

GULF OF MEXICO FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

ECOSYSTEM COMMITTEE

Gold Nugget Hotel and Casino & Virtual Biloxi, Mississippi

August 19, 2024

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 Dave Donaldson.....GSMFC
 Tom Frazer.....Florida
 Michael McDermott.....Mississippi
 Anthony Overton.....Alabama
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4 comment letter on modifications to the 2024 EBFM roadmap, as amended.
5 [The motion carried on page 15.](#)

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8

1 The Ecosystem Committee of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management
2 Council convened at The Golden Nugget Hotel and Casino in Biloxi,
3 Mississippi on Monday morning, August 19, 2024, and was called to
4 order by Chairman Kesley Banks.
5

6 **ADOPTION OF AGENDA AND APPROVAL OF OCTOBER 2023 MINUTES**
7 **ACTION GUIDE AND NEXT STEPS**
8

9 **CHAIRMAN KESLEY BANKS:** We're currently vacant for a chair, and
10 that was Bob Gill, and so I will be acting today. The committee
11 is Billy Broussard, Dave Donaldson, Dr. Frazer, Michael McDermott,
12 Dr. Overton, Andy, and Troy Williamson.
13

14 If we could pull up the agenda, does anybody have any other
15 business or anything they need to add to it? If we could get a
16 motion then to -- Dave. Could we get a second to adopt the agenda?
17 Tom. Thank you. Then the meeting minutes from October 2023, and
18 does anybody have any clarifications or edits?
19

20 **MR. DAVE DONALDSON:** Motion to approve.
21

22 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Dave has a motion to approve. Tom seconds. All
23 right. Then we'll move on to the action guide.
24

25 **PRESENTATION ON MODIFICATIONS TO THE 2024 NMFS ECOSYSTEM-BASED**
26 **FISHERIES MANAGEMENT ROADMAP (EBFM)**
27

28 **DR. VERA WANG:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and so the first agenda
29 item that the committee will be focused on is the presentation on
30 modifications to the 2024 NMFS ecosystem-based fisheries
31 management roadmap. On August 9 of 2024, the Ecosystem Technical
32 Committee convened via webinar to discuss the 2024 NOAA Fisheries
33 draft EBFM roadmap update, which we provided as background in the
34 briefing book, under Tab Q, Number 4(a), and the Ecosystem
35 Technical Committee also discussed the draft comment letter on
36 modifications to the roadmap.
37

38 Staff will summarize the ETC's discussions and recommendations,
39 and the committee should review the ETC's comments on the roadmap,
40 which is Tab Q, Number 4(b), and provide feedback on the draft
41 comment letter, which was updated after the ETC meeting to
42 incorporate ETC recommendations, and that comment letter is Tab Q-
43 4(c).
44

45 The committee should then consider a motion to approve the draft
46 comment letter for submission to NOAA on behalf of the council,
47 and, to provide a little bit of context, the original NOAA EBFM
48 policy and roadmap were developed and implemented in 2016, and

1 both the policy and the roadmap were updated in 2024, and the
2 roadmap is what is open for public comment, and so, originally,
3 public comment was set to close on July 31, and, at the June
4 council meeting in Houston, the council passed a motion to request
5 an extension of the deadline, so that we would have time to convene
6 the ETC to discuss the EBFM roadmap.

7
8 It turns out that we didn't need to request an extension, because
9 they requested an extension for everybody until August 31, and so
10 that gave us time to bring the ETC together and put together a
11 draft comment letter, with ETC comment, to bring before the
12 committee today. If there are no questions, Madam Chair, I'll
13 move on to the ETC summary.

14
15 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** I don't see any questions, and so please proceed.

16
17 **DR. WANG:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and, Bernie, if you could pull
18 up actually 4(a), please, and scroll down to page 4. It's just
19 going to be a 1 through 6. There you go. Perfect. Thank you.
20 Okay, and so, before I dive into the ETC's recommendations and
21 discussion on the roadmap, because we're not getting a formal
22 presentation from NOAA on the contents of the roadmap itself, I'm
23 going to start off by providing a brief, kind of twenty-thousand-
24 foot overview of the contents of the roadmap, so that the committee
25 can be familiar with the document.

