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Operational Guidelines for Science Special Response Processes (SSRP)

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Science Special Response Processes and the DFO Science Advisory Framework

Science special response processes (SSRPs) are a vital part of the [DFO Science advisory framework](#) (referred as ad hoc reviews and meetings in the framework). They are appropriate for two types of situations. The first situation is to respond to urgent and unforeseen issues. Ideally, there would be ample time to consolidate data and information, conduct analyses, prepare working documents, ensure the participation of the appropriate mix of experts and undertake the appropriate advisory process. However, urgent advisory requirements that are normally unforeseeable may arise and the advisory process must be responsive to such needs. The second situation occurs when a fully inclusive and thorough advisory meeting (e.g. standard peer review meeting or workshop) is not required because an advisory framework for the issue has already been developed by a fully SAGE (Scientific Advice for Government Effectiveness) compliant process and the issue is a straight-forward application of the framework. In both situations, the precise nature of the request and the expected breadth of interest in the results may also have an influence on the choice of the process. Some issues may have such significant implications or high profile that a SSRP would not be appropriate, even if one of the two situations above applies.

The information below develops more fully the rationale for using SSRPs and sets out minimum standards that should be met when conducting these processes. This information represents the guidelines designed to ensure that SSRPs are used and conducted in a way that is compliant with the DFO Science advisory framework and the SAGE principles and guidelines, and to allow the DFO Science advisory process the flexibility necessary to respond to client needs in a timely manner.

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Situations where Science Special Response Processes Can be Used

The following illustrates situations where Science special response processes (SSRPs)



can be used and also highlights particular considerations that should be taken into account given the criteria that may apply.

1. **A new and urgent request for information or advice arises. There is a need for a thorough advisory process (peer review or workshop) but there is no time to adequately plan for such a process and respond to this request in a timely manner.**

This situation applies to all urgent requests that would normally require a thorough advisory process for various reasons: information on the issue is abundant and will likely come from many internal and external sources, scientific questions to address are complex, no advisory framework is available, a wide range of disciplines and public groups will be interested in the meeting results, the results could be taken as a precedent for similar issue in other areas, etc. However, time constraints do not permit a full process to be applied. Sometimes such situations are foreseeable, but were not included in the annual planning process. Others are unforeseeable because circumstances outside DFO's control create the need for a rapid science-based response from the Department.

Examples: Requests for input into Species at Risk emergency listing processes and a number of the requests from Habitat Management under the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* (CEAA) could fall into this category (e.g. in-stream flow needs in relation with various mining and energy projects).

2. **A new request for information or advice arises but the issue does not require that we plan for a thorough and inclusive advisory process to provide an answer to this specific request in a timely manner.**

The second situation may be categorized into three sub-situations, each of them providing a specific rationale to justify that a full and inclusive advisory process is not required.

- A. **Advisory precedents already exist on this issue. DFO is the final advisory body but the incremental consequences of the new information or advice are small when compared to the original information/advice provided or framework developed.**

This situation generally applies to urgent and unforeseen advisory requirements (e.g. a new request requiring a response before the next planned peer review on this issue) but the timelines are not the only aspect. There are also advisory precedents on this issue to consider. For an information request, it may be that DFO already conducted previous workshops on this issue and there is a relatively good knowledge of the information available. For an advice request, the science basis is already available and the nature of the request is straight-forward (i.e. the request is similar to requests that have been addressed previously with a complete process, or this specific situation corresponds to a class of requests for which a framework has been fully developed and adopted). Thus, situation 2A may only require a small number of experts to articulate a response based upon the consensus achieved in previous peer reviews/workshops and this situation may not justify adding a new thorough and inclusive advisory meeting in the planning process.

Examples: Some requests from Fisheries and Aquaculture Management (FAM) that deal with alternate harvest forecasts from those given in the Science Advisory Report could fall into this category. In-season requests that rely on real time data (e.g. requests for Pacific salmon management forecasts of sockeye run timing) may also fall under this category.

- B. **DFO Science is asked only to review the information available on a specific issue. DFO is the final advisory body but the request is for**

science guidance at an early stage in development of policies or management measures and the provision of formal science advice is not yet necessary.

This situation is very close to an “Internal Workshop” that is already part of the DFO Science advisory process. DFO Science often initiates internal workshops to establish the status of the knowledge on specific issues whether or not we are asked by a client to provide any specific science advice. In situation 2B, the triggers to use a SSRP are: too little information is available on this issue to justify a formal workshop, the information might come from only a few internal sources, and DFO Science will likely have the opportunity to plan for more thorough and inclusive advisory meetings at a later time to provide formal science advice. In this case, a SSRP could be conducted whether or not the issue is urgent.

Examples: A request for information on the distribution of a species during the spawning season to explore potential in-season restrictions on fishing. The information would be provided only as initial guidance; the final decision would be based on subsequent peer reviewed advice.

- C. **Advisory precedents already exist on this issue (as for situation 2A), or the nature of DFO’s contribution to the issue does not require a full process (as for situation 2B). Moreover, DFO Science is not the final advisory body and it is assumed that the inclusiveness and transparency of the process will be ensured by the other advisory body.**

Sometimes, the primary reason for DFO to conduct a full process is to ensure the inclusiveness and transparency of the process leading to DFO’s contribution. In this situation, DFO has good reasons to expect that full standards of inclusiveness and transparency will be met by the final advisory body and a SSRP can be used for DFO’s contribution to the larger process. SSRPs corresponding to situation 2C could also be included in advance within the annual work plans.

