




**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric  
Administration**

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March 27, 2025

**MEMORANDUM TO:** Mr. Jonathan Dugas  
Chair  
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

**FROM:** Clay E. Porch, Director, Southeast Fisheries Science Center 

**SUBJECT:** Discontinuing Gulf of America Headboat Biological Sampling

Thank you for your February 10, 2025, letter expressing concern about the loss of dockside sampling to support the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS) in the western and northern Gulf of America (Gulf), and requesting information on how the Southeast Fisheries Science Center's (SEFSC) decision to discontinue that work is expected to impact stock assessment and fishery management work in the Gulf. I too am concerned about the loss of this valuable component of the SRHS. Data validation is critical to the integrity of fishery-dependent surveys and my office is committed to working with the Southeast Regional Office, Gulf states, and other partners to reinstate the dockside sampling program to ensure the highest precision and accuracy of SRHS data if and when we can identify a permanent source of funding for that work. Our response to your specific questions follows:

1. If there is no dockside validation for a substantial portion of headboats in the Gulf, does the SRHS still meet program certification requirements from NMFS Office of Science and Technology for use in stock assessments and management considerations?

Response: The SRHS is a legacy program that was never certified, but has been grandfathered in and used in peer reviewed assessments. The SRHS program, in its current form, would not likely pass certification without a dockside intercept component or similar estimation methodology.

2. Will this missing dockside validation component affect the Council's ability to stand up and successfully certify a new federal for-hire electronic data collection program since modifications to the SRHS reporting are being considered in that amendment?

Response: The additional reporting requirements (i.e., declarations, landing locations, did not fish reports) currently being considered in the amendment modifying the Gulf for-hire data collection program would apply to SRHS participants. However, discontinuing dockside intercepts for the existing SRHS program would not affect the Council's ability to stand up or certify the new Gulf for-hire data collection program because the SRHS and Gulf for-hire data collection programs are two independent programs. That said, certification only attests to the validity of the survey design. New resources would be needed to properly implement the Gulf for-hire program once it is certified, which may include the cost of dockside sampling and other expenses.

3. Is the lapse in funding for this program temporary? If limited funds do become available, what will NMFS prioritize for the program?

Response: No. The SRHS dockside sampling program requires \$500,000 annually to maintain current levels of sampling in the Gulf. Historically the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission was funded for this program through various sources over the years, but it was never a line item in the SEFSC base budget. While we were able to identify supplementary funds to support the program in 2024, we were unable to secure full funding this year and expect future support to be unsustainable as budgets shrink and inflationary costs grow. We expect this lapse to be permanent until new funds are appropriated by Congress. If limited funds do become available, we will prioritize rotating funding between SRHS coverage in Florida and Alabama to Texas every other year. Also, there is some possibility that commercial port agents can do limited sampling for SRHS if there is no further reduction in force.

cc: F/SEC: John Walter, Trika Gerard  
F/SER: Kim Amendola, Heather Blough, Richard Fickley, Jessica Stephens