

Scientific and Statistical Committees
Scope of Work
July 31 – August 1, 2024
Tampa, Florida

Agenda Item III: Election of SSC Chair and Vice Chair

Action: Election

Committee input and next steps: Council staff will facilitate the election of the SSC Chair and Vice Chair. SSC members may only be nominated in their absence with written consent to be appointed. Once elected, the Chair and Vice Chair will begin serving immediately.

Agenda Item V: SSC Member General Orientation

Action: Information

Committee input and next steps: Council staff will brief the SSC on their general responsibilities to the Council in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, and with the Council’s Standard Operating Practices and Procedures. This presentation will also provide general information about participation, travel, and stipends. SSC members should review the information presented and ask questions of Council staff.

Agenda Item VI: SSC Member SEDAR Process Orientation and Engagement

Action: Information

Committee input and next steps: Council staff will brief the SSC on their general responsibilities specific to their participation in the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) process, which is the primary process through which the Council receives stock assessments on its managed species. Council staff will also detail how SSC members can become and remain engaged in the SEDAR process to provide the greatest benefit to the scientific process, and to provide feedback to the SSC as assessments progress. SSC members should review the information presented and ask questions of Council staff.

Agenda Item VII: Management Strategy Evaluation

Action: Information

Committee input and next steps: Drs. Cassidy Peterson and Katie Siegfried (Southeast Fisheries Science Center [SEFSC]) will provide an overview of management strategy

evaluations (MSE) to the SSC. They will review the differences between model types and approaches, applications, limitations, and the sorts of expectations users should have. Drs. Peterson and Siegfried will also describe some recent examples for the purpose of framing the discussion and informing SSC members. SSC members should review the information presented and ask questions of SEFSC staff.

Agenda Item VIII: SEDAR Assessment Process Changes and Model Complexity

Action: Presentations and discussion

Committee input and next steps: Drs. Siegfried and Shannon Cass-Calay (SEFSC) will review proposed changes to the SEDAR process and the SEFSC’s organizational plan for addressing and implementing these proposed changes. The SEDAR Steering Committee comments will be summarized for the SSC, as that meeting will be held a day before the SSC meeting. Dr. Siegfried will also discuss possible levels of model complexity which might be considered for various managed species, relative to the data available for each. SSC members should review the information presented and ask questions of SEFSC and Council staff.

Agenda Item IX: Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Contract Review: Progress on EFH Data Collection

Action: Presentation, discussion, and recommendations

Committee input and next steps: The Council is developing a generic amendment to update EFH descriptions for managed finfish and shrimp species. Before generating the new descriptions, it is necessary to identify, collect, and catalog any available contemporary benthic habitat spatial data throughout the Gulf. To conduct this work, the Council contracted with Dr. Bridgette Froeschke (University of Tampa). The objectives of the Council’s contract were to compile contemporary spatial habitat data layers across the Gulf of Mexico from various sources, using statistical and geographic information system (GIS) software to visualize, analyze, and aggregate feature layers to create Gulf-wide maps for each habitat type by zones.

Council staff will also provide a presentation explaining the Council’s role in EFH management and provide rationale for the contract work. Dr. Bridgette Froeschke will provide a progress report on the contract work to date and provide example story maps for Texas and Louisiana. SSC members should review the objectives of the contract and the two presentations as well as access the posted Google Drive to review the collected spatial feature layers (organized by state) and data provider contact lists. The SSC should make recommendations regarding any potential data gaps and provide insight on which years of data may be the most reflective of current distributions for each habitat type. Dr. Bridgette Froeschke will consider feedback from the SSC and submit a final report to the Council for consideration at its November 2024 meeting.

Agenda Item X: Review: *Influence of Timing and Duration of Recreational Seasonal Harvest Restrictions on Gag Effort, Harvest, and Discards in the Gulf of Mexico*

Action: Presentation, discussion, and recommendations

Committee input and next steps: Dr. Challen Hyman (University of South Florida) will present recent research on the effects of modifications to the recreational fishing season duration for Gulf gag grouper on fishing effort, harvest, and discards. Dr. Hyman will describe the relationships between these factors and how accounting for them can assist fisheries managers in better aligning fishing seasons with management goals. SSC members should review the information presented, ask questions of Dr. Hyman, and make recommendations to him and the Council as appropriate.

Agenda Item XI: Public Comment

Action: Information

Committee input and next steps: Members of the public will be able to address the SSC directly with respect to the topics discussed during this webinar meeting, and other matters, as time allows.

