

GULF OF MEXICO FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL  
HABITAT PROTECTION AND RESTORATION COMMITTEE

Hilton Bayfront and Virtual St. Petersburg, Florida

November 4, 2024

**VOTING MEMBERS**

Michael McDermott.....Mississippi  
Kevin Anson (designee for Scott Bannon).....Alabama  
Kesley Banks.....Texas  
Dakus Geeslin (designee for Robin Riechers).....Texas  
Jason Osborne.....Mississippi  
Anthony Overton.....Alabama  
Joe Spraggins.....Mississippi  
Andy Strelcheck.....NMFS

**NON-VOTING MEMBERS**

Billy Broussard.....Louisiana  
Dave Donaldson.....GSMFC  
J.D. Dugas.....Louisiana  
Troy Frady.....Alabama  
Tom Frazer.....Florida  
LT Jackson Morton.....USCG  
John Sanchez.....Florida  
Chris Schieble (designee for Ryan Montegut).....Louisiana  
C.J. Sweetman (designee for Jessica McCawley).....Florida  
Ed Walker.....Florida  
Troy Williamson.....Texas

**STAFF**

Max Birdsong.....Social Scientist  
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  
Kathy Pereira.....Meeting Planner & Travel Coordinator  
Ryan Rindone.....Lead Fishery Biologist/SEDAR Liaison  
Bernadine Roy.....Office Manager  
Carrie Simmons.....Executive Director  
Camilla Shireman.....Administrative & Communications Assistant  
Verena Wang.....Fishery Biologist

**OTHER PARTICIPANTS**

1 David Dale.....NOAA  
2 Bridgette Froeschke.....FL  
3 Tim Griner.....SAFMC  
4 Frank Helies.....NOAA  
5 Clay Porch.....SEFSC  
6 John Walter.....SEFSC

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1 The Habitat Protection and Restoration Committee of the Gulf of  
2 Mexico Fishery Management Council convened at The Hilton Bayfront  
3 in St. Petersburg, Florida on Monday morning, November 4, 2024,  
4 and was called to order by Chairman Michael McDermott.

5  
6 **ADOPTION OF AGENDA**  
7 **APPROVAL OF OCTOBER 2022 MINUTES**  
8 **ACTION GUIDE AND NEXT STEPS**  
9

10 **CHAIRMAN MICHAEL MCDERMOTT:** At this time, I'm going to call the  
11 Habitat Protection and Restoration Committee to order. Members of  
12 the committee are myself, Dr. Banks, Mr. Anson, Mr. Osborne, Dr.  
13 Overton, Mr. Geeslin, General Spraggins, and Mr. Strelcheck.

14  
15 The first matter is going to be an adoption of the agenda. Do I  
16 have a motion to adopt the agenda? Motion by Mr. Geeslin. It's  
17 seconded by Mr. Osborne. The second matter is going to be a motion  
18 to approve the October 2022 minutes. Do I have a motion to approve  
19 the October 2022 minutes? Motion by Dr. Banks. Second by Mr.  
20 Osborne. We're going to move into a presentation by Dr. Hollensead  
21 of the action guide and next steps.

22  
23 **MR. J.D. DUGAS:** Hold on, Michael. Ms. Levy.  
24

25 **MS. MARA LEVY:** Can we just make sure that we're asking whether  
26 there's any objections? I mean, we don't have to take a vote,  
27 but, if someone is going to make a motion, and someone is going to  
28 second it, we need, on the record, that there aren't any  
29 objections, right, with the motion, and that it's approved.  
30 Thanks.  
31

32 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Do we have any objections to the adoption of  
33 the agenda or approval of the minutes? Seeing none, all right,  
34 and so now we'll move into the action guide and next steps by Dr.  
35 Hollensead.  
36

37 **DR. LISA HOLLENSEAD:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's been a while  
38 since this committee has met, and so just to give a quick overview,  
39 and so the council is responsible for managing descriptions of  
40 essential fish habitat, or EFH, for all its managed species. In  
41 this case, we're just going to be focusing on finfish and shrimp  
42 species, and we're not focusing on coral today.  
43

44 There is a EFH amendment on the books. It's about twenty years  
45 old, and so some of the data, and information, that went into  
46 informing those descriptions of EFH need to be updated with some

1 contemporary data sources, as well as a review of what data is  
2 available publicly out there, such that we can have, and inform,  
3 a new amendment that would go through and update those  
4 descriptions.

