

GULF COUNCIL

REEF FISH MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The Lodge Gulf Shores, Alabama

April 8-9, 2025

**VOTING MEMBERS**

- 10 J.D. Dugas.....Louisiana
- 11 Kevin Anson (designee for Scott Bannon).....Alabama
- 12 Kesley Banks.....Texas
- 13 Billy Broussard.....Louisiana
- 14 Troy Frady.....Alabama
- 15 Tom Frazer.....Florida
- 16 Dakus Geeslin (designee for Robin Riechers).....Texas
- 17 Michael McDermott.....Mississippi
- 18 Jason Osborne.....Mississippi
- 19 Anthony Overton.....Alabama
- 20 John Sanchez.....Florida
- 21 Chris Schieble (designee for Ryan Montegut).....Louisiana
- 22 Joe Spraggins.....Mississippi
- 23 Andy Strelcheck.....NMFS
- 24 C.J. Sweetman (designee for Jessica McCawley).....Florida
- 25 Ed Walker.....Florida
- 26 Troy Williamson.....Texas

**NON-VOTING MEMBERS**

- 29 Dave Donaldson.....GSMFC
- 30 LT Jason Morton.....USCG

**STAFF**

- 33 Assane Diagne.....Economist
- 34 Matt Freeman.....Economist
- 35 John Froeschke.....Deputy Director
- 36 Lisa Hollensead.....Fishery Biologist
- 37 Sarah Gardiner.....Fishery Biologist
- 38 Mara Levy.....NOAA General Counsel
- 39 Emily Muehlstein.....Public Information Officer
- 40 Ryan Rindone.....Lead Fishery Biologist/SEDAR Liaison
- 41 Bernadine Roy.....Office Manager
- 42 Camilla Shireman.....Administrative & Communications Assistant
- 43 Carrie Simmons.....Executive Director

**OTHER PARTICIPANTS**

- 46 Mike Allen.....SSC
- 47 Rick Burris.....MS
- 48 Willy Goldsmith.....

1 Nick Haddad.....FL Sea Grant  
2 Frank Helies.....NOAA  
3 Robert Hilliard.....FL  
4 Dylan Hubbard.....FL  
5 Andrew Loftus.....  
6 Charlie Phillips.....SAFMC  
7 Clay Porch.....SEFSC  
8 Charlie Robertson.....GSMFC  
9  
10 - - -

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PAGE 26: Motion to select Alternative 2 in Action 1 as the preferred alternative. [The motion carried on page 26.](#)

PAGE 77: Motion to form a working group comprised of members of the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs to collectively address the best practices for estimating steepness (and thus estimate MSY) for management advice, as well as a discussion of SPR proxy values given a range of life history values among fish species. [The motion carried on page 80.](#)

PAGE 81: Motion to direct staff to develop a document that updates catch advice and jurisdictional apportionments for mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper in the Gulf and South Atlantic in cooperation with the South Atlantic Council. [The motion carried on page 86.](#)

PAGE 96: Motion to direct staff to develop a document that provides management advice for red grouper. [The motion carried on page 98.](#)

PAGE 115: Motion in Action 2 to make Alternative 3 the preferred. [The motion carried on page 115.](#)

PAGE 115: Motion in Action 2 to move Alternative 4 to Considered but Rejected. [The motion carried on page 116.](#)

PAGE 127: Motion to recommend the council approve Framework Action: Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limits and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes in the document. The council chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate. [The motion carried on page 127.](#)

PAGE 191: Motion to direct staff to develop a document that replaces and enhances the DESCEND Act. [The motion carried on page 193.](#)

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1 The Reef Fish Management Committee of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery  
2 Management Council convened at The Lodge in Gulf Shores, Alabama  
3 on Tuesday morning, April 8, 2025, and was called to order by  
4 Chairman Tom Frazer.

5  
6 **LITIGATION UPDATE**  
7

8 **MR. J.D. DUGAS:** Moving on to business, the litigation update from  
9 Ms. Levy.

10  
11 **MS. MARA LEVY:** Good morning. I don't really have very much of an  
12 update. We're still waiting on the decision on the 54 remand  
13 related to the Appointments Clause. That's still with the District  
14 Court. It got remanded back from the 5th Circuit, and so there's  
15 no update there. The Amendment 56 Appointments Clause litigation  
16 that is in Alabama, the only update there is the court did hear  
17 argument on the cross motions for summary judgment, and so then  
18 has taken those under consideration, but we don't have a decision  
19 yet, and so I don't really have an update for that one as well,  
20 and I will answer John Sanchez's question before he asks it. I do  
21 not have an update on the Amendment 53 remand. Thanks.

