

**Ad hoc Charter-For-hire Data Collection Advisory Panel  
Meeting Summary  
February 24, 2025**

The meeting of the Gulf Council's (Council) Ad hoc Charter-For-hire Data Collection Advisory Panel (AP) was convened at 8:30 AM EDT. The AP approved the agenda and summary from the January 2024 meeting as written.

*Review of Council Discussion and Amendment Development*

Council staff provided a progress update outlining Council discussions and development of the amendment from the past year. Council work has largely focused on creating a non-technical validation approach to replace the use of Vessel Monitoring Systems and exploring the use of a sampling design to collect economic information. Chapters 1 and 2 of the amendment have been completed and include 4 actions which consider requiring logbook submissions for all Gulf federally for-hire reef fish and coastal migratory pelagic permit holders, trip declarations, and economic data collection.

*Discussion of Program Validation Methods*

Staff from the Southeast Regional Office (SERO) presented the non-technical validation methodology being considered by the Council for the new program. The validation approach comprises 5 reporting elements: electronic logbooks submitted prior to offload, a combination hail-out/hail-in, landing at approved sites, dockside intercepts, and "did not fish" (DNF) reports. Most of the elements were already required in the previous iteration of the program; however, DNF reports would be a new requirement for the Gulf for-industry.

Several AP members that also possess commercial and/or South Atlantic for-hire permits were familiar with DNF reports. The South Atlantic for-hire data collection program uses weekly DNF reports and keeping the same reporting frequency in the Gulf program would be advantageous. They stated the importance of reducing reporting burden and expressed frustration for having to submit multiple DNF reports for each of their permits. SERO staff replied that DNF reports, at the moment, are sector specific. For example, a fisherman holding Gulf and South Atlantic for-hire permits would only need to send one DNF report if not fishing for a particular week in either area. However, a dually permitted commercial and for-hire fishermen would have to both declare their commercial trip and submit a *for-hire DNF* report if only commercial fishing for a week. The AP stressed that one reporting system that could satisfy reporting requirements for all fishing permits would be ideal.

Council staff reported a recent announcement received at the January Council meeting from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) staff stating that port sampling for the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS) had been discontinued in the Gulf from Texas through Alabama due to lack of funding. Given the importance of dockside intercepts to validating catch and effort estimates coming from any fishery-dependent survey, there is need to understand how the loss in dockside sampling will affect the use of SRHS data. SERO staff replied that they had

no further updates to provide to the AP regarding the status of funding and could not provide any clarification on how data collected through the SRHS would be affected at this time.

An AP member asked what percentage of the Gulf for-hire fleet would need to be sampled at the dock to be considered an appropriate sample size. SERO staff replied that sampling somewhere around 7-10% of the SRHS trips had been deemed sufficient for that survey but additional analysis would be required to deem an appropriate sample size of the new for-hire program. An AP member cautioned against using dockside staff from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) to conduct the work as many fishermen in his area were skeptical of MRIP. A member asked if a technical validation measure, such as geofencing, could be considered for the program at some point in the future. Council staff replied yes and noted that the draft amendment also included a stipulation that the new program be reviewed every few years such that desired modifications to the program design could be implemented. As technologies improve, a technical method could be used in a future iteration of the program.

### *Discussion of Economic Data Collection*

SEFSC fishery economist staff presented a review outlining the rationale, proposed methods, and intended use of economic data for the new program. These data would be used to inform management measures as stipulated in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and disaster relief aid. The collection of these data are being considered in an action with three alternatives: no collection of economic data, a census-level reporting requirement for economic data, or use of a sampling design. The three economic questions to be asked are trip fee, gallons of fuel used, and price of fuel per gallon.

