GULF COUNCIL

304TH MEETING

FULL COUNCIL SESSION

The Lodge Gulf Shores, Alabama

April 9-10, 2025

VOTING MEMBERS

J.D. Dugas.....Louisiana
Kevin Anson (designee for Scott Bannon).....Alabama
Kesley Banks.....Texas
Billy Broussard.....Louisiana
Troy Frady.....Alabama
Tom Frazer.....Florida
Dakus Geeslin (designee for Robin Riechers).....Texas
Michael McDermott.....Mississippi
Jason Osborne.....Mississippi
Anthony Overton.....Alabama
John Sanchez.....Florida
Chris Schieble (designee for Ryan Montegut).....Louisiana
Joe Spraggins.....Mississippi
Andy Strelcheck.....NMFS
C.J. Sweetman (designee for Jessica McCawley).....Florida
Ed Walker.....Florida
Troy Williamson.....Texas

NON-VOTING MEMBERS

Dave Donaldson.....GSMFC
LT Jason Morton.....USCG

STAFF

Assane Diagne.....Economist
Matt Freeman.....Economist
John Froeschke.....Deputy Director
Lisa Hollensead.....Fishery Biologist
Sarah Gardiner.....Fishery Biologist
Mara Levy.....NOAA General Counsel
Emily Muehlstein.....Public Information Officer
Ryan Rindone.....Lead Fishery Biologist/SEDAR Liaison
Bernadine Roy.....Office Manager
Camilla Shireman.....Administrative & Communications Assistant
Carrie Simmons.....Executive Director

OTHER PARTICIPANTS

Billy Archer.....Panama City, FL

Kathryn Birren.....FL
Susan Boggs.....Orange Beach, AL
Leann Bosarge.....MS
Erik Brazer.....Reef Fish Shareholders Alliance
Rick Burris.....MS
Anthony Colletti.....
Jason Delacruz.....FL
Glenn Delaney.....
Major Jason Downey.....AL
Josh Ellender.....
Richard Fischer.....LA
Jim Green.....Destin, FL
Marshall Gross.....
Buddy Guindon.....Galveston, TX
Ken Haddad.....ASA, FL
Frank Helies.....NOAA
Scott Hickman.....Galveston, TX
Bob Hilliard.....FL
Rachal Hisler.....Double Bayou, TX
Chris Horton.....Congressional Sportsmen's Association
Dylan Hubbard.....FL
Lawrence Marino.....LA
Chris Niquet.....FL
Charlie Phillips.....SAFMC
Clay Porch.....SEFSC
Charlie Renier.....FL
Mark Tryon.....Gulf Breeze, FL
Matt Walia.....NOAA OLE
John Walter.....SEFSC
Johnny Williams.....Galveston, TX
Dale Woodruff.....AL
Bob Zales.....Panama City, FL
Jim Zurbrick.....Steinhatchee, FL

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TABLE OF MOTIONS

PAGE 71: Motion to move forward with finalizing the Memorandum of Agreement between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils, NMFS, Florida FWC, and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS). The motion carried on page 71.

PAGE 87: Motion to request NMFS continue with the Texas federal closure in the coming year in conjunction with the State of Texas closure in 2025. The motion carried on page 87.

PAGE 90: Motion to recommend the council approve Framework Action: Modification of the Vessel Position Data Collection Program for the Gulf of Mexico Shrimp Fishery and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes in the document. The Council Chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate. The motion carried on page 100.

PAGE 100: Motion to direct staff to begin development of a shrimp amendment to extend the moratorium of federal Gulf shrimp permits. The motion carried on page 100.

PAGE 102: Motion to request the SEFSC and council staff provide an analysis and summary about the impacts of losing the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey to the fisheries management process. This analysis should explore if the loss of the program would impact catch estimates due to different effort estimates or size of fish landed, what species information would be most impacted and what those differences could mean for stock status estimates and quotas. Contingent upon the review, the council requests that NOAA Fisheries consider and seek all available means for continued funding of the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey as an important time series for data collection. The motion carried on page 105.

PAGE 106: Motion in Actions 1 and 2 to make Alternative 2 the preferred. The motion carried on page 107.

PAGE 107: Motion in Action 3 to include for-hire in Alternatives 2 and 3. The motion carried on page 107.

PAGE 108: Motion in Action 3 to make the modified Alternative 3, to include Options a and b, the preferred. The motion carried on page 108.

PAGE 109: Motion in Action 4 to make Alternative 3 the preferred.

The motion carried on page 109.

PAGE 112: Motion to select Alternative 2 in Action 1 as the preferred Alternative. The motion carried on page 112.

PAGE 114: Motion in Action 3 to move Alternative 4 to Considered but Rejected. The motion carried on page 114.

PAGE 114: Motion in Action 3 to make Alternative 5 the preferred. The motion carried on page 114.

PAGE 117: Motion in Action 3 to modify the language in Alternative 5 to read as follows: Alternative 5: For the recreational sector, if the average deepwater grouper landings exceed the ACL and total ACL over a three-year moving period, the Regional Administrator would reduce the duration of the recreational season by the amount necessary to ensure that the recreational ACL is not exceeded during the following fishing year unless the best scientific information available suggests no adjustment to the recreational fishing season is necessary. The motion carried on page 118.

PAGE 124: Motion to form a working group comprised of members of the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs to collectively address the best practices for estimating steepness (and thus estimate MSY) for management advice, as well as a discussion of SPR proxy values given a range of life history values among fish species. The motion carried on page 124.

PAGE 125: Motion to direct staff to develop a document that updates catch advice and jurisdictional apportionments for mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper in the Gulf and South Atlantic in cooperation with the South Atlantic Council. The motion carried on page 126.

PAGE 128: Motion to direct staff to develop a document that provides management advice for red grouper. The motion carried on page 128.

PAGE 131: Motion to request NMFS develop an emergency rule for 2025 for red grouper based on the results of the SEDAR 88 stock assessment and pending SSC approval of updated catch projections in May 2025. Additionally, to set the ACL at 90 percent of the ABC. The motion carried on page 134.

PAGE 136: Motion in Action 2 to make Alternative 3 the preferred. The motion carried on page 136.

PAGE 136: Motion in Action 2 to move Alternative 4 to Considered

but Rejected. The motion carried on page 137.

PAGE 138: Motion to approve Framework Action: Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limits and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation, and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes in the document. The Council Chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate. The motion carried on page 140.

PAGE 143: Motion to direct staff develop a document that replaces and enhances the DESCEND Act. The motion carried on page 144.

PAGE 145: Motion to draft a letter to the Open Ocean Trustees, Fish and Water Column Invertebrates Restoration Coordinator, and Return 'Em Right project management team emphasizing the importance of focusing the fourth phase of the draft restoration plan on restoring the Gulf's living marine resources and their services that were injured by the spill, particularly HMS and deepwater species. The motion carried on page 149.

PAGE 151: Motion to direct staff to begin work on a presentation to the council to modify recreational management of red snapper by delegating management authority for the federal for-hire component of the recreational sector to the respective five Gulf states. Proposed management measures should include an option for individual states to opt-out of delegation of federal for-hire management authority. The federal for-hire component in those states that opt-out would continue to be managed under the federal status quo. The motion carried on page 163.

PAGE 164: Motion that the council requests NMFS implement an emergency rule establishing a one-fish recreational bag limit for gag grouper for the 2025 season only. The motion carried on page 171.

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The Full Council of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council convened at The Lodge in Gulf Shores, Alabama on Wednesday afternoon, April 9, 2025, and was called to order by Chairman J.D. Dugas.

CALL TO ORDER, ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND INTRODUCTIONS

CHAIRMAN J.D. DUGAS: Welcome to the 304th meeting of the Gulf Council. My name is J.D. Dugas, chair of the council. Please place your cell phone, or similar device, on silent or vibrating mode. For the benefit of all, we ask that private conversations take place outside the meeting room. Additionally, alcoholic beverages are not permitted in the meeting room.

The Gulf Council is one of eight regional established in 1976 by the Fishery Conservation and Management Act, known as the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Our purpose is to serve as a deliberative body to advise the Secretary of Commerce on fishery management measures in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico, ensuring sustainable fishery resources that benefit the nation.

The council consists of seventeen voting members, eleven appointed by the Secretary of Commerce from various Gulf regions with diverse fisheries experience, plus the five state fishery managers from each Gulf state and the Regional Administrator from NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Service. Several non-voting members also participate.

Public input is essential to our deliberative process. We welcome both oral and written comments throughout the process. Virtual attendees wishing to speak through public comment must register online. In-person participants should sign in at the registration kiosk at the back of the room.

Only one registration per person is allowed. Public comment may conclude before the scheduled time if all registered participants have spoken. This meeting is being digitally recorded for the public record. As a courtesy, I kindly ask that all participants seated at the table introduce themselves, beginning on my left.

DR. KESLEY BANKS: Kesley Banks, Texas.

MR. DAKUS GEESLIN: Dakus Geeslin, Texas.

MR. TROY WILLIAMSON: Troy Williamson, Texas.

DR. TOM FRAZER: Tom Frazer, Florida.

DR. C.J. SWEETMAN: C.J. Sweetman, Florida.

MR. ED WALKER: Ed Walker, Florida.

MR. JOHN SANCHEZ: John Sanchez, Florida.

MR. TROY FRADY: Troy Frady, Alabama.

MR. KEVIN ANSON: Kevin Anson, Alabama.

DR. ANTHONY OVERTON: Anthony Overton, Alabama.

MR. CHARLIE PHILLIPS: Charlie Phillips, South Atlantic liaison.

LT. JACKSON MORTON: Lieutenant Jackson Morton, U.S. Coast Guard.

MS. MARA LEVY: Mara Levy, NOAA Office of General Counsel.

MR. FRANK HELIES: Frank Helies, NOAA Fisheries.

MR. ANDY STRELCHECK: Andy Strelcheck, NOAA Fisheries.

MR. DAVE DONALDSON: Dave Donaldson, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission.

MR. JASON OSBORNE: Jason Osborne, Mississippi.

MR. MICHAEL MCDERMOTT: Michael McDermott, Mississippi.

MR. RICK BURRIS: Rick Burris, Mississippi.

MR. BILLY BROUSSARD: Billy Broussard, Louisiana.

MR. CHRIS SCHIEBLE: Chris Schieble, Louisiana.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CARRIE SIMMONS: Carrie Simmons, council staff.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, all. Moving on, next up is the Adoption of the Agenda, and I believe we have some additions to add to the agenda. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so we have several things we would like to add to the agenda for discussion. The first one is a discussion of the Gulf Council rebranding. The second is announcement of a new website launch. Third is just a briefing on the anonymous voice mailbox, where we are with that,

and then discussion of the June 2025 council meeting format, and then you're going to add that other item, the regulatory -- Before I get to Mr. Strelcheck, we also need to amend, under the closed session report, that we'll not only announce the 2024 Law Enforcement Officer or Team of the Year Award, but we'll also announce the Spiny Lobster AP members that were appointed in closed session. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes, and I would like to add two items to the agenda. One is just a discussion of some of the recent executive orders, and then the second item is an update from both Clay and I with regard to some of the staffing losses as well as impacts related to fishery council work that we would expect in the near-term.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. I'm looking at Mr. Schieble, and do you want to add what we could not accomplish in Reef Fish, at least the charter and federal for-hire red snapper?

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes, and it's listed under Other Business, and there's an attachment already in the agenda for that, but you're talking right now?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: I know it was on Reef Fish, but --

MR. SCHIEBLE: We can do right now if you want, and I don't know if there's enough time.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: We could put it in Full Council.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes, for sure.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: We'll add it Other Business in Full Council. Thank you. Are there any other additions to the agenda? Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Just follow up on the gag grouper discussion that I brought up there, just to make sure we talk about it in Full Council again.

MR. RYAN RINDONE: Mr. Chair, I included that at the end of the Reef Fish Committee report.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Ryan. Okay. Anything else? Not seeing any, can I have a motion to adopt the agenda?

DR. SWEETMAN: So moved.

DR. BANKS: Second.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Banks and Dr. Sweetman. Next is the Approval of the Minutes. Is there any edits to the minutes? Not seeing any, can I have a motion to adopt the minutes as written?

DR. BANKS: So moved.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Banks, and Dr. Sweetman seconded. Thank you. Okay. Next on the agenda is going to be Dr. Simmons to give us a brief discussion on the Gulf Council rebranding. Dr. Simmons.

DISCUSSION OF GULF COUNCIL REBRANDING

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so, as many of you know, in January of 2025, the Gulf of Mexico was renamed the Gulf of America, pursuant to Executive Order 14172 and the Secretary of the Interior Order Number 3423 as well.

However, the name of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, Gulf Council, as established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, was not amended, and so, based on this EO, we are updating all geographic references to the Gulf of America, or just changing it to the Gulf, in ongoing and in new council documents, with reference to the same body of water formerly known as the Gulf of Mexico.

The fact that we cannot legally change the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's name until the act is reauthorized is leading to negative interactions with stakeholders and many constituents that have strong opinions about the optics of our name, even though it was not mentioned in the executive order.

In an effort to facilitate more positive interactions, we look to the verbiage already written in the Magnuson-Stevens Act, where we are referenced throughout as the Gulf Council after our formal name is mentioned. The fact that our website and our email addresses have been registered using the domain of www.gulfcouncil.org for years is helpful in this effort.

As such, it seemed to be the logical choice for our public-facing name, at least in the short term, and so what we have done is we're planning to move forward with registering the name of Gulf Council with the state of Florida Division of Corporations, as doing business as, and this will allow us to operate as the Gulf Council,

at least in the short term, without affecting our legal and federally-recognized identity and not conflicting with the executive order.

NOAA Fisheries leadership has indicated that this is an acceptable approach if the council's award documents still use the full name, as provided in the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Then there won't be an issue, and an added benefit to doing this is it also helps us administratively, because many vendors have already shortened our name to Gulf Council as well, and so, Mr. Chair, I'll take questions on that, but Emily has some additional information as well.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons. Is there any questions for Dr. Simmons? No? Not seeing any, we're going to pass it to Ms. Muehlstein.

MS. EMILY MUEHLSTEIN: Okay, and so I just had Bernie pull up our old logo, which clearly says the Gulf of Mexico, and so we decided, internally, that this was a really good opportunity for us to sort of modernize the aesthetic of our logo, and, if we were going to go ahead and rename, we might as well rebrand entirely, and so we hired a company to do two things for us.

One is to help us with this rebranding and creation of a new logo. Also, it was very timely. Last year, in the fall of 2024, we published an RFP, a request for proposals, to modernize the aesthetic of our website, and so they -- We have been working with them since last December, and their delivery date was March 30, and they have completely redone our website for us.

It just happened to coincide with this rebranding change of our logo, and change of our name, and so, in a moment, I'm going to show you the new logo, and I'm also going to quickly drive you through the new website.

We did not decide to launch the new website like the week before the council meeting. I know a lot of you are used to our current website, and finding all of our briefing materials, and we just thought it would be too much to launch it at the end of March. Instead, we plan to launch the new site and all of the rebranding next week.

We're going to systematically replace our name and our logo across all of our council resources and officially notify all of our partners of our change. We will also roll out this new website, which I'm about to show you in a minute, and, as that happens, I just ask that you guys are -- That you do two things for us.

The first is that you are patient with yourselves, and with us, as we all sort of learn the new site. The navigation remains primarily the same, but there are some tweaks, and then, second, if you see anything, or you start using it and it is bothersome to you, and it is not -- It's cumbersome, and it's not working, then please do not hesitate to reach out to me, or any of our staff, and let us know sort of what you're seeing, what's not going right, so that we can really optimize these changes.

So, with that, I'm going to show you our new logo first, and then we're going to go ahead and just take a very quick Look at our new site, and so, Bernie, if you can bring up our new logo, and so there are two versions of this logo. There's going to be a horizontal version, and that's this one, right, and this one kind of works on banners, and then there's also a stacked version, and I think you have that one in the email as well.

That reflects our new name, and we asked them to not only sort of use the region, and you can see that they've done that sort of in a nice design, as well as feature some of our most popular finfish, and a variety of them, in the fish silhouettes, and so there we are. That's our new look, guys, and so stay tuned for shirts and swag and whatever, maybe.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: If funding is available.

MS. MUEHLSTEIN: Pending available funding, and, Bernie, if you can pull up our staged website, and so this website is not yet up and running for the public. Like I said, we will do us a launch, and a systematic rebrand, next week, along with press release announcements and emails to our partners, but I wanted to show you what the new site is going to look like.

As I mentioned, the navigation is going to remain primarily the same here. It's loading. Sorry, and we have a big site, it turns out, and this is -- The anticipation is building. There we go, and so we really worked hard to make sure that we modernized the aesthetic of our website.

You know, typically, companies redo their website every sort of five years or so, three to five years, and we're kind of behind the curve on that one. What you will notice is that the navigational components remain pretty much the same as they used to, and we did an analytics-driven review of what was the most important and most accessed parts of our site, and so, as you can see, there's sort of these -- At the top-right, you'll see there's like that little button with the thing, and so that's going to

bring you to the navigational menu for the entire site.

We also have this call to action that will bring folks to the public comment area, and, then as you move down the site, you've got these three big buttons that really, you know, draw people to the things that they're using the most, the fishing regulations, information on fisheries management, and the information about the council itself.

Then the next sort of phase of the website, as you scroll down on this homepage, is a call-out for our meetings, and what you'll see is you can click for more details, and we also have a calendar. We've also added this feature where you can add it to your own calendar, and so you can hit that button, and it will populate your own calendar with that.

As you slide down a little further, Bernie, our news will be featured here, and so just like we have our press releases, and this is going to include our press releases and our blogs, and then we can take you to a page that has it all, if you want that. We are really trying to focus on providing more visual content, and so we'll be, you know, anchoring all of these things in photos as much as we can.

If we keep going down, this is our seeking public comment section, that you probably recognize from our homepage, and so we will be able to highlight all of the current issues that we're looking for public hearing phase comments on, and you can also submit general comment, and then, if you go on down even further, Bernie, a little bit of information about what the council is, and what they do, and then the very bottom of our webpage -- There's our subscribe to our newsletter, but then, at the very bottom of the page, what you'll see is not only that sort of one color of our logo in the stacked version, but the primary places that users are navigating is going to always be anchored in the footer of our site.

Then one thing -- Bernie, if you can click right in that footer, on the federal fishing regulations button, and so the federal fishing regulations are consistently the highest driver of traffic to our site. We port in the API from Fish Rules, and so we basically manage all of our regulations in the Fish Rules interface, and that sort of code comes from the Fish Rules interface and populates our website.

One of the problems that we've had, even though this has really streamlined our workflow, is that, because Fish Rules regulations logic is based on location, our former site did not account for that, and so I had to choose sort of a default location for the

regulations to all come into.

That didn't work, because, like during the shallow-water grouper closure, if you would have clicked in closer to the --You know, inside the twenty-fathom line, it would have shown you that they were open, and there was no indication that that was location based, and so now our regulations have changed throughout this, you know, through this new redo, that the first thing that you're prompted to do is point to where you're fishing.

Bernie, if you can kind of point to like off Tampa Bay, maybe in the shallow-water. Right there. Perfect. So you would select your own location, and then it's going to populate the regulations based on the location you select, and so what you'll see is black grouper is part of that shallow-water grouper closure, and it does reflect that it's -- That that area is closed during that time, and so that's a way that we've really modernized the way that the regulations are pulled in. It should make them much more accurate.

Again though, as you look at this nice new site, and get used to it, if you see something that is hard for you to understand, or something that's inaccurate, please let us know, because we're going to go through some growing pains. I think that's just part of what happens when you, you know, trade over such a large resource, and so, with that, I'll stop talking, and, if you guys have any questions, or thoughts, or concerns, we're happy to take those.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Emily. Do we have any questions for Emily regarding the new website? Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes, and so I noticed, when you were showing the calendar upload, where you can put it to your own personal calendar, I think that's great. You know how, when a meeting comes up, we're able to register, once the registration is open, to be able to get on the webinar, for like an AP meeting or whatever, and would it be possible where a little button could pop up there also, to where you can register all at the same time, instead of having to wait for the email to come out? I don't know if that's handy or not, but I was just thinking off the cuff.

MS. MUEHLSTEIN: Since you mentioned it, I think it might also be helpful to consider a button that brings you straight to the meeting materials as well.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank You, Chris. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Not a comment for Emily or Carrie, and I think

this is fantastic, and I appreciate the work that has gone into this. One, I want to thank Carrie and the team for their patience, right, and so she's -- Her and I have talked several times about the name change, and some of the challenges dealing with the name change, and the Fisheries Service internally is working through this same process, like the Gulf Council is now.

You are going to see some similar changes with the NOAA Fisheries website, with regard to us renaming to Gulf of America. There are going to be places, at least, that are going to remain Gulf of Mexico, if it's specific to statute, but we are working on a regulatory solution to also make those changes, where it's appropriate, and so I just wanted to emphasize that.

There will be more communication coming. I have a staff person that has been designated to make sure that we're working closely with the Gulf Council team, and so I just appreciate the patience and work that goes into this, and we'll continue to, obviously, make updates as we get more information. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Emily, you have one more item?

UPDATE ON ANONYMOUS VOICE MAILBOX

MS. MUEHLSTEIN: I do. I just wanted to provide a quick update. If you remember, during the January council meeting, you all directed us to pilot an anonymous voicemail comment box, and so that service is ready to roll.

Some of the cool details of that service is, because we have contracted an outside service, we receive zero call log information, and so I don't get any caller ID information. There is also a live transcriptionist that transcribes the anonymous voicemails that we receive, and, if the caller accidentally reveals any personally-identifying information, the transcriptionists are instructed to not pass that along.

The way that this is going to work is a caller will call in, and there's sort of a welcome voicemail, and they are given three minutes to record their anonymous voicemail, and then the service emails me just the text of the voicemail, with no personally-identifying information, and so we retain no records that would reveal the source of the comment.

That voice mailbox is ready to go. You know, we are rolling out a new site, and a new branding, and we will roll out this new voice mailbox immediately following the successful rollout of those

other things, and so I would expect that the June council meeting, or August council meeting -- We're going to roll it out within the month, but we will have some anonymous voicemails to review and consider how we want to kind of go through that, and so I just wanted to give that an update, to both you the council and the public, that that is coming soon.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Emily. Any questions or comments? Not seeing any, one more item before we get into public comment, and I'll hand it over to Dr. Simmons for the discussion of the June 2025 council meeting.

DISCUSSION OF JUNE 2025 COUNCIL MEETING FORMAT

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so we've getting a lot of questions about this, and so I thought maybe we'll just go ahead and make an announcement here, while a lot of folks are still around.

So, unfortunately, due to the timing of the release of the regional management councils' funds, and funding, the June council meeting would be our third meeting of the year, and we've only received about what we think is 46.4 percent of our funding, which we think will be level funded, but, just based on the release of those funds, we are not in the position to hold the June council meeting in-person.

We are suggesting a two-day virtual meeting, and what I would like to do, at the end of our meeting on Thursday, is perhaps go through that draft agenda, once staff has a better understanding of where the chips fall and what the priorities are, by the end, but I wanted to make that announcement while more folks were in the room.

I was assured that we will not pay penalties by moving the meeting to 2026. I think the dates are slightly different, but it's the first week in June, and we will not be charged any penalties for canceling the meeting, and so I'll take a few questions, but we probably ought to get to public comment and revisit this at Full Council, or at the end of the day Thursday.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank You, Dr. Simmons. I'm not seeing any questions. We'll move into public comment. Good afternoon, everyone. Public input is a vital part of the council's deliberative process, and comments, both oral and written, are accepted and considered by the council throughout the process.

The Sustainable Fisheries Act requires that all statements include a brief description of the background and interest of the person

in the subject of the statement. All written information shall include a statement of the source and date of such information.

Oral or written communications provided to the council, its members, or its staff that relate to matters within the council's purview are public in nature. Please give any written comments to the staff, as all written comments will be posted on the council's website for viewing by council members and the public and will be maintained by the council as part of the permanent record. Knowingly and willfully submitting false information to the council is a violation of federal law.

We will welcome public comment from in-person and virtual attendees. Anyone joining us personally that wishes to speak during public comment should have already registered online. Virtual participants that are registered to comment should ensure that they are registered for the webinar under the same name they use to register to speak. In-person attendees wishing to speak their public comment should sign in at the registration kiosk located in the back of the meeting room.

We accept only one registration per person. Each speaker is allowed three minutes for their testimony. Please note the timer lights on the podium or on the webinar. They will be green for the first two minutes and will blink yellow for the final minute of testimony. At three minutes, the red light will appear, and a buzzer may be enacted.

Time allowed to dignitaries providing testimony is extended at the discretion of the chair. If you have a cell phone or similar device, we ask that you keep them on silent or vibrating mode during the meeting. Also, for all to be able to hear the proceedings, we ask that you have any private conversations outside the meeting room. Please note public comment may end before the published agenda time if all registered in-person and virtual participants have completed their comment.

Okay, and Bernie has the list up. We are going to start in the room, with Dylan and Lawrence, and then go online. Mr. Hubbard, you're first up.

PUBLIC COMMENT

MR. DYLAN HUBBARD: Thank you for the opportunity to speak. Captain Dylan Hubbard out of central west Florida, multi-passenger partyboats and charter boats. First, I wanted to start off in ultimate support of anything we can do on a red grouper emergency rule to try to save access to our recreational season this year,

in 2025.

The stock assessment shows such a healthy fishery, with the terminal year of data 2022. Being as though it's 2025 already, it's really important, I think, for recreational buy-in and faith in the system, if you will, to try to do the best we can to preserve access this year.

As far as the red grouper document that would follow, increasing catch levels, based on that stock assessment, I think it's really important if there's any methodology that we could utilize to leave any allocation discussion out of it. In my experience, any allocation conversations slow the process down, and, if this emergency rule is able to be put in place, and does save access in 2025, it's only got twelve months until it expires again, and, if this document -- If raising the catch level isn't in place in time, we're going to have a huge problem.

We get to the end of that emergency rule, and then, all of a sudden, we revert back to these super small quotas, on 2019 data, it's -- It would be a huge detriment to the fishery, and a big black eye to this system and process, and so, if we can leave allocation reviews out of any red grouper document behind this this assessment of review and catch level increase, I think it would help move the document along faster, a streamlined rulemaking, and hopefully help get that catch level permanently increased.

Also, I want to really speak in support of removal of the twenty-fathom closure. I've gone around and around about it, and so I won't belabor the point too much, but it's inequitable, and it really is difficult to enforce these lines off far from shore. They're not straight lines. It's not a geometric shape. It's very, very tricky, and it has to be at-sea enforcement, which is even more tricky, especially with assets in the Gulf of Mexico being moved to the border, and there's even less enforcement on the water than there once was.

Also, removing this twenty-fathom closure, in my opinion, will lower total removals, lowering the B1s, because we're not going to be discarding as many fish. It helps us fish more effectively, and efficiently, and it's better for the overall biomass.

Some questions have come out from other areas of the Gulf of, well, I'm worried about this in my area, and you have to remember we've heard, countless times around this table, that, in February and March, other parts of the Gulf aren't fishing. A lot of these areas don't fish until later March, or until the weather is better,

and so, really, the main area that has directed fishery effort is off of central-west Florida, and so my comments, for my area, I think reflect the overall fishery in a really big way, more so than other topics that we discuss around this table.

Also, there is no data to evaluate, in discussing it with staff and NOAA and other folks around this table. There's no data to evaluate, and so waiting to see what happens with this stock assessment and catch level increase is -- There's no reason for it, because there's nothing to analyze. I think we really need to take this opportunity to move forward and remove this outdated rule.

Lane snapper, I support the document as proposed. Thank you for moving forward and getting that finalized. The messaging I think needs to be a little tempered from the council, and from council staff, because I think the public comment that Emily brought up, and that Captain Walker questioned, and this is a band-aid solution, and the root cause is still there.

It's a super healthy fishery. The fishery is going to continue to grow, and this only reduces landings by about 3 percent, as we saw in that presentation earlier today, and so we're still going to have closures, and this rule won't be in place in time to really affect catch levels this year, and so we're going to have a closure on lane snapper this year, and so think about the optics to the recreational fishermen.

It comes out that, hey, we're increasing lane snappers size limits, to try to give you a longer season, and two months later, lane snapper are going to close early this year. It's not going to look good, and so I think we need to think about the messaging around that.

Data collection, we need SEFHIER back on the water as soon as possible. It really needs to move forward at this meeting. Preferreds have been picked, and discussions have happened, and I'm hoping we can continue on through that process as quickly as possible.

As far as -- Also on data collection, disrupting the Southeast Regional Headboat data stream I think is something that this council should hopefully take some action on, whether it's a letter or encouragement or whatever we can do to try to preserve this recreational data stream. It's the only longest running data stream that's used in all these different assessments.

There's a lot of other great recreational data streams that have

come online in the last ten years, with LA Creel and all the state surveys, but those are good systems, and they great data collections, but they have short histories. This has been on the water since 1986, and we need to work to save and preserve that data stream.

For federal for-hire red snapper, we need the longest possible season to ensure we can more fully utilize our quota. For amberjack, I would encourage the council -- I was encouraged by the council, especially Mr. Schieble's inquiries about, at the next meeting, more fully analyzing the regionality of that large landings, being so high above our ACT, at a time when a large portion of Florida's fleet was out of business, or recovering from a hurricane, and it seems superiorly unreasonable. I just -- I can't fathom how that happened, and so hopefully getting to the root cause of that -- I realize there's still preliminary numbers, and stuff is being worked on, but it would be cool, at the June council meeting, if there was a more in-depth look at those numbers, and I support Mr. Schieble's idea.

The DESCEND Act ending, I would like the council to move forward with the motion that was raised in that review. I think that's a really good idea to continue forward down that road and stand up something on the council side that reflects what the DESCEND Act already has.

For shallow-water grouper, I would like to continue support for Alternative 5, with the April and May spring component and then September through the end of the year. Thank you for your time.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank You, Mr. Hubbard. We have a question from Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: I would be curious your thoughts about Gulf gag.

MR. HUBBARD: I was scared to go first, because I knew I was going to get asked that. I mean, we talked about it at the Reef Fish AP, and there was -- No one was really willing to put their name on that, right, and it's hard to stand up here at this podium and say, hey, I'm happy to take one gag grouper, but I completely agree with your sentiment.

I completely agree with the reasoning that you have for presenting the idea, and I don't think I could sit here and say, hey, I think I support going to one fish, but I would say that I like the idea of doing anything and everything possible to prevent a South Atlantic red snapper situation, and, if that means it has to be a one-fish bag limit for the remainder of this year, with some really

clear, solid wording that this is temporary, and is going to go away, I think we could live with that, to prevent any sort of overage and make sure we get back to a more fully-utilized quota next year.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Go ahead, C.J.

DR. SWEETMAN: Yes, and, just to be clear on that point, yes, it is entirely meant to be temporary. If an emergency action is done there, those are only good for 180 days, and so done.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Any other questions? Not seeing any, thank you, Dylan. Next up is Lawrence Marino, and he will be followed by Glenn Delaney online.

MR. LAWRENCE MARINO: Good afternoon. My name is Larry Marino, and I'm here on behalf of Louisiana Attorney General Liz Murrill. Regarding Amendment 58B, under Action 2, no action seems inappropriate, because both sector allocations should be stated, and not just one of them, but Alternative 2 is obviously inequitable, because it would burden only the recreational sector.

Rec would be sharply reduced, from the 10 percent or so that they have been harvesting to three-and-a-half percent, a two-thirds reduction. That would be a drastic reallocation, for all intents and purposes, and it's contrary to the current catch data. In fact, it wouldn't take recreational landings into account at all, and only the commercial landings from over twenty years ago.

This isn't merely recognizing the leftover from the current commercial allocation. It's doing what this council refused to do years ago when the quota was imposed. Alternative 3 may be seen as inequitable, as doing the exact opposite and imposing the burden solely on the commercial sector. This could be alleviated by removing the 4 percent commercial buffer, which should be done regardless, since it no longer serves a purpose, and the commercial allocation is based on this twenty to twenty-five-year-old data, whereas we have current data for rec, and so it's really not a fair comparison.

Under Alternative 4, the two sectors would bear the burden equally. Alternative 3 still seems more appropriate, given the non-comparability of the data for the two sectors, and the high uncertainty in the data, and especially if the 4 percent commercial buffer is removed, but Alternative 4 is clearly also reasonable.

Under Action 3, it does seem appropriate to have rec-specific accountability measures to enforce the rec allocation, but, with

the highly uncertain data in this particular fishery, using a moving average over two or three years is appropriate. The National standard 1 regulations allow a multi-year approach to determining overfishing status, including when there is high uncertainty in the fishing mortality estimates. That's the case here, and Alternative 5 seems to best address this concept.

Alternative 4 seems to be more objectionable, in that it states the trigger requiring exceedance in two years, instead of phrasing the exceedance itself in terms of an average, but the two alternatives are trying to do the same thing, and so either seems appropriate, and you might as well pick the one that the lawyers don't object to.

I would say that the one-year period for determining overfishing isn't stated in Magnuson. It's in the regulations implementing it. Since this amendment will also be in the regulations, enacting it with an exception to the one-year limitation would enact that exception, if one is needed.

Regarding the rec initiative, it sounds like the council will be requesting staff to start work on amendments, or an amendment, to implement their recommendations. Several of them seem very promising, and I would like to touch on a few.

The harvest control rule approach has already been implemented in the Mid-Atlantic Council, and it seems both workable and beneficial to balancing stability and flexibility. The DESCEND Act is a very good program, and, with its sun setting next year, beginning an action now to replace and enhance it is a very good idea.

Carryover is needed, along with payback, in order to level out the boom and bust cycles. It needs to be done in a way so that you avoid overfishing, but it's fair, and it makes sense that, if the stock could bear a certain amount of fishing in one year, they can also bear the remainder of that amount being fished in the next year. We heard yesterday from three states that fell well short of their quotas last year, which points up the need for carryover.

Permits of some sort, whatever you call them, should be required Gulf-wide, as Louisiana has been doing, so the universe of actual offshore fishermen can be identified and more accurately targeted in the fishing surveys. The states, and not NMFS, can and should be allowed to do this, with standardization to the data as necessary.

Finally, state or regional management is essential to enable the flexibility needed for a workable and fair system of management.

One size simply does not fit all, as we have heard repeatedly. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Marino. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any, thank you, Larry. Next up is online, Mr. Glenn Delaney, followed by Mr. Bob Zales.

MR. GLENN DELANEY: Thank you, Chair. Glenn Delaney, Southern Shrimp Alliance, and I have served on your Shrimp Advisory Panel for many years. I am addressing the shrimp framework action that the Shrimp Committee considered on Monday and again adopted Alternative 3 as its preferred alternative for submission to the Secretary for review and approval.

As I did at your January meeting, I want to thank the Shrimp Committee for once again taking the time and effort to understand this complex issue and why the shrimp industry developed Alternative 3 and has so strongly urged the council to adopt it.

As an industry currently under extreme economic duress, we deeply appreciate the committee's and Full Council's support. As you recall the Regional Office's immediate response to the Shrimp Committee's vote back in January was to threaten to disapprove Alternative 3, asserting its inconsistency with National Standard 7, which states that conservation and management measures shall, where practicable, minimize costs and avoid unnecessary duplication. I assume they will do it the same in Full Council tomorrow.

Therefore, my message to you today is simply that I do not believe the Regional Office's assertion of inconsistency with the National Standard has merit. I do not believe the Regional Office's assertion will be upheld when subject to secretarial review at NOAA Headquarters. Instead, I believe Alternative 3 will be approved.

Why do I believe that? The shrimp ELB scientific data collection program has necessarily existed side-by-side with the agency's very different VMS monitoring and enforcement program for other fisheries for more than twenty years, and I have been engaged with the program's development, funding, and implementation the entire time. I can attest firsthand that this program has always been for the purpose of collecting scientific data for a range of scientific monitoring purposes. It was never for the purposes of the VMS program contemplated by the agency under Alternative 2.

Consistent with the framework's statement of purpose and need, the industry's fundamental purpose and need, reflected in Alternative

3, is to preserve this program as the very basic scientific data collection program it has always been and to do so by simply upgrading what became obsolete 3G cellular technology and by upgrading data delivery to a cloud-based server. That's it.

I also ask you to please consider why suddenly does the agency now claim that the shrimp ELB program is duplicative and inconsistent with National Standard 7, when, for more than twenty years, it never did before. In fact, what we have learned through this more than four-year exercise is the exact opposite. It is instead Alternative 2 that would create a new and duplicative program that is far more complex than what is necessary.

Finally, I note that National Standard 7 also states, in part, conservation and management measures shall, where practicable, minimize costs. Our Shrimp AP chair's highly credible cost analyses, presented to the Shrimp Committee in January and again on Monday, have revealed substantial disparities with the agency's cost estimates for both Alternatives 2 and 3.

The bottom line is that those disparities remain unresolved by the agency or council today, and so the agency's cost estimates simply cannot be relied upon to draw a legal conclusion as to the consistency of Alternative 3 with National Standard 7.

To conclude, I do not see a credible argument, based on duplication or cost, that Alternative 3 is inconsistent with National Standard 7. As the Shrimp Committee has recommended, I urge you to adopt Alternative 3 and send it to the Secretary for review and approval. Thank you very much for your consideration.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank You, Mr. Delaney. Do we have any questions for Mr. Delaney? I'm not seeing any. Thank you, sir. Next up is Mr. Zales.

MR. BOB ZALES: Good afternoon. Bob Zales, II, Executive Director of Southeastern Fisheries. We support everything that Glenn just said about the shrimp amendment and defer the rest of our comments to the expert behind me, Ms. Bosarge.

The lane snapper, on the final action of lane snapper, we support the increase to ten inches on the size limit. On the emergency rule for request for the recreational red grouper increase, we support that if it can be done. Over time, when we've asked for emergency actions on issues like this, the Fisheries Services always told us that they couldn't do an emergency action for an increase. You can do them for overages and impacts, but you can't do that, and so hopefully they'll find a way to do that, to add a

few more fish to the guys for the end of this year.

We also support the stock assessment on red grouper. We support the proposed increase on the commercial side to be implemented next year. We would like for the council to request that the stock assessment panel review the MSY proxy of 40 percent for red grouper.

The red grouper fishery, unlike the other transgender groupers, has a different life history. It doesn't live as long, and it reproduces apparently quicker, and so we think that there's clear evidence that you can play with a smaller proxy than 40 percent.

