

Launching the National Survey and Data Acquisition (NSDA) Program

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Executive Summary

The National Survey and Data Acquisition (NSDA) Program Workshop was held from August 20 to August 22, 2024, at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle, Washington. This workshop was a critical event to strengthen the NSDA Program's processes and improve collaboration among NOAA Fisheries' Science Centers. The workshop brought together nearly 50 participants, including NOAA Fisheries leadership, working groups, facilitators, and logistics support, both in-person and virtually. The primary objective was to enhance understanding of the NSDA Program's annual cycle, clarify roles and responsibilities, and improve data collection processes across regions.

Key workshop outcomes included formalizing participant roles, refining the program's annual planning and prioritization procedures, and producing actionable items for the future. A key focus was improving the coordination between various working groups, including the Fieldwork Coordination, Cooperative Research, Regulatory Compliance, and Science, Technology, and Optimization groups. The workshop also emphasized the need for better financial tracking tools, enhanced communication strategies, and tools to streamline survey prioritization and reporting.

Sessions covered a wide range of topics, including the NSDA Program's framework, survey prioritization processes, regulatory compliance, and tools like the Fishery-Independent Survey System. Breakout discussions identified bottlenecks and areas for improved collaboration. On the final day, participants concentrated on operational resources, Gantt chart refinement, and strategies for internal and external communication about the program.

By the end of the workshop, participants left with a clearer understanding of the NSDA Program's goals, improved collaboration across groups, and a sense of empowerment regarding their roles in the program. Action items identified at the workshop set the stage for further development and efficiency in managing NOAA Fisheries' fieldwork and survey data acquisition activities.

1. Workshop Logistics

The National Survey and Data Acquisition (NSDA) Program workshop took place at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle, Washington, from August 20 to 22, 2024. The workshop aimed to enhance understanding of the NSDA Program's annual process, clarify participant roles, and streamline data collection processes. Daily themes included program overview, participant engagement, and accountability follow-up. Main session activities

were held in the Traynor room, and two additional rooms were available for breakout sessions, with both in-person and virtual attendance totaling 50 participants. Participants included NOAA Fisheries leadership, multiple working groups (Regulatory Compliance, Fieldwork Coordination, Cooperative Research, Science, Technology, and Optimization, and the NSDA Steering Group), facilitators, and logistics support.

2.0 Session Summaries

2.1 Overview of the NSDA Program Framework

Goal: Develop an understanding of the NSDA Program and the roles of the working groups to accomplish the annual cycle of planning, prioritizing, implementing, tracking, and reporting.

2.1.1 Opening Remarks: Introduction and Welcome (*Evan Howell and Kevin Werner*)

The workshop opened with a call for collaboration to optimize the survey and data acquisition process. Evan Howell emphasized the importance of field data collection in supporting the NOAA Fisheries mission and the need for a cohesive, national survey and data acquisition program that is adaptable to regional needs. Three key components for success include:

1. The inclusion of subject matter experts from each Science Center to shape a national program framework.
2. The development of a national prioritized list of surveys and cost information to demonstrate program needs and outcomes to Congress.
3. Presentation of actionable solutions to the NOAA Fisheries Science Board.

Opening remarks underscored the importance of fostering understanding and engagement, and encouraged participants to provide input as appropriate, with a goal of leaving the workshop feeling empowered and invested in the NSDA Program and the annual process.

2.1.2 Session One: NSDA Program Framework (*Patrick Lynch*)

Patrick Lynch led participants through a presentation to develop an understanding of the NSDA Program framework and highlight the importance of an annual process (e.g., Gantt chart). The NSDA Program focuses on improving NOAA Fisheries' capacity to collect, plan, and distribute fishery-independent data essential for managing marine resources amid environmental changes. The program scope includes long-term monitoring and field-based activities across platforms and regions, excluding data analysis and sample processing. The NSDA Program's structured approach (Figure 1) is directed by a Steering Group (SG) of Science Center representatives and supported by working groups that guide strategy, prioritize initiatives, and track program performance. Session discussions emphasized the

need to improve cost accuracy and highlighted the importance of effective communication and collaboration to ensure that all program participants understand their contributions within the larger NSDA Program framework. With rising expectations for communication, discussions emphasized producing recurring products that clearly communicate NOAA Fisheries' value to stakeholders. Session one concluded with participants responding to an online survey to evaluate how well participants understand the annual process and where they fit .