5  
6 The council tasked a contract project that was awarded to Dr.  
7 Bridgette Froeschke, from the University of Tampa, and her team,  
8 to go out and collect those data and then sort of bring it before  
9 the SSC for review. That has already been done. If you'll recall,  
10 at our last meeting, I gave an update, on behalf of Dr. Paul  
11 Mickle, from the SSC, going through, what they had decided for  
12 that, the suggestions and recommendations they had given to her.

13  
14 She's also going to speak about that and then talk about the  
15 deliverables of the contract, to update the council, and so, at  
16 this point, if nobody has any questions about this action guide,  
17 I would turn it over to Dr. Froeschke for her presentation.

18  
19 **CONTRACT REVIEW: PROGRESS ON ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT DATA**  
20 **COLLECTION**

21  
22 **DR. BRIDGETTE FROESCHKE:** Good morning. I'm Dr. Bridgette  
23 Froeschke, from the University of Tampa, and I'm here to present  
24 to you what we've done for the EFH contract. Just overall process,  
25 what we were tasked to do, was to do a data collection, where we  
26 gathered all available spatial data, for all essential fish  
27 habitat, which I'll give you a list of those habitat coming up  
28 soon.

29  
30 The next part of the project was to use ArcPro to visualize the  
31 spatial data layers, and we aggregated the data by zones. Then we  
32 also included metadata, and that included things such as data  
33 source, title, author, description, the geographic extent for the  
34 data, what projection we have the data in, and the type of format  
35 that was collected.

36  
37 For data collection methods, I had a group of students working on  
38 this with me. We started with just a general online search, using  
39 keywords for essential fish habitat. All of that was -- All the  
40 data collection was done by state, is how we tackled it from the  
41 beginning.

42  
43 In addition to those general online searches, we used ArcGIS  
44 Online, which is a great spot for data, and we looked at all of  
45 the individual states' GIS clearinghouses, and so a lot of the  
46 state and federal data get posted to those websites, that we're

1 able to download shapefiles and metadata directly from there. We  
2 also used Google Scholar, to make sure we were getting all the  
3 data that was collected by people publishing papers, a lot of  
4 academics, et cetera, and we were able to get data that way.

5  
6 Once we started the email chain of trying to collect data, we did  
7 get a lot of people saying, hey, you should contact this person or  
8 that person, and so we were able to get data that way, and then we  
9 also were able to download data from any of the interactive web  
10 pages that show essential fish habitat data.

11  
12 All the data, again, was organized by state, and then, within the  
13 state, the data has been organized by habitat type, and that's  
14 listed from the FMP, and so we were able to get data on submerged  
15 aquatic vegetation, mangroves, drifting algae, emergent marshes,  
16 sand and shell bottoms, hard bottoms, oyster reefs, banks, general  
17 reefs, shell edge, and water-column-associated. We also did  
18 include, so the council has it, any artificial reef data that we  
19 collected, that we did see.

20  
21 For all of the data, we have provided the Gulf Council staff with  
22 a large database that shows the data we've collected, and so they  
23 were able to get information of state, the data title that we gave  
24 it, any description we thought would be beneficial, what we named  
25 the shapefile, the contact person that gave us the data, and their  
26 association, their information, and, if it came from a website,  
27 they now have that website.