We also have issues with, on every of these fisheries, every time we look at increases, you're looking at increases of 10 percent, rather than going and looking at a 1 percent, or 2, 3, 4, or 5, whatever percentage is there, because what happens, as an example in the deepwater grouper fishery, is, when you shift to a higher MSY, you arbitrarily shift the impact of the regulatory atmosphere on these species, simply because of a computer model. It has nothing to do with real-world activity, and so we would like to see a look at that.

On the deepwater grouper, we would like to see the commercial quota remain as-is. On all of these fisheries, we do not want to see any kind of an allocation shift in anything until we get the whole allocation issue resolved through the FES review, and also until we get some kind of status on Amendment 53, that we're still waiting to hear from the Fisheries Service from the request from the court, to see where that goes, because shifting allocations -- - The way it is now, you're just adding more problems to the whole allocation issue, and so, until we can get to a final decision on allocations, we would like to see that left alone, and that's pretty much all I've got, unless you've got a question.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Zales. Do we have any questions? I'm not seeing any.

MR. ZALES: All right. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you. Next up is Mr. Buddy Guindon, followed by Mr. Scott Hickman.

MR. BUDDY GUINDON: Buddy Glendon, and I'm a commercial fisherman out of Galveston, Texas and Executive Director of the Gulf of America Reef Fish Shareholders Alliance, our new name.

Troy, I want to thank you. We've had an interesting relationship,

but I've grown to admire it, and so thanks for your service on the council. Tom, I'm going to miss you like a brother. Hopefully you'll hang out and help us with advice.

I've come here many times asking to fully implement the IFQ in the reef fish fishery, adding the rest of the species and getting us to a full-retention fishery, where we can stop wasting fish and make our fishery more conservation-oriented, and so I hope you give that some consideration.

I've also been coming here talking about young fishermen who want to keep the system just the way it is, and I think today you might hear some folks come up here and tell you their story about how they have gone out into the industry, and maybe worked for a captain, and they're buying that business, or they're working on buying it. It's expensive, and so it takes a long time.

When we move forward with having a permit requirement, and moving on out of the fishery in a couple years, you need to consider long-term arrangements, that have been built over decades, where fishermen passed their business down to their deckhands, and their mates, that have helped them make a living their whole life and that --

In this day and age, it takes many years to pay that debt, and so, as we move forward, maybe consider some ability to honor contracts that have been established that, when you have IFQ, you can't transfer the asset, because that's the only collateral you have, and so you hold that asset as it gets transferred, and so there's a lot to this, and I hope you consider all the caveats that might come up in the near future, and thank you for your time.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Guindon. Do we have any questions? I'm not seeing any. Next is Mr. Hickman, followed by Mr. Ken Haddad.

MR. SCOTT HICKMAN: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of the Gulf Council, and this may be the last in-person. I drove all the way over here to tell Tom congratulations for the great job he's done, and, Troy, you as well. I had a great time last night, and I think I'll take myself back to Texas today.

I like the idea of using study fleets to maximize efficiency for our data collection in the Gulf. They're doing it in the Northeast, and I works really good. With the upcoming budget constraints we're probably looking at, the council should be looking into doing that.

As far as SEFHIER, I appreciate you all getting that going. There's a lot of incredible -- I know you've heard me say this a few times, but great technology available. You know, we've got Starlink cellular coming onboard, and a lot of us have Starlink on our boats already, and we can use a simple app to be able to stream that catch data off our charter boats and straight to the Southeast Science Center.

I support moving forward with a fisheries ecosystem plan. The importance of making management decisions that look at ecosystem and environmental factors are very important to me. I'm glad to see that the red grouper for stock assessment accounted for environmental variables, and that's an example how an FEP can work and be in an action.

We need more support in doing that for our future stock assessments, with the FEP work, and I support a lot of what Dylan said. He's one of our best board members on getting on record and saying things. I also support the removal of the twenty-fathom closure, and you all have a great day. I hope we see you sometime next year in-person, and be careful going home.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Hickman. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any, Mr. Ken Haddad, follow by Mr. Chris Horton.

MR. KEN HADDAD: Thank you, Mr. Chairman and council members. My name is Ken Haddad, with the American Sport Fishing Association, a trade organization for the sportfishing industry.

We support the council to begin the process to replace and/or enhance the DESCEND Act provisions that expire in January 2026, and it's one of the priority recommendations of the rec initiative. With few, if any, exceptions, studies have shown that descending devices and venting tools, when properly used, are effective.

As you've heard with Return 'Em Right, the presentations, momentum on the use of these tools is increasing. We're getting buy-in from the anglers, and there's a momentum here that we would like to see continued, and we think requirements for these tools is an important part of moving forward, and reducing fishing mortality is one of our biggest issues in our sector, and we believe proceeding is extremely important.

Just a little history, and I came to the council, at least seven years ago, asking to add descending devices to the current -- Or the then current venting tool rule, and the decision was to rescind everything, and so that's why we went to Congress and got the DESCEND Act, a five-year sunset, with the assumption the council

would take it up and take ownership in it, and we hope you will move forward with the committee recommendation to proceed.

Twenty fathoms, we -- If there are opportunities such as this to give us more access, with acceptable impacts to season and bag limits, we think we should proceed. 58B, we are good with Action 1, Alternative 2, Action 2, Alternative 3, or maybe 4. In Action 3, Alternative 5, and possibly 4. On red grouper, we welcome more fish, as always.

Dr. Sweetman, on gag, as you know, we're typically pretty adamant against a one-fish bag limit, but, under dire circumstances, and seeing where we're headed with gag, we would be supportive of a one-fish, on a very temporary basis.

Then, on the rec initiative, I just wanted to say it was -- As a participant in it, I thought it was -- It went beyond my expectations, and we hope you'll look at all of the recommendations, and follow through where you can, and then, finally, I didn't know I was going to talk to Troy and Tom, but you all have become great friends, and we'll miss you, and too bad we won't see you in June. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Haddad. We have a question Mr. Osborne.

MS. OSBORNE: I'm just curious. With Garrett Graves gone, who would you think would take up the mantle for the DESCEND Act?

MR. HADDAD: In Congress, we're hoping we don't have to even think about that, and so we have -- I don't know if -- We haven't lined anybody up at this point, but we'll come to you if we need to, if that's possible, but I -- You know, our belief is the council will move forward, and that's not a necessary follow-through.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: One more. Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Just a quick comment, and I just wanted to say thank you for participating in the recreational initiative. That was, obviously, a big endeavor, and I know it took a lot of time, and so just thank you, Ken.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Any other questions? Not seeing any, thanks, Ken. I will echo what Dr. Sweetman said. Thank you for your participation. Mr. Chris Horton, followed by Mr. Chris Niquet.

MR. CHRIS HORTON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the council. Thank you all for the opportunity to speak today. My

name is Chris Horton. I'm the Senior Director of Fisheries Policy for the Congressional Sportsman's Foundation, and, to answer your question, Mr. Ezell would probably be the likely candidate there, but hopefully the council can continue down this road with the DESCEND Act.

You know, we've often countered with some of the comments that have been made over the years at this council about recreational anglers are unaccountable. Well, we're accountable. You give us a season, and you give us a bag limit, and we fish to it.

We're also accountable, and we went to Congress, because we wanted to do something about reef fish mortality, and they passed the DESCEND Act, and so we're fully supportive of doing that, but, as far as Amendment 58B, obviously, we support Alternative 2 in Action 1. We also support Alternative 3 in Action 2.

Maybe a decade, or certainly two decades ago, recreational anglers didn't have the technology, or the ability, to go out and harvest deepwater -- Or target deepwater groupers, but that has all changed now, and the public -- An aspect of the public does have an opportunity to go harvest a public trust resource, and so I think that it is time to establish an ACL for the recreational sector, and, again, hold us accountable to that.

Also, I want to thank everybody for their work on the rec initiative. We're very supportive of where we landed. You know, one of the things that we were hoping to see come out of that was encouraging some additional state or regional management, and we're certainly excited to see the council start talking again about going in that direction with amberjack, and so I encourage you to continue to push, and push faster than normal, would be great, if we could we get that fishery under state or regional management, and the sooner the better.

Then, finally, relative to the amberjack, you know, when I was in grad school, in fisheries management -- The first thing you were taught is, you know, there's three legs to a fisheries management school. There's the people, the fish, and the habitat, and, here in federal fisheries management, we focus almost exclusively on constraining the people, to try to influence the fish, and we do very, very little for the habitat, yet greater amberjack could potentially be suffering from what we're concerned with in the Gulf of Mexico, and that's the loss of offshore oil and gas platforms.

A Gallaway study, A Benny Gallaway study, in 2020, and it was published for BOEM, estimated that somewhere between 45 and 48

percent of the biomass in the Gulf of Mexico of greater amberjack is associated with oil and gas platforms, and we had 7,000 platforms in the Gulf of Mexico at one point. Today, we're down to 1,074, as of today.

We've actually lost seven in the last two weeks, but these things are rapidly coming out. In 2010, the council thought about establishing, or designating, offshore oil and gas platforms as essential fish habitat.

I don't know why we stopped going that direction, but I would argue that, if we continue to lose biomass that it's important to amberjack, it's going to be very difficult to ever get them back to a rebuilding target, and so I would encourage the council to think about designating offshore oil and gas platforms, again, as essential fish habitat, and so thank you for your time.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Horton. Do we have any questions? Mr. Osborne.

MR. OSBORNE: I'm curious, and, when you bring up the platform issue, have you guys looked at the wind turbines?

MR. HORTON: We're actually working with some members of Congress. We worked with Mr. Graves in the last Congress, and we'll be hopefully, pretty soon, introducing another round of legislation for Rigs to Reef. It's specifically, at this point, targeted towards oil and gas, but we see it as this has precedence for any offshore wind, because anybody in the Gulf knows, if you put hard structure in the water, stuff is going to grow on it, and you're going to have fisheries around it.

It's been really interesting to see that dynamic the folks in the Northeast with wind, and the angling community is really kind of concerned, of what that's going to mean for them, and I certainly can see that from an access perspective.

As long as they can continue to access it, but that first presentation on a wind lease sale here in the Gulf last year, or the year before last, or whenever that was, you know, I think everybody in this room really recognized the value of additional hard structure going in the water. It's going to be more fish for us, and so we're good with it, but, yes, down the road, we want to be able to roll that into any administrative rule or legislation that we can get through.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Horton. Next up is Mr. Chris Niquet, followed by Mr. Charlie Renier.

MR. CHRIS NIQUET: Hello. Chris Niquet. Every state has got a copy of this amortization schedule. This is a main for red snapper, and I've got four options that I would like to present to the council members today.

Number one is leave this program as it is. It's working pretty good. You've got three-hundred-and-something boats that are involved in the taking of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. You've got ten or twelve people who don't like the way it's going. Therefore, you've got a 95 percent success rate. The other 95 percent of them are out there catching red snapper right now and making money at it. I don't know why the other ten or twelve aren't.

The next thing is the current program to loan new entries, or people who want to increase their quota, isn't working. They can't qualify to get a loan. This last AP meeting, there was a fellow had an 802 score, and he can't qualify to get a loan for these quota. He can go down the street, and he can get an $850,000 center console to go offshore and go recreational fishing, but he can't qualify to get this quota.

This amortization schedule is based upon this, 10,000 pounds at $50 a pound, a twenty-year loan term, at 2 percent. The yearly payments are $30,353.04. If you're leasing the quota at $4.50 a pound, which a lot of them are paying more, that's $45,000 a year. You're making $15,000 immediately. If you get more than 10,000 pounds, you make more. If you're paying more than $4.50, you're getting more than $4.50 a pound for it, you make more than that.

The next is to have the government come in and buy out all the policy -- Excuse me. The quota holders, like myself and others, who want to get out of the program. Fair market value, and distribute them as they wish, to whomever they wish, under whatever circumstance they wish.

Another one is to take the current quota holders and put them in a program to where the new entries go to the quota holder and say this, that I want to purchase your fish, your quota, and the government says we'll put up the money, under these circumstances, and we'll hold the quota. You fish the allocation and pay us back, but under these circumstances.

If you don't catch the allocation every year, you lose that much, and why do -- You say why do you say you do that, and it's so that they don't hold the quota and refuse to fish and just lease the quota out. They don't become an investor. They remain a

fisherman.

Another thing I'm against is the twenty-fathom rule on the black grouper. I think you ought to do away with it. I think it creates more dead discards than it does help the grouper situation, and I'm against a one-fish limit for recreational fishermen, unless you just have to institute it. I sure am against the no-fish limit. That's detrimental to millions of fishermen. Thank you very much for your time, and I hope you consider this plan. Thank you very much for your time.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Niquet. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any, thank you. Next up is Mr. Charlie Renier, followed by Mr. Johnny Williams.

MR. CHARLIE RENIER: Hello. My name is Charlie Renier. I've been here quite a bit speaking in front of you all. I was born and raised in the seafood business, and I plan on dying in the seafood business.

My dad, his biggest thing in life was to make sure every single person in this country who wanted to eat a piece of seafood could get it. He always told me that some people can't afford boats, but they can afford to go out and eat. He made it a lifetime to feeding people. I'm making it a lifetime to feeding people. My daughter is making a lifetime to feeding people.

Ten years ago, I moved up here from the Keys, and I decided to buy longline boats and quota, because I wanted to make sure I could stay in business. I've bought numerous boats, numerous fish houses, and lots and lots of quota. I lease lots of quota.

I think it's a fantastic thing that you all did with this quota. I hear people complaining all the time about it, but, you know what, I've borrowed, and I've begged, and I went out and I've worked my ass off to buy my quota, and get my quota, and it's a wonderful thing to know I've got my quota.

You all have taken a lot of quota from us, and this is the first time I've heard of us getting some grouper quota back, and I want to see it work. I hope it works.

This emergency meeting about the red grouper, I think it's fantastic. You all are moving forward on counting these fish and figuring it out. Times change, and we want to be with you. If these sports can get these fish this year, and we get our quota next year, that's fine.

This twenty-fathom curve, to get rid of that and help these sports out, that's fine. Everybody is entitled to these fish. We all want to catch them. We all want to eat them, and it's a great thing that you all have done.

Now, there are a few problems here and there, and, Dr. Sweetman, I agree with you a hundred percent. We have a terrible problem with gags. We have so many gags that we don't even know what to do with them. We haven't seen the amount of gags since the last two hurricanes. We thought it was bad before, and we were catching gags everywhere. Now we're catching gags where we never caught gags.

My inshore boats, in 120 or 130 feet of water, are throwing twenty and thirty gags a day back. We're catching them from the Panhandle all the way to the Tortugas. I don't know what we need to do to get you all on our boats, get you out there, and our boats cover the entire Gulf out here. The amount of gags that we have -- Where they came from, I don't know my opinion.

In my opinion, I think they came from the deep water, and they came in. For years, they pushed out. I think them hurricanes brought them in. I've got people in twenty, thirty, forty feet of water catching twenty-pound gags. That's unheard of. We've got them everywhere. We need to open the gags up and let us catch them. We don't need an emergency closure on them. We need you all to see what's going on.

We know why we got cut down. We know the girls didn't pick up the big fish. We know what happened, and we've been catching them all along, but now, I mean, there's plenty of them there. Hopefully you all can figure that out.

Anything that I can do, my fish house, my boats, to help any of you all to keep this industry going, we're there for you. We don't want to catch all the gags. We don't want to catch all the snappers. We just want to feed people.

We're trying to put in a restaurant to feed people. I want the people to come down and look at the boats, like Buddy has, and Karen has, and look at the commercial boats, and see what happens. Educate people. We're the only ones that can feed them.

90 percent of our seafood is imported. Look at all the tariffs we're going through now. What's wrong with catching more seafood here? Let's feed them good seafood. We've got the best seafood in the world. All we need is a little help from you all to keep it going.

I mean it's -- Dr. Simmons talking about no meeting in Key West. You all have a beautiful office in St. Pete. I mean, I've been there numerous times. If you can't go to Key West, can't go anywhere, then let's have a meeting in you all's office. At least let the people that want to come be able to come and talk, and be able to see you all, because a lot of us feel the only way we get anything done is in-person.

All this stuff over the phone and TV, it's nothing like being in-person, and we all want to contribute. You all are doing a great job. We want to keep it going.

These two are running off leaving us again. I mean, every time I get to know you all, you're gone, but I appreciate everything, and we're here for all of you, and anything we can do to help, and all we want to do is catch fish, and let everybody catch fish. We've got a lot of fish. I appreciate it. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Renier. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any, next up is Mr. Johnny Williams, followed by Mr. Jim Zurbrick.

MR. JOHNNY WILLIAMS: Johnny Williams, Williams Partyboats Incorporated, Galveston, Texas, third-generation partyboat operator out of Galveston.

Last year, I argued against an increase in quota, but we got it anyway, and it really benefited a lot of people. Unfortunately, it didn't benefit the for-hire sector. We only caught about 70 percent of our quota last year. We were penalized because the time that it takes to accumulate the data in a timely fashion, to have the second season open, when it would have been really beneficial to us.

What I'm suggesting is that we change the fishing season from January 1 and December 31 to March 1 and -- I'm sorry. To April 1 and concluding on March 31, and the purpose of this is that we can still open the red snapper fishing season June 1, like we have currently, and then, after we get the data in, at the end of whenever it is, October or November or whatever, and we're short on fish again, like we were last year, we could extend the season long enough into the new year to where we can accomplish our quota, because everybody is getting benefit from it but the for-hire sector.

We got penalized, because of the way the system set up, and so it's not something that's unprecedented. I mean, like, for

instance, king mackerel, the fishing year for king mackerel is July 1 to June 30, and so what I'm suggesting is that we go ahead and we move it.

Last year, when it opened in November, we didn't have much time to get the word out, and it would be nice to, maybe if we come to that point, say, hey, you didn't catch all your fish, you know, and let us know a couple of weeks ahead of time, and give us a heads-up, so we can get the word out to our people, because that time of the year really isn't that busy for us anyway.

People are thinking about Christmas shopping, thinking about Thanksgiving, and the weather is not nice off of Texas that time of the year, and I would suspect the same in the other states, and so if you could please just change -- It doesn't take much. I talked to Andy, and he said that we could do it for the recreational sector and not the commercial sector, and it shouldn't be a problem.

Just change the starting date of the year from the current January 1 to April 1 and give us a chance to harvest fish that we're entitled to as well, and, also, I want to ask that you all dismiss the twenty-fathom rule.

Council members, thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it. We don't -- We haven't always seen eye-to-eye on everything, but we've always had good relationships with everyone, and so thanks again for your service.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Williams. We have a question, or we have a couple of questions. Mr. Frady.

MR. FRADY: Thank you so much for being here. We spoke yesterday, and I understand what you're talking about, about, you know, adjusting the season, kind of like we did the amberjack, as far as like setting the annual allocation to be distributed in the spring, rather than January 1.

I get that, but, if we can't do that -- You know, we all -- Like you said, we missed the fall season. We missed the Thanksgiving, because of the late, but, if we could ever get to the point to where we could have a standard charter-for-hire red snapper season, whether it be the Friday before Memorial Day, and take it say to the middle of August, to where we could set up and we can have a fixed opening season for red snapper, and we could say October 1, so we something you can plan on, and would that make you happy? Would that be feasible, do you think?

I mean, that the waves keep us from getting the data, or the agency can make the decision to open or not, but, even though we're catching 74 percent of our quota, I think there should be a little leeway, and have you got any ideas about what we should do to change something around to where can have a fixed fall season for red snapper for the charter-for-hire industry?

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, I think, the way the system is set up right now, Troy, that would be very difficult to do, because you wouldn't know if we were going to catch our quota during the June through August season or not, and the data comes in so slowly that, by October, I don't think we would know.

One year we did open up in October, and that was great, because the weather is better then, and we didn't have, you know, the bad weather, like we have in November and December, and we didn't everybody thinking about Christmas shopping, and stuff like that, and so, yes, that that worked, but, this this last year, we didn't get the data in a timely fashion, and we didn't open up -- I think it was the 18th, or something like that, of November, and it was just really too late in the year really for us to harvest our fish.

So, if we change the data, and sure -- I mean, I loved it when we had a fishing season that was fixed every year, but I think we were overshooting our quota quite a bit in those years, and, once again, the reason that it's really detrimental to us is what occurred was that we don't -- You know, if we go over our quota, we lose fish next year, but, if we go under our quota, we're not given additional fish next year, and so we just -- They're just fish lost to us, and so those 30 percent, or whatever it was that we didn't harvest this last year in the for-hire sector, was just lost to us.

If we changed it, like I say, or suggested, it would give us time to adjust, and, yes, I would rather have a fixed season, rather than anything, but I don't know how that would how that would work if we caught our fish in the summertime, and then if we opened up automatically in October, and then, the next year, we would have to get our season cut quite a bit shorter.

MR. FRADY: Knowing in the past we have not caught our quota on the red snapper for charter-for-hire, would you be willing to sacrifice a little bit in the summer if we could get with the agency to where they could set a set-aside of ACL, and they could figure it out, and they can do anything else, but I'm wondering, and would you be excited if you were able to give up a little bit in order to get a little bit?

If we could work our way -- Because, I mean, the states seem to have flexibility to set their season when they want to, but, the charter-for-hire, we get hammered in the corner, and we get told the data collection is not available in time so we can set our season, so we could plan.

I too took a hit last year, because I was -- It was too late, by the time November rolled around, to catch a red snapper, but would you be willing to take a little tradeoff for the summer and give -- Not take as many fish, in order to get a little bit in the fall, because, right now, in the current system, we're not going to get anything done unless we're willing to at least negotiate, I would say, before they at least told us no.

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, toward the end of the summer, our business kind of tails off, because school seems like it's starting sooner and sooner every year, and, when school starts, our business really takes off, or, I mean, tails off during the week, but, to your point there about the flexibility and everything, we had a perfect instrument to do that with 42, and it didn't go anywhere here, and so -- Or at least it hasn't yet, but hopefully one day people of the council will see that's the best way, because I can run my business better than the federal government can, and you can, and everybody in this room can run their businesses better than the federal government can run it for them.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Williams, we have two more questions. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Johnny, I appreciate being here, and I appreciate the conversation last night. One thing I didn't ask you, and I'm interested in is, you know, we've done a really good job of predicting the fleet season length, and not busting the quota, for quite some time, and, obviously, last year was an anomaly, or at least a surprise, with regard to not hitting the quota.

I'm curious, from your fishing experience last season, and did you see any sort of downturn, in terms of your business, or fish abundance, that would equate to also not catching the quota?

MR. WILLIAMS: Yes, we did. You know, the weather is a factor that comes into play every year. There's days in Texas where, you know, we can't go fishing, but I think probably people are concerned about the economy. It was an election year, and I'm really pleased with the outcome of the election. Some people aren't, but I think that people kind of -- Were kind of in a down mood, and stuff like that, and they were kind of watching their money a little more closely last year than they have other years,

because they -- You know, people seem like they've been working harder, but, with the inflation rate that we had, I think that probably affected our business. Our business was definitely down last year from what it had been several years before that.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Williams. One more from Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: So we've been talking about this twenty-fathom closure, and most of us, or a lot of us, talking about it are from Florida, and it's a red grouper discussion. I would like to know how it impacts people on your side of the Gulf. Obviously, it's not a red grouper issue, but I'm assuming it's a scamp issue, and, you know, how are you affected by that? You said you supported getting rid of it.

MR. WILLIAMS: We really don't -- I remember one day my daughter came to me, before she was a captain, when she was only a deckhand, and she goes, Dad, what kind of fish is this, and I said that's a red grouper, and I said the only reason I know that is I saw it in Madeira Beach.

Bob had some fish that came in from one of his commercial boats, and they were red grouper, and that's where I saw them. We're really not affected by them that much over there, where I'm at. We catch one occasionally. We've actually caught the state record red grouper on our boat, but we don't -- That's not a big part of our harvest.

MR. WALKER: But my question was so it's a scamp issue for you, right, the twenty-fathom closure, or does it impact you at all in Texas?

MR. WILLIAMS: Will it affect me at all in Texas? No, and it won't affect me, the red grouper won't.

MR. WALKER: No, and I know the red grouper, but it also involves scamp, and other shallow-water grouper, and so I assume that's where you have the more impact.

MR. WILLIAMS: We catch a few grouper nowadays, and not nearly as many as we used to. Most of our grouper that we catch now are caught on our thirty-six-hour trips out in very deep water.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Williams.

MR. WILLIAMS: Thank you so much, and thanks again, council members. We appreciate your help.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you. Next up is Mr. Jim Zurbrick, followed by Mr. Bob Hilliard.

MR. JIM ZURBRICK: Thank you, council, for allowing me to speak. Jim Zurbrick, from Steinhatchee, Florida, a fish dealer, and I commercial fish. Tom and Troy, I'm going to miss you. I guess I'm going to be around here a little longer than you guys, you know, but we appreciate everything you've done, seriously.

Last night, when we had that recreational initiative get together, I was sitting there thinking about all the things that the recreational guys had come up with, and I really didn't see anything how I feel, which is that hardcore electronic reporting. You know, you get on your phone, and you're going fishing, and they know when you come back, and you've got to declare what you got.

When I got up here, I didn't want to give them -- I didn't feel like I wanted to give up anything, and so I spoke against the twenty-fathom. I wanted to keep it going, but, now that I'm talking to more people about it, especially the charter guys, and, you know, the federal charter guys are really tied down. They can't do that, because they have a chance to lose their license and all that.

You know, the fines for a rec guy, and they do violate. My wife Patty and I, before this last storm, we had, you know -- Well, going back a year, but we've had numerous people -- We're fifty or sixty miles offshore, and we're fishing in 130 to 140, and we've got rec guys, you know, out there fishing, and so it is a -- People do violate it, and there is very little enforcement, so something to think about.

By the way, let's see what happens once you do the analysis. If you really did think about opening it up, what does that do to the length of the rec season? I don't know, and so that's all data and analysis that has to be done.

The red grouper assessment, I was a little scared of it, because I remember, some years back, and it hasn't been that long ago, we -- The commercial guys said, no, we can't raise the red grouper. We are catching them now, and we're not in those kind of straits, dire straits, but I know that we don't want to see a big dump of red grouper commercially, although I will say this, to be perfectly honest.

The folks who have been complaining about the price of releasing

red grouper, or buying shares, it's getting ready to be split in half, and it makes it very affordable. I mean, think about it. If you could buy a red grouper share, and pay for it in one year, and then you own it, and so that's getting ready to happen with this red grouper increase.

Discards, we've got to continue to work on discards, and so that's -- That was one of my concerns about the twenty-fathom, but let's see how this shakes out, but I am supporting it now, and I didn't bring my discard report from Mote Laboratory, because I have the cameras on my boat, because I haven't fished since Helene, and so I'm six months, and so I'm like a guy up here who really isn't fishing, and telling you how it is, right, but the other thing is the SEFHIER is so important.

Think about what we'll getting back once we have a charter fleet and a commercial fleet giving you really good data, supported by groundtruthing, you know, and, also, the gag. Listen, I know, commercially, we're only a small number, and so we see a lot of gags, right, but I -- In Steinhatchee, I'm at kind of the heartland there, and we don't have the quite the pileup that they're seeing in deeper water, or maybe down south a little bit, all right, and so I'm worried for the rec guys, but it's sheer numbers.

When you've got thousands and thousands and thousands of people going, you need so many more fish than we need commercially, okay, and so I'm wishing you good luck, but I am encouraged that the State of Florida, who I have doubted some of the data collecting, because I was -- You know, but has come forward, and they're concerned, and so it's very encouraging for me, sitting on the sideline, and so thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Zurbrick. We have a question from Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Thank you, Mr. Zurbrick, for providing your testimony. Following up on your comment related to the price of the red grouper share, your opinion is that they'll go down by half, and can you explain that? Did I hear that correctly?

MR. ZURBRICK: You're going to end up where -- We've got history here. Back five or six years ago, when we raised the quota, and remember that was a very controversial -- We raised it, and then we about collapsed the fishery, and we had to rebuild it back, but people were at twenty-five cents, or giving it away, and it was free. The guys that fish for me, they didn't -- Of the quota I had, I just gave it to them.

It didn't have the -- Because it was an excess, and so what's going to happen is we are going to get -- We're only catching -- Look at what we're catching, and we're going to almost double that. Now, we want it, and what we'll do is we'll gear up, and we'll start, but it's not going to happen like overnight.

So, when you do give us that quota increase, it doesn't do any good to give it to somebody in October, or November, except for the fact that the guys that still are struggling to find some are going to -- It's going to be much more affordable.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Zurbrick. Not seeing any other questions, next up is Mr. Bob Hilliard, followed by Mr. Billy Archer.

MR. BOB HILLIARD: Good afternoon. Thank you for hearing me. I want to talk about gag grouper and some private recreational fishermen at Clearwater, Florida. That's been my go-to species for fifty years, fishing from high school on.

We had two major hurricanes this last year in west Florida. People's homes, docks, boat ramps are still in disrepair. It's still a mess, and so that may create, you know, a dip in fishing pressure, and we really don't know that, for this coming year.

We keep hearing that, you know, the spawning ratios off, that there's not enough males, and they've got to be out deep to spawn, and so, if it's going to be -- If the season is going to be shorter than it was last year, and it was fifteen days, and that was tough, since we've got all the rebuilding going on, why don't we take the hit this one year and shut it down for one year, just this -- Just for 2025.

If that's too drastic, which it probably is, I support the one fish per person thing, and maybe a slot limit, like twenty-four to like thirty inches, and maybe over thirty per boat, just to give people an opportunity to take some fish home.

Since they do spawn deep water, maybe a deepwater closure, more closed areas, to let them spawn, and let those females transition to males. There's an opportunity to do something different.

The nearshore population seems very, very healthy. I went out a couple times, a couple weeks ago, to fish for mangroves, and I probably caught forty to fifty gags between fifteen and thirty inches, at less than fifty feet of water, each day, and so that's all I've got on that one.

I also support removal of the twenty-fathom rule. That's an old rule set up when the seasons were real long, or not closed at all, and now they're short, and so that's always been overcome, and it's real hard to enforce too, and so that's all I've got. Thank you, guys.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Hilliard. Do we have any questions? Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Thank you, Mr. Hilliard. I appreciate your perspective. I was particularly curious about your thoughts on the bag gag limit reduction, because I know that's kind of your bread and butter, and I've heard you speaking up on the recreational initiative working group here.

First of all, thank you for your participation. You've attended meetings here at the council itself, to provide your own perspective, and I greatly appreciate that. Just to comment on what you said about a total closure for gag, I think that has -- The reason why I'm opposed to that is because it has some unintended consequences, and it makes it really, really hard to reopen it again, once you start losing those data streams, and so that's why I was trying to do something less drastic than that, and I agree with you.

I think the fishery is healthy. It's improving, and I think that is part of my concern, based on the overages that we're seeing right now, and we're having to manage to this small quota, and we've tried, numerous times, to get an interim assessment, to try and maybe do something in the interim, but we're kind of up against the wall here, and so I appreciate your perspective. Thank you, Bob.

MR. HILLIARD: We don't want to be like the red snapper on the east coast, and so we've got to do something.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Hilliard. Not seen any other questions, and thank you for your participation on the initiative group. Next up is Mr. Billy Archer, followed by Mr. Joshua Ellender.

MR. BILLY ARCHER: Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and council members. Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Billy Archer, and I'm a third-generation fisherman from Panama City, Florida. I'm a dual permit owner, and I also own reef commercial IFQ.

I brought along my grandson, Avery. He's the oldest, and he turned fifteen this year, to introduce you to the fourth-generation

fisherman in the Archer family. I was thirteen when I went to work for my grandfather and father, on a brand-new Harkers-Island-built charter boat, The Captain Buck. Avery started with me last year, at fourteen, working red snapper season, and he intends to work with me this year as well. He's now fifteen, as I mentioned.

He has the skills and the mindset that he wants to become a professional fisherman. My goal is to help him become successful in whatever he decides to do. I won't be able to attend the Key West meeting in June, but I do want to mention a couple of thoughts about Amendment 59A, 59B, and 60.

I was able to listen to the recent IFQ AP meeting and was struck by how divided the panel members were. It was obvious to me that rushing to get all three of these amendments done in close succession will be a big mistake. A lot of decent discussion, but very little consensus on how to address the issues of who should qualify to be in this program.

It appeared to me that people that don't like the IFQ program now don't really have any interest in making it better, and just tear it down so they can get something for free. I hope that doesn't happen. I hope the council taps the brakes on Amendment 59 until you have time to see what the unintended consequences are for its impact on the program's participants. As a matter of a fact, a motion was introduced, but failed by split vote, just to do that.

Harvest requirements by shareholders should be really thought out as well. Supply and demand will certainly play a big role in the future of this program, and it could be detrimental to those who depend on leasing quota for their businesses. Reclamation of shares, redistribution, hardship cases, situations like with me and my grandson, and how do I pass that quota to him? He's fifteen, and I'm seventy. There's a lot of a lot of things to consider, all a potential Pandora's Box that has never been opened before, and, unfortunately, I do not believe this is the right path forward.

Also, I would like to mention that I support Dylan Hubbard's concept of the twenty-fathom closure, Dr. Sweetman's concept of, or rationale, for the gag grouper reduction. That's an excellent idea. You know, as long as it's not permanent, I'm good with that, and then thank you for your time.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Archer. We have a question from Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: It's good to see you, Billy.

MR. ARCHER: Thank you, sir.

MR. STRELCHECK: A similar question to what I asked Johnny Williams, and so surprised, obviously, that we didn't catch the for-hire red snapper quota last year, and I'm just curious in terms of your perspective about not catching it last year, and what are you seeing, in terms of bookings, and is there a difference from last year to this year?

MR. ARCHER: So, this year, my business is already down. I've seen a big reduction, and I don't know if it's the election or whatever, but, last year, to answer your question, Mr. Strelcheck, it was -- You know, Jim Green has got his pulse on everything over in Destin west, and I think he sent you a survey, and a personal email, with his concern, which we all are seeing. If we're honest, we're all seeing this in the Gulf, from Panama City to Texas, and so the fish are getting smaller, and I have to go further and further offshore.

I would hope that the council taps the brakes on any increases. I understand that Alabama now has gone to a little longer season, and not raising the bag limit, which is -- Anything that's where you are preserving the catch, you know, protecting the fish, which is what you all are sworn to do, but so it's -- I don't know what's going to happen this year. My June is good, and July not so much, and I always whatever, but I hope it gets better, and I'm sorry that -- You know, I'm thankful to be here with you all, and thank you for asking the question.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you. Mr. Archer. We have one more, one more question, from Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: It's not really a question, but it's just a welcome to Avery. Welcome to the fishery management process.

MR. ARCHER: Thank you. Anyhow, yes, he's in.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, sir. Next up is Mr. Joshua Ellender, followed by Mr. Dale Woodruff.

MR. JOSHUA ELLENDER: Good afternoon. Joshua Ellender, and I'm a fisherman out of Louisiana, chairman of the Louisiana Charter Boat Association, and I'm on various APs as well. Thank you for allowing me to speak today, and I appreciate all you all's service.

First, I'll start off with shallow-water grouper. I support Action 1, Preferred Alternative 2. In Action 2, I support Alternative 2

as well in there. Our season In Louisiana is summertime months. Any time before and after that, it gets really rough, with weather and school and whatnot.

As far as Mr. Hubbard, I support getting rid of the twenty-fathom closure, and, for us, to answer your question earlier, it actually affects scamp and yellowmouth for us, and so like we see it all the time. We've got to release all the time out there when we're more fishing. Deepwater grouper, 58B, I support Action 2, Alternative 3, and, for Action 3, I support Alternative 5.

Going through the amberjack presentation, as far as sector separation, I'm not for or against sector separation. I just think it should be left up to the states, and so, if that state, or region, however it ends up splitting apart, if they decide they want to do it, then by all means let them do it, but it shouldn't be forced upon everybody across the Gulf of Mexico, because what's that's doing is just -- It's destroying what you're trying to do, as far as getting regional management, or state management, out there, by removing the charter-for-hire captains in that process.

I would prefer -- For Number 2, on that note, I would prefer state management over regional, but I am not opposed to regional management.

As far as allocation, that's a tough one, but it could be simple. If we do a regional management set-up, just draw lines right down the middle, 50-50, and it's that easy, right? We'll see if that goes that way.

Then, as far as the states having the power to decide I think that the Gulf Council and the feds should have an oversight over everything going on, but let the states decide how they catch their allocation, right? You all decide what they get, or what they can catch, and then let them do it however they want to do it, whatever season, whatever fishing, catch limits, yada, yada, yada, all that stuff.

Obviously, for Number 5, we definitely need accountability measures for state and regional management. That way, you know, if somebody is doing something wrong, we can hold them accountable for that.

One last thing I would like to say, and I would like to be able to visit, revisit, 50A, when it comes to sector separation, about letting the states decide if we want to be a part of that or not, and so, for instance, for our state, it's kind of had a negative effect between the state capture captains and the federal charter

captains.

There's a lot of disconnect between the two, and a lot of fights, if you will, between the industry, and so it's causing a big headache for everybody. In the State of Louisiana it is, and that's it, if you've got any questions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you. Mr. Ellender. Do we have any questions? Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: So I'm not sure, because the schedule changed, and we're going to discuss some of what you just talked about at the end, as the additional Other Business item that was pushed to tomorrow, and so I don't know if you're going to be here tomorrow or not, but it is also an attachment that's in the current agenda.

MR. ELLENDER: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Do we have any other questions for Mr. Ellender? Not seeing any, thank you, Joshua, for being here. Next up is Mr. Dale Woodruff, followed by Mr. Mark Tryon.

MR. DALE WOODRUFF: Good afternoon. I would like to thank everybody that came out last night to our ACFA social. It looked like everybody had a good time, from the beginning to the end. I'm President of the Alabama Charter Fishing Association, and, also, I have a six-pack boat and a multi-passenger that I own myself.

I'll continue on with the for-hire data. Let's get SEFHIER going. It looks like that can be an answer to a lot of questions, as far as our catch data, and eventually, hopefully one day, we could call it catch history again, because, right now, I don't know, and catch history is what it is, I guess.

Pertaining to the groupers and what Captain Dylan had talked about in his testimony, I'm -- We're all for that. Let's do away with the twenty-fathom closure. Hopefully that will give us more access, especially for the scamp.

Let's work on that red grouper. Let's get an increase there. That way, everybody can have a little bit of a piece of the pie, even though we don't catch very many red groupers in the northern Gulf, where we're at, but, if we do have the opportunity to catch one in 200 foot of water, it would be nice to be able to keep it, especially when it's out of season.

