Gulf SEDAR Committee Report
August 21, 2024
Mr. Kevin Anson – Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda **(Tab I, No. 1)** and approved the minutes **(Tab I, No. 2)** of the April 2024 meeting as written.

SEDAR Assessment Process Changes and Model Complexity (Tab I, No. 4, Tab B, No. 9b)

Dr. Shannon Cass-Calay (Southeast Fisheries Science Center [SEFSC]) reviewed proposed changes to the SEDAR process and the SEFSC's organizational plan for addressing and implementing these proposed changes. She summarized current data availability and highlighted that current data bottlenecks are proposed to be improved through automated data processing and index standardization approaches. Dr. Cass-Calay also discussed possible levels of model complexity which might be considered for various managed species, relative to the data available for each.

A Committee member inquired about the cost savings associated with epigenetic aging methods and Dr. Cass-Calay noted that epigenetic aging was already more cost effective, but work remains to scale and standardize aging processes for that method across the region. Committee members commented that they placed a priority on assessment throughput, especially to reduce the time between the terminal data year and when management changes can be implemented.

A Committee member asked about whether interim approaches could be used to update stock status, and if their use could more regularly update catch advice as opposed to health checks. Dr. Cass-Calay highlighted that there are several interim approaches (i.e., index-based approach, update assessment using available data, updated projections with available data, simpler assessment methodology, etc.) that can be used to provide an update to stock status, but those may be stock-specific and require an evaluation of how well the approaches may address the management needs of the stock. Dr. Cass-Calay clarified that the majority of the data come from various sources and stressed the need for data partners to appropriately prioritize completing and submitting data requests for upcoming stock assessments. A Committee member asked if assessments and subsequent updates will continue to undergo a peer-review by the Center for Independent Experts (CIE), and it was noted that for some stocks a CIE review will take place; however, more often than not, limited updates may go directly to the SSC for review. Dr. Cass-Calay noted it is within the Council's purview to request additional peer review of assessments prior to use in management decisions. Council staff added that some of the timeliness challenges in the current process are not solely attributed to the timing of assessments, as there are challenges with timing related to development and implementation of regulatory changes, which staff plan to work closely on streamlining with SERO staff via Inflation Reduction Act funded projects.

Dr. Paul Mickle (Standing Scientific and Statistical Committee [SSC]) provided a summary of SSC comments and recommendations for this proposal. The SSC highlighted that there is a need to clarify the expectations for management updates between assessments. The SSC thought that a stable management approach allows for better assessment of stock responses to management changes, whereby management changes can have an effect on the model. Stable management advice is beneficial for multiple aspects of the ecosystem, from the fish to the stakeholders to the analysts for being able to disentangle management bias from environmental effects. A Committee member asked about how to handle greater amberjack, which has undergone multiple assessments and management changes and failed to rebuild, and how the upcoming greater amberjack absolute abundance study might help improve the assessment of that species. Dr. Mickle replied that multiple management modifications may introduce significant bias, and that it may be best to just let things play out to limit the number of factors confounding stock performance. He highlighted using retrospective analyses to inform how management decisions had short- and long-term effects on the model. He commended the work being done on the greater amberjack absolute abundance study and thought it would lead to improvements in the understanding of greater amberjack in the Gulf.

SEDAR Steering Committee Summary Report July 2024 (Tab I, No. 5)

Council staff summarized the proceedings from the July 29th, 2024, SEDAR Steering Committee meeting, including the SEDAR project reports, SEDAR process changes, and the requested changes to stock assessment schedule for 2026. Council staff reviewed pending scheduled assessments, and those requested for 2026-2028. Also noted was a request for an interim analysis on lane snapper, which was sent to the SEFSC on August 19, 2024.

SSC Recommendations (Tab B, No. 9b)

Dr. Mickle provided an update on the ongoing RESTORE project, which was presented to the SSC by Dr. Nathan Vaughan (Vaughan Analytics, LLC), and SSC recommendations on the project. The RESTORE initiative aims to enhance stock assessment methods to improve overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) decision making in the Gulf fisheries utilizing projections to attempt to simulate reference points and short term OFLs while considering future fishery dynamics, selectivity based MSY estimates, discards. An example of this work in practice is with Gulf gag, where red tide mortality and anticipated catches for interim years were used to inform projections for the OFL and ABC. The SSC recommended that it receive regular progress reporting on the RESTORE project twice a year, and to include additional considerations of social and economic factors and discard mortality in the future.

Other Business

There was no other business discussed.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.