

**Coral Committee Report
June 21, 2022
Dr. Frazer – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab N, No. 1**) and approved the minutes (**Tab N, No. 2**) of the January 2020 meeting as written.

Results from Coral RFP: Gulf of Mexico Mesophotic and Deepwater Coral Assessment (Tab N, No. 4)

Mr. Stephen Viada (CSA Ocean Sciences, Inc.) presented the results from the contracted work to assess mesophotic and deep-sea coral reefs in the Gulf of Mexico. The purpose of the work was to compile new data on areas that were not included in Coral Amendment 9, identify additional coral habitats for consideration in Coral Amendment 10 based on a comprehensive literature review, perform an ecological assessment of the areas, and design a ranking strategy that the Council could use for prioritization in its effort to protect corals and coral habitats that support sustainable fisheries.

A Committee member suggested analyzing finer resolution fishing effort data. Mr. Viada stated that the benthic trawl data utilized in the report was derived from NMFS data evaluated by Clark et al. 2018. A Committee member suggested that moving forward more recent trawl data could be provided by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center.

Joint Coral AP and Coral SSC Recommendations and Proposed Next Steps (Tab N, No. 5)

Staff summarized recommendations from the Coral Advisory Panel (AP) and Coral Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and provided an overview of previous motions intended to advance the development of Coral Amendment 10.

Given the recommendation to convene a more inclusive group of coral experts to guide the development of Coral Amendment 10, the Committee asked who would be part of the group and if participants in the expert working group would be different from the current coral advisory bodies. Staff stated the working group would include scientists currently engaged in coral reef research in addition to the Council's Coral AP and Coral SSC members. Staff also recounted how instrumental the previous Coral Working Group was in narrowing down the areas that were ultimately included in Coral Amendment 9. A Committee member requested that fishermen input also be solicited by the Coral Working Group. After the Committee meeting, staff discussed the Council's motion made in 2018 to include the Shrimp AP and Shrimp SSC in the process, and proposed the following: convene the Coral Working Group (i.e., Coral AP, Coral SSC, and a small group of other coral experts) first to identify candidate sites for consideration in Coral Amendment 10 and provide an initial inventory of priority sites for management consideration; then convene the Shrimp and Reef Fish APs to review and provide input on the prioritized sites, either in a back-to-back meeting or two-stage plus meeting process.

Lastly, a Committee member expressed concern regarding the limited amount of time to provide comment on the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) expansion draft rule. Given

the expected release date of the draft rule in July 2022 and the 100-day public comment period, the Council may want to consider drafting a letter to the FKNMS superintendent requesting an extension for comment until after its October 2022 meeting to ensure feedback can be captured from its advisory panels.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.