Then we do support the lane snapper, on the final action and the

preferred, selected preferred, alternative, on that, also, and then the greater amberjack, and we have a good showing of greater amberjack out here right now. It's kind of -- It's like they just showed up. We went for a couple of years where I would fish a twelve-hour trip and not bring one to the dock, and now I can catch them ten miles out of our pass, with no problem, thirty-four-inch fish, up to fifty-pound jacks, if you can get one to the boat without it getting broke off.

I fished the other morning, and kept trying to catch vermilion snapper. We didn't have a shark problem, and a couple spots we didn't have a dolphin problem. We had an amberjack depredation problem. We couldn't keep a beeliner, or a vermilion snapper, because of an amberjack breaking us off.

Luckily, we were using light tackle to catch the vermilion snapper, and so we didn't have to worry about the mortality. They may have swam off with a twelve-ounce high-dollar lead weight and a hook, and that was about it, but, other than that again, thank you all for coming the other night, and I don't know when we're to see you all again. All right. Any questions?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Woodruff. Do we have any questions? Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: I just wanted to thank you, Dale, and the Alabama Charter Fishermen's Association, for hosting the social last night. It was a very good event, and I do appreciate it.

MR. WOODRUFF: Thank you, and I would like to say one thing, that the ACFA is very, very blessed, because we have our Gulf Council, Kevin and Troy, and we have the opportunity to always get to share information, and they share with us, and I know a lot of people Gulf-wide don't have that opportunity, where a Gulf Council member goes to their association, the local association, and I would encourage that, if you're not, because, when you get to see fishermen in rare form, sometimes they're a little bit more okay, because they've got to get up here and share three minutes of whatever they can, but thank you again, Kevin.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, and thank you for the event last night. Next up is Mr. Mark Tryon, followed by Kathryn Birren.

MR. MARK TRYON: Gulf Breeze, Florida, rod-and-reel fisherman, for over thirty years, primarily red snapper. I used to run blue crab traps, for ten years, and I ran charters for ten years, and now I just concentrate on commercial fishing, and I'm going fishing tomorrow. The boat is all iced up and ready to go, and we leave

out of here, and then, you know, tomorrow morning, off we go for another twelve to fourteen-hour day trip.

First of all, with the red grouper, there are more red -- I'm kind of on the outer periphery of where you would find lots of red grouper, and so, when the stock is in good shape, they start filtering into our area, and it's the first time in a few years that I'm catching some, and we're not getting a lot, but, you know, we're getting like one to four keepers a trip, and then some discards, and so that's a good news on that.

Gag grouper, last year, we got a few. This year, none, and so I don't know what to make of it. I'm not an expert on gag grouper. I think just it's a good idea, with any fishery management, to err on the side of caution, and so I know C.J. is concerned about the stock, and I guess it's good to see that, you know, we're -- At least in that regard, we're concerned about where we're at and protecting the resource.

My big concern this year is the what are we going to do with the 2025 recreational red snapper seasons, and I think I've given you guys data over the years. Since the implementation of state management, my landings have been in decline every year, and they continue to do so, and, you know, it's -- There is definitely an inverse relationship between my landings and the length of the red snapper season, and it just keeps getting longer and longer and longer, and so what are we looking at with the seasons and, you know, what is the council doing, as far as oversight to making sure that the data is good from the states and there is no overfishing?

The last thing is, on this business of recreational carry forwards, I kind of question that, because, you know, you could have -- Not catching a quota could be a warning sign, and then you're going to carry forward that quota into the next year, and I don't think that's necessarily conservative fishery management, and, on the IFQ side, we're certainly -- We don't do that, nor do I advocate doing that, and so, if we don't catch the quota, that's it. We start at zero again, or not zero, but we start with our normal quota again the next year, and so I would just cautiously look into that, and that's about all I have to say today. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you. Mr. Tryon. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any, next is Ms. Kathyrn Birren, followed by Rachal Hisler.

MS. KATHRYN BIRREN: Good afternoon, Chair, Vice Chair, and council members. I am Kathryn Birren, and I am proud to be representing

the Florida king mackerel gillnet fleet that came before you here in January, and today I'm here for an update.

The 2025 season was a great success. Though we faced challenges with a large area of red tide off of the Florida coast, we were able to locate the large schools of king mackerel. This year, we had eleven commercial gillnet boats participate. The first day they caught fish was February 24, due to -- Mostly due to weather conditions. The last day was March 4. That was an eight-day span. Of the actual eight days, seven days were commercially fished.

The quota for 2025 was 671,328 pounds. We landed 672,523 pounds. We had an overage of 0.2 percent, or 1,195 pounds. That we consider a very successful season. I want to thank you all for allowing the fleet to prove we could successfully harvest our quota.

The fish this season were located in an area we call No Man's Land. It is approximately fifty miles west of Key West. This is an area that has historically had large amounts of king mackerel. The fleet caught fish in this area during the 1970s and 1980s, but, due to heavy shark infestation in more recent years, we have had to avoid this area.

This year, with unusually cold weather and water temperatures, the sharks were not as big of an issue during those dates, and we were able to catch the fish. We also felt that those lower temperatures for the water actually encouraged the fish further south.

On the last day of fishing, all pilots reported seeing very large groups, and tons of groups, of fish bunching, more than we have seen in a very long time, and, obviously, that is good news. With up to 85 percent of seafood consumed in America being imported from the top five countries of Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Chile and Canada, and their unhealthy seafood practices affecting the health and the safety of American consumers, we must take action to do whatever we can to support our American seafood industry.

Maybe, just maybe, I ask you today to put a little bit of trust in the knowledge of the very hardworking commercial fishermen who are actually out there, who are actually seeing with their own eyes what is happening in our fisheries in the Gulf of America, that we all want to work together to protect. Thank you very much, and I'm here for any questions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Birren. We have a question from Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Hi, and thank you. Thank you for coming.

MS. BIRREN: Thank you.

MR. SANCHEZ: I wanted to ask you, and I was speaking with George during the season, and he was telling me something that to me I find encouraging, that you all were encountering fish of all sizes, even some nice big forty pounders. Now, the question is I don't know, given the budgetary crisis the government finds itself in, and was the port sampler -- Was he going to the dock and intercepting some of the boats, to get some record of these fish varying, you know, in great sizes, from fifteen pounds all the way to forty? Did that happen, or was it just one of those things that didn't get reported?

MS. BIRREN: I don't have knowledge of whether or not, you know, people were put on the boats, but I know, typically, multiple vessels have someone on the boat that is actually going with them, for the entire time that they're fishing, and so that three or four days, but, yes, we did see a lot of very large fish this year, a lot of fish, and we're hearing, all the way up and down the coast, of people that are catching, and, even as of this morning, I'm hearing about king mackerel that they're seeing off of Panama City, which they said they haven't seen in a long time, and so we were excited.

We were nervous at the beginning, knowing that we had the red tide issue going on, you know, and what were we -- Where were we going to find them, and what were we going to do, and I think -- You know, we have a lot of knowledge between those eleven licenses, and so everybody worked together.

We worked with the pilots, and they located them in an area that they haven't fished in in a while, but the fish were plentiful, and, like I said, I know that each one of you that are sitting here have a specialty of what you are here for, and why you are put on the council, and why you're here today, to put all your knowledge together to come up with the best scenario for the Gulf of Mexico, the Gulf of America, you know, to make sure that our fisheries are sustainable.

I'm going to ask you today to maybe work on some kind of a program where maybe you're working with some of the top of the top of these commercial fisheries, to get the boots-on-the-ground approach and to be able to see what's really unseen by people that are on the outside, that are trying to look in, and I really believe that that would help out a lot in everything you all are doing, and so thank you very much for your time. Is there any other questions?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Birren.

MS. BIRREN: All right. Thank you so much, and I hope to see you soon, and I'll be in St. Pete, if you do that there. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you. Next up is Ms., Rachel Hisler, followed by Marshall Gross.

MS. RACHEL HISLER: Good afternoon, council. Rachel Hisler, Double Bayou, and I'm representing multiple generations of my family's commercial seafood harvesting business, the oldest of which right now is in the process of divesting, and my husband and I are taking up that mantle, and I was really encouraged to see young Avery here today with his grandfather, because we don't get to see a lot of younger people at these kinds of meetings.

It got me to thinking about what are the terms that we use to measure success in our society, and I see this a lot with the agricultural families, that also live in the same area that I do of Texas, where there's a perception that you can't be successful without going to college, and getting a degree, and then going out into the world and using that, but I would say that a lot of the people in this room have negotiated success on their own terms, whether that includes a degree or not, but, a lot of times, you send a child off to college, and then they see that they can go another route that doesn't require the, honestly, back-breaking, and sometimes grueling, endless work that is being in the harvesting of food for our country, for our nation.

We're losing entire generations of people who are not going to be in this business, who are not going to be harvesting food for our nation, and I think that's something that's been in the media quite a bit lately, where we're talking about it's an issue of national security, that we need people harvesting food for the citizens of this country, that comes from this country, and so, in saying that, I would just like you to be very thoughtful, when we come up to considering Amendment 59 and 60 and some of the unintended consequences that we might have on families like mine, but also people who don't have a next generation to pass it down to, because their child has gone on, and they're not going to remain in the industry, because it's just become too hard to be in this industry.

They just can't -- It's not conceivable to them to remain in this industry, and so just some things to think about, and then I would also like to say, if we're not able to continue to meet in-person for the rest of this year going forward, please think about us as people and not numbers. Remember our faces, and that we are representing entire families, and multiple families at that,

because, you know, it's not just my family.

It's the family of the men who work with us on our boats, and work with us in these fish houses. You know, there's so many people that you can take into consideration for this, and thank you for your service, Troy and Tom. I know I haven't been here long, and so I don't know you as well as some of the other people in this room, but it's been good to know you while you've been here, and, if I am successful in someday being a commercial representative on this council, I would love to have your advice, and insight, and just listen to what you have to say about your time of service here. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Miss Hisler. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any, thank you. Next up is Mr. Gross, followed by Mr. Anthony Colletti.

MR. MARSHALL GROSS: Hello. My name is Marshall Gross. I'm Wayne Werner's nephew, and I've been slowly trying to buy quota from him, or, well, from his wife, and buying the boat, and bought -- I managed to buy 10,000 pounds in the last three to four years, and now they're trying to change it, where I've got to have a permit to own the fish, but I work on a boat that I'm buying, and I'm slowly like trying to buy the boat, and the permit comes with the boat, and so like I would almost have to go and buy another permit to keep my fish, and it's just like -- It bothers me to have to think about that.

Like when you all do make these rules and stuff, I just hope you consider like some stuff and the predicament that I'm in, and there's more people too, and I just -- It's hard to buy quota, and you know you've got to start somewhere, and I give -- I saved every dollar I made last year and bought fish with it from her, and so I make her all this money, and then I give up my money for some quota, and I just -- You know, I hope I don't got to lose it because of a rule change in the middle of all of it, you know, and it's been this way, and now they want to change it, and it's just hard.

I do have the -- I will be able to get the permit from her one day, but, right now, like the rule you all are making, how is she going to sell me her permit when she owns fish, and so it's like I can't win if that passes. Like I've almost got to buy a different boat or something, and it's just been bothering me, and I wanted to express that. That's all I've got to say.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank You, Mr. Gross. We have a couple of questions. Mr. Walker, followed by Mr. Sanchez.

MR. WALKER: Thank you, sir, for coming here, and I appreciate that input and, you know, vision into your particular situation, and you're definitely -- You know your situation is not something that we're looking to impact in the way that it might, and so it -- You know, it warrants consideration, and I appreciate you bringing that here.

MR. GROSS: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Thank you. I'm going to say the same thing, that -- Thank you for bringing to light some of the unintended consequences that happen when you're doing rulemaking, and you don't see all the potential things that happen, and here you are trying to get into the fishery.

MR. GROSS: I've been on the boat for twenty-three years too, and like the last thirteen I've been the captain, and so, you know, I don't want to go nowhere else. I don't -- You know, that's my boat. I know -- You know, it just -- It's hard to think about. It is.

MR. SANCHEZ: No, and I sympathize, and I appreciate you coming here to share that with us, because we've got to think about a way for these folks, who are going to probably over time buy these shares, or possibly a vessel, and, I mean, these are things that -- Say a mate, and he's going to buy that from the from the captain, and he's probably going to make an arrangement, because they're not made of money, to do it over a good amount of time, and then there is the retirement income for the captain that is exiting, and then this is their entry, and, without these folks, who are the knowledgeable fishermen, that can really, really catch fish in quantity, and promote stability of pricing in the fishery, we're going to lose something that we're not going to be able to get back, and so I appreciate you coming.

MR. GROSS: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: One more from Mr. Frady.

MR. FRADY: It's so good to see you here again. I remember meeting you with the Uncle Wayne.

MR. GROSS: Yes, and it's getting hard, man, and I ain't going to lie.

MR. FRADY: I share what you're feeling. You know, coming from a different world, in transportation, and before that the banking world, we used to do what was called a contract for deed, and I don't know if it's been used in this, and I'm speaking now off the hip right here, but we used to be able to sell property, or real estate, by -- When someone didn't have credit, or didn't have the ability to get the financing from a financial institution, we used to be able to do what's called a contract for deed.

I don't know why any attorney in this world could not draw up the paperwork between you and your uncle's widow and have something legally, that you can go to a bank and assign that contract for deed, and, when you've made all your payments, according to the amortization schedule, and then she has to sell you -- She has to deed those -- Or transfer those permits over to you, or transfer the quota over to you, and so there's got to be something out there.

I just don't know what it is yet, and I'm not versed in the commercial industry as much, but I do know, in the real estate world, there are things that exist that banking or financial institutions will honor to serve as collateral, so the investor, or the depositors the bank, will not be exposed to any liability.

MR. GROSS: There's not a lot of federal fishing funds. Like, I mean I've talked at my bank, and I've got collateral, and they still like won't loan me money, because they're like, well, how do you know you're going to catch the fish, you know, and it's different when it's fish. It's different with a bank. It ain't like a house that's sitting there that is worth something, you know, and it's fish you've got to catch, and so the bank ain't -- They ain't sounding like you sound, you know, and it's a little different.

MR. FRADY: Well, I understand that all, but all I'm saying is that, if there's a will, there's a way.

MR. GROSS: Yes, and that's why --

MR. FRADY: All the banks care about is making sure they're collateralized, and there ought to be some information somewhere, through the federal government, through SBA, or somewhere that can help people like you, and people in your predicament, to where you can't get the loan. That's all I'm saying, is keep asking questions, because there ought to be a way for future generations, or the next generation of fishermen, to be able to go to a bank say here's a contract, and the bank holds that contract, and holds those shares as collateral, and so I just -- I hope you the best.

I wish you the --

MR. GROSS: I mean, that's why I've been trying to buy them straight up, and like I only make so much money a year. I made $120,000 last year, and I gave her every penny of it for 3,000 pounds, and so I got a little break on it. I did, but, you know, that's every dollar I made, and, you know, it's hard to do that. I've got two kids that's about to go to college, and it's just -- It's hard.

MR. FRADY: I applaud you. Don't ever give up.

MR. GROSS: I ain't giving up. You ain't got to worry about that, and you all will see me more, because I need to come to these meetings, and I need to talk.

MR. FRADY: Thank you for coming. Thank you, sir.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Gross.

MR. GROSS: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Next up is Mr. Anthony Colletti, followed by Mr. Eric Brazer.

MR. ANTHONY COLLETTI: Good afternoon, council. Anthony Coletti, owner-operator, commercial fishermen for seventeen years. When I bought my boat, I bought my permit, and I knew the program. I knew what I was getting into. I knew it wouldn't be easy, and you have to keep going.

To make changes, when a lot of people have several different complications, especially with funding, and it's a scary thought for all of us. We work hard, and we respect the industry. Every pound of our fish is accounted for, and we want to keep going.

In my personal experience, I've made purchases of shares, another boat, and I bought red grouper shares to fish the eastern Gulf, and, right now, I'm fishing out of Louisiana, mainly red snapper fishing, and so, if there's going to be a catch requirement in the future, that may jeopardize a part of my business that I bought to have diversity through my business.

I don't want to see that happen. As a fulltime commercial fisherman, we have enough, you know, that we deal with on a daily basis just to get through. The Fisheries Funding Program is impossible to navigate through. I've tried, and I perfect credit. I work hard, and I cannot get funding.

As far as the amberjacks go, they're doing great, and I would like to see some of the amberjacks transferred back to the commercial sector. King mackerel, we had a great run this winter up in the western Gulf. The fish are healthy, all different sizes. I know the red tide affected the boats down south. I have a lot of friends down there. All the way around, I just want to keep fishing, but, with certain rules that may be put into place -- If you don't like the program, don't enter it. That's all I have for today.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Colletti. We have a question from Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Not so much a question, but I just want to encourage you to hang in there, to keep coming, because this process is slow. It's difficult, but, if you work it, you can make a difference, and, for sure, if you're not at -- If you don't have a seat at the table, you're going to be on the menu, and so keep coming.

MR. COLLETTI: Well, thank you for that. You know, again, if we don't have the meeting down in the Keys, I hope we get to gather somewhere and continue, you know, communicating and make the best choices for everybody involved. You know, there's a lot of people who really just want to work hard, and I couldn't get to the last couple of meetings, and I was offshore, you know, but thank you for your time, and I hope you take everybody's personal, you know, reasoning and everything into consideration. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Colletti, we have another question from Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Anthony, thanks for being here. I'm encouraged, obviously, what you said about western Gulf of Mexico king mackerel, and can you just talk a little bit more about your winter fishing and what you were seeing?

MR. COLLETTI: Absolutely. For the time I was able to get offshore, with the weather, I had limit after limit. The fish were healthy. The sharks are an issue. That's Gulf-wide, east-coast-wide, and that's -- You know, I know we can't really do anything about it with this agency, but, if it wasn't for the sharks, the whole fishery would be different, in my opinion.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Colletti. I have a question for you. You mentioned you were fishing off the Louisiana coast, and you touched on amberjack, and I just wanted to clarify, and you mentioned the amberjack were healthy. Are you talking about off of the coast of Louisiana?

MR. COLLETTI: Yes, I am. On the seven-fish head count, I had a fifty-seven-pound average. You can't ask for anything better than that. You know, I fished the amberjacks, and it was 2,000 pounds a trip. We went to 1,500 pounds a trip, and we went to a thousand pounds a trip. I used to rely on the amberjacks quite -- You know, that was a good part of my business, and I would really like to see us get some of them back.

The rebuilding -- You know, they're there. You know, a lot of -- You know, the oil rigs and structure have been removed, and the fish have relocated, and, you know, some people are not willing to go the extra distance to locate them, but they're there.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you. I appreciate it.

MR. COLLETTI: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Next up, we have Mr. Eric Brazer, followed by Mr. Jason Delacruz.

MR. ERIC BRAZER: All right. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Eric Brazer, Deputy Director of Gulf of America Shareholders Alliance. First and foremost, Dr. Frazer and Troy, we really appreciate working with you guys. We really appreciate the time that you put in. We may not have agreed on everything all the time, but it's been a hell of a ride, and I sincerely want to thank you both for your support.

On deepwater, you know, we continue to support the council applying what you guys did with shallow-water and doing the same thing here. Prioritize the catch limits now, and then provide a more holistic management response, including allocations, in a follow-on amendment.

Doing this is going to allow you to efficiently address necessary management modifications while ensuring you have time to take a more holistic approach to measures that aren't legally required to be addressed right now. Also, we're really hoping that taking this approach is going to give you the chance to take a little bit more time to address the data uncertainty issue.

I want to point out, on page 21, something that I think is worth reiterating here, that the PSE about annual recreational landings regularly exceeds 50 percent, and so think about this for a minute. What does this mean? This means, for instance, if you're estimating that landings are 100,000, the real number could be less than 50,000, or it could be greater than 150,000, and that’s

a lot of uncertainty, and it just doesn't seem right to base allocation decisions on that much uncertainty at this time.

Regarding the red grouper emergency action, we support using an emergency action to increase the red grouper quota this year. It seems like a great opportunity to shorten the gap of when the science is available and when management measures are implemented, which, as we know is a chronic problem we wrestle with here.

Also, if you do this right, you can get the recreational sector a longer season, while providing some increased access to the commercial sector. Now, to be clear, if you double the quota on December 15th, we may have a little problem with that, but, if you can move quickly, and get this done as quick as possible, with a reasonable and measured increase, and maybe not 100 percent of what you could do, but something a little more precautionary, then I don't see why we can't make this the win-win that we're looking for.

Quickly, I just want to say that the recreational initiative really -- I was really impressed, and it looks like it produced some positive results. We appreciate all the work that was put into it, and I really wanted to flag what Emily put up there for discussion earlier about starting the process for turning these recommendations into reality.

For the twenty-fathom closure, at this time, we support eliminating the closure. Normally this is a bit outside our box, or our wheelhouse, excuse me, but it's, frankly, creating a bit of contention. It's kind of driving a wedge between the different sectors in the industry, and we don't need any more of that, and so, at this time, we support eliminating it. It sounds like this is really important to the charter fleet, and we want to respect that and support them on this.

A real quick rapid succession, and we support the council's preferred action on lane snapper. We're supportive of moving forward with an action to pick up where the DESCEND Act leaves off, and then our standard plug for more electronic monitoring data opportunities and those elusive commercial electronic logbooks. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Brazer. We have a question from Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Eric, thanks, first, for reaching across lines and trying to, you know, make this work and being understanding of issues in other sectors that -- Hey, let's all make this work.

Now on to the question. You were mentioning about economies and, you know, don't go overboard, perhaps, and I don't know if that's the right word, on additional fish, and this and that, and I would want you to further explain your concern. I'm getting the impression that it's a marketing situation, come December, or maybe a price situation or something, and could you elaborate on that a little bit, so that it's very, very clear?

MR. BRAZER: Yes, and, I mean, I think that we just -- We want to be sensitive to the fact that, when you put a lot of new fish, new quota, on the market at the end of the year, it's going to have some market impacts, right, and some of those may be positive, and some of those may be negative, and I would just say that --

You know, I think Jim Zurbrick talked about some of the potentially positive implications of doing something like that, but I would just say, in a sector that really prioritizes stability and predictability, the more of a runway that we can have on this, and the less of kind of this whipsaw big quota increases, big quota decreases, dumping fish on the market at the end of the year, and it just -- It creates instability, where we frankly don't need it or want it, and so, you know, let's look to the data, and let's look to the analysis, and let's find something that works for the recreational sector, but doesn't, you know, blow the commercial quota out of the water.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Not seeing any further questions, next up is Mr. Jason Delacruz, followed by Mr. Jim Green.

MR. JASON DELACRUZ: How is everybody doing? Tom and Troy, thank you very much. Troy, me and you have been sitting across from each other in APs for a long time, and so I'm going to miss you, and, Tom, you have been an incredible council member. I really, really appreciate all your work. I'm sorry to see you go. Hopefully you'll be back on the next cycle.

The only thing I'm here to talk about is lane snapper. Just kidding. On the red grouper issue, let's get that done and give some relief to the charter boat guys. They need it, and it's just a bad look for us. Let's not get too carried away. Let's get it done quick. The faster the better.

There will be a little market uncertainty that happens in the quota side of it, but that's not the end of the world. We can manage that. The way we catch our fish in grouper is different, and so it's not going to be as bad as it was if it was a big snapper dump.

Wow, and usually I don't draw a blank, and I'm kind of drawing a blank right now. The other side of kind of what I was thinking was so you met two guys that I think are great fishermen, and are great guys, and so Marshall and Anthony are good fishermen. They're really good guys, and I think they gave you guys a prime example of what the real world looks like for us, and, Troy, I appreciate what you're saying, but you can't do that.

You would be amazed at the amount of uncertainty that this 17 puts out in the universe. It scares these shit out of a bank. A bank won't touch us. It never happens, and they are right. The fishery finance is a challenge-and-a-half, and very few people have managed to make it through, and so that's almost not a viable option. I hope you guys can really look in your heart and see that these examples are realities, and these things are happening all over the place.

I have two of the guys that fish for me that want to buy the boats for me, and I don't know how this plays out and whether I can even sell them the boats in the future, depending on how all this goes, and so there's a factor with that too, and so I just -- I just really hope you guys reflect on that, and, whatever the thing that I forgot is, I guess I just forgot it. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Jason. Not seeing any questions, next up is Mr. Jim Green, followed by Ms. Susan Boggs.

MR. JIM GREEN: Hello, council. Captain Jim Green. President of DCBA and CFA. Concerning groupers, both associations defer to captain Dylan Hubbard's testimony, but it is important to emphasize the Captain Hubbard initiative with removing the inequity, the inequitable and unenforceable twenty-fathom closure.

We support an emergency rule for extending the 2025 red grouper season, from the findings within the stock assessment, as well as a streamlined document for the implementation of catch levels and address the allocation distribution, once these catch levels have been implemented.

Concerning the loss of the headboat survey dockside sampling funds, we greatly urge the Gulf Council, the Southeast Regional Office, and the Science Center to do all within its power to preserve the longest-running data collection program in the Southeast.

There was discussion in the committee about the process of prioritization, and how that some of the budget items might essentially suffer, but there was also a question that was asked about how many species besides lane snapper does the lack of

validation effect from the headboat survey, and the answer was essentially all of them. I think that's a pretty clear and unmistakable marker for how important it is to preserve this program.

This is not just for a subset of the for-hire industry. It is utilized in some way or another for most all the catch advice for all sectors in the Gulf, and so please make it the priority when it comes to appropriating funds.

When it comes to the new for-hire data collection program, please continue to push forward. We have had two AP meetings, with all motions passing unanimously. This is from the most diverse group of for-hire fishing company owners, captains, and representatives, and not just in perspective, but in geographic areas from all across the Gulf.

I'm proud of everyone on that AP that participated in the meetings. There has been a willingness -- There was a willingness to understand, engage, and figure out a solution, and I believe that it is a testament to how important this program is to our industry. I know there's a lot of uncertainty, and a lot of government -- A lot of government scrutiny on how funding is, more so than for others, but it's important to note that we should continue to work and get it across the finish line.

We support the lane snapper on the final action to be taken. Concerning the amberjack presentation that we saw today, we fully support the Gulf States fleshing out state or regional management for private anglers, but the federal for-hire industry would be more in support of fleshing out what sector separation would look like for us, and so there's a lot to unpack in that document. There's a lot of analysis. I'm not saying that that's the way it is, that we're, you know, going in there blindsided by it, but we definitely want to see what sector separation does for our industry.

I also wanted -- I could have a little leeway, Mr. Chairman, I also wanted to comment on Captain Johnny Williams' idea about moving the snapper season. I almost -- I want to elaborate a little further. I think a May 1 start would be better. I think it would allow us to be really more nimble, and we could utilize those fish that were left on the table last year. We could have had a spring season, and so it's nice to have that ability, and so, if that gets explored, I think that we could find a lot of support for that in our industry.

Troy, it's been a pleasure getting to know you. I appreciate your

time on the council. Dr. Frazer, I've learned a lot from you, and I've enjoyed getting to know you as well, and so thank you all very much.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Green. We have a question from Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: You know what I'm going to ask.

MR. GREEN: Yes, I support the twenty-fathom closure.

DR. SWEETMAN: I know you said you deferred to Dylan on groupers, but I'm going to put your feet to the fire about gag.

MR. GREEN: I think it's a very innovative way that you've thought about it. I would -- I'll be honest with you that I really hesitate at the idea of it. I think it would be hard for a lot of people to wrap their head around on it, on why we would do that exactly, and maybe not so much the people in this room, but the general public, but, you know, we're at a point where we really just need a stock assessment so bad, and it's like a band-aid or something, and I'm not going to fight you on it.

I won't die on that hill, but I really think that, if we get a very short window, people are probably going to expect their two fish. They're going to -- You know, they're going to be like we gave up a fish for exactly what, you know, and I think that would be a hard sell with a lot of the public person, per se, in my opinion, but I still support you C.J. Keep trying, buddy. Thank you so much.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Green. Next up is Ms. Susan Boggs, followed by Ms. Leann Bosarge.

MS. SUSAN BOGGS: Good afternoon, and Jason Delacruz supports removal of the twenty-fathom rule, just so you know. Good afternoon. First of all, on behalf of the Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism Board, we would like to welcome you all to the Alabama beaches. I serve on the board, and they wanted me to welcome you all here. My name is Susan Boggs, with Reel Surprise Charters and Marina, and I made some bullet points, because there is so much to cover in so little time.

First, Dr. Frazer, I can't tell you how much I have learned from you over the years. Troy, it's been a pleasure knowing you as well. Good luck in your future outside of the Gulf Council.

My husband and I own Reel Surprise Charters and Marina here, or in

Orange Beach, because you're in Gulf Shores. In Orange Beach, and we have a sixty-five-foot headboat that he captains, and we have -- It's federally permitted, and then we have a thirty-six-foot six-passenger boat, that is also federally-permitted, and that is operated by our daughter, who is a hundred-ton licensed captain, and so, needless to say, the issue with the headboat data collection is very near and dear to our heart.

We've been participating in it since we bought the Reel Surprise almost twenty-three years ago, and so we've been through the paper logbooks, the electronic logbooks, the changes with reporting the data collection, and so I think you all can tell how I feel about data collection, and I shouldn't say data collection, but, the economic questions that go along with the reporting, we have no issue with that.

I had no issue with it was SEFHIER, but the main thing I'm here to say today is that is the longest-running data collection system in the Southeast and the Atlantic, and to lose that dataset, and, in documents that you all have to prepare and look at to make your decisions, it would be a huge loss.

You don't want to start over, and you can't start from square one. That information is vital and very important to continue on. I don't know if it's a possibility, and I'm looking over at NMFS, to look for some cooperative research programming funding from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center to possibly carry this program through until some permanent funding can be found.

I do encourage the Science Center, as the council works on SEFHIER 2.0, that, when looking for funding for SEFHIER 2.0, they find the funding for the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey plan to move forward with it. I don't think you can roll the headboats into SEFHIER 2.0, because you lose that dataset, and, as they said yesterday, how many species? All of them, and you can't, again, start from square one and try to manage this fishery.

We hear it all the time with data collection, that even with the first SEFHIER program -- Yes, we're going to get it on the water, and, well, how many years until we can use the data, and two, three, five years. You don't need that gap in data. You've got to have the data from the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey. I'm out of time. Thank you, and I'll submit written comments. Have a good day.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Boggs. We have a question from Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: A question and then a comment. What else would you like to tell us today?

MS. BOGGS: Very briefly, the twenty-fathom line, I think it's very hard to enforce. I've said, for years, and my husband has said for years, if you can't enforce it, don't make it a rule, a law, a regulation, and just don't do it.

The red snapper season, I know there's a lot of angst, and, when I say this, if the Gulf Council would just humor the idea of pushing the start date back to January 1, to allow the flexibility as the seasons continue to get longer, and a lot of people say, well, Ms. Susan, that's because you want red snapper in January and February, and I'm not going to disagree, but that's not the reason why.

As these seasons continue to get longer, it seems a shame that this council has to go through the process of some kind of an amendment, or rule change, or not a rule change, but to say, okay, well, now it's going to be June 1, or it's going to be the Friday before Memorial Day, and then, the next year, it's going to be May 1, and then the next -- Just keep it simple.

Give the agency some flexibility to be able to open the season when it allows. At the very least, I think back to when our seasons used to be April 21 to October 31, and so look at an April 21 start date. Just give some leeway to the agency.

The rec initiative, I gave my comments last night about that, but I heard, today, something about trust. The fishermen have to put trust into this council, just as much as this council has to put trust in the fishermen. It works both ways.

The lane snapper, just real quickly, I would suggest a twelve-inch size limit, to give those fish two spawning cycles before you catch them and kill them and take them out of the water. That’s just a thought, but I think you all have made up your minds, and so I'm not going to dig my heels in on that.

Amberjack sector separation has been discussed for years, along with the other species of red grouper, gag grouper, triggerfish, and, I mean, we have this conversation over and over again, and then I'm going to save my last comment, and I'll put it in writing to those that need to hear it.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Boggs. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes, and so my comment is so I really appreciate

Billy Archer bringing up his grandson Avery, and so I know your daughter can't be here tonight, because she's in school, but I just wanted to say thank you to her for inviting me and Carrie and our teams to come talk to her and a number of young captains on Monday night. Thank you.

MS. BOGGS: Well, I have to say she's not in school. She's actually fishing today.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Boggs. Next up is Ms. Leann Bosarge, followed by Mr. Richard Fischer.

MS. LEANN BOSARGE: Thanks. So today I'm not going to speak to you as your Shrimp AP chair. I'm just going to speak to you as Leann Bosarge, and, for those of you that maybe don't know me so well, I guess I'll give a little introduction. Most of you do.

I've worked at our family business since about the time I could walk, Bosarge Boats. We have six offshore shrimp boats that we own and operate in both the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic. I made my first shrimping trip with my daddy when I was about nine years old. I'm on land now, but that's only because I have to be. If it was up to me, I would be on the boats, but Daddy said I've got four kids, and he's too old and worn out to raise them for me, and so I've got to stay on land.

First, I want to thank the council for retaining your preferred alternative in the shrimp framework document, Alternative 3, the scientific ELB program. I also want to thank Andy and Clay for putting up with me. I've got a lot of respect for both of you all. Seriously, I do. You all are some of the most intelligent, hard-working men that I know, and I absolutely cannot stand to have to do battle with you. It nauseates me, and so I'm looking forward to tomorrow, when hopefully that's over and behind us.

So, when I speak to you as the AP chair, a lot of times we have to get down in the weeds, and we're deep into the into the details. I wanted to just kind of step back today and kind of paint a picture for you all of how I see the shrimp ELB program and the decision that you've got to make tomorrow.

First off, I want the council to realize we already have a shrimp ELB program, right? It's up, and it's running, and it's doing its job. It's collecting basic shrimp effort data. It's been doing that for twenty years.

For about the first ten years or so, we had an outside contractor, LGL, that was running it, with Dr. Benny Gallaway, and then the

Science Center took it over around 2013 or 2014. This is not the first time that we've been through a transition where we had to upgrade the technology, right, and so, right now, the system is operating.

There's two things that we've got to give some attention to. We need new boxes on the boat, to get us to 4G technology, so that it will transmit, and we needed a new server at the Science Center, a cloud-based server, to receive that data, and so the server is in place.

We've already got about a hundred boxes on the boats. NMFS has some more funding that they're going to use to ramp that up to about 300 boxes, that they're going to pay for for the fishermen, right, with that alternative. It's not purring like a cat, but it will be once you get those boxes up to about 500, and I hope that NMFS will use some of the money that they have left, that the industry went and got for them, to get us up to that 500-box level, to pay for those boxes for the fishermen. Then we're meeting that requirement of doing as well -- Of doing as good, or better, as what we've done for the last ten years.

I'll shift gears for just a second, if you'll allow me, Mr. Chairman, and let's talk about funding, and so, to talk about funding, we've actually got to talk about tariffs, and I think it's something that a lot of people don't realize, and not these new tariffs that just went into place last week, and not that, but the tariffs that the industry went to the Federal Trade Commission, and we paid attorneys, and we had to plead our case and show that we were being harmed by illegal trade, right, and those tariffs that go in place on imported shrimp.

At first, those tariffs, a long time ago, were coming to the fishermen. It didn't take long for the government to figure out they would rather have that money, and so that changed. The money now goes to the government, okay? However, 30 percent of the tariffs on imported seafood gets set aside at USDA, and there was a law that was put in place that required that 30 percent to be transferred from USDA to NOAA Fisheries.

That's how much those transfers are in the last couple years. In 2023, seafood tariffs -- NOAA Fisheries received $362 million in 2023. In 2024, they received $377 million. That's approximately one-third of their annual budget. When I brought this up in the past, I was told, well, yes, but that goes to Headquarters, and we don't have any discretion over how that's spent.

I can go with that argument if it's a little bit of money, okay,

if it's a couple million. When it's a third of your budget, I don't think we're at a spot where you need to look at the largest fishery in the Southeast and tell us that you don't have the funding to put 500 boxes on boats and collect the most basic scientific shrimp data, effort data, effort and landings. That's what we use for everything. We're not asking for the moon.

However, you told us you didn't have the money, and so the industry went to Congress, and we pleaded with Congress and said, look, we want to continue this scientific program, and please send the Science Center some money to help us continue this program.

We managed to get $1.7 million specifically for continuing the shrimp ELB program, and here we are again being told we just don't have the money, and you'll have to pay for your own boxes, and we're just going to have to move you over into law enforcement or something, if you don't want to do that.

No, and the money is there. It is a question of priorities, and it's time that we again became a priority for the Science Center and the agency. The way I see it, you still have a little bit of that last $850,000 left. Use it wisely. Get 500 boats total on these boxes, and let's keep rocking and rolling, the way we always have. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Bosarge. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any, thanks, Leann, and next up is Mr. Richard Fischer.

MR. RICHARD FISCHER: Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the council. Thank you all so much for having me this afternoon. I'll start out on electronic reporting. First of all, I want to thank you all as a body for putting me on the AP, my first AP experience, and it was a great experience. I also want to thank staff for allowing me to participate remotely at the last meeting. It was kind of one of those days where I had to be in two places at once, and you all helped me do that, and so thank you very much.

I'm not an economist, but I think I support the compromise that was discussed today on the estimated trip fee. There was a lot of work, and discussion, that was put into all of the intended and unintended consequences of making sure that the agency, and the economists, get what they want, as well as protecting the captains from some liability, and I think that gets us there.

Also, speaking of the AP, I really have to commend Captain Green for doing such a great job as the chairman, and really guiding the conversation in a fair, productive way throughout not only this meeting, but the first meeting as well.

Still with electronic reporting, but talking about the document that you all saw yesterday, and we talked about some of the costs that are associated with it. I would really -- I appreciate some of the questions that were asked. I would really like the council to explore some other questions as it pertained to why would doing it separately cost about eight-times as much.

Look, I get that it would cost at least twice as much, if you're doing this communication and then that communication, but eight-times as much sounds like a lot, and, with all of the itemized stuff that was on there to contribute it to being eight-times as much, wouldn't a lot of that, if not all of that, stuff have to be done anyway, if you're doing it in conjunction with electronic reporting, and, if it doesn't, then why not? Like is that going to be as effective as an economic study, and so I just would like to see the council ask some of those questions moving forward.