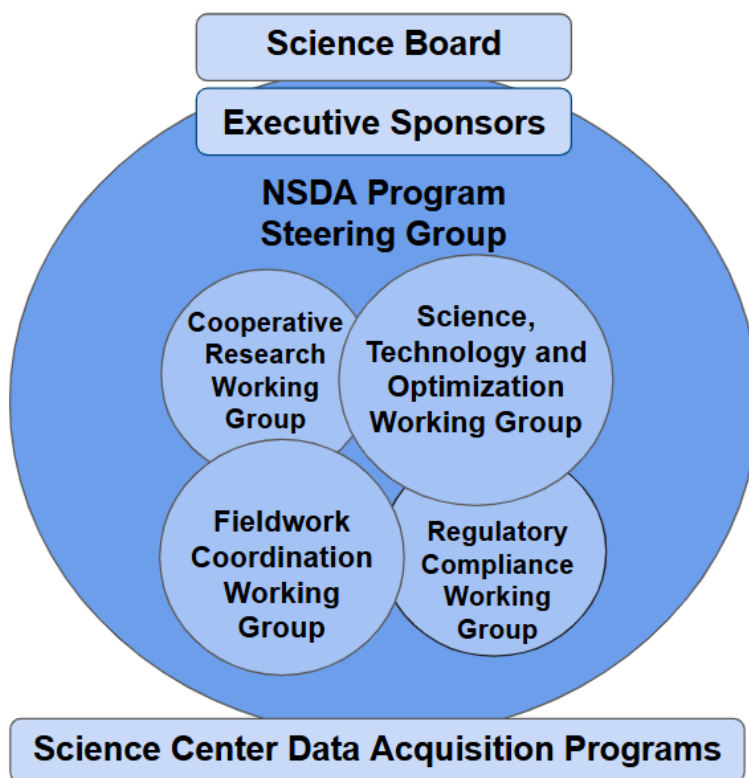
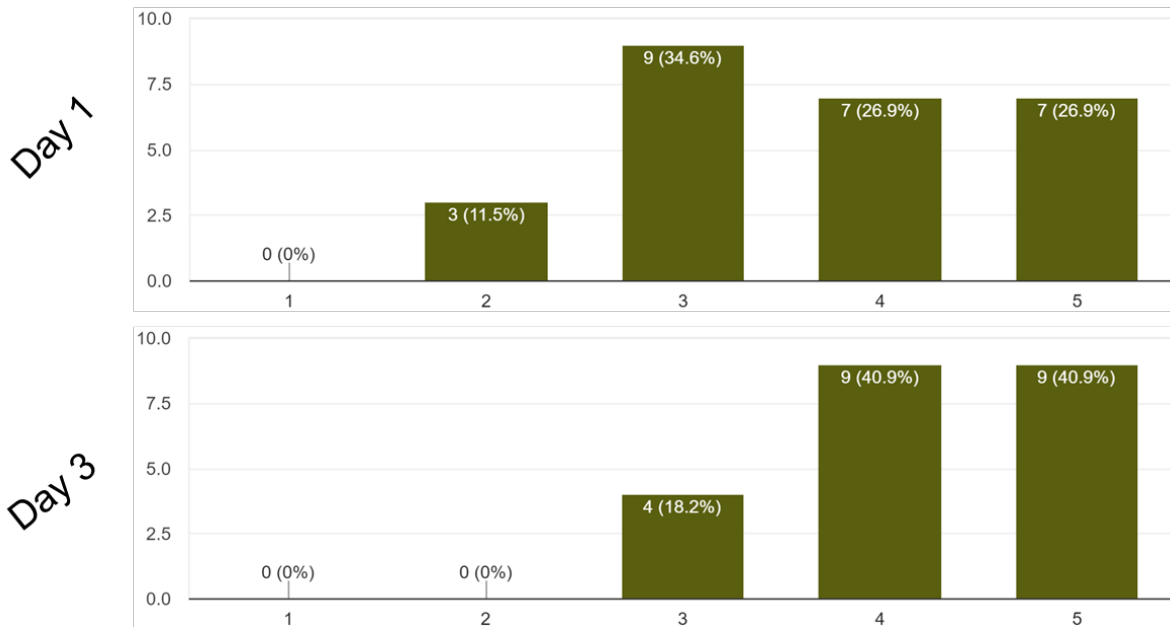


