

**Ecosystem Committee Report
August 19, 2024
Dr. Kesley Banks – Vice Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab Q, No. 1**) and approved the minutes (**Tab Q, No. 2**) of the October 2023 meeting as written.

Presentation on Modifications to the 2024 NMFS Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management Road Map (Tab Q, Nos. 4a-c)

Council staff provided an overview of the 2024 NOAA Fisheries Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management (EBFM) Road Map update, which serves as a guidance document for the agency to implement EBFM and advance climate-ready fisheries. Council staff summarized the Ecosystem Technical Committee (ETC) discussion and recommendations on the Road Map and provided an overview of the draft comment letter to NOAA Fisheries in response to the Road Map. Broadly, the ETC was supportive of the Road Map and its goals for advancing EBFM and increasing climate resilience for marine resources and fishing communities. However, the ETC expressed concerns about maintaining long-term funding and staffing for EBFM initiatives and thought that the Road Map should provide better guidance for management partners to implement EBFM tools. Committee members discussed the Road Map and provided recommendations for amendments to the draft comment letter.

Committee members discussed the need for coordination with other regions when considering EBFM for Gulf stocks whose distributions overlap with other jurisdictions. Scenario planning efforts, such as those detailed in the Road Map, have already taken place for the East Coast, including the South Atlantic region which jointly manages several fisheries with the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf). The Gulf has yet to conduct scenario planning, and committee members recommended that the Council take an active role in ensuring that Gulf fisheries ecosystem needs are represented when jointly managing species with other regional Councils that already have ecosystem initiatives in place. A committee member commented that it is difficult to dictate whether science drives management or vice versa, but highlighted that Ecosystem Status Reports could be integrated into management as a tool for the Council to integrate ecosystem and climate resilience considerations into management strategies, including Fishery Ecosystem Plan development.

Committee members inquired about funding and staffing for Road Map initiatives, as well as plans for long-term maintenance and management utility of data streams generated by the Road Map. Dr. Clay Porch (Southeast Fisheries Science Center) commented that although Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds are unlikely to be renewed, they have generated three permanent positions in the Southeast to support development of Ecosystem Status Reports updates, climate-ready harvest strategies, and other ecosystem initiatives. In regard to EBFM data, Dr. Porch commented that current efforts to streamline data processing (e.g., developing automated image analysis techniques) will reduce staff load and build capacity for continued data collection in the future. Data will be housed locally at the Science Center or in national data repositories, depending on the data type.

Council staff agreed to amend the draft comment letter to address the importance of long-term maintenance of EBFM data streams and the potential for Ecosystem Status Reports to meet Fishery Ecosystem Plan needs.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, **to recommend the Council approve and send the comment letter on modifications to the 2024 EBFM road map as amended.**

Motion carried without opposition.

SSC Recommendations and Feedback on Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Contract Work (Tab B, No. 9b)

Council staff summarized the Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommendation for the EFH contract work. The award for the contract went to Dr. Bridgette Froeschke at the University of Tampa. Dr. Froeschke's task was to identify and catalogue the spatial data available for all benthic habitat types. Dr. Froeschke identified where she suspected data were available and not yet provided, and SSC members offered assistance to fill these knowledge gaps. Dr. Froeschke will provide a final report to the Council at its November 2024 meeting.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.