26
27 There are six overarching guidelines that are contained in the
28 roadmap, each of which has three goals and a series of action items
29 towards accomplishing those goals, and the six guidelines did not
30 change between the 2016 roadmap and the 2024 roadmap. Those are
31 the same, and so the first guideline is to implement ecosystem-
32 level planning, and that includes helping the council develop
33 fishery ecosystem plans and also planning for NOAA to incorporate
34 EBFM kind of into their NOAA strategic planning, and, also, there
35 are plans to facilitate EBFM coordination across NOAA and its
36 partners.

37
38 The second EBFM roadmap guideline is to advance understanding of
39 ecosystem processes, and this guideline represents kind of the
40 bulk of the new data collection for EBFM purposes, and so this
41 aims to build multidisciplinary science capacity, to understand
42 ecosystems processes, and to do things like provide regular updates
43 to ecosystem status reports and develop ecosystem indicators that
44 can be useful for management.

45
46 The third guideline is to prioritize vulnerabilities and risks to
47 ecosystems and their components, and that includes continuing to
48 develop and update climate vulnerability assessments for marine

1 resources and habitats and communities and to conduct risk
2 assessments to identify ecosystem-level climate risk, and risk in
3 general, and identify the most vulnerable resources, in order to
4 eventually develop management options for mitigating risk and
5 enhancing resilience.

6
7 The fourth guideline is to explore and address tradeoffs within an
8 ecosystem. That includes things like scenario planning,
9 identifying changes in fishing fleet behavior with climate change,
10 conducting management strategy evaluations to test different
11 management options and optimize benefits across different
12 fisheries and different communities in the ecosystem, while
13 minimizing conflict.

14
15 The fifth guideline is to implement ecosystem considerations into
16 management, and that includes developing ecosystem-level reference
17 points, incorporating ecosystem considerations into management
18 decisions, and eventually being able to provide integrated advice
19 across multiple habitats, and the sixth, and final, guideline in
20 the roadmap and policy is to support ecosystem resilience through
21 monitoring and adjusting of the management actions, and so this is
22 where we're tracking EBFM progress, and so the goals here are to
23 define and measure ecosystem-level resilience, to evaluate coastal
24 fishing community wellbeing, and to track EBFM performance and
25 adjust action items, as necessary, and so that is kind of a brief
26 summary of the updated roadmap itself, if there are any questions.

27
28 Okay. If there are no questions, I will move on to providing a
29 summary of the Ecosystem Technical Committee summary, which is
30 4(b), and so the ETC convened via webinar on August 9, to discuss
31 the EBFM roadmap in much more detail than the kind of broad
32 overview that I just provided today. They really delved into all
33 the different action items, and what matters for the Gulf, and
34 what is feasible for the Gulf, and provided recommendations to us.

35
36 In general, the ETC was very enthusiastic about the EBFM roadmap,
37 and they thought that the roadmap really demonstrated NOAA's
38 commitment to EBFM, and the ETC also liked that the new roadmap
39 put climate change at the forefront, and really sought to
40 incorporate a lot of information about human dimensions, social
41 science, and economics throughout the roadmap, which was quite
42 different from the 2016 roadmap.

43
44 The ETC also thought that the roadmap was very ambitious, and,
45 because it was so ambitious, the ETC sought clarification on how
46 action items could be prioritized and staffed, particularly given
47 that a lot of the goals in the roadmap are long-range goals, and
48 so there's a pulse of short-term funding for ecosystems, and for

1 climate, through the Inflation Reduction Act, and through the
2 Climate and Ecosystem Fisheries Initiative, but those are short-
3 term funding options, and so the ETC wanted to know whether there
4 were plans to continue this work long-term.

5
6 The ETC also suggested that there could be opportunities to tackle
7 the roadmap, and its goals, by leveraging academic partners to
8 help conduct research, and also to leverage citizen science and
9 partnerships with stakeholders to build data collection and
10 research capacity.

11
12 The Ecosystem Technical Committee thought that Guideline 2, which
13 was the bulk of the data collection and the effort to understand
14 ecosystem processes, was really kind of the most important
15 guideline for the Gulf, given where the Gulf is currently,
16 understanding our data limitations, our data gaps, and what we
17 currently need for understanding ecosystem processes, and so they
18 thought that Guideline 2 was quite important and really represented
19 where the Gulf was at at the moment.