Figure 1: Visual connection and communication flow between the four working groups, Steering Group, Science Board, executive sponsors, and data acquisition programs.

How well do you understand what needs to be accomplished throughout the year to successfully collect data?



How well do you understand where you fit into the NSDA Program annual process?

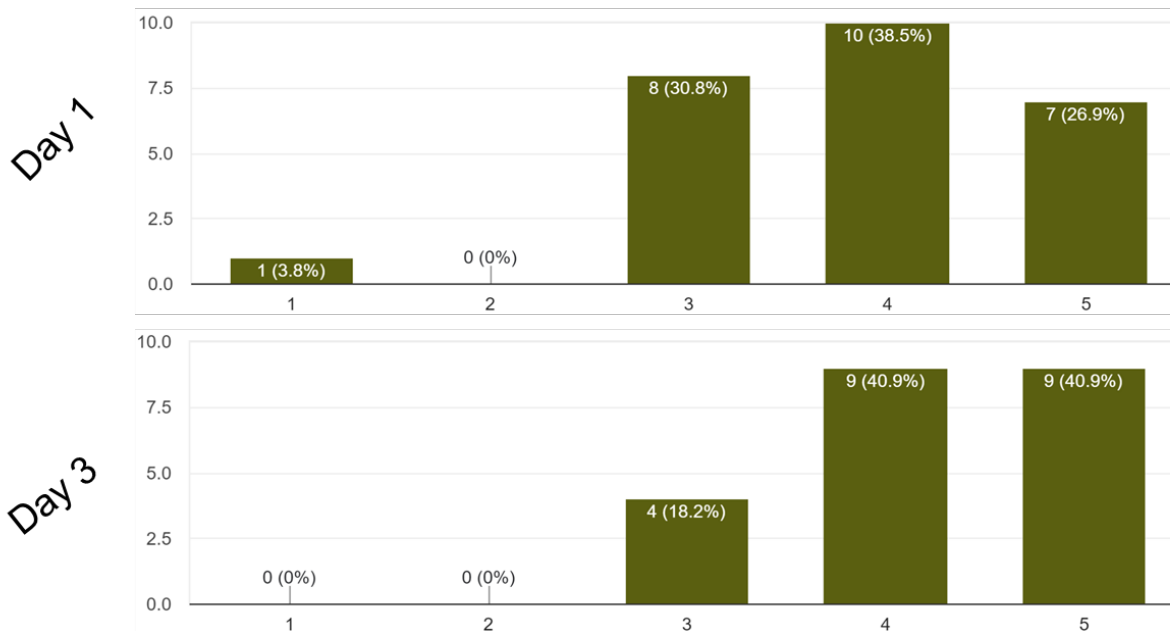


Figure 2: Workshop participant survey responses (1 = not at all; 5 = very well) from day one and three, evaluating how well participants understand what needs to be accomplished throughout the year to successfully collect data and where they fit into the process.