28  
29 For the metadata, this is just part of a metadata table that my  
30 team put together for every single shapefile, so they have that as  
31 part of their data, and so we did data description, the data  
32 creator, date of creation, data format, the geographic extent,  
33 spatial resolution. We gave any attribute information, so they  
34 have a list of all of the fields collected in the data, what their  
35 descriptions are, the data source and quality, any access or use  
36 constraints, and, again, contact information.

37  
38 I presented this to the SSC meeting in July, and what we -- What  
39 my team asked the SSC meeting was to identify any missing data  
40 that we might not have come across yet, any contacts that they  
41 thought we needed to reach out to, and just some feedback on the  
42 best way of presentation or sharing of the information at that  
43 meeting.

44  
45 We received feedback from people in Florida, Texas, and Louisiana.  
46 A lot of the data that they suggested we reach out to get, we did

1 get, and we just got it down a different pathway, and so a lot of  
2 it came from the GIS clearinghouse, and so we did go through and  
3 update that we have the direct contact people for those, and not  
4 just through the clearinghouse websites. We were missing some  
5 data from Texas, from Texas Parks and Wildlife, and so we were  
6 able to add that data, and that was individual habitat surveys  
7 done on oysters, seagrass, mangroves, and other inshore reefs, and  
8 so that dataset has been updated.

9  
10 As far as to visually show the data, what we've provided to the  
11 council is some Story Maps. I'll just quickly show you what one  
12 looks like. So, for each state, we put together an essential fish  
13 habitat that just lets them visually look at the description by  
14 habitat type, where the data was located, what ecoregion it's in,  
15 any constraints that we might have had, and, if there was multiple  
16 data sources from a location, we were able to go through that.

17  
18 We also added, on each one of these, an interactive component, and  
19 so you can click on the number. It shows you spatially where the  
20 data is located, and then information about it, and so that's been  
21 provided to the council staff as well.

22  
23 What we were tasked to do was to collect all of the shapefiles,  
24 and that's been collected and done, and so all the shapefiles are  
25 organized on a Google Drive, and they're on ArcGIS Online, and  
26 they're in a workspace on ArcPro, and so they have three different  
27 ways that they can have the data, and they're all also on a Story  
28 Map, and so, ideally, four different ways.

29  
30 We were also tasked with providing documentation of the process,  
31 and so they have, also within the Google Drive, large tables that  
32 show -- One file shows what I talked about earlier, all the data  
33 that we did provide, contacts, et cetera. We also provided them  
34 with a database with every single person we contacted, even if  
35 they didn't answer back, or if the data was out of date, or they  
36 didn't have it anymore, and we provided that information, as well  
37 as the shapefiles organized.

38  
39 I was also tasked with presenting it to the SSC, which we did in  
40 July, and then to you guys now, and then, after this meeting, I  
41 will provide to the staff a final report of everything we've done,  
42 and I will take any questions.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Mr. Anson.  
45  
46 **MR. KEVIN ANSON:** Thank you. Thank you, Dr. Froeschke, for being

1 here and providing the information. In the presentation, and it's  
2 the habitats that are listed mentioned -- Or they just list reefs,  
3 but, during your presentation, you mentioned artificial reefs.  
4

5 **DR. B. FROESCHKE:** So we did -- So artificial reefs were not listed  
6 as something we were tasked with, but, when we came across it, we  
7 did pull them out separate, just so the council staff has it, if  
8 they want them, and so we did those completely separate, but we do  
9 have artificial reef data.

10  
11 **MR. ANSON:** All right. Thank you.

12  
13 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Dr. Froeschke.

14  
15 **DR. JOHN FROESCHKE:** Just as a quick follow-up, the reason that we  
16 did that is the way that it is -- Our EFH is organized by habitat  
17 type. Artificial reefs is not recognized as a habitat type.  
18 However, that was sort of a plus item, if you will, that we asked.  
19 That is among the most requested information that we have used, in  
20 looking at -- When we delved into this, all the way back in 2013.  
21 This is some of the most requested information downloaded from our  
22 website, and so they were nice enough to provide that information,  
23 and separate it out, in the event that we want to use it. It's  
24 always useful information, and we do get that asked a lot.