20
21 The ETC also thought that the roadmap needed to provide more clear
22 direction for management partners, including the councils, on how
23 to incorporate products from the roadmap, like climate
24 vulnerability assessments and risk assessments, into management,
25 and so they thought that there could be more clear guidance on how
26 to build onramps for management from those EBFM-based products.

27
28 Finally, the ETC, particularly the social scientists on the ETC,
29 really appreciated the incorporation of social science and
30 economics throughout the EBFM guidelines, but they thought that,
31 given the history of limited funds for social science, and limited
32 capacity, they wanted to seek more clarification how those goals
33 would actually be met in the roadmap, and so, because of that, the
34 ETC passed a motion to encourage clearer integration of NOAA social
35 science teams into the continued design and implementation of the
36 roadmap's goals and actions, and that motion carried unanimously
37 and was folded into the -- Those comments were folded into the
38 draft letter, comment letter, that was developed. That is the
39 summary that I have for the ETC meeting, if there are any
40 questions.

41
42 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** I don't see any questions.

43
44 **DR. WANG:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Bernie, if you could pull up
45 the comment letter, which is 4(c). Based on -- Following the
46 discussion from the Ecosystem Technical Committee, staff
47 incorporated comments from the ETC into this draft comment letter
48 that was written in response to the EBFM roadmap, and, as a

1 reminder, public comment closes on August 31, and so I'll just
2 summarize briefly the contents of the letter, and hopefully folks
3 have had a chance to read it. It was updated, I believe on Friday
4 of last week, and so hopefully folks have seen the most recent
5 version.

6
7 In general, the comment letter, again, commends the roadmap
8 developers for their commitment to EBFM and for incorporating
9 climate change and human dimensions. The comment letter also is
10 very supportive of the ecosystem status report initiatives and the
11 efforts to provide regular updates to those and to develop
12 ecosystem indicators, particularly because development of real-
13 time, or annual, indices can really be important for aiding the
14 council in eventually making responsive decisions with climate
15 variability.

16
17 The comment letter also mentioned that Gulf fisheries, many Gulf
18 fisheries, are data-poor and that the roadmap should make efforts
19 to emphasize building management strategies that are not only
20 robust to climate variability, which is focused on the roadmap,
21 but also to some of the data uncertainties that our region, and
22 many other regions, are facing.

23
24 The comment letter also encouraged the roadmap developers to more
25 clearly outline partnerships with management to find onramps for
26 EBFM projects, like vulnerability assessments and risk
27 assessments, and the comment letter also sought to remind the
28 roadmap developers that the Gulf, and many other regions, are still
29 relying on single-species stock assessment, and that staff
30 resources for stock assessments in the Southeast are very limited,
31 and the SEDAR calendar is very full, and some of the initiatives
32 that are in the roadmap to conduct research track stock
33 assessments, to look at things like incorporating ecosystem
34 considerations into stock assessments, need to be clearly outlined
35 in how they're going to be accomplished, because we don't want to
36 fall behind, either in our current stock assessment needs or in
37 any climate stock-assessment-based initiatives.

38
39 The letter also expressed caution for diving fully into whole
40 ecosystem management strategy evaluation, when MSE is very time-
41 consuming, and it has been shown to not necessarily provide
42 tangible management advice, in the end, for other regions, and
43 particularly because the Gulf is still in very limited trial phases
44 for management strategy evaluation in the region here, and, lastly,
45 we folded in the comments from the social scientists on the ETC to
46 encourage the roadmap to make better linkages to social science
47 staffing, and, along those lines, to also make better linkages to
48 NOAA's EEJ strategy, and that is it for the summary for the comment

1 letter.

2

3 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Any comments or questions on the comment letter?
4 C.J.

5

6 **DR. C.J. SWEETMAN:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I am not on your
7 committee, and so I like the letter. I wanted to bring up kind of
8 a little bit of a different subject matter than maybe what's in
9 here, and so kind of focusing on some of the efforts that are going
10 on in the Atlantic region relative to east coast climate scenario
11 planning.