An AP member expressed frustration with the inconsistent characterization of the for-hire industry as either commercial or recreational depending on the situation. He continued that the MSA categorizes charter fishing as a component of the recreational sector and that, in the past, this has resulted in situations where commercial fishermen receive monetary aid after a disaster but the charter industry does not. SEFSC staff answered that the for-hire industry does overlap between the two sectors. The purpose of the trip is recreational since a customer is motivated by access to recreational fishing, but the for-hire permit holder provides that service as a function of a commercial business. An AP member asked why economic data collection for the charter industry could not in the method use for headboats through the SRHS. SEFSC staff replied that the headboats sampled in that survey are relatively fewer than approximately 1,200 charter vessels in the Gulf. Charter trips can also be more specialized than headboat trips, leading to more variation in trip fees and therefore require direct collection from the permit holder. Finally, a smaller share of charter operations maintain websites with trip prices than headboat operations.

The sampling design considered in the draft amendment proposed Alternative 3 is similar to that used in the commercial sector where 20% of vessels are selected to report economic data each trip for a year. An AP member expressed concern since many commercial fishermen take trips with durations of days or up to a week resulting in only filling out the economic survey questions a few times a month. However, many for-hire captains take multiple trips in a day which could mean they would have to fill out the economic portion of the survey as much as 60 times in a month. Further, it was noted by the AP that many of the answers would not be different during

this short period of time. An AP member asked for clarification on if an economic survey would be required if targeting more inshore fisheries within state boundaries. SEFSC stated that the economic survey would have to be filled out every time a logbook is submitted, even if that trip was taken in state waters, if selected.

The AP acknowledged that the collection of economic data in the for-hire industry was contentious and discussed some possible alternatives that would allow fisheries economists to receive the information they needed while addressing stakeholder concerns. Several AP members asked whether having the reporting of economic data be voluntary would be feasible. SERO staff indicated that data voluntarily reported to the agency was not subject to the same confidentiality protections under MSA. Additionally, a few AP members noted there are inherent biases in voluntary data and those estimates would likely not generate results that were representative of the industry.

An AP member asked if it would be possible to use the market value of the trip instead of the trip fee. He stated that fishermen may be more likely to report that value rather than a discrete number for a trip fee. This would allow the economists to generate an economic assessment of the industry while not tying any particular program participant to an exact figure that may be difficult to reconcile in an audit-type scenario. For example, it is not unusual for a for-hire permit holder to provide a trip as a funding raising tool. However, in the older iteration of the program, a selection of \$0 for a trip fee was not possible. There was concern among program participants that placing a dollar value for that data field in that instance would result in a penalty due to perjury and substantially decreased buy-in for the program. Instead, asking to report the market value of the trip could alleviate this concern. SEFSC responded that, conceptually speaking, that approach could work. An AP member asked how economic data were validated. SEFSC staff replied that economic data collection programs do not have the same mechanisms for validation, so these data are not validated.

#### *Review of For-hire Data Collection Document*

Council staff reviewed the draft amendment and pointed out sections in the document where the Council had directly input the AP's previous recommendations on the program objectives into the purpose and need statements and into the generation of the logbook requirements. Action 1 considers implementing the electronic reporting requirement and requires reporting either after every trip or every trip daily for vessel not already participating in the SRHS. Council staff reminded the AP that, in their previous meeting, they had recommended reporting a logbook after every trip to maximize memory retention and data accuracy. Similarly, Action 2 considered vessels reporting to the SRHS and would require reporting either after each trip or daily. The AP agreed that keeping the reporting frequency consistent for all for-hire vessels was ideal.

**Motion: To recommend the Council select Alternative 2 as the preferred in Actions 1 and 2.**

**Alternative 2:** Require that the owner or operator of a charter vessel or headboat issued a valid Gulf for-hire permit for reef fish or Gulf CMP species to submit trip, catch, and effort information for *each trip* via electronic reporting (via NMFS approved software).

If fish are harvested during the trip, electronic reporting is required prior to offloading fish. If fishing did not occur within a monthly<sup>†</sup> period, a “Did Not Fish” report would be required to be submitted.

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

The AP discussed Action 3 in the document which would require a trip declaration either before either a fishing trip or for-hire activity or just on fishing trips. This action was included to address issues in the previous program where program participants were having to hail out any time their vessel left the dock including for fueling or resupplying. The AP decided to modify the language in the in Alternative 2 to focus of the trip declaration requirements only to times when the vessel is engaging in commerce (added language underlined below). The AP also decided that Alternative 2 in Action 3 was its preferred selection and would apply this requirement to both charter vessels and SRHS headboats (options a and b).