2.1.3 Session Two: Overview of Each Working Group (STO WG, *Derek Bolser*; FCWG, *Mike Gallagher*; CRWG, *Mark Chandler*; and RegCom WG, *Erin McMichael* and *Matthew Dunlap*)

Four working groups, Fieldwork Coordination Working Group (FCWG), Cooperative Research Working Group (CRWG), Regulatory Compliance Working Group (RegCom WG), and Science, Technology, and Optimization Working Group (STO WG), were convened at the workshop to share their group objectives, contributions to the annual process, and future opportunities for exploration.

The **FCWG** is responsible for scheduling and coordinating prioritized projects on the best platforms available. They work across NOAA Line Offices and Science Centers to manage survey logistics and provide expertise on vessel and equipment needs, simplifying these processes for project leaders. Annually, the FCWG turns a list of prioritized projects into an efficient, executable plan. They also serve as authoritative sources for reviewing environmental compliance needs, implementing mitigation procedures, and Fleet Allocation Plan (FAP) development. The FCWG plans to develop a database to facilitate vessel contracting, providing a ready source of information on available vessels, archives of information on past charter solicitations, and statements of work, and to provide information and oversight to charter vessel clearance processes. Additionally, the FCWG will explore the diversification of platform usage to reduce reliance on any one given platform type. The FCWG will be the authoritative source of information on efficient and effective research platforms for their respective centers' field activities.

The **CRWG** focuses on advancing fishery management through collaborative research, engaging partners across federal, state, and industry sectors. They establish spending plans to support regional research and develop policies that enhance regional initiatives. Annually, the CRWG contributes to the NSDA Program by preparing regional project portfolios and budget reports, aligning with federal budgeting processes. Their future goals include developing new projects that improve stock assessments with cooperative research funds and moving developed projects to core survey funding.

The **RegCom WG** ensures that NOAA Fisheries' fisheries and ecosystem research surveys align with environmental statutes, mandates, and executive orders, including the requirements that stem from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA), and Endangered Species Act (ESA) requirements. The RegCom WG, Science Center leadership, Regional Offices, Office of Protected Resources, and General Counsel navigate the regulatory compliance processes, from planning to reporting, and coordinate with regulatory bodies like NOAA's

General Counsel and the Regional Offices. The RegCom WG contributes to the NSDA Program by focusing on Science Center adherence to regulatory compliance guidelines and developing documentation and training tools to ensure project adherence to permit and consultation requirements. Moving forward, they aim to address increasing compliance workloads and explore additional resources to reduce litigation risks.

The **STO WG** addresses challenges in optimizing NOAA Fisheries' survey efforts by supporting data-driven decision-making and identifying ways to standardize and streamline operations. As the STO WG is a new group, its scope, scale, and composition will be determined by the NSDA SG. The STO WG's future focus could include developing a decision support tool to support survey prioritization and contingency planning, supporting regional collaboration and modernization efforts, and forming a communication forum for survey science. These efforts will aim to enhance flexibility, improve efficiency, and foster a collaborative survey planning and execution environment within NOAA Fisheries.

2.1.4 Session Three: Gantt Chart Review and Adoption (Facilitator: *Todd Chester*)

During session three, workshop participants reviewed and discussed the annual program timeline and made recommendations to more efficiently complete all tasks. At the end of the session, participants agreed to adopt the new revised annual program timeline. Listed below are a list of discussion topics:

1. **Prioritization and Decision Support for Surveys:** There are difficulties with prioritizing surveys across Science Centers, and similar difficulties are mirrored when prioritizing surveys across NOAA Line Offices. Tools and structured methods to rank surveys nationally were discussed, resulting in a suggestion to develop a decision support tool that assists in the survey prioritization process.
2. **Multiyear and Aspirational Prioritization:** Discussions centered on how unfunded or "aspirational" surveys should be prioritized. There was consensus that aspirational lists tend to be overreaching given realistic constraints, suggesting a need for multiyear planning that includes "aspirational" surveys. The Vessel Prioritization, Allocation, and Scheduling System (VPASS) was discussed as a way to document all planned activities, including aspirational surveys.
3. **Role of the Science Board and SG in Prioritization:** The SG is tasked with creating a national prioritization list of fisheries-independent fieldwork for the Science Board. This prompted clarifying discussions about who has the authority to finalize these lists and the collaborative roles of the SG, Science Board, and Chief Scientist in the process. Ultimately, it was decided that the SG would make recommendations to the Science Board.