12

13 The Gulf Council has been left off of that, yet they are currently
14 kind of discussing, and evaluating, the needs for consideration of
15 other councils, other seats, to kind of consider shared stock
16 shifting distributions and stuff like that, and so part of my
17 concern here is that -- So this initiative is mainly being led by
18 the Mid-Atlantic Council.

19

20 I've got some concerns, and we've got some shared stocks,
21 obviously, with the South Atlantic. The South Atlantic
22 participates in this east coast climate scenario planning, but
23 having the Mid-Atlantic Council kind of navigate some of the issues
24 that we're dealing with, as it relates to shifting stocks and
25 shifting distributions, basically on behalf of the Gulf Council,
26 relative to these shared stocks that we have over there, things
27 like cobia, mackerel, things like that, you know, fisheries that
28 we're actively talking about and actively having issues with.

29

30 I really am not a huge fan of the Mid-Atlantic Council, or other
31 councils, quite frankly, kind of dictating how this climate
32 scenario roadmap is being planned relative to stocks that actually
33 do have implications for what we're navigating here, and so I'm
34 wondering if there's any interest --

35

36 So the South Atlantic Council, obviously, sits on that, like I
37 mentioned, and I'm kind of wondering if there's any interest, from
38 the council here, or at the committee level, about kind of
39 coordinating with the South Atlantic Council along those lines,
40 and maybe -- I don't know if it's, you know, getting someone, a
41 council member, or a representative, to help out with that process
42 in the South Atlantic region, or if it's just coordination with
43 South Atlantic staff, to make sure that the Gulf Council's
44 considerations, relative to the shared stocks that we have, are
45 effectively advocated for, basically. I basically, just more or
46 less, don't want the Gulf Council to be left out of this entire
47 process here.

48

1 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Thank you, C.J. Andy.

2
3 **MR. ANDY STRELCHECK:** Before I comment on the letter, and so, in
4 response to C.J., to provide a little bit more added context,
5 you're correct that the Mid-Atlantic was kind of the lead, in terms
6 of instigating this scenario planning exercise, but that involved
7 New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the South Atlantic.

8
9 Since that effort, we have formed an east coast climate change
10 group, which includes the Fisheries Service, Science Center
11 Director, the Regional Administrator from New England, or the
12 Northeast, the Southeast, all three council chairs, as well as
13 Atlantic States, and so that group meets a couple of times a year,
14 and so I think there's broad representation for the Southeast on
15 that group, and I like your thoughts with regard to better
16 coordination, I think, between the Gulf and South Atlantic, to
17 ensure involvement, engagement, in that process.

18
19 I don't know if there would be a willingness to even include the
20 Gulf, obviously, in that group as well, but maybe there's some
21 opportunities there, but certainly, with my voice at the table,
22 and Clay is at the table, and John Carmichael, and so there's good
23 representation from the Southeast, on Southeast issues, for that
24 group, and so I'll stop there, if you've got anything else.

25
26 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** C.J.

27
28 **DR. SWEETMAN:** That's fine, and, honestly, I'm just looking for -
29 - I appreciate that, Andy, and, obviously, that makes sense. I
30 would think it would probably be good for at least someone, and I
31 don't know whether it's Carrie, coordinating with Carmichael, or
32 something along those lines there, but, yes, just making sure that
33 the voices are heard there, and I appreciate what you're saying
34 there, that it's kind of represented, from your perspective, along
35 those lines there, and I'm just making sure that we're crossing
36 our Ts and dotting our Is there, along those lines.

37
38 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Andy.

39
40 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Thanks for that, C.J. Then, in terms of the
41 letter, obviously, it's coming to the agency, but a couple of
42 comments, and so I think we've stated before, with the ecosystem
43 status reports, and so the additional Inflation Reduction Act
44 funding that's coming for climate, ecosystem, and fisheries
45 initiative, that's largely going to Clay's shop, that's going to
46 help us provide those ecosystem status reports, and so that, to
47 me, is a natural nexus between what your letter is asking for, us
48 being able to deliver that on a more regular basis, and so I like

1 the inclusion of that.