25  
26 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Mr. Geeslin.

27  
28 **MR. DAKUS GEESLIN:** Thank you, Dr. Froeschke. This is great  
29 information. I think, from a state perspective, we all, you know,  
30 have our own individual programs that are currently, you know,  
31 assessing and characterizing, and mapping, various habitats, both  
32 nearshore and offshore, as Kevin has suggested.

33  
34 What's the end goal for this particular project? You know, we've  
35 got all kinds of clearinghouses for this type of data. Who's in  
36 charge of the storage, and the maintenance, the upkeep? Then, you  
37 know, refreshing. As our folks there, even in Texas, are, you  
38 know, scanning our bay systems with side scan sonar, an, as soon  
39 as they're done with one, you know, they're moving on to the next,  
40 and contemporizing that data set, and what's your vision for this  
41 particular project, in kind of the long game?

42  
43 **DR. B. FROESCHKE:** That's a great question. I was tasked strictly  
44 with collecting the data. My role in it, as I know, is done today.  
45 I'll hand it over to Dr. Froeschke, or Lisa, to address that.

1 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Dr. Froeschke.

2  
3 **DR. J. FROESCHKE:** I'll take a swing at that. Like she said, the  
4 objective -- She was to aggregate this information, and so what  
5 our, I guess, master plan is -- We have the essential fish habitat  
6 amendment, which, for each FMP, the council is required to identify  
7 and describe essential fish habitat, the way it's organized for  
8 these habitat types, and then ecoregions and zones.

9  
10 For each of these, we can now take this information and parse it  
11 out into each of those strata, and then we can look at the actual  
12 fish, and then we map those in a relational table for habitats,  
13 life stages, back to the actual habitat. The essential -- The end  
14 game is we can develop maps that better reflect the habitat and  
15 geographic space, and, by linkages, the corresponding fish that we  
16 manage. We do this periodically. We have five-year reviews that  
17 we try to update this information, and so that's sort of where  
18 we're at.

19  
20 **MR. GEESLIN:** Thank you. To either Dr. Froeschke, and maybe  
21 particular to Dave over there, and I know our folks are also  
22 involved in the Gulf States habitat committees, and how are those  
23 two efforts, you know, at least talking to each other, because our  
24 folks are getting tasked with submitting, you know, data layers,  
25 habitat information, across multiple requests. Is there some level  
26 of coordination going on, because I'm assuming that a lot of the  
27 folks that you're talking to are the same folks that are sitting  
28 in on these Gulf States habitat committees as well.

29  
30 **DR. J. FROESCHKE:** We might actually want to phone in a friend.  
31 David Dale, from -- He's the habitat guru from the Southeast  
32 Regional Office, and he might have more information to add on to  
33 this.

34  
35 **DR. DAVID DALE:** David Dale, at the Southeast Regional Office, the  
36 Essential Fish Habitat Coordinator. If I understand the question,  
37 it's what coordination is occurring between the Gulf States and  
38 the Gulf Council, and possibly NMFS, and it hasn't -- As John  
39 mentioned, or John or Lisa mentioned, this amendment was originally  
40 passed in 2004.

41  
42 There is a five-year review requirement. The Gulf Council is very  
43 good at completing that five-year review. This is the first time  
44 that it looks like it's going to result in an actual update, or an  
45 amendment, and so I think that coordination will occur, but it  
46 hasn't yet.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Mr. Donaldson.

3  
4 **MR. DAVE DONALDSON:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Our habitat committees,  
5 under the commission, have not actually been active over the last  
6 several years. Jeff Rester, and, geez, it's probably been ten  
7 years now, and he worked part-time habitat for the commission and  
8 the council, but, since that time, we haven't really -- Those  
9 committees haven't been active, just as a point of clarification.