**Motion: To recommend the Council modify Alternative 2 in Action 3 as follows:**

**Alternative 2:** Require that the owner or operator of a charter vessel or headboat issued a valid charter vessel/headboat federal permit for reef fish or Gulf CMP species submit a trip declaration for trips that will be engaging in any type of for-hire fishing or for-hire activity.

**Option a:** Charter vessels

**Option b:** SRHS Headboats

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

**Motion: To recommend the Council select the modified Alternative 2 as the preferred in Action 3.**

**Alternative 2:** Require that the owner or operator of a charter vessel or headboat issued a valid charter vessel/headboat federal permit for reef fish or Gulf CMP species submit a trip declaration for trips that will be engaging in any type of for-hire fishing or for-hire activity.

**Option a:** Charter vessels

**Option b:** SRHS Headboats

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

The AP discussed Action 4 of the document which would require the reporting of economic data. Several AP members expressed an opposition to requiring economic reporting but were willing to consider a sampling approach rather than a census-level approach. Others advocated for quantifying the economic value of the industry as a whole. The AP contended that being able to explicitly state the significance of the for-hire industry in monetary terms would result in

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<sup>†</sup> Given the AP discussion on the use of weekly DNF reports and a desire to maintain as much consistency between the for-hire data collection programs in the Gulf and South Atlantic as practicable, future versions of the amendment draft will state weekly DNF reports will be required in the action alternatives.

stakeholders being able to more successfully advocate their position to government representatives, the public, and other user groups who might not otherwise be familiar with fisheries issues. Several members expressed support for reporting the market value, as opposed to trip fee. This consensus of the fleet would allow for economists to obtain the information needed for their work while not making for-hire fishermen beholden to a dollar value that may not accurately reflect an agreed transaction with a customer. For this purpose, the AP defined trip market value as such: “The cost of the hired vessel for the duration of the federal for-hire fishing trip.” Using this terminology, the AP decided to add a new alternative to Action 4.

**Motion: To recommend the Council add a new Alternative in Action 4, that annually, a stratified random sampling design of permitted vessels will be used for selecting vessels that are required to report economic data. The trip market value would be used in place of trip fee and will include a box to check if “fuel is not included,” to capture total trip value and not count fuel twice and make it the preferred Alternative.**

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

#### *Discussion on Outreach Approaches to Roll-out New Program*

Several AP members agreed that the port ambassador program used in the first outreach of the for-hire data collection program was a success. The AP stated that for-hire fishermen communicating directly with other for-hire fishermen was beneficial and helped generate buy-in. The AP also suggested the use of digital and easily shareable materials, such as videos sent through the Council’s e-mail list, would be useful. One AP member reminded the group that outreach efforts would need to focus on educating users on the importance of the economic data collection as this issue remains controversial.

#### *Public Comment*

Nick Conicella: He is a charter operator fishing around Siesta Key and working in Sarasota. He recommended the group very carefully consider cost/benefit analysis when determining what is needed for the program and consider how accurate estimates coming from the program needed to be. He encouraged the group to ask themselves what did they want to get out of this new electronic data collection program. He recommended getting a group of for-hire fishermen together to get an estimate of what a trip fee targeting certain species would be. He commended the group on their solutions so far but suggested that other methods should be explored to understand how the industry may impact the local area.

Susan Boggs: She operates a charter boat out of Orange Beach, Alabama. She encouraged the AP to keep things simple and straightforward when thinking about costs associated with running a charter. She did not want to see an outcome where more reporting burden was put on the fishermen.

The AP was adjourned at 4:15 pm EDT.

AP members present

Elizabeth Boggs

Joshua Ellender

Richard Fischer (virtual)

Jim Green III, *Chair*

Michael Jennings, *Vice chair*

Bo Johnson

Steve Papen

Clarence Seymour Jr.

Clay Shidler

Thad Stewart

Josh Swinford

Abby Webster

Council Representative

Troy Frady