On grouper, ditto what Josh said, as well as getting rid of the twenty-fathom closure. On the grouper season opening, I think, in Louisiana, we would prefer alternative -- Amendment 2, but we could live with Amendment 3 on the months that the season gets open, and I want to thank Billy for your comments yesterday as it pertains to how regional or state management could really kind of give everybody all they want here.

Thank you all so much for the amberjack regional management state management discussion that happened earlier. It was two-and-a-half years coming, but it was a great conversation, and it was a great first conversation, of what is going to be many, and I look forward to participating in the process with you all.

I know there are constraints, and other factors, but it was a bit of a gut punch to hear that, hey, thanks for waiting two-and-a-half months, but now you're going to have to wait seven more months, but that's kind of the way things go, and, real quick, I do want to address one comment that I heard earlier during the presentation, where it was stated that commonsense dictates that the fish are where the fishermen are.

I would just like to say that, from a biomass standpoint, I completely disagree with that statement. When we're talking about depleted stocks, and localized depletion in different areas, to me, commonsense would dictate that the fish are where the fishermen aren't, and I think, as we continue to look at biomass, and hopefully we consider biomass as a bigger portion of how allocation gets decided in state or regional management, or really just allocation in general, I just kind of wanted to make that

statement, because I heard that earlier, and was like, yes, I've got to say something on that, and so thank you all so much for the time, and I'm happy to address any questions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Fischer. Do we have any questions for Richard? Not seeing any, thank you, Richard.

MR. FISCHER: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. That will conclude our public comment session today. Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: I just wanted to say a couple things, if I could.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Sure.

DR. FRAZER: I'm planning on this being my last meeting in-person. A lot of good friends, and I probably didn't say thank you enough. You guys spent a lot of time talking to me on the phone, sharing with me what you do, and I really appreciate it. You know, I hope I've worked hard for you. I really do, but the thing that is most important is you invited me in your houses, on your boats, and you shared with me information, and I learned a lot. I learned more from you probably than you ever learned from me, but I'm most happy that I'm going to walk away with a lot, a lot of friends, and so I appreciate all the kind words.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Very well said, Dr. Frazer. That concludes our public comment today, and we're going to take a fifteen-minute break, and I would like to knock out a report or two before we break. Mr. Osborne, and then we're breaking.

MR. OSBORNE: Troy and Tom, I really appreciate getting to know you as well over the last, you know, year that I've been on, or, well, not even quite a year yet, but I also want to acknowledge Camilla too, and this is her last meeting here, and she was going to sing earlier, but they didn't have the soundtrack. Without her and the folks back there, we wouldn't be able to get this done, and so thank you, Camilla, as well for all that you do for us.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Osborne for those words. Let's take a fifteen-minute break. Thank you.

COMMITTEE REPORTS
CORAL COMMITTEE REPORT

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you. We'll get started. Okay. We're going to knock out some committee reports this afternoon. We are

scheduled to work until 5:30. I'm not saying we will, but I would like to knock out a few reports, and we're going to start with the Coral Committee report. Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Coral Committee, the committee adopted the agenda, Tab N, Number 1, and approved the minutes, Tab N, Number 2, from the January 2023 meeting as written.

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Restoration Blueprint Final Management Plan and Draft Memorandum of Agreement between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils, NMFS, FWC, and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, Tab N, Number 4, Ms. Beth Dieveny, Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, presented on the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary restoration blueprint final rule and final management plan, summarizing the work completed to-date and highlighting that the Governor of Florida has vetoed the final rule proposed for state waters.

As such, staff at ONMS are coordinating with NMFS to implement regulations of the blueprint final rule in federal waters. Further efforts with the blueprint and coordination between state and federal orders are ongoing, and staff will coordinate with the council to keep them informed. Ms. Dieveney also provided a high-level review of the draft memorandum of agreement, or MOA, between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils, NMFS, FWC, and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Dr. Sweetman summarized the comments from the South Atlantic Council and opened the floor for committee discussions and comments. A council member inquired on the rationale behind the South Atlantic requesting inclusion of a definition of habitat support structure, or artificial reef, in the MOA. A committee member replied that this language is likely a result of ongoing allocated funds to the state to investigate the use of artificial reef structures to enhance reef structure and ecosystem dynamics.

Another committee member inquired about the permitting process for the use of artificial reefs within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and plans for ongoing monitoring efforts with future planning of use of artificial reef structures.

A committee member replied that the permitting process between coordinating agencies may involve both state and federal agencies and that the funded project to incorporate habitat support structures includes continued and ongoing monitoring to assess the impact of habitat support or artificial reef structures in improving marine resources within the sanctuary.

A council member noted that the MOA outlines the procedure for agencies to coordinate fishing regulations. Currently, artificial reefs are not included in fishing regulations and inquired if this language is better suited for the blueprint rather than the MOA. Ms. Dieveney noted that, at this time, staff are collecting feedback and comments on the MOA for consideration from both the South Atlantic Council and Gulf Council to update the MOA, with the intent being focused on coordinating fishing regulations.

NOAA General Counsel stated that the suggestions by the South Atlantic Council are not substantive, noting that the MOA does not address any authority changes, nor does it affect the regulatory structure within the sanctuary or the permitting process. The agencies will continue to coordinate on permitting processes and other regulatory issues.

Council staff inquired about the timing of the blueprint and the draft MOA for the council to provide input. Ms. Dieveney noted that staff will keep the council informed of ongoing blueprint regulatory implementation in federal waters and that staff will coordinate to bring back a final version of the MOA to the council with any suggested edits.

The committee chair summarized the discussion and highlighted that there are no substantive additions or recommended changes to the current MOA, but further discussion and recommendations may take place at Full Council, and I believe, just to try and wrap this one up, there might be a motion on the table here.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Sweetman. Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and so I do have a motion, if we can pull that up, Bernie. So, just based on the discussion that we had in the committee, particularly as it relates to the relationship between the various entities involved, and we'll see that motion here real quick.

I just think it's imperative that we continue to move forward, and so the motion reads: The Gulf Council recommends moving forward with finalizing the memorandum of agreement, or MOA, between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils, National Marine Fisheries Service, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you. Dr. Frazer. We have a motion on the board. Do we have a second? Mr. Walker. Is there any discussion on the motion? Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries. Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.

CLOSED SESSION REPORT

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Dr. Sweetman. Next, we will move into the closed session committee report, and I'll read that. The committee met on April 7. The Selection of Spiny Lobster Advisory Panel members were chosen. The council made the following appointments to the Spiny Lobster Advisory Panel: Casey Butler, Joshua Nicklaus, George Niles, Daniel Padron, Jerome Young. Are there any questions on that those selections? Okay.

Moving on, selection of the 2024 Law Enforcement Officer or Team of the Year, the council reviewed the nomination information and recommendations received from the Law Enforcement Technical Committee. The council selected FWC's Offshore Patrol Vessel, or OPV, Trident team for the 2024 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year. The team will be honored at the next council meeting held in Florida, and that concludes my report. Are there any questions? Not seeing any, okay, and let's move on to Mr. Donaldson. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I think the staff's thought process is we would just wait until we meet next year in June in-person to give this award, and so unless we figure out something else in the interim, but that's our thought right now.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Any questions or comments or concerns? No? Okay. Thank you. Okay, and let's move to Mr. Donaldson's report from the Gulf States, and then we'll -- It will be followed by the South Atlantic report.

GULF STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION REPORT

MR. DONALDSON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Bernie, if you can pull up my presentation, and I'm just going to update the committee, or the council, on the Inflation Reduction Act funding that we received. You can go to next slide.

As a reminder, there was three main tasks for the agreement that the Commission got. It’s to improve the state and commission data management system, centralize the state recreational data at the commission, and convene three workshops validating fishing effort, improving released catch data, and then improving the data standards and warehouse.

We have completed all three workshops. All the workshop reports are available for me as well as on our or -- Excuse me. The effort and the release workshop reports are available for me, or they're available on our website. They're finalizing the recreational standards and warehousing work report, and it should be available shortly.

From the first two workshops, the effort in and the discards workshops, we developed an RFP, which was published last November, I believe, and full proposals were due last February. We received eleven proposals, which equated to about $14 million dollars in research. We did we did receive $7.5 million to cover that research, and so the review team is currently looking at the -- Looking at the proposals, and the first round is due later this week. We may go out for a second round of review, depending on the situation, but the final decisions will be made by Mr. Strelcheck and Dr. Porch, and we're hopeful to start research in summer of summer of this year, and so it’s good news that we're actually moving forward on something.

As I mentioned, one of the things that we're looking at is improving our state and commission data management systems, getting them up-to-date and utilizing the most up-to-date technology and then centralizing -- Creating a centralized warehouse for all the state recreational data that would be available to the commission and the NMFS and state folks that were interested in it, but we created a new priority, which we've talked about throughout the week, and Louisiana -- Excuse me. Alabama and Mississippi are utilizing the LA Creel methodology, and we've developed the transition plan.

We re-budgeted some of the work to improve our data management systems to support this. Unfortunately, we're still waiting on the NOAA Grants Management Division to approve that the change of scope. It's a little frustrating, because it doesn't require a change in budget or any of that, but it's just it's a matter of we’re approving new money, because we have the money, but we're still waiting on them. Hopefully that will occur sooner than later, so we can continue with that work next.

Charlie mentioned the expansion of the at-sea observer program to Louisiana and Texas, and he went over what's going on in Florida and Alabama and Mississippi. We're expanding that by about a million dollars in new money to support that work in the western Gulf.

We're hoping to target seventy-five offshore trips per year per state, using the same model, or methodology, and technology, in

the eastern Gulf, and we're targeting this year and next year for doing field sampling.

We're doing some training next week, over here in Alabama, and then we'll -- Hopefully we'll begin actual data collection in in the Western Gulf for next month, and so I've got a couple of other issues that I just want to make folks aware of.

As we know, the funding for FY 25 is on hold, and that has a potential problem for SEAMAP. Florida has been -- For the last several years, has been doing some trawling work off of Florida that's important, that's collecting important information about red snapper, as part of the summer shrimp groundfish cruise, but, because the commission doesn't have FY funds for SEAMAP, nor the State of Florida, there's a potential that that's not going to happen.

The survey is scheduled for June, and so we're hopeful that that that can -- We can get something in place before then, and we'll be able to collect that information, but it's kind of a -- It's kind of a double-whammy, because, even if we got the money, Florida -- If Florida doesn't have the money, they won't -- They wouldn't have the people to put on the boat, and so it's -- Again, it's not a unique problem, but it's no less frustrating, and so -- Then, on a more positive note, because I always want to end on a positive note, Gregg Bray was named the new Assistant Director for the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, starting this month, and I look forward to continue working with him, and he may be -- He was actually planning on coming to this meeting, but, because we don't have any money, or an agreement, he decided that it was probably more prudent to stay home, but that concludes my report, and I'll answer any questions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Donaldson. Do we have any questions for Dave? I'm not seeing any. Okay. We'll move on to the next report, Mr. Phillips with the South Atlantic.

SOUTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL LAISION REPORT

MR. PHILLIPS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I'll preface my comments with I've really enjoyed being here this week. I've enjoyed meeting some old friends, and meeting a few new friends now, and so I've learned a lot, and it's been a really good week for me. The total report is in your briefing book, but I'm going to just kind of abbreviate it.

We've got our advisory panels all set for the spring and summer, Snapper Grouper, Mackerel Cobia, and our Habitat and Ecosystem.

We approved submitting a letter to NMFS detailing the proposed modifications to essential fish habitat for our five-year review.

As far as committee membership goes, we decided to take Mid-Atlantic and a New England voting representation off of some of our voting councils, and we're going to get our input through the liaisons and the membership that they do have on the advisory panels.

We have climate readiness projects, and NOAA has provided funding to support the council efforts to develop and advance climate-ready fishery management, and, as you well know, things are changing. They're not like they used to be, and so that's a really good thing.

Our for-hire reporting improvement amendment, that's a work in progress. We've spent a lot of time talking about that, reporting frequency and trip declaration requirements and did-not-fish reports, and so we're still working on that. That will come back up in June.

Mackerel cobia, we had some port meetings, which were quite informative. I went to the one in Georgia, and shark deprecation was high on the list of issues with mackerel, like it is everywhere else. The SEDAR Committee, we changed the name, and we've added some data collection charges to that committee's work, but everything seems to be going along okay.

The council, on snapper grouper amendments, we're looking again at our fifty-five species in our FMU, and we would like to try to lower that number, if possible, but we tried it the last time I was on council, about ten years ago, and it didn't work so well, and I'm hoping it will work a little bit better this time, but, when you start moving things around, it invariably affects other things, and so you have the unintended consequences, but we will be looking at that.

We had a commercial fishery management subcommittee meet, and they have advised -- Asked the council to revise the two-for-one permits that we've had on the South Atlantic for quite a while now, and so we want to just go one for one, and we believe that will increase trip efficiency and just make it a lot cleaner. We don't feel like we need to do keep doing two-for-one.

Red snapper, I was going to just say red snapper, and not worry about the rest, but I was told I couldn't do that. We're waiting to find out, you know, where NOAA is going to -- Andy and his team are going to finish up there. There was a lot of comment, public

comment, about the negative effects off of Florida for businesses, and it's just going to be a -- It's hard. There's no good answers from this, but we will see what -- I guess we'll see what happened by June.

Black sea bass, Amendment 56, they are in really bad trouble. I think they're probably still catching some fish off North Carolina, and the fishermen off of northern Florida say they're pretty much gone. There are not a lot of fish off of Georgia, and so we're going to be -- There's a lot of stuff going on there, but we're going to have to revise catch levels, and we're looking at reducing the size limit, and a lot of other things, and so I guess that will be coming back up in June, too.

Last, but not least, private recreational permit and education, Amendment 46, and we're looking at that, and we've had a lot of discussion, and we're going to keep having a lot of discussion, so we can kind of get an idea on what the universe is, and last, actually last, golden tile. We had a SEDAR 89 stock assessment. It came back with catch levels really close to what we've got right now, and so all we've got to do is update our catch levels and keep going, and that, Mr. Chair, concludes my report.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Phillips. Do we have any questions? Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Thanks for that report, Charlie. With regard to the sea bass, is that -- I mean, have you been in communication with the Mid-Atlantic, and are they seeing more sea bass up in their part of the world? Is it a range, or, you know, just simply a redistribution of fishes, or what's happening there?

MR. PHILLIPS: I don't know if it's a redistribution, but they have been catching a lot of fish. Obviously, after being off of the council for six years, I come back, and the first thing, or term, I hear is "regime change". I had no idea what a regime change was, and so I had to be enlightened, which, basically, to me, is still all of the stuff we just don't understand, and so, as far as I know, that's pretty much what's going on with sea bass.

It could be water temperature, or it could be recruitment failure, or it could be red snapper eating the recruits, which some of the -- A lot of people think has a lot to do with it. We just don't know, but they are moving north. Water temperatures are warming up, and so that kind of makes sense, but there -- We've heard there's a lot of fish up in the Mid-Atlantic, and so prices aren't that good on black sea bass, and so, even with our limited amount of catch, it's not really something we're going to go target.

DR. FRAZER: A follow-up, real quick, and so I guess what I'm trying to get at is a bigger issue, and so, when you do a stock assessment for black sea bass, right, there's a kind of coordinated effort between the South Atlantic and the Mid-Atlantic, you know, and what does the stock structure look like, and, I mean, is this a situation where you have to comanage a stock among, you know, those two fishery management councils?

MR. PHILLIPS: I think they're drawing the line around Hatteras, and they're kind of like acting like it's two different stocks. Now, if there's some mixing or something that goes on, or maybe we get a really cold winter, and some of those fish move south, which we've had some of the North Carolina boats, you know, or fishermen say the fish look a little different. They might be darker, and so they think they may move north and south some, according to the weather patterns, but, no, our stock assessment, I think, is stopping at Hatteras, as far as I know.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Phillips. Mr. Strelcheck has a question. it's stopping at average as far as I know Okay. Thank you. Mr. Phillips.

MR. STRELCHECK: Not a question, just adding to the conversation, and so sea bass is doing very well off New England, two-and-a-half times spawning stock biomass, I think, at MSY. There was a study, or actually a presentation, this week by South Carolina DNR looking at the genetics, and so that's one of the things I'm interested in learning a little bit more about, in terms of the homogeneity, or not, of black sea bass along the eastern coast of the United States, but we've certainly seen a huge shift and change in sea bass abundance and distribution, as well as, obviously, availability.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Any other comments, or questions, for the South Atlantic? Not seeing any, thank you, Mr. Phillips. Mr. Morton, we'll move on to your report of the Coast Guard, and We'll try to squeeze in Mr. Downey after.

U.S. COAST GUARD REPORT

LT. MORTON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Lt. Jackson Morton, Eighth District, located in New Orleans, Louisiana. The first I want to talk about are our efforts on the Exclusive Economic Zone enforcement.

So far this year, we've interdicted thirty-one lanchas and seized a little bit over 11,000 pounds of red snapper. With the Lent

period right around this time of the year, historically we've seen a lot of the activity with the lanchas, and, also, with the priorities of the new administration, we've seen a lot more asset hours of support with Coast Guard cutters.

Of course, Station South Padre Island is always there, but we've seen a little bit more resources come our way, for this mission particularly, in terms of Coast Guard cutters, and so that's always nice to see.

A couple of mission highlights, some good cases, good days we've had out there, back in February, on the 6th, we had Station South Padre Island was able to interdict three total lanchas, and they detained eleven lancha fishermen and seized approximately 3,000 pounds of red snapper onboard those lanchas.

Then, just a couple of weeks ago, on the 12th of March, Coast Guard Cutter Daniel Tarr and Station South Padre Island were able to interdict two lanchas each, four total, sixteen lancha fishermen, and approximately 2,500 pounds of red snapper.

These are some photos from those cases. On the top-left, you can see a typical lancha vessel, low profile to the water, a lot of deck space, and it can hold a lot of fish. On the top-right is a cooler that they were able to take off of one of these lanchas, and you can see it's filled with some ice, some red snapper, and then, when they run out of space in that cooler, on the bottom-left, you can see they'll just load up that boat as much as they can get, and then, on the bottom-right, there's some sharks there, and it might be a little bit washed out, but you can see some sharks that were also seized as well.

Not included in these slides, but kind of an emerging update, I would say, is that, on Monday actually, the State Department was able to make notifications, diplomatic notifications, to Mexico that says that we're intending to start prosecuting some of these lancha fishermen under the Lacey Act.

Not a ton of information for you right now, as this is fairly brand new, but hopefully that can curb some of the issues we have with recidivism. A lot of these guys we catch over and over again. I think, last year, our top offender, we got him eight times, in fact, and so hopefully this will help a little bit.

Domestic fisheries enforcement, thus far this year, we're at 184 total boardings, and where we were at last year. It's a double-edged sword with resources going to the border. You can see some of them falling off for domestic fisheries enforcement, and we

have not -- We have yet to refer a case with significant violations to OLE, and so that's what we've got for domestic fisheries enforcement.

Then marine protected resources, and the cold snap turtle stun in January was the last and only request for assistance we've had thus far. We are, however, tracking the pair of North Atlantic right whales that have been -- That made their way into the Gulf, and I believe the last sighting was off of Destin, Florida, and so we've got some broadcasts of notice to mariners going out. If you have been on the water recently, you may have heard those, but we're still tracking them, and we're ready to assist, if we're able to, and I think that concludes my presentation, if anybody has any questions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Lt. Morton, for that report. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any, thank you again. Next, we'll move on to the Alabama Law Enforcement Efforts report with Major Downey.

ALABAMA LAW ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS

MAJOR JASON DOWNEY: Good afternoon. Jason Downey with Marine Resources here in Alabama. I will talk to you briefly about our joint enforcement agreement and some of our enforcement activities.

This year, our agreement runs from August 24 to August 23, and we received $423,089. We spent $170,577 on direct purchases, which bought us a couple of law enforcement vehicles with emergency lighting and a couple of outboard motors for our offshore vessel.

We spent $67,000 on training and indirect costs. The rest of the money was spent on patrolling our priorities. Turtle excluder devices, we have 745 patrol hours. Recreational reef fish, we have 300 patrol hours. IFQ, 300 patrol hours. IUU, twenty-five patrol hours. Marine mammals, 235 patrol hours, and general CMP and HMS at 298 patrol hours, and we have 300 outreach hours.

So far this year, officers have 513 boat patrol hours and 551 shore patrol hours worked. Total hours, including the outreach so far this year, has been 1,284 hours. They've inspected 304 commercial anglers, 632 recreational anglers, and 372 vessel inspections.

This year, we had our first annual kids fishing day with Alabama Marine Resources. The officers were really excited about this event. We had thirty participants from the local area Boys and Girls club. Every angler that participated received a rod-and-

reel that they could take home with them. The biggest catch award was a lifetime saltwater fishing license for Alabama. All the prizes, food, and bait were provided by sponsors, the CCA, the ACEOA, the Mobile County Commission, and a couple of local commercial fishermen. MRD Enforcement officers baited hooks, untangled lines, cooked and served food, and educated about saltwater fishing.

Here's a few photos of some of the anglers, an officer helping fish. As you can see, a lot of small croaker and white trout. All kinds of fish were caught, and here's our big winner. He was super excited. The biggest catch was a stingray, actually, but he got him a lifetime saltwater fishing license out of the deal, and so he's super excited.

Here's a picture of our outreach setup at a boat show. Officers participate at over a dozen outreach events throughout the state each year. They reach out to thousands of people at these events, and it's a great opportunity for us to get information out to the public about saltwater fisheries.

This is pretty cool. It happened here recently, and the SS United States was actually towed from Philadelphia to the Port of Mobile. This photo was captured by one of our remote cameras that's on top of the Middle Bay Lighthouse, which is pictured below.

The United States is actually a hundred foot longer than the Titanic, and I think it may still hold the record for the fastest crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. It's being brought here to Mobile to be prepared for a reef to be sunk off the coast of Destin.

Our officers were tasked -- Once it once it got into the Mobile ship channel, we were tasked with escorting it all the way up the ship channel, and so it was an all-day affair, but the officers enjoyed it. It's pretty cool historic site.

All right, and I'll leave you all with some pictures from the blizzard of 2025. This is our office on Dauphin Island. We don't see snow a whole lot down there, but that's about six to eight inches of snow on our front lawn at the Dauphin Island office. It was pretty, but we were glad it didn't stay but a couple days, and so that's all I have. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Major Downey. Do we have any questions? Not seeing any.

MAJOR DOWNEY: I appreciate it.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you again, sir. Okay, and we that will wrap us up for today, and we will reconvene in the morning at 8:30. Thank you.

(Whereupon, the meeting recessed on April 9, 2025.)

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April 10, 2025

THURSDAY MORNING SESSION

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The Full Council of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council reconvened at The Lodge in Gulf Shores, Alabama on Thursday morning, April 10, 2025, and was called to order by Chairman J.D. Dugas.

COMMITTEE REPORTS (CONTINUED)
SEDAR COMMITTEE REPORT

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Good morning everyone. Welcome back. We're going to get into committee reports, and we'll have to jump around a little bit. The first committee report we'll do will be the SEDAR Committee report and then, from there, we'll move to the Shrimp report.

The SEDAR committee report, let's see, April 7th, 2025, and I'm the chair. The committee adopted the agenda, Tab I, Number 1, and the minutes, Tab I, Number 2, from the August 2024 meeting were approved as written.

SEDAR Steering Committee Summary Report 2025, Tab I, Number 4, the committee heard a brief overview from council staff of the major agenda items discussed during the February 4 and 5, 2025 SEDAR Steering Committee meeting held in Charleston, South Carolina.

Briefly, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center proposed taking administrative lead for the assessment process, which is usually conducted via webinar. SEDAR would still coordinate the data and review workshops. The Southeast Fisheries Science Center assured SEDAR cooperators transparency would be maintained, along with updates provided to the cooperator’s SSC, as applicable.

The Science Center asked cooperators to expect funding and staffing reductions and indicated a likely need to revisit the stock assessment process once more is known on that front. The SEDAR

Steering Committee also discussed a key stocks approach for assessing priority species by region and using simpler models when or where appropriate.

Council staff then reviewed the assessment progress to date and finalized assessment scheduling through the end of 2026. A committee member was concerned about loss of federal resources and their potential effects on the stock assessment process. Council staff said they would coordinate with the Science Center and the Southeast Regional Office to get a better understanding of staffing changes and impacts. SERO added that losses to the stock assessment branch of the Gulf would be expected to have a negative effect on assessment output, which could be better quantified once all reductions are finalized.

Another committee member noted the involvement of the Center for Independent Experts in reviewing stock assessments and asked if CIE involvement would be in jeopardy in the expected funding reductions. Council staff said that review workshops planned for 2025 were expected to have CIE reviewers, but their involvement beyond that point is unknown.

The Science Center went into further detail about staffing losses and reductions and said that it is still premature to report on total staffing reductions. The Science Center thought a more thorough stock assessment of effects would be available by the June 2025 council meeting.

Review and Discussion of Gulf of Mexico SEDAR Schedule, Tab I, Number 5, council staff will provide an updated draft of the SEDAR schedule, which has been finalized by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center through 2026.

A committee member recalled that, in June of 2022, the planned assessment of greater amberjack was expected to be completed in 2026, and now it is not expected to be completed until 2028. The committee member also noted a council request for an update on the greater amberjack count, which will be a key new source of data for the planned greater amberjack assessment.

Council staff replied that the lead principal investigator of the greater amberjack count had informed staff that they were not yet prepared to present preliminary results, but expected to be able to provide those at the June 2025 meeting.

Council staff assured the committee that the planning for the greater amberjack assessment was locked in on the SEDAR schedule at this point and that the assessment would be completed as

efficiently as possible, while ensuring key new data like the G-FISHER composite video index and the greater amberjack count can be considered. There was no other business brought before the committee. This concludes my report. Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so we talked about this committee prior to Dr. Simmons letting us know about the change to the June council meeting to a two-day potential webinar, or virtual, meeting, I guess.

So, based on that, would we still be able to accommodate, in the schedule, an update from Dr. Powers on the amberjack count, or is that something that we need to consider moving to the August meeting in-person?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you Mr. Chair, and so we have a rough draft to talk about at the end of the meeting, and, right now I do not have that on the agenda. I suspect there's going to be quite a bit of public interest, and so I guess we need to think about that as well, and timing of that, and so can we wait until the end to make a decision on that?

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes, and I wasn't aware we were going to talk about a priority list, and so that's fine. Let's do that.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Do we have any other questions regarding the SEDAR report? Not seeing any, I would like to make a comment regarding this item. I think we all realize with the funding cuts that are before us, and the challenges that lie ahead, you know, before the Science Center and NMFS, and I think I've been saying this for quite some time, that I think it's an appropriate time that we venture out into other avenues of getting these stock assessments done, whether it's universities, third-party consultants, and I think that would help speed the process up.

It's something I would at least like to see if it's even possible, which I think it’s possible, because I think there's universities that do work now, and so I'm not looking to make a motion or anything like that, but I just wanted to bring that up in conversation. If there's no other comments, we'll move on. Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Well, just in support of your comment, I agree with what you're saying. I think, when we get this update on the potential schedule changes from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center at the June meeting, that says what would be coming there, I think, at that point, maybe we need to make some decisions on should we request staff to solicit various universities, to come

up with which ones -- A list of which ones would have the capabilities and ability to even do that type of assessment at that scale, or not, or what sources of alternative assessments could be done outside of the Science Center, if needed, something like that, but, at this point, I think let's see what they come back to us with in June, as far as, you know, where the schedule changes and what they're able to do based on their staffing at that point, that they know.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: So I'm open to, obviously, exploring the idea. I think, when we've talked about this in the past, a couple of the main challenges with the stock assessment process is that it's not just the analyst where a lot of the time is spent. It's the data, the data procurement, the data processing, all of the data streams that go into a stock assessment, one. Then, if we're facing budget cuts as an agency, right, you still have to have funding to contract out those stock assessments, right, and so what does that look like in the future, and how would we make that happen.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you Mr. Strelcheck. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so we have talked about this in the past. I guess it depends on where the funding is coming from. If it's council funding, under our administrative award, we have to be a little bit careful about that, because the Science Center and Regional Office are our partners.

You know, they typically do stock assessments, where the administrative side of the house, those dollars, are kind of more administrative. We have funded, in the past, projects to try to fill data gaps that we need to improve stock assessments, but taking on paying for that process would be something we haven't endeavored in the past, and we would have to think about that quite a bit, after we have some stability in funding, and figure out how other councils have gone about doing that, which I think they have. I think the Mid-Atlantic and New England Council have done that, and so we just need to think about that administratively a little bit more.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons. Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I kind of agree with your thought process. I think, given the challenges that we're up against right now, and our colleagues are up against in the federal government here, we might have to think long and hard about what

we're actually expecting to get out of a stock assessment here in the future, right, and like these age-based stock assessments -- Obviously, they're super informative, but they're very data intensive, and take a lot of time.

We've been kind of talking about how the data that we're using -- You know, we're making management actions on data that's five years old, right, and so it's not entirely reflective, and so, you know, there could be an opportunity here to make lemonade out of these lemons, right, where we can maybe have a more timely assessment process, with less intensive data scrutiny.

Now, that comes with -- There's pros and cons associated with that, right, and so I think, as we kind of get some clarity for what is actually going to be feasible in the future, from an actual assessment capacity perspective, I think we're just going to have to think about maybe looking at the assessment process a little bit differently here. Thank you, sir.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Sweetman. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Clay has his hand up.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Andy. Dr. Porch.

DR. PORCH: Thank you. I just wanted to reiterate what C.J. just said. We're actually doing some internal planning, and we're not at a point where we can release it, but the basic planning is looking at what happens if our budget is cut in half, or say a 25 percent reduction, and what we can actually accomplish, and so basically how we would reinvent, you know, our participation in the whole enterprise, including from data collection all the way through stock assessments.

Depending on the extent of the cut -- Yes, we would not be able to support the complex age-structured models that we're doing now, at least not for all the species that we're doing, and so I completely agree that, once the dust settles, and we see what we have to work with, we'll have to talk about the extent to which we need to reimagine the process.

One of those items could be, you know, going back to simpler approaches, like production models and simple index-based adjustments vetted through management strategy evaluations, basically simulation frameworks, and just to see if we can develop some kind of robust harvest strategies with less information.

I think it's something we definitely want to think very hard about,

and maybe prepare that that's going to happen at some level, no matter what at this point, in particular, you know, focusing on things like having an indicator species for a complex, and then you might have to work with aggregate bag limits and things like that. I don't want to pontificate too long on it, but we've certainly been thinking a lot here about how we would provide scientific advice with under reduced staffing and budget scenarios.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Porch. Mr. Rindone.

MR. RINDONE: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Dr. Porch, and council staff, and the composition of the council's representation on the SEDAR Steering Committee, has been asking for exactly that approach for the better part of a decade now, and, you know, there are some species that we've often questioned whether we're, you know -- Forgive my use of words, but trying to drive a space shuttle to the grocery store, when, you know, the van would have done just fine.

We certainly would endorse trying to spend more time looking at those sorts of scaled-back approaches, and seek efficiencies in modeling, because, in a lot of cases, it really is only one or two indices, in addition to the landings, if any indices at all, that are actually driving the signal in the stock assessment, and so --

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Rindone. Any other comments or business to come before the SEDAR Committee? Not seeing any, okay, and we'll move on to the Shrimp Committee Report. Mr. Schieble.

SHRIMP COMMITTEE REPORT

MR. SCHIEBLE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Shrimp Management Committee Report, the committee adopted the agenda, Tab D, Number 1, and the committee then approved the January 2025 meeting minutes, Tab D, Number 2, with the removal of the word "of" on page 7, line 2.

Review of the Texas Closure, Tab D, Numbers 4(a) through (b), Dr. Liese from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center presented on the economics of the federally-permitted Gulf shrimp fleet. The inflation-adjusted average prices for imported shrimp and for Gulf shrimp trend downward from 1984 to 2023.

A council member commented that it appears shrimpers are only getting two dollars per pound, on average, for their product, but that the final cost to consumers is about two to three-times that

initial price. Dr. Liese responded that he could only speculate as to what happens with markup, along the supply chain, noting that it appears to get higher as the product gets closer to retailers, but that we would not expect any participant to extract excessive value in very competitive markets.

Another council member noted that, in the presentation, the Gulf shrimp price is the ex-vessel price, but the imported shrimp price is a final cost, which includes transportation and processing costs, and would therefore be higher. Ms. Bosarge, the Shrimp AP chair, reinforced that expenses have increased over time, but that ex-vessel shrimp prices are lower in recent years than received in the 1980s and 1990s.

Dr. Lowther, from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center, presented a review of the 2024 Texas closure. He noted a lot of variability in landings of Texas offshore brown and white shrimp from 2016 through 2024. He added that landings of excess offshore white shrimp in July and August 2024 were primarily in larger size categories.

A committee members stated that there is a biological purpose for the Texas closure, in allowing shrimp to grow to a larger size, and encouraged Dr. Liese to work with Texas state agency folks on economic data for future presentations.

The committee recommends, and I so move, to request that National Marine Fisheries Service continue with the Texas federal closure in the coming year in conjunction with the State of Texas closure in 2025. That motion carried unanimously. Mr. Chair, we have a committee motion on the board.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Schieble. We have a motion on the board. is there any discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Final Action, Framework Action Modification of the Vessel Position Data Collection Program for the Gulf of Mexico Shrimp Fishery, Tab D, Numbers 5(a) through (e), council staff reviewed the summary of written and virtual public comments, noting that a direct mail-out was sent to Gulf shrimp moratorium permit holders and that a virtual public hearing webinar was held on March 31, 2025.

A council member inquired if there was any industry feedback in support of Alternative 2. Council staff responded that there were there were no direct comments favoring Alternative 2, but that

there were comments indicating an inability of the fleet to take on any additional costs.

Council staff reviewed the alternatives in the shrimp framework action and noted that, while the devices for Alternative 1 and Preferred Alternative 3 were referred to as cellular electronic logbooks in the text, the devices to be considered under Preferred Alternative 3 would not be the same technology as under Alternative 1.

Council staff added that National Marine Fisheries Service plans to transition the administration of the vessel monitoring, the VMS system, program from the Office of Law Enforcement to the Office of Science and Technology. Council staff noted that the effects of the administrative environment on Chapter 4 had been updated to reflect cost information provided by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center in its March 4, 2025 correspondence to the Gulf Council.

Dr. Gloeckner, from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center, reviewed the table of administrative costs in the Southeast Fisheries Science Center's March 4, 2025 letter to the Gulf Council. He noted that these costs are incremental costs to the agency and that Alternative 2 is expected to cost substantially less to initiate and continually operate compared to Preferred Alternative 3 when summed across all respective program components. Council staff added that these detailed costs are in a condensed version in Table 4.1.4.1 in the shrimp framework action.

A committee member noted the council's desire for the Shrimp AP to discuss these administrative costs, which were not received by the council for review by the Shrimp AP until the day of its meeting. The committee member stated that several of the line items in the Southeast Fisheries Science Center letter have already been covered, or completed, and do not need to be included in the budget.

A committee member then added that some budget items were being duplicated, as they are already being conducted for other programs, and contended that approximately 70 percent of the Southeast Fisheries Science Center's projected costs for Preferred Alternative 3 could be eliminated from the estimate.

Mr. Strelcheck, from the Southeast Regional Office, reviewed an infographic of administrative costs between Alternative 2 and Preferred Alternative 3 and emphasized that the system to be built under Preferred Alternative 3 duplicates the system that exists

under Alternative 2.

A committee member inquired who is paying for device costs under Alternative 2. Mr. Strelcheck responded that the Early Adopter Program, as well as the national VMS reimbursement program, is currently available to help fund the purchase of devices.

Staff inquired why development of technical specifications are a cost under Alternative 3 and why customer service would be an administrative cost, instead of calls go into vendors. Dr. Stephen, from the Southeast Regional Office, responded that technical specifications are for hardware and that the national VMS program already has a contract in place, which would cover devices under Alternative 2. A separate contract would be needed for a program Under Preferred Alternative 3. Dr. Stephen added that calls about device issues are typically received by the agency first. Dr. Gloeckner responded that calls can range from regulatory questions to device troubleshooting.

A committee member inquired why shrimpers would want Alternative 3, even though it means they would bear the cost of devices. Ms. Bosarge stated that shrimpers would prefer the government pay for the devices and that the industry lobbied for $1.7 million to assist with the data collection program.

She stated that there are two problems. One, devices need to go from 3G to 4G and the physical server needed to be replaced with a cloud-based program. She acknowledged that the cloud-based server is in place and that about 300 devices will be purchased through the Early Adopter Program. However, more devices should have been covered through the Early Adopter Program.

She also expressed concern that, in the current budget environment, National Marine Fisheries Service may not have the funds to reimburse vessels for VMS units under Alternative 2. She stated that the technical specification development costs should be minimal, as she already wrote the technical specifications, which can be found in an appendix of the shrimp framework action.

Mr. Strelcheck noted that it has long been a concern of industry that data will go directly to OLE and that the agency is now transitioning the VMS program administration to the Office of Science and Technology. He added the requirements for government security have substantially increased over time, as have the costs.

Ms. Levy, from NOAA General Counsel, reviewed the codified text for Preferred Alternative 3 and noted that final details would need to be approved by the council chair.

The committee recommends, and I so move, to recommend the council approve the Framework Action: Modification of the Vessel Position Data Collection Program for the Gulf of Mexico Shrimp Fishery and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes in the document. The council chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate. The motion carried with one abstention. Mr. Chair, we have a committee motion on the board.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Schieble, and so we have a motion on the board, and I'm asking if there's any further discussion on the motion. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: I wanted to just go through and make some points I think that I've made throughout the process, but just to kind of further emphasize where we're at. So we didn't discuss a lot between Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 during committee.

Alternative 3 remained our preferred, and so, in terms of the amendment, there's been a lot of discussion that NMFS is overestimating the costs and that only two changes to the program are needed. We disagree with that assessment. Our best estimate, based on the expertise of the people that actually work on this program, is that there are higher costs than what industry believes there are.

With that said, obviously, we recognize there's a minimum cost of doing business, and the bottom line is the cost for Alternative 3 is higher than the cost for Alternative 2.

If you take just the values that we put forward in the letter to the council, and it's also in the amendment right now, the costs are 40 less for -- 40 percent for Alternative 2 relative to Alternative 3, right, over a five-year period. That's a substantial difference.

Even if you eliminate some of the costs the industry suggested, and, for example, you take away the help desk at the Science Center, the costs are still 53 percent for Alternative 2 relative to Alternative 3, right, and so there is a considerable cost reduction for the Science Center that would happen based on selecting Alternative 2.

