interview Report, "the landings data collected and provided by ACCSP through SAFIS [and through other methods] is an essential product and critical to the mission of state and federal fishery management organizations up and down the east coast." The review panel endorses the interview analysis that:

- SAFIS's [the web form] ability to provide near real-time electronic reporting of dealer and trip level landings data is an essential service,
- Landings data provided through SAFIS [the database] are frequently cited as the most important product or service that is provided by ACCSP.

The interview analysis also raises the concern that:

- Some fishery managers do not know that much of the East Coast landings data are collected and compiled by ACCSP.

The implication of this concern is that the program needs to be better marketed. This is reflected in the recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report which the Panel endorses:

- S-01 ACCSP needs to better identify the services SAFIS provides to partners for collection [web form] and consolidation [database] of data (TOR 4, 5).
- S-02 That status of partners achievement of the full standards needs to better identified and ACCSP needs to work with partners as a resource to foster their full achievement (TOR 4, 5).
- S-03 ACCSP needs to better promote their accomplishments and remaining work in SAFIS targeted to those that may influence funding decisions (TOR 4, 5).

The interview analysis found a couple of usability concerns with the web form of SAFIS:

- The SAFIS interface is not well designed for user experience.
- State fishery management staff and commercial industry members who frequently enter data through SAFIS are frustrated at the slow response time of the web-application.

The analysis also notes that:

- Some fishery management organizations with in-house capability have built scripts to automatically download near real-time SAFIS data [database] into their own data programs. This capability greatly increases the ability of the product.

From these concerns and comment, the Survey/Interview Report offered the following recommendations:

- S-04 Focus resources on improving the user interface of all SAFIS products through user feedback and user-centered design, incorporating new or technology improvements, as needed. (TOR 3, 4)
- S-05 Improve the response time of the SAFIS web applications. (TOR 4)
- S-06 Provide advisory services and best-practices to state and other customers on custom scripting for exporting SAFIS data in near real-time. (TOR 4)
- S-07 Consider building a local SAFIS software client for customer workstations to complement the existing web applications. (TOR 4)

Although the Panel does not necessarily support all four individual recommendations above, the Panel does support the general conclusion that:

- S-08 SAFIS be made more user friendly, both from a data entry and data query perspective as implied by these recommendations from the Interview/Survey Report (TOR 4, 5).

The major issues with SAFIS range from a lack of funding for some partners to completely implement it and to change how ACCSP operates, to being more forceful in working with partners or at least more open about where different partners are in implementation (TOR 2).

- S-09 ACCSP should consider changing the partnership working mode to one that has a more direct role in assisting partners in the short term to realize the full SAFIS standards (TOR 4, 5).

Program Management

During the Workshop, the Panel identified a seventh review category of Program Management. The program management category includes themes related to ACCSP's internal management of the program.

In these current economic times when organizations are inevitably expected to do more with less, it is critical to seek out opportunities to become more efficient with resources. Critical choices between what *must be* and what *could be* accomplished can drive the success or failure of an entire program. Having and communicating clear goals and accountability through "best practices" in program and project management can help ensure program success.

Communication, outreach, and responsiveness to and between stakeholders remain an issue. The Survey/Interview Report indicated ACCSP must clearly define its value and continue strategic outreach and communications that articulate that value. The value of the stakeholders input into the ACCSP is also

very important and they need to feel value in their input to ACCSP. The recommendations from the Survey/Interview Report were:

- M-01 Develop overall communication plan that encompasses strategic viewpoints and priority needs of the program, defines stakeholders, and includes updated outreach plan.
- M-02 More clearly communicate data consolidation process to users. (TOR 4)
- M-03 Adopt an improved "trouble" ticket and enhancement request management system, specifically including response from staff on expected timeline until completion. This should not be a list available on only one staff member's computer, but a more transparent living document. (TOR 4)

The Panel also observed there is no internal strategic planning or evaluation process to help guide the Coordinating Council, Executive Committee, or Program staff. The following are recommendations from the Panel to help develop such a process:

- M-04 Adopt an internal strategic planning and execution process, using quality program, project and business management best practices. This is not data quality assurance and quality control (QA/QC) which, of course, remains of critical importance, but is about getting more focused on your mission and business layer, not just the IT layer, including, for example, change management processes and data management plans inclusive of disaster planning. (TOR 4)
- M-05 Develop a well-defined and strategic process to address budget shortfalls, both anticipated (congressional budgets) and unanticipated (within fiscal year rescissions). (TOR 2, 4)
- M-06 Develop and maintain a transparent and comprehensive system of annual performance plans and evaluations for the Executive Director and staff, with methods to acknowledge and reward success and achievements. (TOR 2)
- M-07 Develop and monitor Program level performance measures and communicate to stakeholders. (TOR 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) These may include within established priorities:
 - Level of achievements of full standards selected by individual partners.
 - Engagements with individual partners to forward achievement of ACCSP standards (data management, data collections, permitting, legislation, etcí).
 - Participation in data workshops such as SEDAR.
 - Active and ongoing communications with Partners to achieve increases in leveraging and efficiencies.

Conclusion

ACCSP has greatly matured as a program since its genesis in 1995. The Program plays a vital role as the central repository for data collected, processed, and disseminated in support of fishery management decisions at the state, interstate, and federal levels. ACCSP has achieved significant progress in

standardizing fisheries statistics across the East Coast partner jurisdictions. Through the successful development of data collection standards and SAFIS, ACCSP is poised to become the one-stop-shop for East Coast fisheries data.