4. **National Reporting Tools:** Discussions took place on the limitations of the current reporting tools, especially regarding post-survey cost reporting. The need for national-level tools to streamline tracking and reporting across centers was emphasized. These tools could potentially reduce regional discrepancies and increase efficiency.
5. **Contingency Planning:** There was ambiguity around the definition and execution of contingency planning. The need for clarity when defining “contingency” was identified, and there was discussion over whether contingency planning should be part of the initial planning stage or whether it should be handled separately.

2.1.5 Breakout Session #1: Working Group Discussion

Participants broke into one of three groups to discuss tools and resources for completing the annual process and areas needing collaboration or support. The three groups convened were (1) the FCWG combined with the CRWG, (2) the RegCom WG, and (3) the NSDA SG joined by the STO WG. Below is a brief overview of the discussions within each group.

To meet the goals of the NSDA Program, the FCWG, joined by the CRWG, concluded that they will need a financial tool that tracks important survey cost information at a granular scale. The system should be common among Science Centers, be connected to planning, execution, and tracking, be an end-to-end solution that also connects to the Fishery-Independent Survey System (FINSS) (must track actuals), and be compatible with NOAA’s Business Application Solution system. In the future, FCWG and CRWG will build a list of requirements for a common tool and demonstrate how existing tools could be adapted. The inclusion of a survey’s funding vehicle or award type (grant or contract) in FINSS was also a consideration. In addition, the FCWG agreed to become Fieldwork Coordinators (FCs; formerly Vessel Coordinators), in effect pledging to become subject matter experts in all sampling platforms, not just vessels.

The **RegCom WG** highlighted that in the future, regulatory compliance should be integrated into standard operating procedures for all fisheries and ecosystem research surveys, emphasizing its role as essential rather than supplementary. Compliance leads asked for a comprehensive schedule for compliance for all Science Centers to keep track of where each Science Center is within the larger five-year compliance process. Additionally, a formalized training program similar to that of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which focuses on enhanced understanding of NEPA, ESA, MMPA, MSA, and so on, would increase the understanding of all the statutes with which NOAA Fisheries complies. Lastly, the RegCom WG discussed how their work changes across a 1–5-year span and that they may need additional resources (labor) to get the work done when there’s an increase in workload.

The **NSDA SG** spoke at length about tools (national and regional) that are used to generate reports and discussed the role of the SG and other working groups in the annual process. They provided four key takeaways:

1. The SG learned about communication tools the Regional Offices use to update stakeholders.
2. Funding line integrity causes hurdles when looking for shared resources or platforms.
3. A relational database is needed to support all the data needs (tracking) or taskers.
4. The role of the SG in the annual process (Gantt chart) should be reduced from where it currently stands.

2.2 Survey Prioritization and Reporting

Goal: Develop a clear understanding of how fisheries-independent surveys are currently prioritized (Office of Marine and Aviation Operations (OMAO) FAP, fisheries criteria) and reported (FINSS).