Agenda Item XII: Discussion: Acceptable Biological Catch Control Rule Modifications

Action: Presentation, discussion, and recommendations

Committee input and next steps: Drs. Calay and Siegfried (SEFSC) will review presentations on an alternative approach to the current Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) Control Rule, used by the SSC for determining the scientific uncertainty between the overfishing limit (OFL) and the ABC. This information has been incrementally presented to the SSC in May of 2021 and May of 2022, and was discussed further in January of 2023.

The current ABC Control Rule has been in place since 2011; however, SSC members have regularly expressed a desire to revisit the control rule. This stems from the propensity for the buffer determined by the P* approach generally resulting in a difference between the OFL and ABC that is not representative of the uncertainty identified in the stock assessment. The SSC will review these presentations and the background materials provided and should focus its efforts on how to best revise the ABC Control Rule. The SSC should make revisions and recommendations as appropriate.

Agenda Item XIII: RESTORE Project Update: Projections Model Review

Action: Presentation, discussion, and recommendations

Committee input and next steps: Dr. Nathan Vaughan will review targeted research of his team’s RESTORE project, which aims to create new modeling technologies to better project the effects of known variables on future catch limits. Dr. Vaughan and team’s work has recently focused on incorporating the effects of episodic mortality from red tide and its effects on red grouper and gag catch projections. He will also describe simulation work related to improving the interim analysis process, which the Council has been using with increasing frequency to monitor stock health in between stock assessments, and also to update catch advice. Dr. Vaughan will then describe different proposals for quantifying maximum sustainable yields by fleet and region, and the handling of discards in projections. The SSC should focus its attention on feedback related to key decision points for moving forward based on initial results, SSC preferences for participation in and receipt of future updates, and how to best integrate these products into stock assessment advice. Lastly, the SSC should provide feedback to Dr. Vaughan on any other research priorities to consider over the remainder of the 5-year funding period.

Agenda Item XIV: Review: *Regional and Sector-Specific Gulf of Mexico Age, Growth, and Age-length Key Estimation Derived from Otolith-based Ageing*

Action: Presentation, discussion, and recommendations

Committee input and next steps: Dr. Will Patterson (University of Florida, Standing SSC) will review results of the research contracted by the Council to assess ageing error in Gulf gray triggerfish. The Council funded this work in light of its critical importance for completing a new stock assessment on Gulf gray triggerfish schedule for 2025. The last stock assessment was terminated prior to completion due to irreconcilable data issues; among these was an outstanding issue related to differences in ages between using otoliths and dorsal spines. The specific objectives of the Council’s contracted study were to 1) sample gray triggerfish from commercial fisheries landings in the southeastern, northeastern, and western Gulf of Mexico; 2) estimate fish age via opaque zone counts in sagittal otoliths; 3) validate otolith-derived age estimates for a subset of samples (n = 30) randomly selected from each region via application of the bomb ¹⁴C chronometer to eye lens core (age-0 portion) ¹⁴C values; 4) test for differences in sex-specific size-at-age and growth estimates among regions and between commercial and previously sampled eastern Gulf of Mexico recreationally harvested fish; and 5) compute age-length keys by sex, and potentially by region and fishery sector pending results under objective 4. The SSC should review objectives of the contract and the results and information presented, ask questions of Dr. Patterson, and make recommendations for modifications as appropriate so a final report can be submitted to the Council for consideration.

Agenda Item XV: Discussion: 2025-2028 Research and Monitoring Priorities

Action: Discussion and recommendations

Committee input and next steps: Council staff will review the Council’s research and monitoring priorities for the next four years of its grant cycle, 2025 – 2028. These priorities are intended to serve as a guide for individuals seeking to understand where the Council hopes to

resolve gaps in knowledge or to expand existing datasets. After the SSC and Council review and approve the updated research and monitoring priorities for 2025-2028, they are posted on the Council website and sent via letter to NMFS and other relevant federal and state grant agencies for consideration as priority items for funding opportunities.

These priorities, if addressed, are expected to measurably improve the Council's abilities to manage federal fisheries per the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. SSC members should review the information presented, ask questions of Council staff, and make recommendations to the Council as appropriate.

Agenda Item XVI: Public Comment

Action: Information

Committee input and next steps: Members of the public will be able to address the SSC directly with respect to the topics discussed during this webinar meeting, and other matters, as time allows.

Agenda Item XVII: Other Business

Action: Discussion

Committee Input and Next Steps: Additional items may be brought up for discussion by SSC members, time permitting. If the SSC wishes to pursue action, then action can be scheduled at a future SSC meeting.