New challenges face ACCSP as it approaches its 20th Anniversary in 2015. The Program's continued advancement will continue to be influenced by current and undoubtedly ongoing fiscal challenges. This backdrop necessitates an acute focus on strategic planning, reinvigorated partner engagement in priority-setting for resource commitment, elevated communications, and renewed engagement in Program governance.

The Panel wishes to thank the ACCSP staff, Work Group, and the many partner agency contributors who are part of the ACCSP family and who provided invaluable insight and input into this review.

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Appendix B – Independent Program Review Panel Members

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Appendix C – Terms of Reference for the Panel

Terms of Reference for the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP) 2012 Independent Program Reviewers

The Review Panel is tasked with providing an external review of the ACCSP program, with emphasis on a broad evaluation of how ACCSP is meeting the goals and mission of the program. The Program Design of the ACCSP (November 2004 edition, p. 12) calls for external peer reviews, at least every five years, to evaluate the program's success in meeting the needs of fisheries managers, scientists, and fishermen.

Terms of Reference

1. Review the structure of ACCSP to draw general conclusions on the overall effectiveness of the Program in fulfilling its mission and vision as perceived by end user scientists, managers, and stakeholders.
2. Review the operating environment including program organization/governance and, in particular, the interaction between the Coordinating Council Chairman, the Director and the staff to determine how well staff manages work plans and accomplishes the work of the 2008-2012 Strategic Plan. Review funding of Partner projects, allocation of Partner staff resources, and adequacy of funding levels.
3. Review the process used by the Program to evaluate customer needs and Program deliverables to meet those needs. Review the adequacy of the mechanism used to respond to stakeholders and customer feedback and ensure continuous improvement.
4. Review the information technology program to evaluate if: data systems are meeting constituents' needs; data management needs are being met on an efficient and timely basis; there are sufficient processes in place to ensure coordination and communication between partners; improvements or updates are meeting the growing data management objectives for constituents and partners.
5. Review Program Goals and Strategies articulated in the 2008-2012 Strategic Plan to determine continued relevancy, and evaluate current (2008 to 2012) performance in program accomplishment in the context of the Plan. These are:
 - a. Create and manage a fully integrated data set that represents the best available fisheries data
 - b. Continue working with the ACCSP Program Partners to improve fisheries data collection in accordance with the ACCSP standards
 - c. Strengthen collaboration and involvement among partners at all levels
 - d. Monitor and improve the usefulness of ACCSP's products and services
 - e. Improve outreach and education and maintain support from all stakeholders and constituents

- f. Support nationwide systems used for collecting, managing, and disseminating marine fisheries information as defined in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization of 2006
6. Draw general conclusions on the overall effectiveness of the Program in fulfilling its mission and vision as perceived by end user scientists, managers, and advisors. Assess overall program effectiveness: e.g. "Are better decisions being made as a result of ACCSP?"
7. Are the partners generally satisfied with the investment they have made in ASSCP and how do they feel their investments can yield a higher return.
8. Make recommendations for the future, including specific recommendations for program improvements, organization/governance and priorities.
9. Review the completion rate of previous Program Review recommendations and evaluate subsequent actions taken in response and their efficacy towards improving the program.

Appendix E - Agenda and Attendees of Workshop

2012 Independent Program Review Workshop

AGENDA

September 5-6, 2012

Crowne Royal Plaza

901 North Fairfax Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

Web link: <http://warsawgrouper.>

accsp.org:7777/pls/accsp/f?p=550:15:3091873735852622::NO:15:P15_CAL_ID_1:1241

Wednesday, September 5

8:00 AM Introduction and Overview - M. Cahall

9:00 AM Mission/Organization

9:30 AM Data Warehouse

10:30AM Break

10:45 AM Standard Atlantic Fisheries Information System (SAFIS)

12:15 PM Debrief (Buffer time)

12:30 PM Lunch (Catered buffet lunch)

1:30 PM Debrief (Buffer time)

1:45 PM Partner Projects and Program Funding

3:30 PM Break

3:45 PM Outreach/Communications

5:00 PM Data Collection Standards

6:00 PM Adjourn

Thursday, September 6

9:00 AM Preparation of Panel Report (ACCSP Staff available with Word files and computers)

10:30AM Break

10:45 AM Preparation of Panel Report (ACCSP Staff available with Word files and computers)

12:00 PM Lunch (Bringing in sandwiches)

1:15 PM Preparation of Panel Report (ACCSP Staff available with Word files and computers)

3:30 PM Break

3:45 PM Preparation of Panel Report (ACCSP Staff available with Word files and computers)

5:00 PM Adjourn

List of Attendees

Mark Alexander (CT DEEP)
Robert Beal (ASMFC)
Mike Cahall (ACCSP)
Gordon Colvin (NOAA Fisheries Service)
Dave Donaldson (GSMFC)
Julie Defilippi (ACCSP)
Karen Holmes (ACCSP)
Kathy Knowlton (GA DNR)
Ed Martino (ACCSP)
Ann McElhatton (ACCSP)
Nico Mwai (ACCSP)
Jennifer Ni (ACCSP)
Theresa Nishimoto (SRA International)
Cheri Patterson (NH FGD)
Greg Power (NOAA Fisheries Service)
Karen Sender (NOAA Fisheries Service)
Susan Shipman (Independent Contractor)
Geoff White (ACCSP)
Matt Willse (SRA International)
Douglas Vaughan (Independent Contractor)

Appendix E – SRA Report *(attachment)*