2.2.1 Session Four: Development of OMAO FAP, Collaboration with NOAA Line Offices, and Fisheries Prioritization Criteria (*Mike Gallagher and Lindsey Kraatz*)

Session four was focused on describing the Fleet Working Group process to approve the OMAO FAP and the fiscal year (FY) 2024 NOAA Fisheries prioritization criteria. Congress directed NOAA Fisheries to produce and circulate an annual fish survey and stock assessment priority list. In FY 2022–2024, using Science Centers’ ranking, congressional direction, and economic impact, surveys were categorized into three tiers: Tier 1, which includes critically important surveys that must be completed to support NOAA Fisheries’ mission; Tier 2, which encompasses core surveys and surveys with high stakeholder and council interest; and Tier 3, which includes important surveys with a lower profile. The Fleet Working Group oversees the approval process for the OMAO FAP by coordinating efforts among NOAA Line Offices. The process begins with the submission of Ship Time Requests, which are then prioritized within Line Offices based on national and regional needs. The FCs use the prioritized list in negotiations with other Line Offices to create a FAP that reflects operational demands and budgetary constraints, enabling efficient use of fleet resources to collect data for all of NOAA.

2.2.3 Session Five: FINSS Reporting and Business Rules (*Jihong Dai*)

FINSS was established in 2009 and expanded in 2021 to facilitate comprehensive reporting and tracking of NOAA Fisheries fieldwork across various platforms, including vessels, aircraft, and land-based activities. Each Science Center has designated personnel responsible for timely updates and accuracy in reporting, ensuring that all estimated and

executed financial and operational aspects are thoroughly documented and reviewed. The FINSS reporting timeline spans from October to September each year (Figure 3). The planned surveys are locked in by October 10, and the actuals for the previous FY are locked by November 20. Any data changes after the locking dates will need to be requested and reviewed by the FINSS Change-Control Team. The FINSS data are used to create an Annual Survey Report in December and respond to other survey taskers throughout the year. Jihong Dai also provided a live demonstration of FINSS.

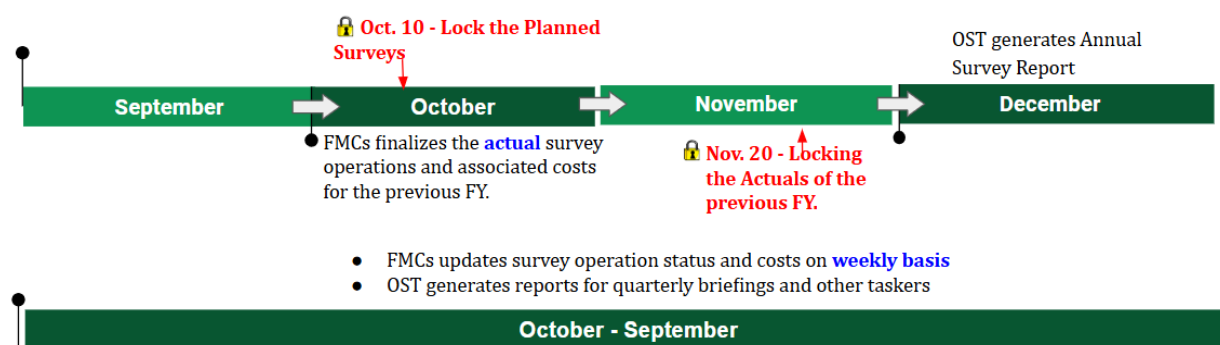


Figure 3: Annual FINSS reporting timeline.

2.2.4 Breakout Session #2: Working Group Discussion

Participants broke out into one of three groups to discuss expectations and collaboration among working groups, identify bottlenecks, or review Terms of Reference and provide feedback to the Science Board for finalization. The three groups convened were (1) the FCWG combined with the CRWG, (2) the RegCom WG, and (3) the NSDA SG joined by the STO WG. Below is a brief overview of the discussions within each group.

During breakout session one, the FCWG, joined by the CRWG, highlighted the difficulty faced by a FC when obtaining financial cost information. Therefore, breakout session two focused on understanding how each individual FC obtains cost information (platform cost, science cost, and annual overhead) at each Science Center to input into FINSS. For each Science Center, FCWG and CRWG charted out the person responsible for calculating each cost, how each cost is calculated, and who is responsible for entering the cost into FINSS. The process for obtaining and entering cost information at each Science Center varied widely and underscored the need for a universal financial tool that tracks survey costs consistently across Science Centers at a granular scale in the long-term. However, in the short-term, comprehensive understanding of the process was reached to aid in consistency across Science Centers.