The Science Center, obviously, bears those additional costs, based on maintaining the system, approving units, security, duplication

of interfaces, et cetera, and that's been, obviously, one of our concerns, is this duplication of the system.

In addition to this, we have the overlay of the Executive Order Unleashing Prosperity through Deregulation, and so this would be a regulatory action. Any additional costs for regulatory actions remember have to be offset considerably by deregulatory actions, right, and so, the higher the cost, the more is going to have to be offset in order to move that forward.

In terms of purchase of VMS, I think Clay and I are fully committed to purchasing as many cellular VMS devices as we possibly can through the Early Adopter Program. That's not going to cover all the boxes, and so Alternative 2 provides then another avenue of funding for the industry, because it would come out of the VMS reimbursement program, versus Alternative 3, and those that don't get boxes through the Early Adopter Program have to purchase those boxes in the future.

In terms of cellular VMS versus ELBs, I feel like I'm a broken record on this, but the hardware is identical, and so we can call it something else, but the devices are the same. The question would be whether the same devices would be approved under each of the programs, because you potentially have different requirements, or standards, that the Science Center would be implementing relative to the vessel monitoring system, but there is, obviously, these newer duplicative data standards and technical specifications that would have to be created, and, you know, it was noted that the industry has developed these technical standards.

That's appreciated, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're approved and finalized by the government, and there's still work that would have to be done in order to, obviously, implement those, even if it's a good starting point for us.

We've talked about duplication. For those that haven't been around this table for quite some time, the data used to go to a NESDIS server in the northern Gulf. That server no longer exists. The data are now downloaded through Gulf States Commission from SD cards, and it's accessed by the Science Center, and so Alternatives 2 and 3 require some sort of data database to receive the data, and view the data, and receipt of that data right now happens through our Headquarters Office in Silver Spring, whereas Alternative 3 would require the Science Center to stand up, in our view, a duplicative system to be the catchers mitt to receive that data at the quantity we need to receive it under the program.

Then just a couple of final points, and I guess, approval or disapproval, I was taken aback, and it bothered me, obviously, with some of the public comment that was made, in terms of what was perceived as me threatening disapproval, right, and I'm not making that decision today.

My job is to give the council guidance, like Mara and Frank and others here, with regard to building a record and explaining to you what we need to do in order to meet federal laws and requirements, right, and, ultimately, the decision to approve or disapprove this action will be based on the record you build, right, and so I've heard a lot about, you know, we want to support the industry, and I want to support the industry.

I want to figure out how we can do this to make it the most cost-effective and efficient of a program as we possibly can, and we also have to meet legal mandates, National Standards, other requirements, and all of that will have to be taken into account, in terms of any sort of final decision.

At the last meeting, we talked about National Standards and the concerns we've had about minimizing costs and avoiding unnecessary duplication. I think it would behoove the council to have a solid conversation about that, about some of the things that maybe you've heard, or they have come up over the last couple of meetings, to continue to build that record, because, right now, you're essentially making a recommendation to take final action without changing anything in the document, which is a part of the record that we are going to have to then make this decision on, right, and so I just want to acknowledge all that.

I fully support, obviously, the program as a whole, and trying to get something stood up. I think it's important for the industry, and it's important for the agency, with regard to monitoring.

We've, obviously, been in disagreement in how to do this, but there's certainly a lot of, to me, challenges related to costs and duplication of effort that I feel like needs to be further discussed. Thank you, and Clay may want to say something, since this is his program, that he ultimately would have to manage under this alternative, so I would like to ask Clay if he wants to say anything.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Dr. Porch.

DR. PORCH: Thank you, Chair. Just listening to some of the comments at the Shrimp AP meeting, and then subsequently, it's becoming apparent that I think the Shrimp AP committee view of

what Alternative 3 is is a little different than the way we view it.

It seems they've been advocating for basically a bare-bones type approach to collect shrimp effort data, analogous to that old 3G system. The problem is we need better data than that, and it had a -- The old system had a number of shortcomings, and not just the problems with the data due to the poor quality of the hardware, and all the flaws with the 3G reporting, but also the voluntary nature of the reporting, with relatively little accountability.

Things were hard to enforce reporting, and there was a lot of problems with trying to match up that subsample of reports and track reports with all the trip ticket information and all, in order to expand it to the total effort, and those problems just started increasing over time, and so there's a lot of things that had to be fixed with that.

On top of it, a lot of -- I think the AP chair actually said that really, you know, security -- Weren't we taking good care of it back in the day, and the problem is cybersecurity requirements are much higher now than they were fifteen years ago, and it's expensive to implement systems that are secure, and so, when we set up a new system, we've got to put in all this -- All these layers of cybersecurity that we didn't used to have to. Cyber-attacks weren't a big thing back in the day, when the old system was in place, and things -- Times have changed.

We're also trying to improve the efficiency of viewing and accessing the data. As you've heard a couple of times from the Shrimp AP committee, I think it comes down to their biggest concern is for law enforcement, and they don't want law enforcement to be able to access where they're going in in real time, which is what they could do with the systems that OLE was operating, and then, even when it's transferred, under Alternative 2, to the Office of Science and Technology, in principle, they have some links to the data.

I don't think it would be anything close to real time, because the systems don't transmit until they come within cellular range, but that seems to be, from what I can tell, the biggest objection to moving the system to the Office of Science and Technology, which would be considerable cost savings for us, rather than setting up a whole new program.

Just in general, as Andy said, we need to consolidate systems, for greater efficiency and cost savings. We just can't afford to keep creating independent systems, and I think this is consistent with

the President's executive orders on government efficiency and the cost efficiency initiative. It's important for us to cut costs, to save taxpayers money, and so thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Porch. I see Mr. Schieble's hand up.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes, and I understand that, and since, you know, we're talking about building a record, I just wanted to reiterate the building of the record has taken us over four years to get to this point, right, and we've deliberated this -- Or five years, and I guess is year-five now that we've worked on this to get here, and so I think it's quite extensive, the record of what we've been working on.

Also, last Monday, as a reminder, we had the public hearing meeting for the preferred alternative in this action, and that was a perfect opportunity for us to hear from the industry in opposition to what the council has selected, and, again, the summary that we got from Ms. Muehlstein did not indicate that, and so that's all I had.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Schieble. Ms. Levy.

MS. LEVY: So, understanding that, yes, you have been talking about this a long time, I think the point is the record on the duplicative nature of things, right, and, if you're going to recommend Alternative 3, how that's appropriate under National Standard 7, and I don't think we've really had a robust discussion about that.

Aside from the system, I think it would be helpful for the council to explain Alternative 3's requirement for cellular only, when there are some vessels that are already required, for other permits, to have satellite, and so what that's setting up is a requirement for some vessels to have two pieces of required equipment on their vessels, and I'll just point out the language in the National Standard Guidelines that say management measures should be designed to give fishermen the greatest possible freedom of action in conducting business.

When you're limiting to cellular, and some of these already have satellite, you're really not allowing that freedom, and so I guess it would be helpful, if you're going to pursue Alternative 3, to discuss how that in particular meets these requirements. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Levy. Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: I was doing my best to stay out of this. We heard an economic presentation, and the status of the industry is -- You know, it's saddening. Over half the fleet is tied to the dock. With that reduction in effort also comes a reduction in interactions with sawfish, manta rays, turtles, finfish, et cetera, all these species of concern.

This industry is 100 percent on the ropes. It's about to take its last breath, and here we are arguing over budgetary items, that were clearly in disagreement on, and, I mean, we're talking big disagreements. The estimate from the agency and the Science Center was upwards of $5 million for Alternative 3. The industry's estimate is a lot more conservative, something more along like $1.54 million.

I also remind you that the industry went to Congress to help get $1.7 million in appropriations to help fund these data collection programs, and so we're at an impasse, where we're arguing over things, and I can't help feel but, you know, we're being asked to speak on the record, and so that's what I'm trying to do, but I feel that there's been a very heavy-handed approach to this, where the sole determiner, and presenter of the budgetary costs, is also the one who seemingly is the sole determiner of what's viable and what isn't, and that, to me, is very heavy-handed, when we haven't had a proper opportunity, even though this has been being discussed for four years, to really go, all right, here's our numbers, why we think they're right, and here's yours, let's determine who is right.

We haven't had that meaningful exchange, because, when we've tried to have that, what we got instead was a letter, presented at the last hour, presented to the group that would have been the most productive group to have that meaningful engaged discussion, and that just set the wrong tone and did not afford an opportunity for that discussion, and so here we are, and I'm going to ask, I guess, my colleagues on the council that we proceed with the preferred alternative, because, at some point, we're going to have to have that discussion, and bring this in for a landing, and I don't know if it will take a third party outside person to take a look inside and see whose budgetary figures are right or wrong, but we can't keep just responding to, you know, a heavy-handed approach. I don't respond well to being bullied, and I kind of feel like I'm being bullied right now. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Sanchez. Do we have any other comments? Mr. Donaldson.

MR. DONALDSON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As I've mentioned previously

in in the Shrimp Committee reports, and as Andy mentioned, we are currently processing the SD cards from the old 3G system. When we were approached, it was it was for a one-year term, and, as Mr. Schieble pointed out, we're going on year five.

I was hoping that we would take final action at this meeting, and I just want the council to know that, if we don't take final action we're -- The commission is not going to be able to continue to process those cards, and so that's something to consider, just for the record.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, Mr. Donaldson, and thank you for your comments. I have a question, and maybe it's for Andy, or Clay, and I'm not sure. The way I understand it is this document has been in front of us for four or so years, with the same alternatives in place., and, to me, in January, or maybe November, we picked a preferred, and, once we picked the preferred, then we were notified that the preferred was not viable, and it rubs some folks maybe in the wrong way, that it's been in the document for almost four years, and there was never an issue until the preferred was chosen. Is there any reason for that timing?

MR. STRELCHECK: Clay can talk to it from the letter that was sent, but the cost estimates came forward in that November or so timeframe, right, and so, yes, the amendment has been developed for quite some time, but we had not built the entire amendment, with all the details and analysis and all that, and so that was what was, obviously, coming forward at that stage.

I want to, I guess, because I have the microphone, respond to John Sanchez, because I respect him highly, and we've talked about this. I don't view the agency is being heavy-handed and threatening here. What I'm trying to acknowledge, right, is that this is a normal part of the council process, right, and we have to look at all the information before us and make a decision, and that's what I'm looking at, right, is what does the record say.

I get that people are saying we disagree with the numbers, but this would be no different than talking about lane snapper, or electronic logbook programs, and we provide these numbers for different alternatives all the time. Sometimes we question them, and sometimes we question the analysis. A lot of times we build additional rationale and record for that particular action, and that's essentially what I was laying out for the council, based on all of the pros and cons of each of these approaches.

I recognize that Alternative 3 is fully supported by the industry, but then we talk about things like the industry is in dire straits,

and economically they're not doing well, and I look at Alternative 3 as putting a greater burden on industry, rather than going with Alternative 2, and so, even taking the government's cost out of that, Alternative 3, unless there's some other congressional funding to support additional purchase of ELB units, would cost the industry more, right, and so it's that record, and all of this information, that, obviously, builds over time. We didn't necessarily have all the pieces prior to November, and, after November, we've, obviously, gathered more information.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck, for that explanation. Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: I think we've discussed, you know, the issues and the differences I think enough, and I guess we just don't agree, but I do appreciate -- I do appreciate you reaching out and saying, you know, that this is respectful, because it is, and I respect you too, and this is not personal. We just happen to disagree on this issue, the facts as they are.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Sanchez. Dr. Porch.

DR. PORCH: Thank you. I did want to respond to the comment that's been made a couple times now that somehow the center was doing something underhanded by submitting the cost estimates at the last minute to the AP Shrimp committee, and I'll remind the council that the letter was sent, and it did ask for the analysis in advance of the council submission deadlines for the briefing book, and then it did say it would be ideal if it was also presented to the Shrimp AP, but there wasn't a request to submit it well in advance of the Shrimp AP, and, honestly, we did the best we could to get that out.

We were working on it even that morning, and we had to get approval. Of course, any documents under this administration are requiring a higher level of approval, and so it was quite a lot of work to get that out, given all the other circumstances that are happening right now, as you all are aware, and so I really am uncomfortable with the continued insinuations that we were trying to sneak something -- To sneak something by folks by submitting it at the last minute.

That was actually -- Even the Executive Director sent us an email asking if we wanted to present it or wait until the council meeting, and we thought, well, we'll go ahead and present it, and start that conversation, and so, again, I really regret that folks are interpreting it as something underhanded. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Porch. I'm looking around the table. Do we have any more comments, or questions? Mr. Donaldson.

MR. DONALDSON: I've got one more comment. In talking with staff about the processing the SD cards, we -- This is just anecdotal, and we don't have any -- We haven't done any actual analysis, but it appears that we're getting more cards that are blank, or are non-functioning, and so, at some point, that whole 3G system is going to stop working, and so I think it's imperative that we get something in place sooner than later, and so just again.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Donaldson. Is there any further discussion? Not seeing any, okay. This is going to be a roll call vote for final action. Go ahead, Dr. Simmons.

Bernie, I'm going to read the motion into the record. The committee recommends, and I so move, to recommend the council approve Framework Action: Modification of the Vessel Position Data Collection Program for the Gulf of Mexico Shrimp Fishery and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes in the document. The council chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. McDermott.

MR. MCDERMOTT: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Geeslin.

MR. GEESLIN: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Williamson.

MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Broussard.

MR. BROUSSARD: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Overton.

DR. OVERTON: (Dr. Overton's response is not audible on the recording.)

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Captain Walker.

MR. WALKER: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: General Spraggins.

GENERAL SPRAGGINS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Abstain.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Captain Frady.

MR. FRADY: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Osborne.

MR. OSBORNE: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Dugas.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: The motion carried sixteen to zero

with one abstention, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons. Okay. We'll move on in the report. Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Next, we went to the 2023 Gulf Shrimp Fishery Effort Presentation, Tab D, Number 6. Mr. Detloff, from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center, presented on the Gulf shrimp fishery effort in 2023.

From 2022 to 2023, effort increased in Statistical Areas 10 through 21, but decreased in the total Gulf. Council staff added that, in Shrimp Amendment 18, the target reduction goal for juvenile red snapper of shrimp trawl bycatch mortality is 60 percent less than the benchmark years of 2001 through 2003 and requires monitoring of days fished in the ten to thirty-fathom depth zone in Statistical Areas 10 through 21.

The purpose of the target reduction goal is to assist with rebuilding of the red snapper stock. A committee member noted that the Gulf shrimp fishery is well within the target reduction goal.

Discussion of Potential Expiration of Moratorium for Federal Gulf Shrimp Permits, Tab D, Numbers 7(a) through (b), council staff know that the moratorium for the federal Gulf shrimp permits is set to expire October 26, 2026, as set forth in Shrimp Amendment 17B.

The moratorium was initially established in Shrimp Amendment 13 in 2006, for a period of ten years, and was then extend for another ten years in Shrimp Amendment 17B. Both amendments reference the prevention of overcapacity as a purpose of the moratorium. Council staff added that the Shrimp AP passed a motion recommending the council extend the moratorium for an additional ten years.

Ms. Bosarge emphasized of the Shrimp AP expressed interest in the amendment having only one action to focus solely on the continuation of the moratorium for federal Gulf shrimp permits.

The committee recommends, and I so move, to direct staff to begin development of a shrimp amendment to extend the moratorium on federal Gulf shrimp permits. That motion carried unanimously. Mr. Chair, we have a committee motion on the board.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Schieble. Do we have any discussion on the motion on the board? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Seeing none, the motion carries.**

Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We then received the remaining items from the summary of the March 4, 2025 Shrimp Advisory Panel meeting, Tab D, Number 4(c). Council staff reviewed a motion from the Shrimp AP related to the forthcoming results of the SEDAR 87 stock assessments for brown, white, and pink shrimp.

Council staff added that the Shrimp AP motion could be brought back to the Shrimp Committee when the results of the SEDAR 87 are presented. Ms. Bosarge noted that the Shrimp AP was not expecting the council to act on this motion. Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Schieble, for your report. Is there any other business that needs to be discussed with Shrimp? Not seeing any, thank you, Mr. Schieble. We're going to move on to Captain Walker with the Data Collection Committee report.

DATA COLLECTION COMMITTEE REPORT

MR. WALKER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Data Collection Committee adopted the agenda and approved the minutes of the November 2024 meeting. We discussed loss of the Southeast Region Headboat Survey, and staff from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center provided a report regarding the recent loss of funding for dockside validation sampling within the Southeast Region Headboat Survey from Texas through Alabama.

The loss of monetary support and staffing reductions are expected to continue into the foreseeable future. To mitigate this loss, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center will explore using port samplers or rotate sampling efforts in different Gulf states each year.

Several committee members acknowledged the importance of the headboat survey as a long-term data collection program and its use in a substantial number of stock assessments. A committee member asked how spending plans are justified within the agency. SERO staff indicated that executive administrative budget priorities are determined at a national level within the Department of Commerce each year.

Several committee members recognized the current funding levels and suggested the council communicate data needs. Communicating data needs could help the agency develop funding priorities, and I know -- I think we had a little bit of discussion on this. Captain Frady, did you have something you wanted to point out here?

MR. FRADY: Yes, and thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to make a motion at this time, Bernie. Thank you, ma'am. All right. **I want to make a motion to request the SSC provide an emergency analysis and a summary about the impacts of losing the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey to the fisheries management process. This analysis should explore the loss of the program, which would impact catch estimates, due to different effort estimates or the size of the fish landed, what species information would be most impacted, and what those differences could mean for the stock status estimates and quotas. Contingent upon the SSC review, the council requests that NOAA Fisheries consider and seek all available means for continued funding of the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey as an important time series for data collection.** If I could get a second, I would appreciate it.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: We have a committee motion on the board, or sorry. Not committee, but full council. We have a second by Mr. Sanchez. Is there any discussion on the motion? Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I believe this really be the Science Center that would have to do this. I mean, we could take it to the SSC, but I don't know that they would really be able to say a whole lot on this. I think it's really the Science Center taking a look at this, and looking at all the assessments, which even our staff could look at the assessments where we've utilized this index. You know, some of them -- I think lane snapper comes to mind, and we were basing a lot of the recent information on catches, I believe, just on this index alone, and so I think it could be a group effort, maybe, with the Science Center and council staff, if that's okay with the council.

MR. FRADY: Thank you, Dr. Simmons. You know, my whole thing is, being on the water every day, and trying to get data continuously coming in, and, you know, I don't care who analyzes the data, but I just know there are people of influence, and there are organizations, and there's bodies that work within this agency who have influence, and I want to have the ability to give the agency something to go to NOAA Headquarters and defend the importance of this, of losing this data, and that is why I wrote a long one, but I just -- I think it's so important not to lose this data stream. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Frady. Dr. Porch.

DR. PORCH: Thank you. I want to correct the record a little bit here on the Southeast Headboat Survey. The program itself is not under threat of being discontinued. It's just the supplementary

funding for the biosampling component.

Remember, as Mr. Donaldson said, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission conducted the biosampling for the better part of thirty years, using their GulfFIN funding. When Gulf States dropped the program a few years ago, the center and the Regional Office, at various times, managed to cobble together funds to keep the program going, but I sort of feel like this is a case of no good deed goes unpunished, since I keep hearing folks think this is something that should become a permanent obligation for the center.

Now, as Mr. Frady said, there's certainly nothing that would prevent the council from asking the National Marine Fisheries Service, or others, to go to their congressional representatives to increase funding for this program, and it doesn't necessarily have to come to the Southeast Center. It could be an increase to the GulfFIN budget, so Gulf States could pick it up again, but there is no money tree here at the Southeast Center, and, in fact, given recent events, there's a possibility that our budget will be cut, and so I would just keep that in mind as you think about this motion. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, Dr. Porch, and, in response to that, Mr. Frady.

MR. FRADY: Thank you, Dr. Porch, for -- This is Troy. I just wanted to thank you for explaining that. You know, at this point in time right now, our nation is going through some changes right now, and just the uncertainty about everything out there, and I appreciate your explanation, trying to make me feel a little bit better about this, and I don't care where the funding comes from.

I just don't want funding to be cut, and I just think this should be listed as a priority, rather than just a, you know, let's catch all -- You know, get what we can, and I think it just needs to be reiterated that -- Not necessarily to Congress, but to NOAA Fisheries, the agency, and everyone else, because whoever wants to donate the money, or we reappropriate money, but this needs to be a priority. Thank you, sir.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chair and so understood what Clay was saying about, you know, it’s not like the headboat survey is going away entirely, but we are losing that validation component for four out of the five states, which basically makes this data not usable, based on what we’ve seen in the past, and so, effectively, it kind of is going away, just because these data

won’t be useful anymore.

I understand the concerns here all around, and this is a tough situation, but, to Carrie's point, Captain Frady, maybe a friendly amendment about not the SSC, and have the council staff work with the Science Center, rather than SSC,

MR. FRADY: Yes, sir, and that would be fine. Just the SSC, to me, was a little higher fruit, and I wanted the impact of the SSC, and their opinion, to hopefully have influence on this process and the funding. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, Mr. Frady, and so do -- Does anyone want to help wordsmith, to make changes?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Bernie, if you could just please the “request the Science Center and council staff”, instead of “SSC.”

MR. FRADY: You have my permission to edit anyway you want to, to change the name to --

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: I guess just also, while I have a mic for a moment, I mean, just to build on what Dr. Sweetman said, it says, back in the letter to us, that, you know, if it doesn't pass -- It's not likely to pass certification and validation for use, and so this data it could not be used, potentially, without this dockside validation and biological sampling, and so it would in fact be null and void, and it is in the letter. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: I guess I wanted to talk a little bit about timing here as well, and so I alluded to, in committee, that this is potentially one of many budget reductions, whether it's with us, with Gulf States, with other data collection entities.

From a timing standpoint, I think we'll have a much better sense of what the Regional Office’s and Science Center’s budget is going to look like toward the end of FY25, and so you were referencing an emergency analysis, but, to me, I think would be better to do kind of a holistic, you know, analysis of this and other impacts that we might be incurring, to be able to bring that back to you, and so, if you're okay with that, I think timing would maybe be less of an emergency and more just, you know, when available, bring back that analysis, based on budget considerations.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Do we want to edit the motion? Mr. Donaldson.

MR. DONALDSON: It doesn't have to do with the motion. I just have a point of clarification on some statements.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. I will circle back to you. Mr. Frady.

MR. FRADY: You're welcome to edit any way you want to. I was doing good to get all this out in one sentence.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. I'm looking at Andy, if he wants to change some wording.

MR. STRELCHECK: Well, if Troy is willing to just delete "emergency" and, you know, provide an analysis and summary of the impacts, so that -- I view "emergency" as kind of an immediate response.

MR. FRADY: Yes, sir, and that's fine.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Sanchez, good? The second is good.

MR. FRADY: But remember the emergency is kind of me groveling a little bit, and, when you grovel a little bit, it gets more attention. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: I don't think it's critical in the motion, but I see this not only being the Science Center and council staff, but Gulf States, the Southeast Regional Office, and I think there's a lot of entities that are going to have to be involved and contribute to a response like this.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Is there any further discussion on the motion? Not seeing any, I'll read the motion into the record. **To request the Southeast Fisheries Science Center and council staff provide an analysis and summary about the impacts of losing the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey to the fisheries management process. This analysis should explore if the loss of the program would impact catch estimates due to different effort estimates or size of fish landed, what species information would be most impacted, and what those differences could mean for stock status estimates and quotas. Contingent upon the review, the council requests that NOAA Fisheries consider and seek all available means for continued funding of the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey as an important time series for data collection. Is there any opposition to the motion? Seeing none, the motion carries.** I'm going to circle back to Mr. Donaldson.

MR. DONALDSON: Thank you, Mr. Chair. As I mentioned during the committee, this -- The port sampling and biosampling aspect of this program was initially, back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was funded through the Southeast Fisheries Science Center. GulfFIN, back in their early 1990s, decided that they were -- That they were kind of in the same situation, where they were trying to find secured funding for this, and GulfFIN said, well, as a stopgap measure, we'll fund it until you can find secure funding for this, and, lo and behold, it just became our responsibility, and so I just want that in the record, and, again, the benefit of being here forever, and so, you know, I'm pretty sure we have the record on stone tablets. It was that long ago.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Donaldson. Okay. We'll continue with Captain Walker and the committee report.

MR. WALKER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Data Collection committee, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center staff provided presentation comparing administrative costs for three economic data collection methods considered in Action 4 of the draft document.

The highest administrative costs would be for the no-cost alternative, which is Alternative 1, which would require the development, implementation, and analysis of ad hoc surveys. Alternatives 2 and 3 would cost much less relative to Alternative 1, while providing better economic data.

Alternative 2, the census level approach, would mostly work within the logbook application completely, and therefore would be slightly cheaper than Alternative 3, a sampling approach, which would require sampling design, notification, mailing and tracking of selected participants, and more advanced statistics.

The committee reviewed the Ad Hoc For-Hire Data Collection AP's February summary and the draft amendment. For Actions 1 and 2, the committee agreed with the AP's rationale that submitting a logbook after each trip would aid in memory retention and reporting accuracy. This would especially be helpful for charter and headboat vessels taking multiple trips in a single day.

The committee recommends, and I so move, in Actions 1 and 2, to make Alternative 2 the preferred alternative. Alternative 2 reads: Require that the owner or operator of a charter vessel or headboat issued a valid Gulf for-hire permit for reef fish or a Gulf CMP species to submit trip, catch, and effort information for each trip via electronic reporting via NMFS-approved software. If fish are harvested during the trip, electronic reporting is required prior to offloading fish. If fishing did not occur within a weekly

period, a did-not-fish report would be required to be submitted. Mr. Chair, that's the motion on the board from the committee.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Walker, and so we have a motion on the board. Is there any further discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Seeing none, the motion carries.** Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: For Action 3, Captain Jim Green, AP chair, reviewed the rationale for the AP's recommendation. The AP recommended amending Alternative 2 to require a trip declaration only when leaving to conduct for-hire fishing or any for-hire activity, i.e., sunset or dolphin cruises.

The AP recommended not repeating the multiple hail-out issues encountered in the first iteration of the program and suggested explicitly adding language in the alternative to address that issue. The committee agreed with the AP and decided to additionally modify that same language in Alternative 3.

The committee recommends, and I so move, in Action 3 to include for-hire in Alternatives 2 and 3. Alternative 2 is require that the owner or operator of a charter vessel or headboat issued a valid charter vessel/headboat federal permit for reef fish or Gulf CMP species submit a trip declaration for trips that will be engaging in any type of for-hire fishing or for-hire activity. Option a is charter vessels and Option b is Southeast Regional Headboat Survey headboats. Alternative 3 is require that the owner or operator of a charter vessel or headboat issued a valid permit for reef fish or Gulf CMP species submit a trip declaration for trips that will be engaging in any type of for-hire fishing activity. Option a is charter vessels and Option b is headboats. The carried with no opposition. Mr. Chair.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Walker. We have a committee motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Captain Walker.

MR. WALKER: Council staff stated that they would work with the interdisciplinary planning team to make sure the modified alternative language in Action 3 would be aligned with that in Actions 1 and 2.

The committee then discussed the merits of including the hail-out requirement for trips that conduct for-hire activity that does not include fishing. Several committee members stated that activities such as cruises do not require a federal charter boat permit and

do not result in catch or harvest of federally-managed species. Therefore, the hail-out provision should only pertain to for-hire fishing trips.

The committee recommends, and I so move, in Action 3 to make the modified Alternative 3, to include Options a and b, the preferred. Alternative 3 is require that the owner or operator of a charter vessel or headboat issued a valid federal charter boat permit or headboat permit for reef fish in the Gulf of Mexico submit a trip declaration for trips that will be engaging in any type of for-hire fishing activity. Option a is charter vessels and Option b is Southeast Regional Headboat Survey headboats. The motion carried with no opposition. Mr. Chair.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Walker. We have a motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any opposition, the motion carries.** Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: In Action 4, the committee discussed an AP recommendation for an alternative to the trip fee reporting requirement and the mechanism for collecting economic data. The three economic questions that will be asked in the survey are the trip fee, fuel used, and price of fuel per gallon.

The trip fee question was controversial in the first iteration of the program, and the AP had discussed an approach to increase buy-in for the new program. The AP had suggested using the term "market value" in place of "trip fee". This would allow for the program's participants to report an estimate of the trip, but not be beholden to a particular number for any specific trip, in the event of an audit.

SERO and council staff economists responded that they were concerned that asking for the market value would be interpreted too broadly and would reduce the transparency and accuracy of the data for management and other purposes. Economists are most interested in the actual price paid for the trip, i.e., total revenue collected for the service.

The trip fee provides an estimate of this price, or revenue, and the fuel used and fuel price variables provide some estimate of the cost to run the trip.

A top-line price, or total revenue information, trip fee on its own is important for fishery resource disaster determination requests as well as modeling the economic value of individual trip components to for-hire anglers.

Together, the revenue and cost data allow economists to calculate the net value of each trip, a measure of producer surplus and profitability for for-hire trips. By reporting trip fee and fuel information separately, the usefulness of the data for fishery management advice and disaster relief determinations would be much greater.

To address participants, concerns while still providing explicit direction to what -- To that report, or what to report, they instead suggested exploring the use of language such as "estimated trip fee". NOAA General Counsel explained that, regardless of the specific terminology used, the council and NMFS would need to be explicit about the definitions for the fields to be collected.

For the data collection methodology, the committee determined that a sampling approach would balance the reporting burden for program participants, while also providing data needed by fisheries economists.

The committee recommends, and I so move, in Action 4 to make Alternative 3 the preferred. Alternative 3 reads: Require that the owner or operator of a charter vessel or headboat issued a valid federal charter vessel/headboat permit for reef fish or Gulf CMP species submit economic data as part of the logbook when the vessel is engaging in any type of chartered fishing or chartered activity if selected. Annually, a stratified random sampling design of permitted vessels will be used for selecting vessels that are required to report this economic data. The Southeast Fisheries Science Center will determine the strata, based on previous years' data and minimum sample size by strata, sufficient for providing scientific and management advice. The motion carried with no opposition.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Walker, and so we have another motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.**

MR. WALKER: Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Captain Walker. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair. So, just based on the changes to the June council meeting format, our plan now is to try to develop a public hearing draft of this document for the August council meeting, for you to look at and approve before we got to the public.

That being said, we do need to think about what type of engagements we want to have and the O&E gave us some information on that, and so we'll bring that back in August as well.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons, I think now is an appropriate time to take our break, before we get into Reef Fish. Let's take a fifteen-minute break, until 10:05, or 10:10.

(Whereupon, a brief recess was taken.)

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. We'll go ahead and move to the Reef Fish Committee report. Dr. Frazer.

REEF FISH COMMITTEE REPORT

DR. FRAZER: All right. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Reef Fish Committee report, April 8 and 9, 2025, the committee adopted the agenda, Tab B, Number 1, and the minutes, Tab B, Number 2, from the January 2025 meeting were approved as written.

Review of Reef Fish and IFQ Program Landings and State Program Landings for Red Snapper, Tab B, Numbers 4(a) through (e), SERO staff reviewed the status of reef fish and individual fishing quota program landings relative to catch limits.

Council representatives from the five Gulf states also reviewed their 2024 private angling fishing seasons for red snapper and offered projections for the 2025 fishing season. The states also characterized available data for observed mean lengths and weights for red snapper, fishing effort, and other data.

A committee member asked about the disruptions in Florida due to the active 2024 hurricane season, which saw three named storms make landfall in the late summer and fall. The State of Florida representative replied that hurricane activity undoubtedly had an impact on the state's fishing effort in 2024.

The state representative from Alabama clarified that they would be transitioning to a seven-days-a-week fishing season for 2025, and its landings do include self-reported dead discards, which account for between 5 and 7.5 percent of Alabama's landings by weight.

Draft Reef Fish Amendment 58B: Modifications to Deepwater Grouper Management Measures, Tab B, Numbers 5(a) and (b), council staff presented updated management alternatives for modifying the deepwater grouper complex.

In light of recent stock assessment advice, management alternatives for deepwater grouper include specifying status determination criteria, catch limits, sector allocations, and accountability measures. This most recent draft reflects changes made by the council to the document in January 2025.

The committee heard feedback from the Reef Fish Advisory Panel on the actions and alternatives presented. The Reef Fish AP recommended that the council select Alternative 2 in Action 1 as the preferred and thought the 4 percent buffer between the commercial quota and commercial annual catch limit was no longer necessary.

Captain Dylan Hubbard, the Reef Fish AP chair, recalled concern by the Reef Fish AP with reallocating deepwater grouper between the sectors using data which are informed by the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey, or MRIP-FES. Given that, the Reef Fish AP preferred Alternative 1 in Action 2, retaining the status quo and allocation.

For AMs in Action 3, the Reef Fish AP preferred Alternative 5, which would impose a postseason accountability measure to adjust the recreational fishing season in the event of an ACL overage, based on the average landings from the previous three fishing years.

NOAA General Counsel asked why the Reef Fish AP did not select Alternative 1 in Action 2, which performs similarly to Alternative 1 in that action. Captain Hubbard replied that the Reef Fish AP debated the issue heavily, but ultimately was hesitant to recommend any allocation changes using MRIP-FES data.

A committee member asked about the implications of selecting Alternative 1 in Action 2. NOAA General Counsel replied that applying accountability measures in Action 3 would be problematic without defining a recreational ACL in Action 2.

Council staff reviewed Action 1, which evaluates changes to the status determination criteria in the setting of the overfishing limit, acceptable biological catch, and complex ACL. A committee member asked about the mechanism for implementing the current accountability measures, given the undefined recreational ACL.

NOAA General Counsel replied that applying the current accountability measures requires NMFS to assume that the commercial sector will harvest its ACL, although accountability measures have not been triggered to-date. Whether a recreational ACL is specified or not, the recreational sector is managed to the

poundage and the remainder of the complex ACL minus the commercial ACL.

The committee recommends, and I so move, to select Alternative 2 in Action 1 as the preferred alternative. Alternative 2 is revise the MSY proxy and catch limits for the deepwater grouper complex based on the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommendations. The OFL and ABC for yellowedge grouper would be set based on an MSY proxy of the yield when fishing at 40 percent SPR and the yield when fishing at 75 percent of the FMSY proxy, respectively. The OFL and ABC for the three remaining species would be based on Tier 3 of the council's ABC control rule. The deepwater grouper MSY proxy would be the yield when fishing at 40 percent SPR. The OFL and ABC for yellowedge grouper and the three remaining species would be combined, and all four species would be managed as a single complex with a complex OFL of 731,035 pounds gutted weight and an ABC of 555,026 pounds gutted weight. The complex ACL would be set equal to the ABC. That motion carried without opposition.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We have a motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Council staff reviewed the alternatives in Action 2, which considers changes to sector allocations and ACLs. A committee member thought the only alternative in Action 2 that was less likely to result in recreational ACL overages and closures was Alternative 3, which would set the recreational ACL at 10.21 percent of the complex ACL, or 56,649 pounds gutted weight.

The committee member also thought the larger recreational ACL in Alternative 3 would reduce the likelihood of recreational fishing season closures, and thus might reduce dead discards.

The committee member asked about the precision of the recreational data for the deepwater grouper species. Council staff replied that, based on the vessel types required to reach the depths in which deepwater grouper species occur, recreational anglers targeting deepwater grouper would likely be fishing from private access points, and were thus less likely to be intercepted for catch surveys conducted at public ramps.

Committee members added that guidance from the NOAA Office of Science and Technology is do not use landings data with a proportional standard error, or PSE, exceeding 50 percent. The annual, or wave, PSE for recreational landings of deepwater grouper

often exceeds 50 percent.

Regarding the 4 percent reduction from the commercial ACL to the commercial quota, the committee thought it necessary to determine whether to retain the current flexibility measures between the other shallow-water grouper complex and the deepwater grouper complex. The 4 percent buffer between the commercial ACL and quota is in place to allow the current flexibility measures to function. Removal of these flexibility measures is a current consideration in Draft Amendment 58A, which considers modification to the shallow-water grouper complex.

Council staff reviewed Action 3, which considers revisions to the recreational accountability measures. Regarding Alternative 4, council staff noted that NOAA General Counsel thought it was in violation of National Standard 1, which requires annual monitoring of landings against the ACL. NOAA General Counsel further clarified that Alternative 4 would allow for no action for a two-year period, regardless of stock status.

A committee member recalled that the Southeast Fisheries Science Center presented the approach outlined in Alternative 4 as scientifically viable and questioned why that would be in violation of National Standard 1.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes, and a question for staff. Remind me about timing for this amendment, and would it be beneficial to select preferreds for Action 2 and 3 at this meeting, or would we want to wait until -- Well, are we going to have this on the agenda for June? Maybe that’s the question.

MR. RINDONE: We’re going to bring you guys a public hearing draft back in June. If you wanted to select preferred alternatives here, I mean, that might help with the analyses a little bit, as we're preparing the public hearing draft, but I would definitely ask you to consider selecting preferred alternatives before we go out to public hearings, so the public has some idea of where the council's head is at.

Then there's the subject of Alternative 4 in Action 3 for the accountability measures, which General Counsel has identified as being in conflict with National Standard 1, and so, as it sits right now, it's not something that that we can do, and so you guys would need to remove that, or we would need some other kind of justification as to how we can make it work and it be in compliance.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: I don't know what the appetite is for the council with selecting preferreds. I'm happy to make the motion to remove Alternative 4 in Action 3, but, if you want to work through this sequentially, I'm happy to wait as well. However you prefer.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: I mean, it's a pleasure of the committee, right, and so --

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Go ahead, Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: So I will recommend that Alternative 4 in Action 3 be moved to Considered but Rejected.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. We'll take a moment and let Bernie get Mr. Strelcheck's motion on the board. Okay. Mr. Strelcheck, is this what you're looking for?

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. We have a motion on the board. Is there a second? Mr. Broussard seconds. Is there any further discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: I would like to make another motion to select Alternative 5 as the preferred alternative in Action 3.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, and we'll take another moment and let Bernie catch up. Okay. Mr. Strelcheck, is that good with you? We have a second from Dr. Sweetman. Is there any discussion on the motion? Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes, and so my rationale is this, obviously, is consistent with our National Standard Guidelines, but also we've talked a lot about the uncertainty in the data, and so this just gives us some flexibility with regard to using an average over a period of three years, obviously, to evaluate the accountability measure, and so I think this is appropriate for a species where we have higher data uncertainty.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Any other comments or discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Ms. Levy.