2

3 The other thing I will comment on, and I think this may be related
4 to the work that would be going on with the FEP, is, you know, the
5 letter talks about these natural on-ramps, and kind of better
6 coordination, and I feel like it's a chicken-and-egg thing, right,
7 and like how does the council want to be involved in that on-ramp,
8 and how does the Fisheries Service, and others, contribute to that
9 on-ramp, and so I think, as a council, as we work on our fisheries
10 ecosystem plan, we really need to think holistically about risk
11 and vulnerability and how that is treated from a policy, a
12 regulatory, perspective, and relates then to the science and
13 information that's informing that.

14

15 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Dr. Simmons.

16

17 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and so, to
18 that point, Andy, I think one of the things that the ETC brought
19 up was -- I lost my train of thought now. Not enough coffee. Oh.
20 Do we want to have a regional plan, and this is a national plan,
21 and so we would address some of that in potentially a regional
22 framework, but we did talk a little bit about moving forward with
23 the ecosystem, the fisheries ecosystem, plans, and the FEIs and
24 all that, and I think we did have a sentence in here that talks
25 about some of that, but we could try to beef it up.

26

27 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Dr. Porch.

28

29 **DR. CLAY PORCH:** Thank you. I just wanted to commend the council
30 for the letter, and it's actually very consistent with the Science
31 Center's view, and I agree that, while the national plan is
32 ambitious, it's pretty well understood that the various regions
33 will proceed a little bit differently, and so there's a lot of
34 latitude in there.

35

36 I did want to mention, as Andy alluded to, we are able to bring
37 some new resources to the table. We did hire three new positions
38 that would do things like push us along the curve, in terms of
39 ecosystem status reports. They will be doing -- Working with our
40 existing staff on more management strategy evaluations
41 incorporating ecosystem, including climate considerations, and
42 help us develop robust harvest strategies, in light of climate
43 change.

44

45 We're also looking at collecting more, and better, data, including
46 ecosystem indicators, and doing work to figure out the best way to
47 incorporate that into management decisions, and so there's quite
48 a lot of work, but we also recognize there's not after -- Behind

1 IRA, there's not any indication that there's going to be a huge
2 amount of funding, and so I think this is going to be more like an
3 evolution, rather than a revolution, but I do expect some
4 substantial changes in the next few years, and we're very happy to
5 work with you. We're very excited about the fishery ecosystem
6 plan, as it's maturing, and so I think we're on the right track.
7 Thank you.

8
9 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** So, sitting in on the meeting, there was a healthy
10 discussion about funding, and I have that in my notes, from the
11 ETC, and what comes after this little boost of funding with it.
12 The other thing that they discussed, for quite a bit, was data
13 collection and where that data is going to be housed, in that
14 central location, and so I don't know if that's something we want
15 to discuss. I know that's kind of in other topics as well,
16 especially like in shrimp and some of the electronic monitoring.
17 Tom.

18
19 **DR. TOM FRAZER:** Thanks, Kesley, and so I guess, to some of those
20 points, Clay, after the IRA funding goes away, and because you've
21 hired new people specifically within that context, do those
22 positions go away? That's one.

23
24 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Clay.

25
26 **DR. PORCH:** No, those positions will be permanent, unless there is
27 additional cuts to our budget. Like the House budget, as you all
28 know, is not very friendly, and that would require a reduction in
29 force to meet that, if that were to happen, and then we would just
30 have to go through our prioritization exercise, but, assuming that
31 budgets remain as they are, those would be long-term commitments,
32 those three positions.

33
34 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Tom.

35
36 **DR. FRAZER:** Then, with regard to data collection, right, and so
37 there is a substantial amount of funding to kind of explore
38 ecosystem-level processes, and, you know, data that might yield
39 new indices that provide insight into how we might manage the
40 fisheries, but, again, we don't expect a lot of new funding at the
41 end of five years, and so is this group, and the agency, you know,
42 trying to figure out a way to transition those new data streams
43 into the process, and get rid of some old ones, you know, and how
44 does that happen?

45
46 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Clay.

