

Fish Tails

TLAs, FLAs, and Alternate Steady States: Do We Really Need that Many Acronyms in Our Profession?

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Fish Tails is *Fisheries* magazine's newest feature that tells true stories about how great our fisheries profession is, pokes fun at our foibles and eccentricities, and conveys an important lesson or two, all with maybe a bit of humor.

Fisheries is an interesting discipline; then you add the acronyms. The GOV is known for a lot of its TLA's, but a lot us work for FLAs, especially in NRM agencies. Certainly, a lot of state NRMs have a lot of TLAs, like DCFs or DNRs. But whether a TLA or FLA, NRM agencies, especially for LMRs and AMRs, sure do like their acronyms.

It has gotten to the point that we can hold entire conversations using just acronyms. My family often just listens to me talk to colleagues in astonished wonder bordering on amusement. For example, I have been in arguments over whether MSY or MEY was appropriate to use as a proxy for OY to help set ACLs or ABCs or ACTs or OFLs. And whether MSY was appropriate solely for SS OF, or was also appropriate for EOF. From that, the question begged whether we were doing EAFM or EBFM or EBM and if it is better do so via an FMP or FEP? But after all of that, we have to ask: do we really need that many acronyms in our profession?

On the one hand, part of being a professional is knowing the terminology and jargon of that profession. And there are a lot of technical details in our profession, such that utilizing short hand makes it quicker and easier and more efficient to communicate. Yet on the other hand, such shorthand can provide obfuscation for true communication to occur, particularly for those new to the field, our stakeholders, and our partners who are not as technically into the details as we are.

The challenge with acronyms is that they have weird histories, backgrounds, and rules, and are often highly context dependent. For example, acronyms can have multiple meanings, often in the same context. If one goes to an acronym finder Webpage (and there are many AFWs), and looks up AFS, one can get quite a number of results. For instance, AFS can also mean the very similar American Fern Society (I wonder what they have as door prizes at their conferences), American Foundry Society (I wonder if you have to wear protective gear for their meetings), or Asian Fishery Society (I kinda get this one), but also Anti-Fouling System, Advances in Food Science, Audio Frequency Shift, Automatic Flight System, or one of another 100+ things. And I just was looking to find our beloved American Fisheries Society's acronym.

Another challenge with acronyms is that people misuse them. There are stutter acronyms that have too many of the same letters in sequence—think EEZ, MMPA, MSST, SSC, or maybe even AARP, the latter of which may be an option if the acronyms become too much. Then there is the use of acronym-redundant acronyms, almost like a double acronym, whereby someone uses the acronym to describe a part of, usually the terminal word, of the acronym. For example, we have CAC cards, MSE evaluations, ACT targets, DBMS systems, or CPUE catches. In our desire to use acronyms, we have gotten to the point where we actually use an acronym and also the word that it is acronymizing to thoroughly cover the acronymized phrase, and we don't even notice that we're doing it—which should be penalized for excessive use of acronym, similar to a 10-yard penalty for excessive roughness or at least called as foul ball or something like that to force this over-acronymization to stop.

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Another challenge with acronyms is that rules to develop them don't always seem clear. Frankly, there are some places that just don't know how to make to acronyms, nor the common expectations that we use to establish them, plus the words we use don't always translate into other languages, and as a profession the rules for acronymizing not always clear. For example, we once had a French–Italian–Croatian partnership that developed something like, "SCHOOL-BUS-OOFTA*" (actual countries and acronym changed to protect the innocent acronym) as an abbreviation for "Scientific Project for Sharing and Exploring the Phenology of Business as Usual Management for the Oceans and Forecasting it's Component Seas," or something like that. You're probably having the same reaction I had when I first heard it: huh? I mean one acronym rule is that if it is not 1T1 (one-to-one) for each word, it should probably at least give some sense of what the subject is about. I mean, what happened to the judicious use of acronymizing rules? We should get an AFS committee to look into this and codify these rules more clearly.

A related challenge with acronyms and foreign languages is that sometimes they just don't, and shouldn't, translate. I was once running a working group session where foreign colleagues got into the spirit of acronymizing and were attempting to use the following phrase as an acronym. And as the chair I had to gently suggest that we just spell it out and use the full term, as the term "alternate steady states" is a bit awkward to use as acronym in a polite and public forum. I'll let you figure that one out.

So, what do we do about all these acronyms? When is enough enough? I don't know. I would simply say, let's err on the side of ensuring we are communicating well, thoughtfully, and thoroughly, such that in any given context, we see and know that our audience understands what we are attempting to convey. Maybe that means a little acronymizing, but that's alright. TTFN, TIA, and until next month.

(Acronym key to be published next month, or buried somewhere else in this issue...)

The Editors of *Fisheries* have decided to trial the new *Fish Tails* for the next 6–9 months to see what the membership thinks of this new contribution. Please let us know your thoughts on *Fish Tails*, whether you like it or not, at magazine@fisheries.org, or even if you might be interested in contributing a fish tale...