MS. LEVY: I think we might want to think about adding some clarity to this language, and so it says if the average deepwater grouper landings exceed the average ACL, and is that the recreational ACL? I assume so, because the discussion talks about it like that, but then my question is do we want to make it so that it needs to exceed both the average recreational ACL and average complex ACL, in order to do the payback, in order to do the reduction for the commercial season, and so kind of like how Alternative 3 is worded, except we're using averages, as opposed to just the straight catch limit, and so those are my two questions. I think, right now, it's just recreational average compared to recreational catch, average ACL.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Levy. Captain Walker.

MR. WALKER: I think that's a good point. Are we talking about exceeding the rec ACL or the total? It could make a big difference.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Rindone.

MR. RINDONE: I mean, you guys could go other way on that, and so, I mean, the intent, based on the way that it was written, was for the recreational ACL, but Ms. Levy's point is well taken that you could do it based on the average total ACL, and so it's an option.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck, and then Mr. Sanchez.

MR. STRELCHECK: In the South Atlantic, we haven't necessarily used the average approach, but we do have this kind of multi-tiered accountability measure for some species, where you have to exceed both the recreational catch limit and the total catch limit before an accountability measure is triggered, and so I like the idea that Mara is suggesting, and I certainly would be open to adding that, and would we need to modify the motion that has already passed at this point, or give staff direction?

MR. RINDONE: Yes, you should probably make a motion.

MR. STRELCHECK: All right, and so --

MR. RINDONE: I mean, we understand what you're asking, but -- I mean, would that just be done as options then under Alternative 5, or, well, it will now be Alternative 4, but, you know, based on the recreational ACL, or based on total ACL, or just do it based on total ACL, is --

MS. LEVY: I think you could make a motion to change the wording

of the alternative however you deem appropriate, and so, right now, Alternative 3 doesn't use averages, right, but it has the language about the recreational ACL is exceeded and the total ACL is exceeded. You could mirror that in 5, but you just need to make a motion to change the language of the alternative.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Levy.

MR. RINDONE: Make a motion.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: I have Mr. Sanchez on hold. Is it is it pertaining to this?

MR. SANCHEZ: Yes, and I just -- I know this is evolving, and we're, you know, developing this, but I'm kind of uncomfortable with different sectors, you know, sharing in some burden for someone's overage. I would prefer it to be, you know, if you exceed your ACL as a sector, then you're solely responsible, and not just take it off the whole, because I don't find that to be encouraging for either sector.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Sanchez. Mr. Strelcheck, to that?

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes, and so this would be specific to the recreational sector's accountability measures being triggered. The commercial sector wouldn't have to pay back an overage if this accountability measure was triggered, right, and it would only pertain to the recreational sector, but it gives them some flexibility, or more flexibility, in the event that commercial underharvests their quota by some amount, and recreational landings, based on data uncertainty, are higher than we expect, right?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. I have Ryan, C.J., and Tom

MR. RINDONE: So, just for actually implementing this accountability measure, in the event the accountability measure is triggered, we would probably need to write somewhere, and I'm looking at Mara on this, that NMFS would have to -- In the year in which the accountability measure is in effect, NMFS would have to assume that the commercial quota would be met, and then the projection of the recreational fishing season would have to be based upon -- Based considerate of that, or no?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Ms. Levy.

MS. LEVY: No, because the accountability measure is to ensure that the recreational season does not exceed the recreational ACL,

but that's only triggered if you go over both the rec ACL and the total, but then the monitoring and the accountability measure is directed only towards the recreational ACL and the recreational season.

We're going to have an ACL for the rec side, and so -- Well, if we don't, none of this works, and so assuming that, right, and so the only reason that the commercial plays into this, or the total, is to actually trigger the need to restrict recreational harvest, but, other than that, it doesn't impact the commercial side at all. You don't have to assume anything about the commercial side.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: I'm good, Mr. Chair. Andy answered my question.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Similarly, and I'm good.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. McDermott.

MR. MCDERMOTT: I mean, Andy pretty much said what I was going to say, but, I mean, if I understand this correctly, it's not going to limit the commercial sector in any way, and it's kind of like the red snapper deal we discussed, where, if there's some fish left over, and the total ACL wasn't exceeded, then the recreational sector wouldn't be limited in the following years, and so --

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. McDermott. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: So I'll make the motion in Action 3 to modify the language in Alternative 5 to read as follows, and then we need to add, before "average ACL", "recreational", or "average recreational ACL" I guess be better. After "ACL", "and total ACL".

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Mr. Strelcheck has motion on the board. Do we have a second? Dr. Frazer seconds. Any further discussion on the motion? Seeing none, is it -- No further discussion? Ms. Levy.

MS. LEVY: Well, just so we're clear, the highlighted word -- It's "recreational" that we added. It has always said "average", and so I just wanted to make sure that we're not confused.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Levy. Is Dr. Frazer okay with that?

MR. RINDONE: Mr. Chair, we call it a complex ACL throughout much of the document, and so that's how we'll reflect it in there. I mean, it doesn't really make a difference, but I'm just saying like the way that it will be written, to be commensurate with the rest of the document. Instead of "total ACL", it's "complex ACL". It means the same thing, but --

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Any other discussion? **Any opposition? Seeing none, the motion carries.** Dr. Frazer. Sorry. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: I just want to go back to Action 2. I'm not going to make a motion for a preferred, but, based on what I've heard from public testimony, it sounded like Alternative 2 is preferred by the commercial sector, and Alternative 3 or 4 was preferred by the recreational sector, which leaves, obviously, a lot of decisions for us, but we have, obviously, three different options.

One, obviously, would kind of maintain the status quo, in my view, and the other kind of equally reduces everyone, and the third is based on a recent time series for recreational, and so I'm curious if there's any appetite to select a preferred here.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: Remind me, but Alternative 3 is the only one that doesn't have a projected rec closure, and is that correct?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Rindone.

MR. RINDONE: Alternative 3 results in the highest recreational ACL, and so, based on the average landings, has the lowest probability of a closure, but it still would result in a closure about approximately half the time, based on the recent landings history.

Alternative 4, there was -- If you're looking table 2.3.1, which, again, would have to be tweaked a little bit, because of the change in the language that you guys just approved, Alternative 4 would still result in a closure most of the time, and then, of course, Alternative 2, the one has the lowest recreational ACL, would result in a closure all the time, despite the averaging, and so just understanding that we're going to have to update this to reflect the change in the language that you guys just made.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Rindone. Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Part of my thought -- I'm

not too comfortable making a preferred alternative recommendation today. I mean, I think Alternative 4 is kind of the equal cut across the board. I recognize that there could be some potential closures there, but, just based on the way this fishery has been historically set up, Alternative 3 would be a drastic change, and I'm not saying I'm not in favor of Alternative 3, but I, quite frankly, would like to get a little more feedback from the public on some of this, to be honest with you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Thank you, Dr. Sweetman. Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Yes, and I'm with C.J. on that, with Dr. Sweetman. I would like to hear a little more from both sides before we proceed with picking a preferred.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Ms. Levy.

MS. LEVY: So I would just encourage you, while you're thinking about it, and if you have to pick preferreds at the next meeting, to the extent we're dealing with an allocation here, right, in all circumstances, whether we keep the status quo or not, whatever you're going to choose, articulating how it's fair and equitable and reasonably calculated to promote conservation, and so just be thinking about that. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Levy. Is there any more discussion? I think -- What I think I understand is Dr. Sweetman and Mr. Sanchez and Mr. Strelcheck are okay not picking a preferred at this time, and so, with that being said, we'll move on. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just had a question about the flexibility measures discussion that was had in committee, and thinking about all the moving pieces right now, to make sure that we have that action in the right document, and so we're planning to bring a final action framework for the short-term solution for scamp in June, public hearing drafts of deepwater grouper, yet we have the flexibility measures currently in Amendment 58A. That will come much later, and so I guess my question is, timing-wise, is that the correct place administratively for that action?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: So we have -- Let me make sure I get the wording right. The shallow-water grouper framework is going to be first, deepwater second, and 58A, which is the long-term shallow-water action, and I think -- Yes, I think we have to stay the course.

We have to, I think, keep the 4 percent in this document, and then, if we want to remove that, we would remove it both for deepwater grouper and other shallow-water grouper in Amendment 58, because we have to remove both.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Dr. Froeschke.

DR. FROESCHKE: So, just to clarify, we would potentially put one additional action in 58A that would further modify the deepwater grouper buffer, and that's -- Operationally, that makes sense. We just need to add it at some point.

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes, and whether it's a new action or combined with the existing action, but I think it can be handled collectively in that amendment.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Good. Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We'll move on to the recreational initiative, Tab B, Number 6(a) through (d). Dr. Willy Goldsmith and Mr. Andrew Loftus reviewed the final report on the council's recreational initiative, including the recommendations put forth by the working group.

Following the summary of working group outcomes, Mr. Robert Hilliard gave an overview the recreational initiative working group's progress and recommended outcomes. Lastly, council staff provided a summary of the public engagement sessions held to-date.

Council staff presented a decision flow chart to perform to prompt the committee to systematically move through the working group recommendations. Points of consideration for the council in addressing working group recommendations should include the magnitude of the impacts of the recommendation and prioritization of working group recommendations for action.

A committee member commended the working group participants, consultants, and council staff for the effort put into the working group meetings and noted that the working group was able to capture the complexity in fisheries management and the multifaceted issues the council is faced with when managing fisheries.

Another committee member suggested that the working group recommendations be integrated into the council process, but are likely to take a few meetings for the council to prioritize those recommendations. A committee member suggested that rationale be

included in council-led decisionmaking to aid in the council's prioritization of working group recommendations. Additionally, it was suggested that an evaluation of necessary resources for each recommendation be used to inform the prioritization discussion.

A committee member suggested that council staff coordinate with the steering committee to expand on the working group member recommendations to be presented to the council in a later meeting. Additionally, it was suggested that, in reference to the decision flowchart, the first question should be whether the recommendation is within the council's purview, as it is likely that a few of the recommendations fall outside of the council's authority.

Another committee member suggested that, for those recommendations that do not fit within the purview of the council, the appropriate agency to recommend changes should be identified. A committee member suggested that those recommendations that contain a regulatory component be identified and those that do not contain regulatory components be prioritized over those that do, due to the additional workload associated with regulatory actions.

A committee member proposed that, based on the discussion, the committee suggest staff develop the appropriate tool, a flowchart, white paper, et cetera, to bring back to the council to aid in the prioritization.

Council staff weighed-in that timing for a staff-produced product is unknown, and that there should be a larger discussion at Full Council to determine if further steering committee involvement is necessary. On the evening of April 8, 2025, the council held a separate recreational initiative public engagement session, and a summary of that public engagement session will be provided at Full Council.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: I think maybe we should start trying to narrow this down a little bit. You know, we've had -- It was really a lengthy discussion on the process we went through on this, and the outreach efforts, and the meetings, and it was forty pages of explanation that we got, and it was like an hour-and-a-half.

I think, at this point, we should maybe make an effort to really boil this down to like some two-sentence items that we can consider, that are very specific, and we know exactly the issue that we're talking about, and we can, you know, maybe move past the process that we went through to get here and all this now, and we've all been well versed on that, and let's get right to those

topics, and narrow them down, and that would be my suggestion, because it's still --

There's still a lot of talk about ancillary things here, it seems like to me, and let's get down to some -- You know, six, and, you know, there were some things listed there, but let's narrow them down to some very specific items, so we can discuss them specifically, and if there's actionable things to do or not.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Walker. Is there an interest by the council to move forward on Mr. Walker's recommendations?

MR. WALKER: I'm not saying I have those very specific items yet, but that you -- That kind of goes to my point here, that it could take a long time to start, and so I think whatever we can do to try and narrow it down, and I'm not sure if that's something staff could do, or that we have to do item-by-item, and it could become a -- It looks like, to me, that it could become kind of a lengthy process. I know there were some listed, and there was like six items listed, but I don't -- I don't know that I'm ready to make a motion on that exact thing right.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Go ahead, Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I can start, and maybe I'll ask Emily to help me here, but the way I understood what the council wanted us to do is kind of take that flowchart, make the changes that were documented in the committee report, and then maybe hone-in even more, and you guys can prioritize some of those, and I'm going to have to think about how we would do that, either just ad hoc or if you want some other type of information to make those types of decisions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons. Okay. Emily is good?

MS. MUEHLSTEIN: Yes, and, I mean, I think we -- I have preliminarily run all of the recommendations of the working group through the flowchart, and, you know, we can separate them out into things that are more like education-based, things that are more scientific recommendations that might have to be made to the Science Center, and then really the things that are within the management purview of the council.

I think what we can do is, the next time that we bring this up in a Reef Fish Committee, we can sort of re-present all of the recommendations from the working group, with that filter, and really get you all to prioritize the management actions and decide which ones you want to take action on and sort of, you know, which

ones are most important and will take shorter and longer time periods, and so I think we can have that ready for you next time we've got some time on an agenda.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Emily. Captain Walker is good? Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: All right. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Summary of the February 2025 Gulf and South Atlantic Scientific and Statistical Committees Webinar, Tab B, Numbers 7(a) through (f). Dr. Mike Allen, the Gulf SSC chair, reviewed recommendations from the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs joint meeting in Tampa, Florida held in February 2025.

Dr. Allen began with reviewing the SSC's evaluation of the SEDAR 79 stock assessment of Southeastern U.S. mutton snapper, including catch limit recommendations. The council's Fishermen Feedback tool and the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's fishery performance report indicated neutral and positive sentiments for mutton snapper, respectively.

SEDAR 79 uses the State of Florida State Reef Fish Survey, or SRFS, in place of MRIP-FES for private vessels, with a terminal data year of 2023. Generally, the mutton snapper stock appears to be experiencing stable landings, increasing recruitment, and increasing fractions of older fish composing the stock's biomass.

The SSCs thought that the increase in the minimum size limit to eighteen inches total length, combined with the reduced recreational bag limit, had likely been positive for the stock. The SSCs concluded, based on the SEDAR 79 results, that the mutton snapper stock is not undergoing overfishing, nor is it overfished as of 2023.

This determination of stock status was based on the currently adopted spawning potential ratio (SPR) based proxy for the fishing mortality at maximum sustainable yield (FMSY) of 30 percent SPR. The SSCs selected an alternative approach from the South Atlantic Council's P* approach in its ABC control rule for mutton snapper, because of differences in how the uncertainty in OFL was characterized.

The SSCs used the geometric mean of the most recent five years of recruitment, 2019 through 2023, for informing OFL and ABC projections. The OFL is set at 30 percent SPR, and the ABC is set at 75 percent of 30 percent SPR for the years 2026 through 2028, as derived from the provided projections for 2024 through 2028. Projections are provided in the table below.

Captain Hubbard reviewed recommendations from the Reef Fish AP regarding the SEDAR 79 stock assessment for mutton snapper. The Reef Fish AP recommended that the annual catch limit (ACL) be set equal to the ABC for the Gulf and that other current management measures remain unchanged.

Dr. Allen recalled that, during a period of open discussion, the SSCs noted a clear need to collectively address the required precision to estimate steepness, and thus estimate MSY, for management advice. He noted also that there was a discussion of appropriate SPR proxy values, given a broad range of life history characteristics among fish species, for example, longevity, age at maturity, growth characteristics, and vulnerability to environmental perturbations.

The SSCs, by consensus, thought that a follow-up joint meeting to address these topics is essential to the consistent application of an agreed decision-making paradigm for present and future stock assessments.

A committee member pointed out that the estimated stock-recruit relationship for mutton snapper was poorly fit, despite allowing the model to estimate MSY. The Southeast Fisheries Science Center added that NMFS was working on a technical guidance document to inform best practices for estimating steepness.

The committee, and I so move, to form a working group comprised of members of the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs to collectively address the best practices for estimating steepness, and thus estimate MSY, for management advice, as well as a discussion of SPR proxy values, given a range of life history values among fish species. That motion carried without opposition.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We have a motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: All right.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, MR. Chair, and so just a little bit about timing of this. I haven't had a chance to speak with Mr. Carmichael on this specific request, and I don't think they're going to get some of this at their council until June, and so, sometime after that, we'll try to come up with a plan, and

hopefully some more funding stability, and we'll work with the chair and vice chair of the SSC and try to figure out a path forward on this effort.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons. Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: All right. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so Dr. Allen continued with the SSCs' evaluation of the SEDAR 96 stock assessment on the Southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper, including catch limit recommendation. The council's Fishermen Feedback tool and the South Atlantic Council's fishery performance report indicated positive sentiments for yellowtail snapper and northward range expansion.

SEDAR 96 uses SRFS in place of MRIP-FES for private vessels, with a terminal data year of 2023. Generally, the yellowtail snapper stock appears to be experiencing oscillatory, but, on average, consistent landings, increasing recruitment and catch per unit effort. Like mutton snapper, the estimate of steepness was considered too uncertain to use the estimate of MSY from the model by the SSCs.

The SSCs concluded that yellowtail snapper is estimated to not be overfished and not experiencing overfishing as of 2023. Like mutton snapper, this determination of stock status was based on the currently adopted SPR-based proxy for FMSY of F 30 percent SPR. Also, like mutton snapper, the SSCs selected an alternative approach from the South Atlantic Council's P* approach in its ABC control rule for yellowtail snapper, because of differences in how the uncertainty in the OFL is characterized.

The SSEs used the arithmetic mean of the most recent five years of recruitment, 2019 through 2023, for informing OFL and ABC projections. The yellowtail snapper OFL is set at F 30 percent SPR, and the ABC is set at 75 percent of F 30 percent SPR for the years 2026 through 2028, as derived from the provided projections for 2024 through 2028. Projections are provided in the table below.

Likewise, for the SEDAR 96 stock assessment of yellowtail snapper, Captain Hubbard said that the Reef Fish AP recommended that the Gulf ACL be set equal to the Gulf ABC and that other current management measures remain unchanged. The Reef Fish AP also noted the northward expansion of the yellowtail snapper stock in the Gulf.

The committee recommends, and I so move, to direct staff to develop a document that updates catch advice and jurisdictional

apportionments for mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper in the Gulf and South Atlantic, in cooperation with the South Atlantic Council. That motion carry to that opposition.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We have a motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: All right. Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Moving on, Dr. Allen added that the SSCs recommended updating the stock assessments for mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper at least every five years.

Dr. Allen summarized the Gulf SSC's evaluation of the SEDAR 88 stock assessment of Gulf red grouper, including discussions about status determination criteria and catch limit recommendations. The council's Fishermen Feedback tool indicated neutral sentiments for red grouper, while also noting issues with depredation by sharks.

SEDAR 88 uses SRFS in place of MRIP-FES for private vessels, with a terminal data year of 2022. There is no shore mode included for red grouper. The estimate of natural mortality was updated for red grouper, resulting in a 31 percent increase in that parameter, which greatly influenced the stock assessment in terms of red groupers productivity and projected biomass.

Landings for red grouper are lower in recent years. However, lower catch limits may have biased these recent landings data. The combined video survey indicates an increase in abundance since 2015. Like mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper, steepness was estimable in SEDAR 88. However, the SSC was not confident in the precision of that estimate, and thus did not use model-estimated MSY. Instead, the SSC decided to use a proxy value for MSY of F 40 percent SPR, in keeping with its past decisions on the matter of hermaphroditic groupers, i.e., gag, scamp, yellowmouth grouper, yellowedge grouper.

Red tide episodic mortality was modeled as a bycatch fleet for four red tide years of 2005, 2014, 2018, and 2021, with a selectivity by red tide being variable by age, or higher selectivity at lower ages. Recruitment is highly variable, but generally increasing since 2010.

The SSC found the SEDAR 88 stock assessment for Gulf red grouper to be consistent with the best scientific information available and appropriate for management advice. The SSC set the OFL at F

40 percent SPR for Gulf red grouper, based on the SEDAR 88 base model projections and a constant catch scenario for the fishing years 2027 through 2029, at 11.28 million pounds gutted weight, and the SSC set the ABC at 75 percent of F 40 percent SPR for 2027 through 2029 at 8.78 million pounds gutted weight.

A committee member was concerned about a default approach for the SSC to use an MSY proxy of F 40 percent SPR for all hermaphroditic groupers. The committee members thought red grouper were more resilient and productive and that perhaps a less conservative MSY proxy could be appropriate.

Captain Hubbard said that the Reef Fish AP recommended setting the ACL equal to the ABC for red grouper. The Reef Fish AP also recommended exploring an option for reallocation based on the updated red grouper landings in SRFS units as a secondary document to follow catch increases.

Regarding the 2025 recreational red grouper fishing season, the Reef Fish AP expressed concern about the continued negative social and economic effects of the recreational fishing season as currently projected, calling attention to the positive stock assessment results from SEDAR 88.

Given this, the Reef Fish AP recommended that the council explore every possible avenue for extending the recreational fishing season for red grouper for 2025, based on the results and catch projections from the SEDAR 88 stock assessment, to address the economic and social needs of the red grouper fishery.

The committee discussed a request for an emergency rule regarding modifications of red grouper catch limits. SERO said that there appear to be grounds for an emergency rule, based on economic circumstances, and that moving forward with such a management measure would need to become the top workload priority for the council and SERO to implement that change in a timely manner.

A committee member thought not allowing the expansion of the recreational red grouper fishing season would be detrimental to the recreational fleet, especially in June and July, when fishing for red snapper off Florida is also open. The committee member prioritized keeping June open for red grouper.

Regarding proposed management changes, the committee agreed that updated status determination criteria and catch limits would be considered. Regarding sector allocations, NOAA General Counsel reminded the committee that, the last time the underlying data units were updated to MRIP-FES, sector allocations were updated.

As such, sector allocation should be reconsidered, given the use of SRFS units. The committee noted that it may need to request updated OFL and ABC projections from the SSC which include 2026.

The committee recommends, and I so move, to direct staff to develop a document that provides management advice for red grouper. That motion carried without opposition.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We have a motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** I believe Dr. Froeschke would like to speak to the emergency rule here.

DR. FROESCHKE: Yes, and if you could put that slide presentation -- So we were just thinking, internally, about, if we were to do an emergency rule, what the catch limits might look like. We reached out to the Science Center, both for some bridging analysis, to understand what the impacts of the currency change might be, and then we reached out to Dr. Forrestal at the Science Center to update the projections beginning in 2025, and so we tried to do that.

I think that 3.81 number I'm looking at that there -- I'm not sure that's correct, and so I'm going to have to go back, and we're going to have to work on the bridging a little bit, to make sure that's correct, but the two right columns -- She provided three things really, but two -- There's a three-year average of constant catch from the projections, 2025 through 2027, a five-year, and then the yield stream. I didn't present that here, but the OFLs and ABCs -- The 10.64, for example, would be the three-year constant catch average OFL, beginning in 2025.

The ABC would be using the methodology that the SSC has previously used, the 8.28 million pounds. The SSC would have to review this and make a formal recommendation, and they would do that at the May meeting.

If they went with that process I'm proposing here, three options for the annual catch limit that we could consider for 2025, and so the 8.28, which would be the ACL equal to the ABC, which we've done before, and the Option 2 would be the ACL is 90 percent of the ABC, or Option 3 would be 75 percent.

We presented those, and there was some concern about flooding the market, potentially, and things like that on the commercial side, and so we're just throwing these up there for discussion, to get your all's feedback, if you want us to do something else.

Otherwise, we could propose these, and we're trying to do this quickly, because you -- Just, by the timing of it, there won't be a lot of time for council input later.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Froeschke. Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: I appreciate you looking at this and putting this together in such a quick manner, John. My general thoughts here are I'm a bit leaning towards the Option 2, 90 percent of the ABC, and it's still effectively a doubling of what the current ABC is, and so that's going to get us a significantly longer season, but just throwing in, I guess, a little bit of caution, based on, you know, it's a significant quota bump, and, you know, there were some assumptions made in that stock assessment, and so just kind of accounting for a little bit of management uncertainty here, but I still think -- It nearly doubles, and so I still think it's golden.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you. Dr. Sweetman. Do we have any other questions or comments for Dr. Froeschke? Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: I just want to kind of echo some of C.J.'s comments. I think it is a significant bump, and I think a little bit of -- Or incorporating some of the management uncertainty would be important here moving forward, whether it's 90 percent or 75 percent. I don't have a strong preference, right, and so it would be Option 2 or Option 3.

I'm all -- I appreciate the need to access this fishery, particularly in light of recent observations, but I'm not a big fan of big pendulum swings in management, and so -- But I'll defer to the folks around the table on how conservative they want to be.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: Considering Dr. Sweetman's comments there, I think I could get behind Option 2 there, with a bit of caution sewn in, but still getting the benefits of such a positive stock assessment. I mean, I haven't really -- I haven't seen those numbers, and so I haven't thought about it too much, but I would certainly get behind Option 2, or maybe Option 1, but, if the will of the council here is that leave a little caution in it, then 2 would be all right as well.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Osborne.

MR. OSBORNE: So, as you, Captain, are looking at this, and C.J., are you also looking at it with the caution of going with the

three-year or the five-year?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: So I think the three and five-year will be decided by the SSC, correct, and so I don't think that's really up to -- Yes.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, C.J. Any other discussion, or questions, for Dr. Froeschke? Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I think, procedurally though, I think you would want to go ahead and -- If you want to consider an emergency, go ahead and direct us generally to start work on that, pending the SSC review, for 2025, and I think, also, it would be helpful if maybe Mr. Strelcheck or Ms. Levy could talk a little bit about the emergency rule process, and when that would go in effect, potentially, and what that would mean for both sectors, and how long we could extend it, especially for new council members.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Thanks, Carrie. So we do have emergency rule guidelines that we can share around with the council. I had shared those with Carrie beforehand, and I think you'll want to, obviously, consider the rationale for that, in terms of justification.

In terms of emergency rules, you would request the Fisheries Service, and we would work with the council to develop an emergency rulemaking. That would have to be a vote today, in order to proceed with that. Once a rule is completed, and published, it's in effect for 180 days, and then it can be extended for an additional 186 days.

Red grouper is little complicated, because of the IFQ program, and so we would only be able to essentially implement the emergency rule from the time that we publish the rule until the end of 2025, December 31, because we can't release new quota in 2026 for the commercial IFQ program. That's not -- Because we can't pull it back, essentially, after that first six months of the year, and so that means that, after this emergency rule, the action that we just voted on would have to put in place a more permanent, longer-term catch level that would come in 2026 and beyond.

I can't, at this point, tell you how long the rulemaking process would take, but one of the aspects of emergency rulemaking is

you're essentially weighing the benefits of proceeding quickly with the impacts of not allowing for, you know, as detailed transparent public comment and input, right, and, with the emergency rulemaking process, as I mentioned, there's a lot of -- You know, a number of things you can use to justify it.

I think the biggest, and most appropriate, based on my review, is that the emergency would be justified based on economic grounds, to prevent significant direct economic loss or preserve a significant economic opportunity that otherwise might be foregone, and there's also aspects related to social communities and preventing significant community impacts or conflicts between users, and so I think we're on solid ground in terms of justification, and so I'm happy to answer any questions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: So, Andy is -- Are all three of these options viable, and would selection of any of them make any difference in the likelihood of passing this rule, or are they all acceptable?

MR. STRELCHECK: With the caveat that none of them have been approved by the SSC at this point, right, the scientific advice is consistent with the prior SSC recommendations, and so I don't see any issues with them, as long as it's approved by the SSC.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: I'm trying to take this in for a landing here with a motion, and so I'm going to work on this one on the fly, Bernie. **Okay, and I might need some help from -- Okay. Here we go. Sorry. To direct staff to develop an emergency rule for 2025 for red grouper, based on the results of SEDAR 88 stock assessment, and pending approval for the SSC in May. Then I'm going to add, additionally, set the ABC or -- Sorry. Set the ACL to 90 percent of the ABC.** I think that's okay.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Sweetman. Do we have a second? Mr. Walker seconds. Mr. Walker.

MR. RINDONE: Pending SSC approval of updated projections, or updated catch projections, in May 2025, since it's going to be based on a new set of OFL and ABC recommendations, and so updated catch projections. That's fine enough.

DR. SWEETMAN: Yes, and good call.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Dr. Sweetman is good with the changes, and

is Mr. Walker?

MR. WALKER: I just wonder, and does it need to include some of that specific verbiage of economic grounds and social grounds, to help it pass, or is that not necessary?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: So I would first recommend, instead of "to direct staff", "to request NMFS to develop", because we're the ones that will do the emergency rulemaking, and I think, by doing that, the council can essentially write us a letter and explain the rationale and reasoning, including the economic grounds for the decision.

DR. SWEETMAN: Yes, and I'm good with that.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: I just want to circle back to the comments I made originally about the Option 3 was at 75 percent, and I don't feel strongly one way or the other, but the comments were based on the public hearing, or the public testimony, that I heard about dumping a lot of fish potentially on the commercial sector at the end of the year, but, when we actually do the amendment, we can -- You know, this is only going to stay for one year, and so I'm good with it. I just wanted to let people know why I made, you know, those comments earlier.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. I'm going to go back to Dr. Sweetman. Are you good with the motion the way it's written?

DR. SWEETMAN: Yes, sir, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Is Captain Walker good, as the seconder?

MR. WALKER: Yes, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: It's seconded. Okay. Is there more discussion? Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Just that it needs to be a roll call vote.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Andy. Is there any further discussion on the motion? Not seeing any, okay, and we'll do a roll call vote. Dr. Simmons.

I will read the motion in before we take our vote. It's to request NMFS develop an emergency rule for 2025 for red grouper based on

the results of the SEDAR 88 stock assessment and pending SSC approval of updated catch projections in May of 2025. Additionally, to set the ACL at 90 percent of the ABC. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Dr. Overton.

DR. OVERTON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: General Spraggins.

MR. BURRIS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Geeslin.

MR. GEESLIN: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. McDermott.

MR. MCDERMOTT: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Broussard.

MR. BROUSSARD: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Captain Frady.

MR. FRADY: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: No.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Osborne.

MR. OSBORNE: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Captain Walker.

MR. WALKER: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Williamson.

MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Dugas.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: The motion carried sixteen to one.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. The motion carries, and thank you, Dr. Simmons. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: For those that haven't been around the table and gone through an emergency rulemaking, I always like to explain this, and so, one, I'm in support of what you just passed, but, in order to preserve the Fisheries Service's ability to move forward or not move forward this action, I'm advised to vote no if there's going to be a unanimous vote on an emergency rulemaking, right, and so it just preserves our authority to decide what we should move forward or not. Our intent is to move forward here.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Andy, for that explanation. We're going to move on, I believe, Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and so we will move on to the Summary of Reef Fish Advisory Panel Discussions and Recommendations, Tab B, Number 5(a). The Reef Fish AP discussed data collection for the headboat fleet in the Gulf and recommended that council encourage the Southeast Fishery Science Center and NMFS to seek all available means for continued funding in the Southeast Region Headboat Survey, as to continue and protect this

key data stream.

Captain Hubbard recalled general discussion about recreational data collection and strongly recommended that the council request that NMFS, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, and the five Gulf states expedite the requirement for a private recreational federal fishing permit to fish in the Exclusive Economic Zone, and states can require similar language to their state fishing licenses in lieu of a federal permit, expedite implementation of the revised for-hire SEFHIER program, and create and implement a similar required electronic data reporting program for the private recreational fishery.

The committee recounted a previous letter to NMFS requesting additional information about the headboat survey, noting its importance to fishery data collection. A committee member asked about any limitation with including the headboats in question into the newly-proposed Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting Program.

Another committee member thought that doing so would still result in the loss of the current time series for the existing headboat survey. SERO cautioned that continuing funding for one program, considering expected budget reductions, would likely be to the detriment of another program, and that decision would need to be carefully considered.

The committee noted that it is not privy to all programs that are being considered for cuts or elimination in the proposed NMFS budget. A committee member did not want to imply that funding for another program should be reduced, but rather that funding for the headboat survey should continue.

Draft Framework: Other Shallow- Water Grouper Catch Limits, Tab B, Number 9, council staff presented on the draft framework action to modify the catch limits and recreational fishing season for the shallow-grouper complex. This document is being considered to reduce fishing mortality on shallow-water grouper species ahead of the development and implementation of Amendment 58A, which considers modifications to other shallow-water grouper management measures.

Captain Hubbard reviewed the Reef Fish AP’s recommendation to create a new Alternative 6 in Action 2 and selecting it as the preferred alternative. This new Alternative 6 would open the fishing season from April 1 through May 31, close the fishing season in June and July, and then reopen to fishing August 1 through December 31, or when the fishery is projected to close.

However, upon hearing council staff's review of the Figure 2.2.1, Captain Hubbard noted that reopening in August with a new Alternative 6, that is not currently in the document, would likely cause the season to be closed before the end of the year. A committee member concurred that Alternative 5 would be preferable to the proposed new alternative proffered by the Reef Fish AP.

Another committee member stated that the public comment would be useful before selecting the preferred alternative. He expressed some reservations about a split season with Alternative 5 and noted that Alternative 3 appeared to provide a long single season and would avoid some of the discards during summer months.

A committee member inquired how long the framework action would be in effect, and the council staff responded that it would be in effect for 2026.

The committee recommends, and I so move, in Action 2 to make Alternative 3 the preferred. Alternative 3 establish a recreational fixed closed season for the other shallow-water grouper complex. The recreational season would open July 1 and close when the recreational portion of the total ACL is expected to be met under the preferred alternative in Action 1. Action 1, Alternative 2, closed January 1 through June 30, open July 1 through December 31. Action 1, Alternative 3, closed January 1 through June 30, closed August 18 through December 31, and open July 1 through August 17. Action 1, Alternative 4, closed January 1 through June 30, August 25 through December 31, and open June 1 through August 24. That motion carried without opposition.

DR. BANKS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We have a committee motion on the board. Any discussion? **Seeing none, any opposition? Seeing none, the motion passes unanimously.**

DR. FRAZER: All right, and so the committee members recognized that Alternative 4 in Action 2 provided a much shorter season than Preferred Alternative 3 and should not be further considered.

The committee recommends, and I so move, in Action 2 to remove Alternative 4 to Considered but Rejected. Alternative 4 is establish a recreational fixed closed season for the other shallow-water grouper complex. The recreational season would open September 1 and close when the recreational portion of the total ACL is expected to be met under the preferred alternative in Action 1. Action 1, Alternative 2, closed January 1 through August 31, open September 1 through December 31. Action 1, Alternative 3, closed January 1 through August 31, closed October 28 through

December 31, and open September 1 through October 27. Action 1, Alternative 4, closed January 1 through August 31, closed December 21 through December 31, and open September 1 through December 20. The motion carried without opposition.

DR. BANKS: Thank you. We have another committee motion on the board. Any discussion? **Seeing none, any opposition? Seeing none, the motion passes.**

DR. FRAZER: All right, and so we will move on to the Presentation and Discussion on the Twenty-Fathom Recreational Seasonal Closure for Shallow-Water Grouper, Tab B, Number 10. Council staff reviewed a presentation on the history and status of the twenty-fathom recreational seasonal closure for shallow-water grouper.

The committee member acknowledged the stock status for red grouper and wanted to see what the fishing season projections under the newly-proposed SEDAR 88 catch limits were prior to deciding. The committee member also noted that removing the twenty-fathom closure would be a form of deregulation. Another committee member agreed, but did not want to remove the closure at the expense of fishing season duration.

Captain Hubbard recalled that the Reef Fish AP recommended that the council remove the twenty-fathom seaward closure for the recreational sector in February through March. He thought compliance with the regulation was very inconsistent and is often misunderstood by recreational anglers. He added that, in his experience, the twenty-fathom closure resulted in increased discard mortality for smaller red grouper during February and March.

The committee considered including an action for the removal of the twenty-fathom closure in the requested red grouper management measures document. NOAA General Counsel asked about how discards, especially for gag, might change if this regulation is removed. Council staff replied that discard date are not spatially explicit. Captain Hubbard added that he did not think discards of gag would increase. A committee member agreed, noting personal experience with gag and red grouper. Final Action: Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limit, Tab B, Numbers 11(a) through (c).

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Hold on, Dr. Frazer. Mr. Rindone.

MR. RINDONE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We kind of need some direction here about what to do with this twenty-fathom closure. So, you know, are we going to do it as a separate document, or are we going to try to roll it into what we're doing with red grouper, or like

what are you guys -- Not the emergency rule, but the other document. Like is this -- Where do you guys want to do this?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Again, I mean, there's a couple things that come to mind for me. I think it makes sense to roll it into the longer-term amendment, right, and I think that's my preference.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: No, and I just got my bearings straight. As long as it's not going to slow down the red grouper emergency rule.

MR. RINDONE: All right. So noted, and it will be added there.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Rindone. Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: All right. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and so we'll move on to Final Action: Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limit, Tab B, Numbers 11(a) through (c). Council staff reviewed public comments received regarding the proposed modification to the lane snapper minimum size limit. Staff then presented a final action draft of the document and reviewed changes from the last draft.

SERO staff expressed interest in further exploring the economic analyses, which may be overestimating the economic effects of the proposed action, given that lane snapper is not commonly a primary target on the reef fish fishing trips. The committee then reviewed the proposed codified text.

The committee recommends, and I so move, to recommend the council approve Framework Action: Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limits and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the changes -- To make the necessary changes in the document. The council chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate. That motion carried without opposition.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We have a motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? Not seeing any, okay, and it's final action here, and we'll do a roll call vote. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Williamson.

MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Captain Walker.

MR. WALKER: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Captain Frady.

MR. FRADY: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Overton.

DR. OVERTON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: General Spraggins.

MR. BURRIS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Geeslin.

MR. GEESLIN: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. McDermott.

MR. MCDERMOTT: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Osborne.

MR. OSBORNE: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Broussard.

MR. BROUSSARD: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Dugas.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: The motion carried unanimously, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Can I just say one thing about the economic?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Yes, please.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Staff will work with the Regional Office staff on the economic effects that was discussed during committee, and, if necessary, we can always have the chair take a look at that before we transmit it.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Everyone is good? Thank you. Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We'll move on to the Presentation of Greater Amberjack Flowchart to Identify Decision Points for Regional Management, Tab B, Number 12. Council staff presented background information and decision points to consider when evaluating options for state or regional management for greater amberjack.

Council staff summarized the history of management for greater amberjack and discussed recreational landings by state and by mode. Staff noted that amendments that implemented state management for red snapper would provide valuable information, should the council decide to pursue state or regional management for greater

amberjack.

