The Collaborative Research Committee met to discuss preliminary alternatives for the Council’s long-term involvement in collaborative research. The Council suspended the RSA program in 2014 and is considering whether to reactivate the program and/or pursue an alternative form of involvement in collaborative research.

**Discussion**

Staff presented four broad approaches for consideration by the Committee. These approaches include (1) coordinating with NOAA/NEFSC to improve existing initiatives under the Northeast Cooperative Research Program; (2) managing independent, Council-funded CR projects on a permanent basis; (3) exploring the potential development of a Mid-Atlantic collaborative research consortium; and (4) reactivation of the Research Set-Aside program.

Two approaches were considered but rejected -

* **Approach 2 -** The Assistant Regional Administrator indicated that continuation of a Council-funded research program is not a viable long-term option for the Council. While GARFO has allowed both the Mid-Atlantic and New England Councils to fund short-term CR programs, there are a number of issues that would lead them to oppose a proposal to continue on a long-term basis.
* **Approach 3 -** Development of a collaborative research consortium was not extensively discussed by the Committee. The general consensus was that the existence of a research consortium would be beneficial to the region and the Council’s managed fisheries but that funding constraints make this option impractical and the Council is not in a position to initiate development of such an organization.

The two remaining approaches both involve coordinating collaborative research efforts through NMFS/NEFSC (as opposed to funding independent research initiatives.)

**Approach 1 –** This option would involve coordinating with NMFS/NEFSC to improve and expand the scope of existing research activities carried out in the Mid-Atlantic region as part of the NEFSC’s Northeast Cooperative Research Program. The Committee was generally supportive of the actions laid out under this approach. Dr. Karp agreed that there is a need for improved coordination between the NEFSC and regional fishery management councils concerning cooperative/collaborative research activities. Because Approach 1 is not linked with a specific source of funding, some Committee members expressed concern that without the fund-generating capacity of the RSA program, the Council will be limited in its ability to influence new research projects in the region.

**Approach 4 -** Committee members had mixed opinions regarding renewal of the RSA program.

* A number of Committee members and members of the public noted that RSA enables the Council to conduct valuable research that would not otherwise be possible, as well as offering social benefits and economic opportunities. There were concerns that the Council would not be able to find an alternative funding source that could replace RSA. Some felt that the RSA concept was worth keeping but that the Council should consider a range of alternative program designs to replace the current auction-based program.
* Other Committee members expressed concern that the structure of the RSA program makes it inherently vulnerable to abuse. It was noted that a number of programmatic and enforcement changes were implemented to address these concerns in 2014, but because these changes were only in place for a short time before the Council suspended the program, it is unclear whether they would address the Council’s concerns.
* Another concern is that the program has not historically produced consistently high-quality scientific data. While some projects, such as NEAMAP, have been very valuable to the Council, others have been of little use to the Council. It was noted that this has little to do with the design of the RSA program and that it could be addressed by improving the Council’s priority setting process and revising administrative procedures.
* Some Committee members felt that the RSA program is inherently unfair (creating haves and have nots) and should not continue.

**Committee Recommendation**

The Committee recommended a hybrid approach which would combine elements of Approaches 1 and 4. This would involve retaining RSA as an option for future consideration but moving forward with steps to improve coordination with NEFSC and identify opportunities for more NCRP research in the Mid-Atlantic. While Approach 1 is not linked to a specific source of funding, improving coordination with NEFSC would be beneficial if the Council decides to renew the RSA program in the future. The Committee recommended establishing a technical working group with participants from MAFMC, NEFSC, and GARFO to develop an action plan and craft options for Council consideration at a meeting later in 2016. The working group will explore options for addressing MAFMC collaborative research needs more effectively through NCRP research activities as well as options for reconfiguring RSA.