The RCWG discussed two main topics during breakout session two. The first topic was about delineating the compliance roles and responsibilities of NOAA Fisheries personnel and OMAO personnel during vessel transit. Compliance Leads expressed their concerns about which compliance obligations apply (NOAA Fisheries or OMAO) when OMAO vessels are in transit but have not yet picked up NOAA Fisheries scientists. The group agreed to work on a template or form to specify compliance obligations. The National Coordinator sent follow-up emails to attorneys from NOAA Fisheries and OMAO, and a meeting to discuss the topic has been scheduled for January 2025. The second topic was about how to ensure that partner vessels report incidental takes as required and follow reporting and mitigation measures that are specified in biological opinions and letters of authorizations required for obtaining sampling permits. Compliance Leads from regions that explicitly share these obligations during annual compliance training shared language with regions that did not yet have such language in their training materials.

The NSDA SG focused their discussion on developing the roles and responsibilities of the NSDA SG and the STO WG. The Steering Group Terms of Reference were discussed, and the NSDA SG worked through expectations that are not necessarily in alignment with the annual process (Gantt chart). For example, they are charged with developing a multiyear survey plan, but it is not clear what that may look like or what resources and tools may be needed to develop a multiyear survey plan. Moving forward, the SG will work with some of the other working groups to sort out what information is needed to pursue multiyear planning. Discussion on the STO WG was limited, but a constrained scope and scale were recommended, given the other responsibilities of potential working group members. The NSDA SG decided to revisit the STO WG Terms of Reference and membership after prioritizing FY 2025 surveys and affirming their own Terms of Reference.

2.3 NSDA Program Operational Resources

Goal: Identify solutions to improve the NSDA Program process and agree on post-workshop products (final Gantt chart, annual reporting, internal or external outreach, and elevator speech).

2.3.1 Session Six: Improving Working Group Coordination and Operations (*Todd Chester*)

For the first 30 minutes, workshop participants broke out into small groups (5–8 people) to build on breakout session two and discuss areas of the NSDA Program that would benefit from additional resources, capacity, or support to improve the annual process. For the remaining time, each table identified specific questions, issues, decisions, and actions (written on sticky notes) and stuck them on the wall within each category. Unresolved identified items were recorded as action items in this report.

2.3.2 Session Seven: Communicating the NOAA Fisheries NSDA Program Enterprise (Internal and External)

Session seven discussions focused on the importance of messaging to effectively communicate the NSDA Program information to the internal team as well as Congress. Participants reflected on what they have learned over the week to distill the main components so that they could consciously communicate NSDA Program efforts. First, participants individually recorded words they associate with the NSDA Program (Figure 4) and then worked within their small groups to form an elevator speech (Figure 5). An example of one elevator speech is as follows:

Who: The NOAA Fisheries Survey Program executes the surveys needed to achieve sustainable fisheries and conserve and recover protected species.

What: Our coordination distributes resources internally and informs Congress and the public of the agency's ability to meet its mission.

Why: To optimize NOAA's ability to collect fisheries-independent data.

Lastly, participants responded to a post-workshop survey to evaluate progress made at the workshop toward understanding where participants fit within the NSDA Program and what they need to do to be successful. Overall, participants have an improved understanding of what needs to be accomplished throughout the year to successfully collect data and are more confident about where they fit into the process (Figure 2).



Figure 4: Word cloud of participants' responses to the prompt, "words you associate with the NSDA Program."