Staff discussed the main decision points and issues the council would have to consider, including sector separation, maintaining the recreational sector as is or establishing separate private angling and federal for-hire components, management units, considering state or regional management, apportionment method and determining the allocation of greater amberjack between the management units, delegation or conservation equivalency, and accountability measures.

Committee members indicated that the greater amberjack count and the next greater amberjack stock assessment would inform future regional management discussions and noted that the upcoming greater amberjack season is expected to be very short.

SERO indicated that, before the implementation of state management for red snapper, the federal recreational seasons were getting shorter, while state seasons were increasing in duration. He noted that exempted fishing permits could be an option for greater amberjack, provided that their purpose is clearly specified and the information expected to be gained is valuable. He noted that determining a practicable allocation approach for greater amberjack will be key.

In response to a question on data calibration, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center indicated that a portion of the Inflation Reduction Act, or IRA, funds is planned to be used to run different data collection systems side-by-side, which would facilitate landings calibration when needed.

A committee member reiterated that the limited greater amberjack ACL would make allocation decisions challenging. The committee member -- Or the committee indicated its intent to move forward with an amendment and asked whether a decision tool could be built. Staff noted that building a decision tool would be feasible. Staff suggested that the committee discuss some of the decision points presented and start to determine the contours of the regional management approach to consider.

A committee member inquired about the difference between conservation equivalency and delegation. NOAA General Counsel replied that conservation equivalency requires upfront approval by the agency, while delegation can be suspended if the agency determines that the terms of the delegation are not met.

Committee members and staff noted that more guidance to staff was needed to develop an amendment. Committee members discussed and

concluded that sector separation would be included. Committee members indicated that, in no particular order, the amendment should include actions addressing sector separation, management units, apportionment method, delegation or conservation equivalency management, and accountability measures.

A committee member suggested that, rather than a document, staff could provide an extended outline or presentation to support the next committee discussion on this issue.

Review of Return 'Em Right Science, Tab B, Numbers 13(a) through (d), Mr. Charlie Robertson, Return 'Em Right Coordinator, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, presented a programmatic overview of science and monitoring funded by Return 'Em Right.

A committee member inquired about the Return 'Em Right funding towards this SRHS. Mr. Robertson replied that the Return 'Em Right provided funding to the SRHS to aid in inconclusion of Return 'Em Right-specific questions and has contributed funding in each year to continue that support.

Another committee member followed-up asking if Return 'Em Right would have additional funding to support the ongoing efforts of the Southeast Region Headboat Survey, given the potential for cancellation of the survey. Mr. Robertson replied that is possible, but allocation of funding would require alignment with the program's ongoing goals and outcomes.

A committee member asked about the estimate of depredation rates while using descending devices. Mr. Robertson replied that those estimates were not included in the presentation, but it is likely that they could be acquired. He noted also that the rate of depredation is challenging to calculate, given the need to directly observe depredation to derive an estimate.

Dr. Allen reviewed recommendations from the SSC regarding research conducted with funding from the RER program. The SSC recommended continuing efforts to quantify the effects of angler education on fish survival following release, with specific examples found in the SSC report to expand upon additional data sources to reduce dead discards and improve stock assessment data streams.

Mr. Nick Haddad, Florida Sea Grant, then provided an education and outreach update to brief the committee about continuing awareness efforts for Return 'Em Right. A committee member asked about the cost per release kit, and Mr. Haddad replied that the kit is not commercially available, but, if it was, the total cost would be approximately $100.

Lastly, council staff briefed the committee on the expiration of the DESCEND Act on December 31, 2025 and possible implications for the Gulf relative to Return 'Em Right and the use of descending devices when fishing for reef fish species in federal waters.

A committee member proposed requesting staff to develop a document to replace and enhance the DESCEND Act. Another committee member commented that Florida and Texas have a requirement to use a descending device if the fish is experiencing barotrauma, and this may be something to consider.

A committee member indicated support of replacing the DESCEND Act, but highlighted that there may be some complexities in implementing new regulatory components, given executive orders that focus on deregulation. Another committee member inquired as to whether the proposed document would include an alternative with an enforcement component and a requirement that a descending device be rigged and ready for use on a vessel.

A committee member concurred that the document should explore a suite of reasonable alternatives, to include whether venting tools will be required or are to be replaced by descending devices. Council staff suggested that, if the DESCEND Act is replaced, it would include a reasonable range of alternatives, to include allowing the option for requiring either a venting tool or descending device.

The committee recommends, and I so move, to direct staff to develop a document that replaces and enhances the DESCEND Act. That motion carried without opposition.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We have a committee motion on the board. Is there any discussion on the motion? Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: It's not really related to the motion, and I'm fine with that, but I think just a point of discussion here, especially for outreach. Going forward with this, if there's a way that we can figure out how to tie in the benefits of the descending device use to the outcome of a stock assessment, and, in other words, the reduction of F, or fishing mortality, that value that goes into the stock assessment from reducing discards, and explain that to anglers, the average angler out there, with some sort of diagram, and I don't know, but outreach type of thing, as we go forward with this, and I think making that connection for anglers, as to the value of using this thing, would be highly important.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Schieble. I think it's been noted.

Is there any other discussion on the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion? Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: I would like to bring something to the council's attention in relation to this, with Return 'Em Right, and so I'm also going to throw a motion up, Bernie.

Back in the fall, it was requested that, with Open Ocean TIG, which funds Return 'Em Right, that they come in November to give us an update, which was prior to a public comment period that was open for them on the expansion of Return 'Em Right. Due to late notice, and lack of time on our very crowded agenda, we did not receive that notification, or that presentation.

As you noticed in this council meeting, the presentation was also pulled, and so the council has not had the ability to comment on how Return 'Em Right might expand, and so there's been very few details on how Return 'Em Right is going to expand. However, there has been some suggestion that that money moves to the South Atlantic, in the order of millions of dollars.

This is the fifteenth year after the BP oil spill, which is how Return 'Em Right is funded through Open Ocean TIG, and so, with the discussions happening around this table about deepwater grouper and other species, I would like to -- Bernie, if you'll pull my motion up that I emailed you, or I guess Tom technically emailed you, and I modified it.

I would like the council to write a letter directing, or encouraging, Return 'Em Right to keep that money here in the Gulf, particularly focusing on some of these deepwater grouper species.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, and we'll give Bernie a moment to pull Dr. Banks' motion up. Go ahead, Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: So, if I can get a second, I'll expand it a little more.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay we have a second from Mr. Walker. Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: So this presentation was actually given to the South Atlantic, and they have written a letter of support, along with South Carolina, to move this money over there. Like I said, there's extensive conversations around this table about reef species that still need some research done, as well as conservation efforts, as we're talking about splitting complexes and all sorts of stuff.

If you look at their preferred, Return 'Em Right's preferred, alternative, they're discussing expanding into highly migratory species, coastal migratory species, and then outside of the Gulf. Again, that money was dictated because of an oil spill here in the Gulf, and it should be here to conserve our species, and I'm happy to read it in the record.

My motion is to draft a letter to the Open Ocean Trustees, Fish and Water Column Invertebrates Restoration Coordinator and Return 'Em Right project management team emphasizing the importance of focusing the fourth phase of this draft restoration plan on restoring the living marine resources and their services that were injured by the spill, particularly HMS and deepwater grouper.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. We have a motion on the board by Dr. Banks, and it was seconded by Mr. Walker. Is there any more discussion? Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: So a question, Kesley. This doesn't take away from the Gulf, and it just expands it to the South Atlantic, correct?

DR. BANKS: Yes, and so they are talking about expanding to the South Atlantic, yes, but at $66 million, and there's still active research that needs to be done here, and, out of the first thirty, four projects were funded, and I don't think we should be expanding to the South Atlantic just yet. I think we need to focus a few more things here before we start.

DR. SWEETMAN: But there's an extra pot of money that would cover that expansion, and so it's like not taking away from any proposed research projects that would come forward in the Gulf, and, from my perspective, I don't think I can support this. I will admit it even caught the South Atlantic Council off-guard, because they did not have a say in this, because it was just a proposal that was accepted, and thought to be funded there, and it was just kind of brought forward to the South Atlantic Council.

I guess I understand where you're coming from, about resources should be dedicated to the Gulf, but I'm in favor of dealing with barotrauma and best fishing practices, regardless of whether it's in the Gulf or the South Atlantic or, quite frankly, the Antarctic, you know, and like it should be done.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: I have Dr. Frazer and then Mr. Geeslin.

DR. FRAZER: Thanks for the comments, and I had to walk out for a second, and so I apologize if I repeat something that might have

been said. You know, I think, you know, we're fortunate that we had a fair number of resources to address a number of outstanding data issues in the Gulf of Mexico, and I -- As an individual, I'm not privy to where the funds come from necessarily that might be supplemental in nature, C.J., and I don't know that.

My original concern about funds that were being appropriated through the Open Ocean TIG, right, is that they be focused specifically on the Gulf of Mexico, and on federally-managed species, or issues that are relative to federal management.

I did have an opportunity to talk with Jamie about this a little bit, and try to get some explanation of why things might be moving, or effort might be placed in the South Atlantic, and what he indicated to me was that, hey, there's a number of highly migratory species, for example, and there's, you know, not clear, you know, definitive boundaries between those species and what goes on in the Gulf and Atlantic, and some of that information will be transferable, and helpful, and I understood that.

I guess some of the things -- Without understanding where that supplemental funding is coming from, there was a lot of effort as well on species that I would consider to be managed shallow-water and state, under state resources, right, and I just -- For me, it's such a challenge, and a struggle, to try to keep limited resources in the Gulf of Mexico, and I just -- I think this letter perhaps just emphasizes that it's a significant issue for us, moving forward, and it doesn't commit, or obligate, anybody to making any decision, and it's just expressing an opinion that we would like to have some resources, and appropriately allocated.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. Mr. Geeslin.

MR. GEESLIN: To that point, Dr. Frazer, I guess my concern, or, even more, confusion, is that source of funding. I wouldn't suggest that I'm concerned about the merit of extending Return 'Em Right into the into the South Atlantic, as I think we've recognized and, you know, acknowledged the benefits of that program and to you know the fisheries within the Gulf of America, and extending that over just seems like the right thing to do.

I just -- If this is in fact supported funded, and directed by that Open Ocean TIG and the trustees, I would just want to make sure that, even from a state perspective, that our trustees that are representing from the states are very clear, and are aware, that these funds could be redirected outside of the area of the -- You know, the affected waters within the Gulf, and so that's where I'm a little puzzled, and concerned, and confused here, is

really the source of the funds and wanting to the intent of keeping those -- You know, those funding streams directed at the affected area within the Gulf.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Geeslin. I have Mr. Anson, and then a few more.

MR. ANSON: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so, Dr. Banks, you had mentioned, a little bit during your explanation of the motion, that they were supposed to have a public comment period, and did they have that public comment period, and I have a couple more questions and comments, too.

DR. BANKS: So, yes, and that public comment -- Let me pull up the timeline, and so, yes, that public comment did happen. Due to hurricanes in the fall, council staff and offices, along with state, federal, and local agencies, were unable to participate. In October 21, they -- On October 21, they notified us that they wanted to present at our council meeting in November. The draft plan went up on the 30th, and we had our meeting, where we did not discuss this, and it closed on the 16th of December.

MR. ANSON: All right. Thank you, and then, just echo some of the prior comments Dr. Frazer had made, you know, I too would be concerned about the source of funds, and, actually, Mr. Geeslin mentioned that as well, and that, if they were directly as a result of the Deepwater Horizon, you know, lawsuit and litigation, then I would feel very strongly that those funds need to be in the Gulf, remain in the Gulf, as well.

Then, just to help reiterate that point, particularly since we're talking about HMS, and I understand that some of the information that's gathered could still be applied and used in other areas, for the same species potentially, but just to help underscore -- I would just make a friendly suggestion that you add, after "the", and before "living marine", add "the Gulf's living marine resources" into the motion.

DR. BANKS: I will accept that. I think Emily is bouncing.

MS. MUEHLSTEIN: I just wanted to clarify that the funds for this expansion are not of supplementary nature, right, and they are actually funds that originated from the spill, and they are the still original pot of money from the spill, and so there isn't some extra source of funding. This was the stuff that was intended to restore the living marine resources in the Gulf of Mexico, and I did receive confirmation of that, and so that's the first thing.

The second thing is I just wanted to clarify it looks like, in this motion, you're specifying HMS and deepwater grouper specifically, and I wanted to question whether or not you wanted to expand that to deepwater species, right, and we do have some other deepwater fisheries that we manage, and so that might be a friendly amendment to consider.

DR. BANKS: Sure. **Change "grouper" to "species" for me, please, Bernie, and I'm looking at Ed, to see if you're good with those changes, as the seconder.**

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, and the seconder has approved the motion, and, Mr. Walker, did you have your hand up?

MR. WALKER: I did, and I was going to say that I'm not familiar enough with where these funds are, and how they're distributed, to really make a strong recommendation, although Emily's input just helped, and so I would speak in favor of it, because it's just a letter that expresses that, hey, we at the Gulf Council would like you to consider keeping Gulf money in the Gulf, and I don't think there's anything wrong with a council that manages the Gulf asking that. It doesn't direct them, and it's not a motion mandating anything, and it's just a little saying, hey, we would like to keep our stuff home here, and so I'm in favor of the motion.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Walker. Is there any other discussion on the motion? Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Yes, and I apologize, Dr. Banks, and I'm not totally aware of the structure of the trustees and all that stuff, but is it -- Is it the Open Ocean trustees, or is it the Open Ocean Fish and Water Column Invertebrates, or is it -- Is it the group, and so you have the trustees, and so it's the state reps and the federal reps and such, and so I just want to make sure that it's appropriate that it would cover not only a coordinator, which may be a federal trustee, but it would also go to the states, and the states would also be notified of the of the letter, the individual state trustees.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: I'm going to have to look to Emily on the coordinator portion. I've always just seen it as Open -- As this here, and so that's why it's like that. I'm happy to add anything in. If you would like a copy sent to the states, let's go.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Emily.

MS. MUEHLSTEIN: So the Open Ocean trustees consist of people from NOAA, from the EPA, from the USDA, and so there is a number of folks. I think -- I believe, and, Tom, you're going to have to help me with this, and we thought that they were state personnel, but I think, after doing a dive on this, there were not state folks that were part of this, and so it seems like it's a bunch of folks that are sort of more federal in nature.

DR. FRAZER: Yes, and I think, again, there's -- The federal agencies are the primary one for this particular TIG, and there are others, right, that involve -- That include state representatives.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Emily and Dr. Frazer. Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: I'll read the edited motion. **It's to draft a letter to the Open Ocean Trustees Fish and Water Column Invertebrates Restoration Coordinator and Return 'Em Right project management team emphasizing the importance of focusing the fourth phase of the draft restoration plan on restoring the Gulf's living marine resources and their services that were injured by the spill, particularly HMS and deepwater species.**

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you Dr. Banks. **Is there any opposition to the motion?**

DR. SWEETMAN: I'll abstain.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: One abstention. Two. Andy. Okay. **The motion carries with two abstentions.** Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: All right. Well, that will move us on to Other Business, and the first item of other business is the Louisiana state charter and federal for-hire red snapper 2024 trips and landings, and I believe that that's Mr. Schieble.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Bernie is going to pull up the -- It's a three-slide presentation, real short, that's in the briefing book, and then I can go through it real quickly with you guys. Essentially, as you've heard some of the public comments over the past few meetings here, we've had -- I'll keep going while we're finding it. There it is.

So we've had a lot of public comments, over the past few meetings, regarding how the structure of our state charter season in Louisiana overlaps, to some extent, in the federal for-hire season.

Last year, as you remember, we had an early start date in April, and so the state charters were allowed to start at the same time as the private recreational anglers for their season.

They were also allowed to have a four-fish bag limit, and fish seven days a week, and then the federal for-hire season kicked off in June, like normal, and then they had to have a two-fish bag limit, as per the federal regulations, and so, you go to Slide Number 2, Bernie, please.

These two sets of graphs here pretty much explain everything. On the left side, you'll see federal and state charter trips for red snapper from 2018 to 2024, and then the graphic on the right is landings for the same time series, and then that data is presented in tables associated with the graph as well.

It's the exact same data, but, obviously, there's going to be some differences interannually, because of the length of the season, and so the number of days open is the right-hand component of the table, and so it shows you that the state season, for example last year, was 151 days, and the federal season, including the reopening, was 132 days, and so fairly similar, except the start dates were different, but, the previous year, the state season was 220 days, and the federal season was its longest in the time series up to that point of eighty-five days, but, graphically -- The graph above that, if you look at the state charters, the gold color, and then the -- I'm sorry.

The federal for-hire is the purple, and it's supposed to be purple, but it's blue. It's the blue color, and there's a difference every year, you know, as far as the season length goes, but, also, you can see that the state charters have had increased numbers of trips in the past two seasons, because of the season length, and so necessarily that's going to increase.

However, in 2023, it doesn't seem to have affected the federal for-hire season, which had the highest number of trips that they've had in the time series, and, moving over to landings, it's very similar, and so you can also look at the landings graphic, in the bottom-right, and the landings for 2023, and the eighty-five-day season, were the highest they had for all the time series for the federal for-hire fleet.

Then you can also see that the charter landings or up, but they were about equivalent to what they were back in 2019, but the highest landings for the state charter season was this past year, and it's also an artifact of having a long season, a 151-day season, for them, and so I think the telling graphic is the next

slide, and so, Bernie, could you dance to the next one please?

Again, we have number of trips on the left, and we have landings on the right, and this is for the entire time series, but you can see the gold bars over on the left-hand side of the graphic, and number of trips, and they go up as the state charter season starts, and then you can see when the federal for-hire season kicks in, with the June start date, and then those number of trips go up, but they are exponentially higher than the state charter season.

The state charter trips tend to go down during the federal for-hire season, and so they're reduced, but it doesn't seem that there's an effect, year after year, on the federal for-hire season from the state charter season, and you can see that plainly the number of trips is exponentially higher than the number of state trips, even though they have a higher bag limit and an earlier start.

The same thing for landings. If you go to the graphic on the right, you can see the state charter landings, in the gold color, and they kick off when the state season starts. They go up, and then the federal for-hire season kicks in, with its start date, and then the landings for the state charter season go down proportionally, and that makes sense, and so I would say that, looking at this graphic, the state charter season is not impacting the landings of the federal for-hire season, as the landings for the state charter season go down.

Yesterday, in public comment, if you recall, we heard Captain Dylan Hubbard from Florida state that the federal for-hire snapper season needs the longest season possible, is what his quote was, and then, from the other side of the Gulf, we heard Captain Johnny Williams say that we need to change the federal for-hire season to April 1 to May 31, and then, in the middle of the Gulf, we heard the head of our charter boat association, Richard Fischer, advocate for essentially the federal for-hire season should be run under state management.

Moving to that level, and, Bernie, I sent you an email with a motion, and, while you're pulling that up, I'll talk about it a little bit, and so I'll read the motion, while Bernie is pulling that up and getting it on the board for us.

It's to direct staff to begin work on a document to modify **recreational management of red snapper by delegating management authority for the federal for-hire component of the recreational sector to the respective five Gulf states. Proposed management measures should include an option for individual states to opt out**

of delegation of federal for-hire management authority. The federal for-hire component in those states that opt out will continue to be managed under the federal status quo. If I can get a second on that, we could talk about it. Mr. Broussard.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. We have a motion on the board. Is there a second? Mr. Broussard. Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: So I think, you know, going forward here with what the recreational initiative outcomes, or final reports were, that we should look into further state management for things. This seems to segue with that as well, and fit right in. Also, as I've shown in our red snapper landings updates on a regular basis, that, under the LA Creel system, our state, Louisiana, can monitor the federal for-hire landings on a weekly basis, and so it's not a wave basis.

For example, this past year, if we were monitoring the federal for-hire component, we would have kept fishing at the end of August, with our federal for-hire allocation, and moved through and had probably an endpoint around somewhere around Labor Day, maybe, or a little bit afterwards, based on landings, instead of a stop and a restart, like we had, because we had to wait on data from a two-month wave, and so I think the federal for-hire fleet would probably have rather had that course of action, instead of a stop and start.

Also, secondarily, as a reminder, we currently have two other states that are on the same data reporting system within the Gulf right now, and I think, with SRFS, Texas, and three states on LA Creel, the states could handle this, and have probably more responsive data than we currently have, in order to move forward with this, and so I'll stop at that.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Schieble. We have a question from Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: So this -- I believe this would have to have each state allocation developed for the for-hire industry, which I'm not in favor of, and I'll leave it at that. I speak against the motion.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Sanchez, and then Dr. Sweetman.

MR. SANCHEZ: Yes, and I'm going to speak against it as well. Having gone through sector separation, as a former member of this council, and the states fought it the whole time, and I would not be in favor of this until we let the very groups that fought for

this for years, CFA, and Destin Charter Boat Association, et cetera, et cetera, all come together, and the Alabama Charter Boat Association, and weigh-in on this and say yes or no, and so I'm going to say no right now.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, Mr. Sanchez. Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think just one component that could be challenging, and at least I'll just highlight some of my concerns, and it's just relative to -- I think you offered the flexibility of an opt-out in there, and so there's that, but this is not just like -- For Florida at least, with the highest amount of for-hire charter boats, it's not a simple -- This would require some significant funds to add on to the State Reef Fish Survey, in order to accommodate for this, and I'm not sure, in the current fiscal climate, that that's something that the state legislature would take on, and not something that we could control, and so I do got some concerns, just questions in my head, basically, that I can't really answer right now.

I mean, just to what Ed and Tom said, or what Ed and John were saying there -- Since you brought this up, I've gotten like ten text messages about people just -- Charter captains saying no to this, but, you know, it's a document, and -- Yes, and I would have to wrap my head around this a little more.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Just picking up on what's been said already, I mean, I agree that this kind of addresses some of the concerns, or wishes, recommendations, that came out of the recreational initiative, as far as, you know, additional opportunities for state management and flexibility within the recreational community as a whole.

You know, previously, when we had the option, as we were going through Amendment 50 discussions, we had polled our charter, federally-permitted charter, boat captains at the time, and there was an overwhelming majority that did not support state management, but, you know, with the states managing the private rec side, and the state charter boats -- You know, there may be some different feelings on that, as far as, you know, how they perceive the state's ability to manage the state, as well as, again, looking at the options that a state could provide in respect to a season change and such.

At this point in time, although I do realize that there is, you know, a lot of burden on staff, with changes in the regulatory

environment, with staffing, I'm going to support this motion, at least initially.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Anson. Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: So just a couple of points of questions that have come up, and so, for Captain Walker's question, yes, allocation would have to be figured out in this, which I think would be quite easy. Just go through and look at the historical time series, and we would have to set a start and stop date on that, and whatever year, and then what the historical landings have been by each state over that time period.

Also, to address C.J.'s question, I think that's why I included the opt-out option in there, so that, if Florida would not be able to financially handle this, or start in the first -- In the beginning, then you could opt out, but it wouldn't mean that you would have to opt out indefinitely, and it would be like, okay, well, let's evaluate this, and potentially the next year we would be able to jump in on it.

If you recall, when we went through Amendment 50 for state management of snapper, this was included in those discussions, and we had some states that wanted to have this included, and others that didn't, but I think the bottom line of that is that, regardless of sector separation, you could still manage this in the individual state landings, whether a state opts in or opts out, and the ones that are still under federal management would still have their landings reported as-is. The only difference would be potential season length, and you may have some states that are still fishing when the federal season would be closed, but we would have to figure that out.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Chris. I have Dr. Frazer, and then Dr. Simmons.

DR. FRAZER: Again, and I remember the discussion as well, right, and Louisiana was a strong proponent and advocate for this action, you know, early on, but I think it was not simply an issue of the states could desire to opt in or opt out, and I thought it was a little more complicated than that, because, again, what you're doing is the federal for-hire sector doesn't have a state-by-state allocation, right, and so it really complicated things on the service's, National Marine Fisheries Service's, side of things, and I'm going to put Andy on the spot a little bit.

He wasn't administrator at the time, right, but Roy was, but perhaps you could weigh-in on what you thought some of the

logistical hurdles were in implementing something like that, Andy, if you care to, and sorry about putting you on the spot.

MR. STRELCHECK: I mean, there's, obviously, the challenge of just allocating the quota, right, and I think that's the biggest thing to reach an agreement on, but, you know, my remembrance of the sector separation debate was like we're discussing around the table, right, and there was pockets of charter captains throughout the Gulf that supported sector separation, or opposed sector separation, and there was some charter captains that trust their states more than others, right, and so, you know, what is being proposed here is trying to strike a balance, but, obviously, for those that don't want to go down this path, it could put a lot of additional pressure, in terms of managing the fisheries, you know, at the state level, based on -- Or at the federal level, if the pie continues to get divvied up.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so just a couple things on the recreational initiative. I mean, I think, in general, we heard a lot of support for regional approaches, and regional management, but we did not really explicitly discuss and make any recommendations, that I remember from the group, that the for-hire would come under state management specifically for red snapper.

It was generally talked about, and so that was that was one point, and keep in mind also that you only had, I believe, two members on the working group that would represent that component of the recreational sector as well, and so I wanted to bring that up.

The other thing is, I mean, I think, if this motion passes, it's going to be a significant amount of work, and so we're going to have to figure out does this take priority over the amberjack effort, or vice versa, plus we have the carryover provisions that we're working on, with the individual state ACLs, and that's going to be quite a bit of work, plus we've been tasked with several new documents in addition to that, and so we are really going to have to think about priorities and workload here at the end.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Sanchez, and then Chris.

MR. SANCHEZ: Thank you. Carrie, you brought something up that I was going to ask, and you kind of hinted on it. When we formulated, and I wasn't here for that part, you know, and started this recreational initiative, the composition of it, and how many for-hire people were on that, now that we're bringing stuff like this

up?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: I believe there's only one federally-permitted for-hire member, and that individual actually I don't believe could participate in every single meeting, due to family issues.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes, and so, to Dr. Simmons' point, this is why I didn't try to put a date on this, and I would like to see it get on the action guide, and then, as we work through other things that we've already addressed, or put on there -- To me, those would be priorities, and then we are able to handle this as we can in workload, and so, to me, this would be something that I would think maybe we look at in November, or maybe January of next year, whenever it comes to, and I don't see this as superseding other things that we're currently working on.

Also, and just my opinion, we spent a lot of time, and I'm sure this council spent a lot of money, on the recreational initiative, and, if we are to take advice from that, I see this as one of those things, and that's just my opinion.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Chris. I have Mr. Walker, and then Mr. Geeslin.

MR. WALKER: I don't recall the rec initiative suggesting that the for-hire -- I mean, I don't remember everything, but I don't recall them suggesting the for-hire sector should consider dividing up into states, but, you know, this possibly would have implications to the SEFHIER program, which we're starting to try and kick off, and not stall, but, to me, my biggest hurdle and, you know, hesitation to support the motion is the state-to-state allocation arguments that we're going to have.

I can see myself possibly supporting this if we had a few years of SEFHIER landings information, where we had a really universal, robust what landings were caught by how many charter boats in each state, and I think that might be something I could get behind at that time, but I don't look forward to an interstate battle over how many charter boats caught red snapper in their state.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Geeslin.

MR. GEESLIN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I do see a lot of questions and details that would need to be fleshed out, but I really see this motion outside of the, you know, the workload that would be

involved, and I see this as being pretty benign.

We would look into this, and we would form a document, and the states would certainly need to, you know, pulse their charter fleets, gather the input, and then, as Chris alluded to, there's this opt-out option there.

I think, notwithstanding the rec initiative, and let's just untether that for a bit, but Chris is hearing some of the same things I'm hearing. Time and time again, we speak about, or we hear about, some of the benefits of, you know, flexibility in the opening of the seasons, the season length, the reopening, and the variability of those comments across the Gulf.

I think state -- You know, putting this under state management, even if you don't want to, you know, tie that particular name to it, that's the way to get it, and address some of those, and realize some of those benefits, you know, and get away from the one-size-fits-all.

It just seems like every -- Whether it's in the rec initiative that we hear about some of this, or it's completely outside of it, and some of those same themes continue to emerge, and so I do applaud Chris for stepping out and, you know, feeling the pulse of the council, the pulse of our constituents, and putting this together. I would certainly support it.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Sorry, and one last little point here, and so, yes, I appreciate the opt-out perspective on this, but, even in an opt-out, you're still going to have to deal with allocation issues here, and it's -- I don't understand how this is going to work right now, and I just -- I have so many more questions, and I want to engage the public on this before we start fully fleshing forward on it. I would just like to learn more before I think I could support this motion, Chris. I mean, I appreciate where you're trying to go here, but -- Yeah. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Sweetman. All right. Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes, and so I envision that all of those types of questions would be things that we work through as we get the first iteration of this, is the options and alternatives to go through, keeping in mind that the states that would be choosing to go this route would likely have a data reporting system that reports landings weekly, and so you would know where they are versus their

allocation, versus a state that chooses to opt out and that remains under the federal system and the wave reporting, right?

Also, with regards to SEFHIER, this -- Right now, besides the economic component of SEFHIER, LA Creel captures every single thing we talk about in SEFHIER anyway, and so we would have that data from that, and, besides that, you would have data in between, until SEFHIER actually is up and running. Right now, the commercial electronic logbook program isn't even running, and we lost that over a year ago.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Go ahead, C.J., and then Dr. Froeschke.

DR. FROESCHKE: Thank you, and, just to follow-up, Chris, there, I mean, Florida is not weekly reporting, right, and so we're on the monthly timescale there, and so that's a bit of a concern for me, and so it's just not -- Given the fact that a vast majority of the for-hire boats are in Florida, I think this is why it's just raising my level of concern a little bit here, given these uncertainties. Sorry, Tom, and go ahead.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Again, Chris, I totally appreciate, you know, where you're trying to go here, and, in principle, I'm not opposed to that. What I'm thinking about, however, is, you know, just a hypothetical, because I don't have the answer to this, but let's say the federal for-hire guys in Louisiana said, yes, we're in, right, and that's good for us, and it's good for the state, and that's all good, but then the other states, you know, opted out, right, because it wasn't good for them.

What that misses is what the potential consequences are of an individual state's actions on the other states, right, and that may be good in fact for Louisiana to do that, and hopefully it would be, right, and hopefully it would be good for the other states as well, but, in the absence of looking at, you know, how it all shakes out, we don't know that, right, and so there could be an unintended negative consequence for the other states, and so I'm all for exploring this, but, you know, I'm just --

It's timing for me, right, and I don't want to push back and keep you from going in that direction, but I certainly would maybe say -- I'll maybe look to Mara about this. If we tabled a motion like this, could we bring it back after we get more feedback from -- I don't know how that process would actually work to table this motion. I don't care, right, and, I mean, I just -- Chris, go ahead.

MR. SCHIEBLE: I was just going to say that, you know, I understand your concern, and, from a Louisiana perspective, if -- Let's say we go forward with this, and Louisiana is the only one that comes out of this, and everybody else opts out, and Louisiana ends up doing state management of the federal for-hire fleet, and we're talking about -- Historically, it's about 300,000 pounds.

Last year, they caught about half that, because the season duration for them is too short, and it's just a simple fact of the matter, but I don't see 300,000 pounds impacting the entire Gulf, regardless of how we fish it, you know, and so other states may choose to do that.

Rick could choose that his federal fleet has whatever allocation they want to fish, for whatever duration, so it overlaps with their state charters, and we fix this perceived problem of state charters impacting federal charters, and that really is what we're trying to do here, but I would not be in favor of tabling it. I think it needs to get on the action guide, and then we work it out as we go through the process.

DR. FRAZER: Sure, and I'm just, again, trying to reiterate -- I'm not pushing that necessarily, and I understand where you want to go. I think it is going to take a lot of time, but so I'll just step back on that one.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Just to follow-up with what Mr. Schieble said to Dr. Frazer regarding Dr. Frazer's comment, you know, if a couple of states were to opt-in, so to speak, and then that would mean there would be less dissension, or less disagreement, among the remaining states, as far as what then NOAA could do for setting a season for those remaining states, and so there would be flexibility then offered to those other individual states, or individual states that opted out, that would then theoretically be more in line with what their needs would be too, and so, you know, even if you go forward, and there's still some exclusion, there's still some opportunity, I guess, for those states that decide to remain in with the federal system.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Kevin, I have a couple of -- Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: I'm okay.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: You're okay? Okay. Mr. Walker, and then Mr.

Sanchez, and then we'll try to wrap it up.

MR. WALKER: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and, with all due respect, I have no interest in tabling this, moving it forward, or continue to talk about it.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, Mr. Walker. Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: I'm kind of there with Ed, just because, if I think about it, if you have a federal permit, and the federal season is closed, you're done. How is this going to work with other states, with this one open, or not open, and then, to me, it kind of opens the floodgates in that state for people to go that don't have a federal permit and to be able to go out and fish basically federally when the rest of the federal fleet is closed. This is -- No.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Sanchez. Mr. Frady, and then we're going to take it to a vote.

MR. FRADY: Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Schieble, for at least wanting to explore this. I would say I'm opposed at this point in time, because the charter-for-hire industry, especially the federal charter-for-hire industry, spoke, many, many years ago, as to their desire to remain separated, and I don't think there's an appetite, from any of them that I know of, other than a few in Louisiana who love you all's way of management, which I totally respect, and, you know, there's a timing issue here.

Dr. Simmons mentioned about the importance of getting the recreational initiative underway first, and see what they can do about constraining effort, and making sure that no states go over, because there is a definite problem in the Gulf of Mexico with red snapper management, with the average weights declining, even though the average length and the age may be maintained, and all of us who make our living out there, and not 300 days, but maybe a little less, and we make our living out there, and we're seeing trends that make us a little bit nervous.

Anything that would jeopardize the constraints that we've got on ourselves to make sure we don't overharvest our quota, you know, I would speak in opposition of, but I do think the idea is great, for those who want to do it, but I just don't think we have an appetite to do it. I want to see the recognition get underway, and then maybe revisit this later. I just -- I just don't support it right now, because of the timing and the principle of what we've already been through with sector separation for the federal -- For a majority of the federally-permitted charters.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Frady. I would like to say a few comments regarding Chris's motion. I would speak in favor of it. I've been here for seven years, and I've been hearing the same argument over the charter fleet across the Gulf, from west to east, and back and forth, and they want different season dates, and one wants May 1, and one wants May 31, and it goes back and forth all the time.

We hear it all the time, and I understand that there's folks in the eastern Gulf that are not in favor of this. I get it, and I understand it, but the western Gulf I would like to say has somewhat of a different opinion.

I don't see an issue with the motion being passed, and us at least taking a look at it, and I'll stop there, and we'll take a vote.

MR. STRELCHECK: Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: I've just, obviously, been sitting back listening to the conversation, and I've heard a few things, right, one of which is kind of wanting more information and feedback from the charter community. This motion asks for a document, and could we just bring back a presentation, or some other form of information, at least as an initial starting point, before we start a document, just to inform, obviously, any kind of next layer of the decision, and so I just propose that as maybe a compromise between, you know, those that are not wanting to proceed and those that want to proceed with this.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: I think what I'm hearing Mr. Strelcheck recommend is the staff wants to produce a presentation, or if Mr. Schieble's appetite is presentation, versus the document.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: I mean, I think that's up to Mr. Schieble and what he would like to do. I mean, I think there's going to be a lot more work on staff. I mean, we can certainly -- - Even if you pass this, we can start with a presentation, and, I mean, it doesn't keep us from doing that.

I'm just concerned about the number of things we've added to the docket, and staff resources, and so I just think we should be patient. I also think about the timing of the red snapper stock assessment, and when that's going to be completed, which is when again, Ryan? Is it mid-2026 to late 2026-ish?

I mean, we have several other things dealing with red snapper allocations as well on the list, and, you know, the red snapper private angling allocation that we need to work on, and, as I mentioned before, the private recreational accountability measures for red snapper, and so we have quite a few items already on the docket. Just I think, if you pass this, we can start with a presentation, and think about workload, and I just -- It's going to involve a lot with everything going on with the assessment.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Understood, Dr. Simmons. Thank you. Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: So, first, I would like to thank Andy for those comments. Those are helpful, and that's the kind of thing I'm looking for around the table from all of us here, whether there's some that don't agree with going this direction, and it works better for their states to stay where they are, and other states that would like to at least look into this and see what the options would be.

I think that's what we're sort of charged with here as a council, is to look at new and innovative management techniques and things that help, you know, our anglers in each different component of the state, and so, anyway, I would be in favor of -- Yes, and, if a presentation is the preferred course of action here, and then look at that as a decision tool type of thing, to let us make some choices, and we can vote up or vote down certain things that are in the presentation, and then have a document next, and I'm fine with that option, and so I'm not opposed to it.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Schieble, and so, with that said, does the motion need to be reworded?

MR. SCHIEBLE: So I would change the motion to direct staff to begin work on a presentation to the council for modification of the recreational management of red snapper.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Broussard, are you okay with the changes? The seconder is okay. Ms. Levy, and then we're voting.

MS. LEVY: Just to -- We can talk about this at the staff level, and so, I mean, one option to include here is the things that were considered in Amendment 50A that you did not actually choose, right, and there was a should there be -- Should the states be allowed to opt-in, and, if the states opt-in, how do the charter vessels identify themselves with the state, and we -- There were allocation options that included for-hire, if there was that optional opt-in, and so one option that might be less work upfront

is to just bring those documents back and let you look at how it was structured in Amendment 50A.

The data would not be recent data, in terms of the landings, but the process of how you looked at potentially doing this before would be available to you fairly quickly if we just brought those documents back.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Ms. Levy. All right, Dr. Frazer. Last word.

DR. FRAZER: Again, I think -- To Mara's point, I think there was a fair amount of discussion, and I would just expect that dialogue would be captured in the presentation moving forward, and I would like to just say thanks to Chris for like listening to the words around the table and, you know, kind of meeting everybody halfway on this, and so I'll go ahead and support this.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, and we'll take a vote. **Can we have a show of hands in opposition to the motion?** Okay. **Three in opposition. The motion carries.**

I think we had one more agenda item in Other Business in Reef Fish, but I'm going to look around the table at council members and ask if you all want to work through lunch, and there's not much left, or do you all want to break for lunch?

We have gag left, and then we have OLE and Other Business. Dr. Simmons is going to discuss the June council meeting, and then Andy has an executive order and an update on staffing, and do you all want to work through lunch? Yes? Do you all want a break? Do you want a ten-minute break, and then work through lunch? I'm good with that. Okay let's do that. Thank you.

(Whereupon, a brief recess was taken.)

