

## **Sustainable Fisheries Committee Report November 4, 2024 Dr. Kesley Banks, Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab E, No. 1**) and approved the minutes (**Tab E, No. 2**) of the August 2024 meeting.

### *Research and Monitoring Priorities for 2025-2028 (Tab E, No. 4)*

Staff presented the Council's research and monitoring priorities for the 2025-2028 grant cycle. These priorities are intended to foster a better understanding of the gaps in knowledge and data the Council hopes to mitigate. A Committee member inquired if SSC feedback on the prioritized list would be incorporated before final approval. Council staff clarified that due to time constraints the Council would not review the list after SSC feedback. If the SSC recommended significant revisions the Council chair would work with staff to finalize the 2025-2028 Research and Monitoring Priorities. Andy Strelcheck of the Southeast Regional Office (SERO) agreed with prioritizing key stock and species undergoing rebuilding plans. A Committee member highlighted discard mortality and depredation as major concerns. Dr. Simmons acknowledged long-term data gaps for key species and noted that recent funding, such as IRA funding, could help address some of the specific projects for some species.

Dr. John Walter from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) inquired whether the Science Center should give feedback on the research and monitoring priorities. Dr. Simmons indicated that while comments from the Science Center would be valuable, the timeline might limit the opportunity for in-depth review this year.

### *Consideration of Wahoo for Federal Management (Tab E, No. 5)*

Council staff presented information on wahoo stock connectivity, behavior, growth, and reproduction in the western North Atlantic. Staff then walked the Committee through considerations to review before recommending whether wahoo is in need of federal conservation and management. A Committee member did not think there were any pressing concerns for wahoo in the Gulf. They noted the Atlantic portion of the stock is healthy and thought that the Atlantic coast Councils were managing wahoo adequately. However, the Committee member expressed some concern for exceptional regional landings and asked whether any of the states had any motivation to create management measures for wahoo. Absent that, the Committee member noted that the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (FGBNMS) could implement its own management measures within its boundaries. Another Committee member replied that the high harvests off Texas seemed to be the exception, and not the norm. They echoed points in the presentation about the uncertainty in the landings data, and the lack of reliable length composition data. The Committee member thought the best course of action might be for the FGBNMS to pursue its own regulations. A Committee member from Louisiana added that LA Creel landings were as oscillatory and uncertain as the Gulf-wide landings data, and that the landings seemed to be coming more from off the mouth of the Mississippi river. They echoed a preference for having FGBNMS pursue its own management measures. A

Committee member asked for more information about the reasoning behind the current recreational regulation in the Atlantic for the two-fish daily recreational bag limit there. The Southeast Regional Office (SERO) noted that the Atlantic stock status is unknown, and that the Caribbean Fishery Management Council now has management measures in place for dolphin and wahoo. SERO added that most Gulf landings come from Florida, echoed the fast-growing nature of the species, and suggested avoiding fishing on aggregations. SERO recommended going back to the FGBNMS and offering input on ideas they might consider for regulations within their boundaries. A Council member not on the Committee recommended the Committee be mindful of its experiences working with the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS), the lack of public transparency in that process, and the difficulty the Council and the State of Florida had recently with that FKNMS process. A Committee member clarified that the current retention limits for wahoo in the Atlantic stemmed from proactive measures put in place in the wake of tightening swordfish regulations along the Atlantic seaboard. Another Committee member commented that the significant harvests in FGBNMS were occurring in the winter, when the weather is rough, and outside of the stated spawning season. A Committee member summarized that the Committee showed some support for the FGBNMS pursuing regulations, or the Gulf states, if they thought it necessary. NOAA General Counsel stated that if the Committee thought wahoo needed federal conservation and management, then wahoo either needed to be added to a current fishery management plan (FMP), or another FMP would need to be developed for wahoo. A Committee member replied that they thought wahoo was currently effectively managed by other state and federal management entities. The Committee ultimately decided to listen to public comment and discuss further at Full Council.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.