22  
23 **MR. DUGAS:** Okay. Thank you, Ms. Levy. We have another question.  
24 Mr. Sanchez.

25  
26 **MR. JOHN SANCHEZ:** Thank you for anticipating. Is there any chance  
27 of an update on a timeline on when there might be some compliance  
28 with the remand?

29  
30 **MS. LEVY:** I don't really have an answer for that either. I mean,  
31 I guess I would just dispute the compliance part, but we're still  
32 working on it.

33  
34 **MR. DUGAS:** Okay. Not seeing any other questions for Ms. Levy,  
35 we're going to move into Reef Fish. Dr. Frazer.

36  
37 **ADOPTION OF AGENDA**  
38 **APPROVAL OF JANUARY 2025 MINUTES**  
39 **ACTION GUIDE AND NEXT STEPS**  
40

41 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I don't really have an agenda today. No, but  
42 all right. Thanks, J.D. All right. I'll call together the Reef  
43 Fish Management Committee. I'll remind everybody that's a  
44 committee of the whole. The first item on the agenda is the  
45 Adoption of the Agenda, which is Tab B, Number one in your briefing  
46 materials. Is there a motion to adopt the agenda? C.J.

47  
48 **DR. C.J. SWEETMAN:** I would like to add something to Other

1 Business, just a discussion about gag grouper.

2  
3 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Added. Are there any other  
4 additions? Chris.

5  
6 **MR. CHRIS SCHIEBLE:** I would like to add an item to Other Business  
7 as well, a Louisiana -- A discussion of Louisiana state and federal  
8 for-hire charter.

9  
10 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Noted. Thanks, Chris. Any other  
11 additions or modifications to the agenda? I'm not seeing any.  
12 Can I get a motion to approve the agenda with the added business  
13 items? Motion by C.J. Is there a second.

14  
15 **MR. DAKUS GEESLIN:** Second.

16  
17 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** It's seconded by Dakus. All right. Any  
18 opposition? All right. Seeing none, that motion carries. The  
19 second item of business is the Approval of the January 2025  
20 Minutes. That would be Tab B, Number two in your briefing  
21 materials. Are there any edits or modification to those minutes?  
22 Not seeing any, is there any opposition to approving the minutes  
23 as prepared? Not seeing any, we'll consider the January 2025  
24 minutes approved.

25  
26 That will lead us into the Action Guide and Next Steps, which is  
27 Tab B, Number 3 in your briefing materials, and I will let Mr.  
28 Rendon talk us through Item Number IV.

29  
30 **REEF FISH AND IFQ PROGRAM LANDINGS UPDATE**

31  
32 **MR. RYAN RINDONE:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so Frank is here, and  
33 he's going to review the status of the reef fish and IFQ program  
34 landings relative to the catch limits, and this is just for you  
35 guys' information.

36  
37 Also, the council representatives from each of the five Gulf states  
38 will review their 2024 private angling fishing seasons for red  
39 snapper, including things like weight and length by year and  
40 fishing effort, and they'll also talk about their 2025 fishing  
41 seasons, and this is also just for the committee's information,  
42 and you guys should feel free to ask questions, as appropriate.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Mr. Rindone, and so I guess first up  
45 on the list is the Reef Fish and IFQ Program Landings Update, Tab  
46 B, Number 4. Frank.

47  
48 **MR. FRANK HELIES:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good morning. Frank

1 Helies, NOAA Fisheries. I'm going to start with the reef fish.  
2 We give you guys an update on this twice a year, and so this will  
3 be for preliminary 2024 and 2025 landings.

4  
5 I'll start with the federal red snapper for-hire landings. We had  
6 a season that went from June 1 through August, and we initially  
7 landed 2.1 million pounds, which was 71 percent of the ACT. We  
8 reopened, and we caught another 3 percent of the ACT, 80,000  
9 pounds, and so for a total of 2.2 million pounds, and feel free to  
10 ask questions as we walk through this, if you would like to do  
11 that.

12  
13 Just one more point on for-hire red snapper. We're waiting on the  
14 final landings for 2024, so we can make the announcement for this  
15 season. Normally we would have them by now, because we generally  
16 have a shorter season, but, because we reopened, we have Wave 6,  
17 and so we're still waiting on final Wave 6 landings. Thanks.