47
48 **DR. PORCH:** Yes, exactly. One of the ways it happens is by being

1 more efficient, and so, for instance, one of the surveys where we
2 collect the most information, and potentially can get, you know,
3 habitat indicators, and all sorts of things, is the video survey,
4 the so-called GFISHER survey, and that's -- We're achieving a lot
5 better coverage, a lot more intense sampling, and a lot of
6 technological improvements, working with the states, particularly
7 the State of Florida, but now more of the states are getting
8 involved, so that we can have that kind of coverage, and, at the
9 same time, we're working on automated image analysis.

10
11 That's going to be very important, because a lot of our labor is
12 actually sitting down and reading videos, and, if we can automate
13 that process, then we save that labor cost, which means we can do
14 other things, and so we're looking at a number of advances like
15 that, basically using artificial intelligence, in a number of
16 applications, to make this more efficient.

17
18 It takes a little time, but our expectation is that, by the end of
19 the IRA cycle, we will be more efficient on a number of items,
20 which enables us to invest in other activities, collecting other
21 kinds of data streams.

22
23 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Tom.

24
25 **DR. FRAZER:** That's great, and it's encouraging, and the last
26 question I have -- This was with regard to the data repository,
27 and so, I mean, generally, right, the ecosystem-level data is
28 intended to be housed at the Science Center?

29
30 **DR. PORCH:** So some of that will reside at the Science Center, and
31 some of it may reside at a national data repository. The key right
32 now -- We're in conversations of what exactly that's going to look
33 like, and, obviously, it takes some resources to set the system
34 up, but, in some cases, the national data repository may just
35 contain the metadata and then point to, you know, local servers
36 that are storing the information, but that's still evolving at
37 this point.

38
39 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Any other questions or comments? If not, I think
40 we have another item on our agenda.

41
42 **DR. WANG:** So I just wanted to clarify, and make sure, that I
43 understood correctly that we should amend the letter slightly, to
44 add a little bit of a sentence about how data streams will be
45 maintained beyond the current pulse of funding, into the long-
46 term, and, also, incorporating a comment to acknowledge that the
47 ecosystem status reports are important for meeting our fishery
48 ecosystem plan needs. Is that correct?

1
2 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** I think that sums it up pretty well. I don't see
3 anybody balking at the idea. All right, and so is that everything
4 you need for the letter?

5
6 **DR. WANG:** I think we need a motion to approve the letter.

7
8 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Okay, and so a motion. Billy for the first, and
9 Tom for the second. Do you need that motion amended any, so you
10 have freedom to amend the letter, or -- Bernie, can we amend the
11 motion to say, "To recommend council approve, as amended"? Is
12 that still good with you, Billy and Tom? Tom.

13
14 **DR. FRAZER:** I think the grammar is a little messed up. We might
15 want to fix that. Maybe we could say, "the council approve and
16 send the comment letter, as amended". Hold on. That will work.

17
18 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Do we have any objections or comments?
19 Objections? Okay. **The motion passes unanimously.** All right. I
20 think we have one more item on the agenda. We will be looking at
21 the SSC recommendations and feedback on the essential fish habitat
22 contract work. Good morning, Dr. Hollensead.

23
24 **SSC RECOMMENDATIONS AND FEEDBACK ON ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT**
25 **CONTRACT WORK**
26

27 **DR. HOLLENSEAD:** Good morning, Madam Chair. I have been tasked
28 with giving the SSC summary on a recent presentation they received
29 on the EFH, or essential fish habitat, project. Bernie, if you
30 wouldn't mind pulling up Tab B, Number 9(b). Thank you.

31
32 Just a really quick overview, and so, for those new members, and
33 those that could use a refresher, the council is responsible for
34 designating essential fish habitat, or EFH, for all of its managed
35 species. The work that I'm going to be discussing is only going
36 to be in relation to the finfish species and shrimp species, and
37 coral is its own other beast.

38
39 Last year, the council awarded a contract to Dr. Bridgette
40 Froeschke at the University of Tampa. This contract work, the
41 objective of it, was to support the council's EFH descriptions in
42 this new amendment, and so, if you recall, what's on the books now
43 is rather dated. A lot of that spatial data is being used from
44 like 1986, and so things have changed since then, and so it's time
45 to look at some more contemporary spatial data to inform those
46 descriptions.