Examples: Draft reviews of COSEWIC Status Reports could fall into this category. It is difficult to include all reviews in the work plans at the beginning of the fiscal year and several may arise during the year. Some of them may also be technically complex but in such cases, a Pre-COSEWIC review should have already provided a peer-reviewed body of scientific information justifying the use of DFO’s SSRP to review the reports. If no Pre-COSEWIC peer review occurred, it must have been agreed that not enough scientific information exists to justify even an initial peer review meeting. The inclusiveness and transparency of the process is ensured by COSEWIC, as the advisory body who is responsible for making the final recommendations to the appropriate government body which is consistent with the SAGE principles and guidelines.

Various requests from CEEA panels, Co-Management boards and Energy boards (e.g. impact studies from proponents) could also fall under this category.

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General Considerations Applying to the Use of Science Special Response Processes

- A. All reasonable efforts should be made to ensure that requests handled with Science special response processes (SSRPs) will only occur for truly unforeseeable and urgent needs when issues are of a scale or level of complexity that would normally require a more thorough process (Situation 1).
- DFO Science is striving to reduce (and ultimately eliminate) the occurrence

of issues/requests that would require the conduct of an inclusive peer review process, but that are not identified during the planning phase; however, it is recognized that some issues are truly unforeseeable. The establishment of closer links with the clients at the planning phase of the advisory cycle and a better understanding of the benefits of the peer review process by the Science managers, the scientific community, the stakeholders, and especially the DFO clients will contribute to a decrease of such instances.

- There are requests that appear urgent but, after deeper examination, it becomes evident that the scientific information could be provided later, thus allowing DFO Science to plan and conduct the necessary preparatory work and meetings that are required to respond adequately to the request. Such cases could be made less frequent by establishing closer links with the clients at the planning phase of the advisory cycle, and by requiring clients to provide rationale for requests and associated response deadlines.
 - There are issues that are well known ahead of time (e.g. major mining and energy projects are generally in preparation for several years) but the precise nature of the requests/scientific questions that will be posed to DFO Science cannot be determined in advance (e.g. CEEA reviews are generally associated with 30 - 60 days deadlines). A full peer review and advisory process, appropriate to the scale of the undertaking class, should be used to develop advisory frameworks to deal with the key environmental issues associated with such undertakings. Then, when case-specific, time-sensitive requests for DFO Science advice are received, SSRPs can be applied while complying with the intent and provisions of the SAGE Principles and Guidelines.
- B. To consider that a sound basis of peer-reviewed information and advisory precedents already exists (e.g. Situation 2A), there must either be a history of addressing similar questions in science advisory contexts (i.e. inclusive peer review meetings), or an advisory framework document in the specific class of activities or ecosystem properties has been developed through the DFO Science advisory process.
- C. The expected interest in the results of any issue, or the incremental consequences of a SSRP as compared to what was produced in previous peer reviews, is not easy to estimate (Situations 2A and C). All advice provided by DFO Science is important and is of interest to someone; all reasonable efforts should be made to ensure that most of the assessments/specific questions that DFO Science may be asked will be known in advance in order to be integrated within the standard schedule of inclusive peer reviews and workshops.
- D. DFO Science has to provide sound science even if the final advice is developed by another advisory body (Situation 2C). In some cases, it may be in the interests of DFO, stakeholders, or the ecosystem itself to require a full peer review (either internal or fully SAGE compliant, depending on the circumstances) before DFO provides its input to that other advisory body.
- E. The expected use of the information that will come from a SSRP must be taken into account before deciding to conduct such a process. All reasonable efforts should be made to avoid SSRPs when the impacts of the results are expected to be high. When issues normally requiring a peer review must be addressed via SSRPs (because of the timelines), the DFO Science response should include a clear mention about the interim nature of the advice and the need to plan for subsequent and more inclusive meetings that will allow enough time for preparation, and where the preliminary advice will either be confirmed or modified as necessary.

Minimum Standards for Science Special Response Processes

The minimal standards associated with any Science special response process (SSRP) are as follows:

- A. The outputs of SSRPs will generally be documented via the "[Science Response series](#)" in order to have a consistent way to document the results. However, there may be particular cases where it is considered not relevant to document the results of a process using one synthesis report (e.g. gathering comments from various sources on a draft of a COSEWIC Status Report). In such cases, no Science Response report may be produced.
- B. The authority approving the release of each report will have to be clearly identified in the report.
- C. DFO staff will be informed about the upcoming SSRPs and their opportunity to participate will be the same as it is for any of the DFO Science advisory processes.
- D. All reasonable efforts should be made to ensure that those who may be affected by the results of a SSRP (e.g. industry) be able to contribute to the process when there is no provision for their inclusion in any subsequent science-related step prior to a decision. In such cases, their participation should be subject to the same rules as for peer review meetings, acknowledging the fact that the process of obtaining external participants to a SSRP may be more difficult given the usually very short timelines associated with those processes.
- E. All Science Response reports for which DFO is the final advisory body will be translated in both official languages and will be posted on the CSAS Web site as it is the case for the Science Advisory Reports. However, posting could not be done, or at least could be delayed, when DFO is not the final advisory body and when this posting would be in conflict with some fundamental rules of the other advisory body (e.g. specific rules of COSEWIC to guarantee the confidentiality of their interim processes). Any particular requirement regarding the posting of the reports should be clarified before initiating a SSRP.

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