- Create a Google Shared Drive with folders or lists for each program group [Office of Science and Technology (OST)].
 - Create a group chat.
 - Create an email group after the new name is approved.
- Update Terms of Reference with priorities.
- Develop an understanding of what is needed to create a five-year vessel plan.
- Ask the Science Board to consider a Regional Coordinator for each Science Center. This may be a Regional Specialist or a full-time FC.
 - Identify how Science Centers would use a Regional Coordinator.
- Discuss if OST should have a designated Protected Resources person to help with program coordination.
- Increase membership from 1 to 2 representatives per Science Center; consider including a fish/protected species pair from each region.
- Each region's NSDA SG members should write up their own 1–n list.
 - Discuss how this differs from the SC 1–n list.
- Develop a survey needs, request, and unfunded projects system. Ensure that this information is systematically packaged.
- Develop Terms of Reference for the NSDA Program.
 - Define roles and responsibilities.
 - Identify a point of contact to complete FINSS reporting.

STO WG

- Update STO WG Terms of Reference with priorities discussed at the NSDA Program Workshop.
- Onboard members to the STO WG.
- Administer rotational support that:
 - Promotes quantitative evaluation of designs and effort.
 - Incentivizes collaboration between programs and centers.
 - Facilitates the incorporation of new approaches into long-standing surveys.
- Establish a quarterly survey science communication forum and an annual survey science symposium.

FCWG

- Make changes within the Science Centers' financial system to track money by survey rather than program (e.g., sea turtle program). A global system that absorbs current platforms is preferred. This action originated in the FCWG breakout discussion but will be facilitated by the NSDA Program Lead and will involve numerous entities across NOAA Fisheries.

- Short term: scope or demonstrate possible common tools to Operation, Management, and Information Divisions and relevant staff at each Science Center.
- Develop a standard process across Science Centers for FINSS cost calculations, including labor.
- Create a database of contingency options (Indefinite Delivery/Indefinite Quantity Contracts, Charters, etc.).
 - Demonstrate inflationary trends in charter vessels for the Science Board.
- Establish regular communication among FCWG, CRWG, and RegCom.
 - Use the Gantt chart to identify when communication is needed.
- Establish more coordination with OMAO on long-term vessel availability.
 - OMAO scheduler: insert realistic repair periods in VPASS based on historical service time.
 - FC VPASS submission cruise dates should be more refined than a principal investigator's submission.

RCWG

- Bring in a detailee when needed to help in the regulatory compliance process, every 4 to 5 years per Science Center.
- Ensure regular communication among FCWG, CRWG, and RegCom.
- Create a shared drive with folders for work collaboration.
- Use the term “Regulatory Compliance” instead of “Environmental Compliance (EnCom).”
 - This name change is reflected in this report.
- Make regulatory training more available to Regulatory Compliance Leads.
- Continue to draft an updated RCWG Coordinator/Lead position description. Possibly add specific task details to a spreadsheet to see which Regulatory Compliance Leads do certain tasks (e.g., who enters takes into the Protected Species Incidental Take database).
- Create a template for communicating with OMAO and partner vessels prior to surveys: provide boilerplate letters or memoranda to send to vessel operators (partners and OMAO, realizing that they may need separate letters with unique language) using the Northeast Fisheries Science Center as an example and then share with everyone so that it can be adjusted to fit each center. Templates can be sent to vessel operators so that they acknowledge receipt of specific permit requirements including mitigation responsibilities.

CRWG

- Move mature projects to core survey funding.
- Establish regular communication among FCWG, CRWG, and RegCom.
- Align cooperative research naming conventions with FINSS.
- Evaluate shifting regional cooperative research programs' project selection forward to sync with NSDA's processes.

Office of Science and Technology

- Create a workshop report.
- Find someone to shadow Mike Gallagher.
- Develop a LANTERN detail for the NSDA Program Manager in the short term.
- Hire an NSDA Program Manager.
- Discuss if there should be an annual coordination meeting for the survey program.
 - It was mentioned that some working groups already have an annual meeting and that perhaps those could be combined into a 2 to 3-day event.
- Change the current name of the program (this program name change is reflected in this report).