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. We're going to get back started. Welcome back from lunch, and I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We will pick up with Gag Grouper Recreational Management Measures for 2025. A committee member summarized the patterns of recent recreational landings against the ACLs for gag grouper and expressed a concern for control over quota monitoring.

The committee member specifically wanted to avoid a situation like that experience in the South Atlantic with red snapper, where discards have become a significant issue. The committee member

recommended reducing the recreational back limit for gag for the 2025 fishing season only, in an effort to prevent an ACL overage and allow the recreational fishery to experience improved fishing season durations in 2026 and beyond.

The Reef Fish AP also discussed the 2025 gag grouper recreational fishing season and recommended that the council request that NMFS consider options to prevent exceeding the recreational ACL, with the exception a complete fishery closure. Further discussion on this topic will occur during Full Council.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Because of time, I'm just going to ask Bernie to throw up the motion there, and we can certainly have some discussion on it. I definitely want perspective from the council. All right, and I'll read it into the record.

The council requests NMFS implement an emergency rule establishing a one-fish recreational bag limit for gag grouper for the 2025 fishing season.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay. Dr. Sweetman has a motion on the board. Is there a second? Mr. Broussard seconded.

MR. WALKER: For discussion, I was going to suggest for the 2025 season only. I think the selling point on this is going to be really to emphasize that this is a one-year thing, because I don't think the public wants to buy into doing it permanently.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: So I'm not sure that's really needed, Captain Walker, just because an emergency rule is only good for 180 days, and so it's kind of inherent in there, but, if we wanted to add "only", just for transparency's sake, and make that crystal clear, I think I'm okay with that. **We can add the word "only" if my seconder is okay with that.**

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Broussard is okay with the changes. Go ahead, C.J.

DR. SWEETMAN: Just some discussion. I mean, I was really interested to hear what the public was saying on this. I mean, this is mainly a Florida fishery. People are not going to be happy with me in my own state about this, and so I don't take this lightly to push this forward, but I really do think that we're

kind of in a situation here where the benefits, you know, will outweigh the negatives here in the long-term, and it's really just for this one fishing season.

I want to provide people with the opportunity to get out on the water, catch gag grouper, and the fishery is improving. I mean, that's what everyone has been telling me, and that's actually part of my concern, here is that, because, as the fishery is improving a little bit, and is on the upswing, when you've got these reduced catch levels, it's easier to catch them, and then you get the compression, and then it's just -- I don't envy your position, Andy, for trying to project what the season would be like and these uncertainties with this effort compression.

I can't -- I can't even blame our Regional Administrator on that, because it's just we don't know. We don't, and we saw, last year, that effort compression was huge, and the year before that as well, and so I think that, economically, this is going to be important in the long-term.

We are so close to just getting back towards our rebuilding plan, where it's the stepwise increase each year, and all this is doing, really, is just providing a little bit of risk-adverse management here, just for one fishing season, and I was surprised, for the most part, about how people in the audience, for the most part, supported it.

You know, I heard some other people that had some concerns about it. I think Charlie Renier said heck no to it, but it was from the perspective of that the fishery is so healthy, and that's actually part of my concern, is because of those catch rates, and how we're managing just to a low ACL here, and, when you have those catch rates improve -- It's not like we're being punished for managing the fishery better, but that's kind of what it feels like when you're up against these small catch limits during this timeframe, and so, like I said, the bag limit analysis that we conducted with our FWRI staff, in conjunction with Science Center staff, shows about a 19 percent savings there.

While that's not a huge amount, that might be exactly just what we need to provide this buffer here, so we can get out of this cyclical cycle of overages, and low ACLs, so we can start finally start to provide an actual fishing season and get out of potential derby fishing conditions, and so that's my overall justification for this.

I think it's something, you know, I don't take lightly for putting this forward here. I heard Ken Haddad, yesterday, saying like we

typically do not support a one-fish bag limit, really for any species, but I think these are, you know, circumstances where it might be warranted, but I certainly don't want to go this alone.

I know that it's a Florida fishery, but I really would be interested from other council members around the table, just to get your perspective. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Sweetman. Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: So I've thought long and hard about this, and I think it's the right thing to do. The issue here is this payback cycle that we're stuck in. The ACL has gone up every year, and the season is still getting shorter and shorter, because we're in the payback, and it knocks the ACL down so low that we overfish it, and so then, the next year, we overfish it again, because it's so low, and we're really stuck in a cycle, and the season is getting shorter while the ACL goes up.

So, you know, in the best interest of the recreational fishermen, they need to shake this perpetual payback, once and for all. The ACL is high enough now that, if they cannot overfish just one time, they could probably have a thirty-day season, or more, but they've got to get that payback monkey off their back one time, and that's why this is a one-year thing, and so I speak in favor of it.

You can have a bit of a season this year, and you can keep one fish per person instead of two, but the goal here is to shake that payback monkey off our back and get to realize the entire ACL that fishermen have essentially earned in this rebuilding plan, as it goes up, and so, with the very strong mention that this is a one-time only deal, and even if it fails I think we should go back to two, you know, to constrain harvest, and I'm going to speak in favor of it, even though, you know, it will be controversial to some, but I think, if they understand how much it potentially benefits the fishing community, it's in their best interest to do this.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Walker. Is more discussion? Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Just to kind of put a little more science spin on this, right, and so I've been working with my group, in collaboration with the folks at FWRI, and some of their stock assessment scientists, and also coordinating and learning from some of the staff at SERO, and one of the problems that we've run into is, because of these kind of short seasons, and our inability to, you know, forecast accurately any in-season types of things,

we're faced -- Or forced to deal with kind of historical harvest levels to set, you know, the projected season length, and we've, you know, regularly kind of overshot those by about two, right, double where we're at, and that does put us in a precarious position with regard to, you know, these paybacks and actually going into a deficit.

What we've done is we've kind of looked at changing the approach, and using some statistical models to help with the preseason projections, as well as the kind of the in-season forecasting, and I think we can do better, moving forward, with the preseason projections. It's still a really short season, and, you know, I don't want to get ahead of NOAA and say what that might be, but, you know, even if it was similar to last year, the confidence intervals around that, whether it's, you know, two weeks, or twelve days, whatever, is somewhere between one and twenty-one days, right, and so that's where that effort compression comes in.

If you have a lot of effort compression, and you get to the confidence, and you actually only -- You know, you get your quota in one day, for example, right, and you've overshot that by twice as much, and, again, you're getting into a deficit, and so I think what this does is this one-fish rule actually gives you an added buffer, some confidence that in fact you're not going to -- You're not as likely to have a payback, and then you'll be able to realize the full kind of yield stream, moving forward, so it's a bit of a tough pill to swallow in the short-term, and I understand that, but I think we're getting better at the science, and I think the rationale is good, and so I'm certainly in support of this.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: I think would be helpful to talk a little bit more about the rationale specific to why this would be considered an emergency, right, and so there's four factors that we would look at. Even though we've had overages, the stock would not be considered overfishing, because we haven't exceeded the overfishing limit.

There's not a public health emergency here for this, and so it really comes down to economic or social circumstances, right, and what at least I'm hearing around the table is that you are concerned about foregoing better opportunities, future opportunities, for harvest, based on overages, or continued overages, obviously, in the short-term.

One of the concerns I have is we've built a record about not wanting to decrease the gag bag limit around this table the last

couple of years, and we've even had that before us and decided not to make those changes, and so that diminishes, in my view, the emergency justification, with the exception that you've now noted that, well, this would just be for one year, and this is, obviously, why we're doing it.

The other thing, just so I'm clear, and I think I'm hearing this correctly, is it's not necessarily to give more days for this season as much as it's just to mitigate for the potential for higher harvest.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Thanks for that, Andy, and so -- I hear what you're saying loud and clear. We did shoot this down, the bag limit reduction, in the past. I mean, I think part of an emergency action criteria results from recent unforeseen events, or recently discovered circumstances, and I would certainly consider the overages that we've had since then as kind of recent unforeseen circumstances, along those lines.

As it relates to presents serious conservation or management problems in the fishery, I mean, we're seeing the direct -- In the rebuilding plan, right, and so, if we're not able to realize that rebuilding plan, I think that presents serious conservation issues, and clearly management problems in the fishery, with having -- Just constantly changing the fishing season, impacting our charter fishermen's ability to plan trips, along those lines there, and, yes, I do think that the benefits outweigh the value of advance notice, public comment, and deliberative considerations of the normal rulemaking process.

We've got an eighteen-year rebuilding timeline, right, and, based on how it's set up right now, we're not meeting that, unless we get this under control, and so long-term, and even short-term, economic benefits I feel outweigh some of the issues that we have at hand here, and so I'm trying to address some of your points there, and I'm not sure if you would like some additional stuff, but --

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: No, and I appreciate that C.J. Just one other thought I've had, and so this goes beyond the emergency justification and rulemaking, is there might be something where we want to look at changes to the accountability measures, right, and I'm not saying we should. I'm just saying we may want to look at them, just to see if there's other options to address the

accountability measures going forward, because, if there are other signals and things that show that we are rebuilding on track, or, you know, increasing in abundance like is expected, right, we're essentially paying the overage back, but the reality is we're still meeting our biological goals, right, and I don't know if we have the science or information that could support that, but those are things I would like to at least dig into a little bit more and see if there's other opportunities to take a look at those accountability measures.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Captain Walker.

MR. WALKER: Could you elaborate on maybe what kind of examination of the kind of -- Are you saying there's -- That we might be able to lower it if the estimate of the stock or something changes, and what avenues might be available there?

MR. STRELCHECK: I'm just thinking out loud, and, I mean, we have, in the National Standard Guidelines, when you have an overfished stock, that you should be instituting paybacks, right, and that's part of the challenge here, right, but sometimes what happens is our projections miss the mark, and a lot of times probably, right, and so, if the status and health of the population is increasing at the rate we projected, or even faster, than we don't necessarily have to implement the payback provision, right, and so is there ways to look at the consequences of what happened with any sort of overage, how it's actually performing biologically within the population, and then making an informed decision as to whether or not an accountability measure should or shouldn't be implemented for that particular season here.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: I like what you're saying there, Andy, and I guess my concern right now is just time, right, and, if we're dealing with trying to change accountability measures, I don't think that would be able to get in place with the season starting September 1, right, and so that's part of the issue here, but I agree with what you're saying.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Is there any more discussion on the motion? Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion?

MR. STRELCHECK: (Mr. Strelcheck's comment is not audible on the recording.)

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Andy. We have to do a roll call vote. Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. McDermott.

MR. MCDERMOTT: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Geeslin.

MR. GEESLIN: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Williamson.

MR. WILLIAMSON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Captain Frady.

CAPTAIN FRADY: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Overton.

DR. OVERTON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Broussard.

MR. BROUSSARD: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Banks.

DR. BANKS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Captain Walker.

MR. WALKER: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Burris.

MR. BURRIS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: No.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Osborne.

MR. OSBORNE: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Mr. Dugas.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Yes.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: The motion carried sixteen to one.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Sweetman.

DR. SWEETMAN: Just thank you all for listening to me on this. I realize this was kind off-the-cuff here, and kind of rushing this to get ahead of the September season, and so I just appreciate you all listening to me. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I'm a little bit concerned about timing with this and how we're going to communicate some of this to the public, and so I would like us to think about having a unified voice when we know what the season length is going to be and we tell the public it's going to be a one-fish bag limit.

They're going to embrace the wonderful news, I'm sure, on Facebook, and so if we could have a unified front with the states, and not just the State of Florida, but to remind anglers that, you know, this fishery is not open until September, and the State Reef Fish program is getting out-of-season landings, quite a few actually, earlier than those dates that are open, and so please help us remind anglers of these changes in the regulations, because this is going to be a very tight timeline.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons. Dr. Frazer.

DR. FRAZER: Well, Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Frazer. Okay. We're going to move online to the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement report and presentation and Mr. Walia.

NOAA OFFICE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT (OLE) REPORT

MR. MATT WALIA: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Can you hear me?

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Yes, sir, we can.

MR. WALIA: All right. Well, I appreciate you taking the time, and I apologies that I couldn't hop on during the other supporting agencies yesterday, and I wish I could be there in-person, but traveling is a little difficult right now as well, but I'll just wait for -- Bernie, if you can pull up -- I just have a couple of slides to go over.

We don't have a current -- We're in between our reports, and so I did not provide a report this time around, but I still want to highlight some of the work we're doing. This data here is current though, and so, you know, I just want to highlight our cooperative enforcement programs, a great success, and this is how we're able to get a lot of work done, with a force multiplier, working with the states.

We currently have agreements with all Gulf states right now, and this is great. You know, you see the numbers down there, and we have forty-one referrals from partners overall this past quarter, with Florida taking the higher end this time, with Florida with twenty-eight cases, and you see the other ones, but there is a good force multiplier, like I said, and it helps deputize state officers to go out and to enforce federal regs, and so this is a great part of our success.

One of our main priorities has been, and will continue to be, IUU enforcement. This is a big one, and I just want to highlight and showcase some of the work that we're doing here in our division in the region, as well as nationwide, and so seafood fraud -- Protecting domestic seafood is important.

You see the logos there, and we work with a lot of our partners to keep that going, and, if you go in the briefing material, that link to that field DNA testing corresponds to the picture down below, on your lower left, and that's pretty good news, and we

just had a web story that went out, and it's been pretty successful.

This was actually up in New Jersey, but there's a new PCR device that we've been able to work with and use, and we're testing it right now. Right now, it can test up to a hundred different species, and so we can be on-site, at these ports inspecting seafood coming in, the containers, and test it on-site, which is a huge improvement.

Before, we would usually take samples, and have to turn it into our forensics labs, and it takes time to figure out, hey, is this fish able to come into the country legally or not, and so, in this current case, we actually detected over twenty-seven tons of fish that we stopped from coming into commerce.

Also on our website, I would say we just released another story that involves Brazilian red snapper coming up that that we stopped, and so we worked with our Brazilian partners, and we stopped twelve tons from coming in. We actually sent it back to Brazil, and they seized the twelve tons of Caribbean red snapper, and, on top of that, they had another forty tons that was getting ready to come into U.S. commerce that we're able to stop.

The other component we have of IUU enforcement, and a lot of this involves our ports of entry, and these are all mostly land-based, and so this is down on the Texas border, and this has been real successful too, working with the Coast Guard, working with Texas Parks and Wildlife as well on this, and so all this is the seafood import monitoring program. We're inspecting the containers coming in, what's in there, and we're testing it.

A recent one we did from Laredo down to Brownsville, and we had over 4,000 pounds of red snapper, and there was some other fish species too, tilapia and barracuda, but everything was good to go, and we were able to get that in, but we're still stopping it. That picture on the bottom-left is actually someone that tried to bring in a couple -- That is shrimp and blue crab and some other species illegally across the border, and so we were able to stop that.

You've heard some of the fish were state violations, but we stopped that coming into commerce too, and so there's stuff like that that we're looking for that are people bringing it in on individual trucks or vehicles as well coming in.

Going along with that, that other picture is us doing a ride along with the Coast Guard, helping out with lanchas, and so we have helped out to seize and interdict some of the lanchas there, and

they were kicked back over to the border as well, and so we're trying to stop that effort.

What I want to do here is just quickly highlight a couple cases, just show the diversity of what we have going on. This first one actually took place up in South Carolina, but the reason I'm highlighting it is just the overall implications of it, and so this was a commercial fisherman, and this is a case that we referred over to Department of Justice, and so this actually went criminal.

He made false statements, and so he lied about the amount and quality of fish that he caught as well, as lying to some of our enforcement officers and agents during a subsequent investigation, and so this went criminal. It was a three-day trial, and we gave statements up there as well, and he was assessed three felony convictions, and so he's awaiting sentencing right now, and we'll see what the final outcome of it is, but he was three-times over the limit on the snowy grouper and about one-and-a-half-times over his commercial allotment for blueline tilefish, and so there's some big implications.

You know, it shows the importance of all the work you do at the council, why these rules -- They're set in, in quotas, and there is teeth to it too, and we want to make sure that people are catching what they're supposed to catch and reporting it properly.

The bottom case is something that you wouldn't really think of, and this is actually off the Flower Gardens, in the sanctuary in the Gulf, and this involved an energy company. There's some old platforms they were required to remove, and so they piled in some -- They put some piles and anchored them into the seabed down there, but this was actually within the boundary of the sanctuary, and it caused some issues, and so we were working with sanctuary staff.

They were instrumental in this as well, and working with the energy company, and they did not realize they actually had outdated boundaries on all their charts and their information, and so just a reminder to everyone, you know, fishermen, to make sure you have the most up-to-date charts and everything on your electronics, so you know exactly where you're going and where you can't go. That was a $25,000 Notice of Violation assessment that we had a civil penalty for.

Two other cases that I just wanted to quickly highlight and show different work, and so we had a recent charter case off of Louisiana. One of our officers did a ride along with Louisiana

officers on this, and this was a joint patrol. We came across some fishermen, and they were fishing, and we rolled up on them, you know, and start doing interviews. He had a cooler, and he had federally-managed reef species, as well as some HMS. He admitted to, hey, yes, I'm on a charter.

He thought, because he caught some of the fish in state waters, that he was okay. That's not the case, right, and so it's permit-driven, and so he met the elements for that, and so he was charged, and it was a little over a $7,000 NOVA that he was charged for that, and so that was good cooperation with our state partners on that case.

The one below involves protected resources for TEDs, and this was a JEA referral from Florida, and so it just shows when you -- They were able to submit it quickly, and they had it efficient, and everything was well documented, and we were able to pursue it on federal charters. The angles and bar spacing were not correct, and that can, obviously, you know, hurt the turtles on there, if they're not able to escape out of the TEDs properly, and so that was actually under the Endangered Species Act, $4,000 NOVA that was assessed on that, and so good success all around with our partners.

Staying on the protected resources team, and this has been a priority as well for us, and so we continue to do a lot of multi-agency trainings and boardings, and I know props to the Florida OPV crew that got the award. We actually just held a recent training that they were at down in the Naples area, and we'll go with them, with the gear management team, and show how to properly measure TEDs, what we're looking for, and then put it into action out on the water, and so that's what some of those pictures are, working with the Coast Guard as well doing that, and also trying to help out when we can.

Earlier this winter, there was a couple of cold weather events, everywhere, but some big ones in Texas, and there was 200 or 300-plus turtles that we helped rescue and re-release back in, once the cold weather was off, and so that's what those pictures are, is officers helping out some of the NGOs in Texas as well with that, and so that was a good success, getting them back in the water.

This is just a reminder that I wanted to throw out there. There's a lot of shrimpers that have the Chauvin deflector in there, and we're still getting a lot of reports that they're not installed properly, and that can cause efficacy of it, and it could make it harder for the turtles to actually get out of the TED, and so that

upper-left picture is folks are installing different size PVC on that roller bar that's going across horizontal, so there's certain specs you have to follow.

I'm happy to provide that after the fact, or reach out to us, and we can get them to you, and so that's what that picture is. The one on the bottom are folks that are putting the PVC too close to the TED, and it's not allowing a proper opening for the turtles to escape, and so just a notice, and a reminder, to make sure you get that out there, and, when our folks see them on the boats, we're working with industry to fix them on the spot, and help them get into compliance too, when we see that, and you see what a correct one should look like.

This is just a quick reminder, just a couple of the closures that are going on, or what's going on. You know, through January, the southern zone for gillnet has been closed. The Edges is still closed through the remainder of this month, unless you're transiting through, and you all were just talking about it, but the recreational shallow-water grouper -- That is open, and just be sure to follow the four aggregate bag limit. Gag continues to be closed, and I guess we'll look at maybe that will be a different allotment, depending on what actions are taken come September.

The last slide I have is just our number, if there's any questions or anything to report, and please don't, you know, hesitate to reach out and let us know what's going on, and so I thank you for your time, and I'm happy to take questions, if there are any, and that concludes my report, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Walia. Do we have any questions? Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: Thank you for the presentation. I'm curious, relative to the Flower Gardens case, was there any other mitigation besides the fine that the energy company had to do?

MR. WALIA: Not that I'm aware of. It was an old platform, and it was in about 300 foot of water, that they were tasked -- It was actually the lower deck that allowed the surface structure to stick up, and that's what they had to -- That they were tasked to remove, and so I think they -- I mean, they were fined for the action they took, and I haven't heard any follow-up on that afterwards.

MR. ANSON: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Do we have any other questions for Mr. Walia? Not seeing any, thank you, sir, for your presentation.

MR. WALIA: Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay, and we're going to move on to Other Business, and I'm going to give the floor to Mr. Strelcheck. He has a couple of items he would like to discuss.

OTHER BUSINESS

MR. STRELCHECK: Let me start with just the staffing impacts and just a kind of synopsis of what's going on with the Southeast Regional Office and then turn to Clay, if he's online, to talk about the Science Center, and then I'll end by talking about the executive orders.

As you're aware, and you probably have been reading in the news, the government is, obviously, going through a downsizing. We have had a number of I'll say initiatives to either encourage people to leave, or that may be a reduction in force ultimately, and so there's been deferred resignations that have been offered, and, right now, we have an early retirement process that's being offered for employees that are eligible.

Probationary employees, that had one year less of service with the government, were terminated, although that's still kind of in limbo with the court system at this point, until that's figured out, and then there's been a hiring freeze that, obviously, has been in place, not allowing us to then backfill positions.

For the Southeast Regional Office, around the start of the year, we had 117 employees. We've lost nine employees since that time, and we have another six that we know we're going to lose by the end of April, or early May, and so, at minimum, we're going to be down fifteen employees, and I expect that number to grow.

We've done a little bit better on the fisheries staffing side in terms of losses. The impacts on the fisheries side were actually being realized before a lot of these downsizing efforts began, in that we were trying to fill key positions, and we just weren't able to, and so, right now, we have our vacancy for the assistant regional administrator, which was formerly Jack McGovern's position, and I have several economist positions that are vacant, and we have a fisheries biologist position that's vacant in our South Atlantic branch.

What I wanted to just share is that, you know, going forward, we're going to have to really understand the gaps and impacts that this is going to have. There is also an executive order that would not

allow us to hire a new position unless four additional positions leave, and so we will shrink before we can grow.

My expectation is the areas that the council and its constituents will likely see the most impacts from the regional office in the short-term will be on our economic work, and social science work, as well as our permits office, because I think we're going to lose several people to the early retirement as part of our permits office, and so more to come.

The only other things I'll share is that there is a lot of review going on with grants, with contracts, and that's resulting in some impacts to partners that we work with, taking longer to get those either cleared, or approved, or potentially not even issued at all, and so, to the extent that, you know, you want to reach out to me, I'm happy to, obviously, listen and share, obviously, what I know, in terms of kind of procedurally what's happening, but there are definitely some disruptions that we're aware of and have been working with several key partners on that front.

I'll stop there and maybe ask if there's any specific questions for the regional office before going to Clay, and so anything for me? Go ahead, Carrie.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: You might not have an answer to this, and you can tell me later, but are you allowed to hire contractors right now?

MR. STRELCHECK: We are not allowed to hire contractors to kind of replace losses, and right now we have contracts in place, and so the question will be whether or not, you know, contracts will be extended in the long-term to maintain those positions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Do we have any questions for Mr. Strelcheck? No? Then we'll give Dr. Porch the opportunity to speak, and then we'll go back to Mr. Strelcheck.

DR. PORCH: Thank you for the opportunity to relay impacts for the Southeast Center. Andy talked through the basic background of it. As I think you all know, the Southeast Center has gradually been downsized, since the peak of about 300 employees twenty years ago to just under 250 in 2024, at least on our staffing plan, but, since the new administration has prioritized further reducing the size of the federal government, the Southeast Center, through the processes Andy described, has so far lost about forty-seven positions, due to the hiring freeze, termination, new employees, and deferred resignations.

As these terminations were abrupt, there wasn't much opportunity to hand off responsibilities in an orderly way, and, in addition, we expect to lose about twenty more by May, due to the latest round of early and retirement incentives.

The good news is that our new Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, Eugenio Pineiro Soler, has onboarded this week, and there will be a formal announcement pretty soon, and we just heard that on a leadership call, while the council was on break, and, once we get a better sense from him of the administration's priorities for fisheries, and what resources will be available, I can give you more details on specifically which programs are likely to be cut back or eliminated.

What I can say, based on what has happened so far, is that our ability to execute our budget and other administrative services has been severely compromised, and so, in addition to the challenges from the new BAS financial system imposed by the previous administration, we now have fewer staff, and a more complex approval process to work through, and so you can expect some slowdowns there.

This year, you can also expect the resource survey enterprise to be reduced at some level. You heard some of the potential problems from Mr. Donaldson, and there's likely to be some cutbacks in the coverage from the NOAA ships, and we're still working through that now.

Progress in the IRA funded automation and advanced technology has been slowed, as we're not able to disperse all the IRA funds, and some of the employees that were hired to implement that new technology were part of that class of probationary employees that were fired.

Support for stock assessments, protected resources, and some fishery data collection programs will also be reduced, owing to the loss of personnel. For example, because of the hiring freeze, we cannot backfill Ken Brennan's position, and then the CEFI program, the Climate, Ecosystem, and Fisheries Initiative, has essentially been eliminated, and the employees hired to do the work were those probationary employees who were fired, and that's going to affect things like the Shrimp Futures project, ecosystem status reports, and a host of our other ecosystem activities.

Then, finally, of course, travel privileges have been limited to those deemed mission-critical by the administration, and particularly if there is a virtual option, hence the reason I'm not there with you in-person, and that's all I have to report for

now, and more coming hopefully in a month or two. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Porch, for the update. Do we have any questions for Dr. Porch? Not seeing any, thanks, Clay. Mr. Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: You know, I guess I want to put a little bit of a positive spin on this, and it, obviously, can come across as doom and gloom, but we're rolling up our sleeves to look at, obviously, how we're going to have to restructure, what the priorities are going to be for the core mission going forward.

Clay has already been working down the path, and Clay and I have been coordinating on that, and so more to come on that, but, ultimately, at the end of the day, you know, as I tell a lot of people that ask me, we're going to land on our feet, and we're going to figure out how to get through this, right, and so it's just -- I think the hardest part has been losing a lot of close colleagues and people very quickly, and not really having to be able to have a transition plan, with those losses happening at such a rapid rate.

All right, and so the last thing I just wanted to talk to you about was the Executive Order for Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation. You've heard me talk about this a number of times this week. This is Executive Order 14192. A lot of you probably heard of it is the ten-for-one executive order.

We've been receiving some guidance on this, and I will say that the guidance is still -- I think we're still trying to understand the guidance, right, and so there is guidance, but there's some, I think, gray areas and things that are still a little bit uncertain but a few of the things that I think are probably most beneficial for you to know, and so the ten deregulatory actions for every one regulatory action only applies to actions that are deemed to be significant by the Office of Management and Budget.

Those significance criteria are annual effect on the economy of greater than $100 dollars, create an inconsistency or interfere with an action taken by another agency, materially alter the budgetary impact of entitlements grants, user fees, loan programs, or raise novel legal or policy issues.

The good news is the Fisheries Service doesn't implement a lot of significant regulatory actions, and so we don't foresee having a lot of challenges with having to meet the ten-for-one requirement. There might be some, and I won't rule it out of question, and there's always potential for the Office of Management and Budget

to deem something significant that we would expect wasn't going to be significant.

The other, I think, positive thing to note is that, in the guidance we received, it does have an exemption for routine hunting and fishing actions, and they even reference established annual harvest limits, and so those aren't required to have an offset, but they're also not able to be used for cost savings, right, and so we're going to implement a red grouper quota increase here, right, and that would be a deregulatory action, kind of in most circumstances, and that would be a positive, you know, economic benefit, but, based on this guidance, it's essentially not regulatory or deregulatory, and it's an exempted activity, because it's just a routine action that we can proceed with.

What we don't know is how broad that definition of routine actions is, right, and so is a bag limit change, or a size limit change, or some of the other things that we do around this table routine actions? I would argue, obviously, like building a SEFHIER program, or implementing regional management, and those are not going to be considered routine, and those, obviously, will have to be looked at from the regulatory aspect.

The last thing I'll just comment on is that, with all new regulations, the incremental costs, and this is an FY25, shall be significantly less than zero, right, and so we essentially have to maintain a balance sheet that has the economic benefits, or costs, that are less than zero, and so, for every regulatory action we move forward, we're having to put forward deregulatory actions to make sure we're below zero, in terms of economic benefits.

In 2026, that will change, and we don't really know the process yet, but essentially the Director of the Office of Management and Budget will identify a total amount of incremental costs for regulatory and deregulatory actions, and then those total costs will be imposed -- That can be imposed cannot exceed the agency's allowance, right, and so to be determined as to what that allowance will be.

When I start talking, around the table, and I'll be communicating more with Carrie and John Carmichael and other councils about really focusing on deregulatory work, it's going to be really important that we balance kind of those statutorily-mandated requirements for regulatory work against some of the other deregulatory actions that will be needed to meet this cost-benefit, essentially, calculation that we're going to be doing.

As more is learned, I'll share it with you. As I said, I think

there's some gray areas, some uncertainties, that we're still trying to understand, but, procedurally, we've set up a process internally that, even with, you know, actions they are in kind of their infancy, we can start flagging them as to where we think they're going to be with regard to regulatory and deregulatory aspects and how that can then be accounted for as we track them through the system, and so I'll take any questions.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Mr. Strelcheck, for that. Do we have any questions? Mr. Frady.

MR. FRADY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Andy, I would just like -- You're talking about deregulation, and I understand the frustration of what you all are going through, but, you know, a number of years ago, we had a regulation put on the federally-permitted charter boats to keep turtle gear onboard, and is that one of those ten that we can get rid of, because of the nuisance that it causes everybody, and it singles out a specific user group, but the majority of the people out there fishing are not required to have it, and is that one you all could just submit as a checkoff, and I'm being serious about that, because it's a pain in the butt for a charter boat to have to keep the requirements onboard, and none of us have had interactions with turtles.

MR. STRELCHECK: So I would just say, generally, right, if there are deregulatory actions that we want to look at as a council, and explore, then, yes, I think those should be offered on the table. We had a lot of discussion about the twenty-fathom closure this week, right, and that could be viewed as a deregulatory action.

Those things don't necessarily have to meet the ten-for-one requirement, and it would just be considered an economic cost savings to eliminate them.

With that said, your example has Endangered Species Act implications to it, and, obviously, we would have to weigh the benefits and costs to the industry relative to, obviously, the conservation benefits to the species, and I recognize what you're saying, is you don't interact with them, and you're having to carry a lot of gear.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: Yes, and I like the concept, you know, of some of the turtle package, and you could probably check-off ten unnecessary regulations, with the dog bones and the hank of rope and a car tire, and there's some real absurdity there, but I recognize the challenges, but I love that you said that, Captain Troy.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Is there anything else for Mr. Strelcheck? Not seeing any, Andy, thank you for the update. Next, we're going to move to discussion of the June 2025 council meeting and Dr. Simmons.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so, instead of going through our normal planning activities at the end of the meeting, I would like to talk about the June council meeting, and so, during public comment, and afterwards, staff and council members, I think, were approached by considering maybe more of a hybrid approach for the June meeting, if we hold it in our office.

We've run some very rough numbers, and we have a couple different options to consider, and I don't know that we have to make any decisions right here, but, if there's something that the council doesn't have an appetite for, then that would be helpful to know.

So, if we considered a hybrid meeting in the Gulf Council office in Tampa, and not St. Pete, but Tampa, that would include the public's ability to participate in-person. First, we would need to secure a room block at the government rate next to our office, ideally, so people would not have to get rental cars.

If we did this more hybrid approach, we could start on Tuesday, perhaps, instead of on Monday, and, if you did choose to come in-person to participate, we would expect you to go home the second day and not incur additional costs, and, if that wasn't possible, then, obviously, you could participate virtually.

A couple things with that. We would just also need to know fairly soon who would want, out of the council members, how you would choose to participate, and so to get ahead of that, and we would probably have to do a little bit of reorganization in our office, as far as having enough room. It's going to be a little tight in there. We typically have twenty-three folks around the U, and we do have kind of a spillover option down below that we can use.

So just very rough estimates for your information to do this, and, if we did the two-day virtual meeting, we're estimating, you know, bringing in the chair of the council, bringing in the SSC chair, and we would hav our staff in the office, and that would be roughly around $17,000 to $20,000.

If we did this hybrid approach, where we allow council members to come in or, you know, participate virtually, however they choose, but, if everyone came, we're estimating it would be about double, around $40,000, and so I'll put that out there as some approaches

we could take, and, obviously, we'll have a lot of things to finish up with the chair and vice chair on that, but that is something we're willing to consider, if there is an appetite for it.

Then I don't know if there's questions on that, but I do have a very, very rough agenda that I just wanted to put up and walk through, as to what we're trying to bring to the council, and so, Bernie, that's a slightly older draft, and I've updated it, if you just pull the one off the server, but maybe if there's questions, while she's doing that.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: So do we have any questions? Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: I'm just curious, and you had suggested, depending on how many people, $20,000, and, if there's more, $40,000, and, if it's entirely virtual, what's the price tag on that?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: If it's entirely virtual, it's about $20,000, because we still have to pay salaries, and we would pay for the chair to come into the office to run the meeting, so we can help if needed, and then also the SSC chair.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Dr. Simmons, correct me if I mention something incorrect, but I think we have about twenty days or so, and did we talk about May 1 maybe to finalize a decision?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Well, May 1 is the drop-dead date for our Federal Register notice, right, and so we have to get ahead of that, and so I would say, next week, we need to be kind of honing-in on what we would like to do.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Okay.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: So, right now, we're proposing three committees, the Reef Fish Committee, the Mackerel Committee, and the Ecosystem Committee, and so let's just start at the top. Public comment is going to be a little bit different, and so folks are going to have to be patient with us on that, and so we'll try to do the best we can there, but we are allowing a virtual option, of course, and so we're getting -- We will probably have their 2025 recreational gag season, hopefully, the announcement, and we're planning to bring a final action draft framework on other shallow-water grouper catch limits.

We hopefully can wrap up the framework action to adjust the red snapper federal charter for-hire season, and we'll have the one day SSC meeting summary report to report out to you, and that will have implications on what we do with Reef Fish Amendment 58A, and

so we'll put that, as it stands, back on the agenda and make sure we get some guidance from you all on what to do.

That also has implications on the red grouper emergency rule, and then, I guess, based on timing, and talking with Mr. Strelcheck, it seems that we do have to start talking about the red grouper management actions. I was hoping we could wait until August for that, but it sounds like there's some urgency there.

Then the public hearing draft for Amendment 58B, the deepwater grouper, and so keep going down, and the times are not -- They're just estimates right now, and I have to get with staff, and then we would have a short Mackerel Committee, to try to wrap up Spanish mackerel.

Then Ecosystem, and a lot of folks said this is not, you know, a priority, which I kind of understand where people are coming with that, but, with our Inflation Reduction Act funding, we have certain deliverables that we have to get to, and a timeline for that funding as well, and so we would need to take this to the council, to try to get feedback, so we're not slowed down again on that project.

Right now, I was thinking, you know, public comment kind of over the lunchtime, and it would be a little bit early maybe for Central Time, but we can adjust that, with the help from the leadership of the council, and so let's keep going down, Bernie.

If we allow the in-person, we might need to add a little bit of time for public comment, and then the committee reports and adjourn, and hopefully I'll be able to give you an update on council funding, and then we would go through our planning activities to wrap it up.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Thank you, Dr. Simmons, and, again, this is a rough draft, and I spoke with Dr. Frazer during the break, and he made a suggestion, and I think it's a great suggestion, that, if we entertain this hybrid approach, that at least the chairs of the committee would maybe come in-person, and it could help with the flow of things. Do we have any questions for Dr. Simmons? Mr. Walker.

MR. WALKER: So there's no data collection discussion at this one?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: No, not planned, and we would wait until August for that.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Schieble.

MR. SCHIEBLE: So what happens with I guess the hotel reservation that we had in Key West? Are you able to postpone and use that for next year?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Yes, and we were able to move that with no penalty to June of 2026, and so this hybrid approach -- I mean, in thinking more about it, and I know we don't have to make a decision right here, until we get the hotel secured, but what I don't want to do is have to redo things, if they're not transparent enough, or there's not enough access to it, and so I think that's why we were trying to come up with this thought.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: What I recall, Dr. Simmons, is that the two main points for what I understood is that the hotel piece is first, if that can be solidified, and then what's the interest in the council members being in-person, and I think that would be step number two, and, as Dr. Simmons said, we have about a week to lock both of those in place, and so I would say that, once the hotel is done, if it's positive to move forward with the hotel, I would assume we're going to reach out to council members, at that point, and get your interest in attending. We can send out a survey of some sort. Any questions or comments? Mr. Anson.

MR. ANSON: I'm just curious. With the hybrid approach, and having the public come to provide testimony, you mentioned something about a downstairs room, and so there is going to be -- I know it's the busy time of year, and so there may not be a lot of, you know, ability of folks to come, but we do have some bigger items, particularly in that part of the Gulf, that are going to be up for final action, and so I'm just thinking about, if enough people come, are you able to accommodate them is all.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS: Yes, and that's a fair point. Like I said, we have kind of a potential overflow option downstairs that we could set up with streaming the webinar, so people could go back and forth, and it's not ideal, but it would still provide more access to staff and council members.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: Mr. Sanchez.

MR. SANCHEZ: I don't have any hard feelings, and I'll do whatever is in the best interest of you all, you know, virtual or whatever you want. Now, when it comes to Monday or Tuesday, if that's still up in the air, if it's only two days, is there a Tuesday and Wednesday, just because Wednesday is the traditional public hearing day, and travel is a little easier on a Tuesday.

CHAIRMAN DUGAS: So the initial idea was Monday and Tuesday, and then Dr. Froeschke made some valid points that maybe we should entertain Tuesday and Wednesday, and so I think it's to be determined, pending rates, hotel rates, and it could impact rates on flights as well, you know, from Sunday to Monday, and so there's options to be weighed out. Any other questions or comments for Dr. Simmons? No?

Is there any other business that needs to come before the council? Not seeing any, okay, and I have a few comments and/or thank you's to announce before we adjourn, to the Alabama Charter Fishing Association and Zeke's Marina for the social, the industry folks that showed up to give public testimony. Thank you.

The presenters that presented to us, the SSC chair, Dr. Allen, the AP chairs that were here, and one of my most important things is the staff, and thank you, and so we'll be in touch. We'll be in touch within a week. Thank you all, and safe travels.

(Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on April 10, 2025.)

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