47
48 That is actually sort of a heavy lift, what is out there, what is

1 available, publicly available, what is complete, those sorts of
2 things, what does it look like, can we use it, and so that was the
3 objective of the contract, and so the work included identifying,
4 cataloguing, and assessing those habitat data, and so the council's
5 role is going to provide just some guidance and review that project
6 process, which will be upcoming here at the next meeting.

7
8 Before we get into that, her task was to identify, like I said,
9 comprehensive, contemporary habitat datasets, and catalog, looking
10 at the relevant datasets and associated metadata, and so that was
11 really important, and what kind of data are we looking at, and are
12 they able to sort of be able to be quilted together, to give us a
13 Gulf-wide perspective, and these sorts of things were really
14 important, as well as to inform our EFH descriptions, and engaging
15 a lot of academic and state agency partners, and federal agency
16 partners, to get information.

17
18 The SSC's role, and so Dr. Bridgette Froeschke had a year or so,
19 a little less than a year, to go through and ask all these agencies,
20 hey, what does your habitat data look like, can you give us the
21 metadata associated with that, and so she was tasked with going
22 out and doing that and collecting that and cataloging it, so that
23 you can see, hey, you did you, you know, contact, so that we have
24 that information as well, what does that data look like, what time
25 period was the data collected, what type is it, and is it points,
26 or is it polygons, and all of these things are important if we're
27 trying to thread these things together.

28
29 Then she brought this before the SSC, and asked for their feedback,
30 and so they looked at it, and they said that, you know, to evaluate
31 what the quality or the completeness was, one of the overarching
32 questions is, hey, are we missing anything, and there actually was
33 several SSC members, in the State of Mississippi and the State of
34 Texas, that had some more information, other than what she had
35 provided, to say, yes, we can give you some of that, to make sure
36 you've got a complete dataset there, because one of the questions
37 that we certainly had, when we started describing EFH, is, you
38 know, we don't have a map, and is it sort of a true zero, or that
39 this area hasn't been mapped, or it's not publicly available, or
40 did we miss something somewhere, and so we wanted to make sure
41 that we didn't miss something. If there was data available to be
42 able to inform these descriptions of EFH, we wanted to be able to
43 have it.

44
45 As well, the SSC provided a little bit of feedback to improve the
46 final report, and so she's going to take that information that she
47 got from the SSC, and she is going to finalize that report, and
48 she will be giving it to the council in November, and so you'll be

1 able to then see that final report and provide any feedback to her
2 as well.

3
4 Just a few questions that the SSC had raised. Again, the contract
5 work was to, hey, go out and get the information and construct
6 this library, but, past that, it will be council staff that sort
7 of looks through and see, hey, what are some of these things that
8 we can use, and how is the most appropriate way to piece these
9 things together, and so some of the questions that the SSC raised
10 is can the habitat distribution changes be tracked over time, and
11 so, right now, we have sort of these static maps and descriptions,
12 and is there any way to look at some of these dynamic processes,
13 something like sargassum for example, and incorporate that, and
14 potentially we could, through some modeling approaches, but that's
15 something for the, you know, next iteration of the amendment,
16 something that council staff -- That we would be looking at in-
17 house.

18
19 Some of the current limitations is many of those datasets only
20 offer ranges of years, and not specific dates, and so you'll get
21 a spatial file that says, hey, this was collected from 1995 to
22 2000, and you're not sure which section that was, and how do you
23 sort of piece that together, and how do we want to handle that,
24 those sorts of things, and so we'll have to sort of look through
25 all of these layers and go one-by-one and decide, when we get to
26 those decision points, especially if there's any conflicts, how do
27 we want to handle those, and report that out to the council, so
28 you all know the best way to interpret that information.

29
30 Again, is the data available, and some shapefiles had specific
31 years, and others didn't, and so those are just some of the next
32 steps, the next challenges, that we'll go through, but, like I
33 said, you will be receiving a finalized report from Dr. Froeschke
34 at your next meeting, and so you'll be able to provide comment on
35 that, and that's, I believe, all I have.

36
37 **CHAIRMAN BANKS:** Thank you. Any comments or questions? I don't
38 see any. All right. We didn't have any other business added at
39 the beginning of the meeting, and so I will turn it back over to
40 you, Mr. Chair.

41
42 (Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on August 19, 2024.)

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