10  
11 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Mr. Anson.

12  
13 **MR. ANSON:** Thank you. Just to follow-up on the states, and I'm  
14 from Alabama, and you mentioned that there was no data from  
15 Alabama. Is that because you reached out to staff at Alabama, or  
16 did not have a contact for someone there?

17  
18 **DR. B. FROESCHKE:** No, and that was -- We got some contacts after  
19 the SSC meeting, that we might have been missing data, but we  
20 didn't miss it. We had just gone down a different pathway, and so  
21 we had all of the data. A lot of the data we got from like the  
22 Alabama clearinghouse, because the state puts a lot of their data  
23 on there, and so we hadn't gone directly to the state contact, and  
24 so now that's been updated, so that the council staff has a direct  
25 contact and not just the clearinghouse website.

26  
27 **MR. ANSON:** Thank you.

28  
29 **DR. B. FROESCHKE:** You're welcome.

30  
31 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Mr. Strelcheck.

32  
33 **MR. ANDY STRELCHECK:** Thanks for being here and the comprehensive  
34 review that you and your team have done. I don't know if this is  
35 a question for you or council staff, and so we're kind of at the  
36 end of the process, you kind of turning over your report. Given  
37 some of the questions about coordination, is there still  
38 opportunities for kind of final review input back to you, or to  
39 the council, before your report is finalized, or pretty much you've  
40 completed that effort at this point?

41  
42 **DR. B. FROESCHKE:** I'll turn that over to the bosses over there.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Dr. Simmons.

45  
46 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CARRIE SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think

1 there's some really good questions that have come up. We haven't  
2 really fully thought about how we're going to maintain this  
3 database. We just did this great contract, and we have all this  
4 new data, and so now we need to start going through it with the  
5 IPT process and determining how it's going to go in an amendment.

6  
7 That's going to take us some time, and you'll get different  
8 iterations that will come to the council for your review, and so  
9 we'll have to figure out the database question later on. I feel  
10 like we can get ahold of Dr. Bridgette Froeschke, if we really  
11 needed to, and we have a good connection right now, but, you know,  
12 the --

13  
14 **DR. B. FROESCHKE:** The week's not over, Carrie.

15  
16 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** I've got you, but, anyway, I think  
17 those are some good questions that we're going to have to work  
18 through and bring back to the committee. I hope that makes sense.

19  
20 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** Mr. Anson.

21  
22 **MR. ANSON:** Sorry for -- I keep raising my hand here, but, reviewing  
23 the last five-year review report, Dr. Froeschke, there is not  
24 mention of the benthic algae and sargassum. Is that because there  
25 just was not -- There wasn't any information that was added in the  
26 five-year report, and there's more in the original EFH document?

27  
28 **DR. J. FROESCHKE:** I'll take a stab at this. In general, in terms  
29 of mapping, the habitat types that are mobile, if you will, like  
30 sargassum, we have not made an attempt to map those in the past,  
31 and so that's sort of the way that it's always been done.

32  
33 **MR. ANSON:** But, in as much as the benthic algae that you can or  
34 states do map -- I mean, I'm just wondering, and it's not listed  
35 as a specific species in the last five-year report, and so I just  
36 didn't know if that was because there was no new information, and  
37 all you were doing was just saying, hey, here's the new information  
38 from the previous report, and therefore it wasn't included. I've  
39 not read the document fully to understand it.

40  
41 **DR. J. FROESCHKE:** I don't actually know the answer to that  
42 question. I can look into it, if you want.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN MCDERMOTT:** All right. Have we got any other business  
45 for the Habitat Protection and Restoration Committee? If there's  
46 no other business, I'll turn it over to the chair.

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**DR. B. FROESCHKE:** Thank you.

(Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on November 4, 2024.)

- - -