18  
19 Red grouper, the season was January through June. The total  
20 landings were 2.2 million pounds, which was 123 percent of the  
21 ACT. We'll be talking about red grouper a little bit later on in  
22 the agenda for Reef Fish.

23  
24 Greater Amberjack commercial, the final landings for 2024 were  
25 52,000 pounds, which was 89 percent of the ACT. So far this year,  
26 we've landed 33,000 pounds, which is 35 percent, and we're  
27 currently in a fixed closed season of March through May.

28  
29 This is kind of ugly, the greater amberjack recreational landings.  
30 We had -- The season was in September and October, the 2024-2025  
31 season, and the total landings were high, 250 percent of the ACT,  
32 and so we have S&T doing a little deeper dive on greater amberjack.  
33 We hope to hear from them soon, but there is a payback, and so  
34 we'll have to examine what the length will be for the September  
35 season. Questions?

36  
37 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and I know that S&T is going to dive into  
38 this a little bit, but any like preliminary idea geographically  
39 where those fish came from?

40  
41 **MR. HELIES:** We can find that out, and we will have a better idea.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay.

44  
45 **MR. HELIES:** All right. Lane snapper is a stock ACL. Once again,  
46 we exceeded the stock ACL last year by 0.3 million pounds. We're  
47 looking at adjusting the size limit in our framework action today,  
48 and so hopefully we'll be able to extend the season this year.

1 Gray triggerfish commercial landings are currently at 13,000  
2 pounds, which is 15 percent of the ACT. Gray triggerfish  
3 recreational landings, we haven't had any closures since 2021.  
4 Last year, we landed 203,000 pounds, which is 74 percent of ACT.  
5

6 Gray snapper, we changed units to FES, and so the ACL, the stock  
7 ACL, is much higher now. It's currently, 21,000 pounds, and mostly  
8 rec landings for this species. Mutton snapper, we're going to get  
9 an update on the latest assessment on mutton snapper today as well.  
10 We were fairly close to the stock ACL last year, but under.  
11 Currently, we're at 14,000 pounds, which is 10 percent of the stock  
12 ACL. You can see an increasing trend in landings over the last  
13 few years.  
14

15 Yellowtail, we're well under the stock ACL. Last year, we landed  
16 only 30 percent, 267,000 pounds. This is a -- The fishing year is  
17 a split season fishing year, and so, so far this year, the 2024-  
18 2025 fishing season, we've landed 136,000 pounds, which is 15  
19 percent of the stock ACL.  
20

21 Cubera, we did exceed the stock ACL last year. It's very low  
22 though, and so it's -- We had 5,987 pounds. We're currently at 16  
23 percent, which is almost 800 pounds, and so the accountability  
24 measure for cubera is, if we exceed it in a fishing year, we have  
25 to monitor in-season, and so we'll be monitoring in-season this  
26 year, and we may need to close early if it looks like we're going  
27 to exceed the ACL this year. Questions on that, the AM? It's a  
28 similar AM for a lot of these species, the reef fish species.  
29

30 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Simmons.  
31

32 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CARRIE SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so,  
33 Frank, I think I might have mentioned this at the Reef AP meeting,  
34 and is this also one of the species you might ask S&T to take a  
35 closer look at as well? I know it's lower priority, but it's  
36 probably more rarely landed, and it's a very low ACL.  
37

38 **MR. HELIES:** Okay. Vermilion snapper, good shape there. So far,  
39 329,000 pounds, which is 6 percent of the stock ACL. The jacks  
40 complex, you can see a trend that's going downward recently in  
41 this stock. It's currently at 2 percent, which is 6,000 pounds.  
42 The Reef Fish AP did ask, next time I give this presentation, to  
43 break these out by species, and we can try to do that. There's  
44 some thoughts on potentially some of these species driving these  
45 landings, individual species, instead of the whole stock or  
46 complex.  
47

48 Midwater snapper was an issue a few years back. That fisherman

1 left the Gulf, and we've been in good shape since, and so we're  
2 currently at 22,000 pounds, which is 13 percent of the stock ACL.  
3 There were also some questions at the Reef Fish AP on queen  
4 snapper, I believe, and so we'll look into that one as well for  
5 the next presentation. That should be reef fish, if there's any  
6 questions on that.

7  
8 Bernie, I think it's all one, right, and so IFQ will be next, but  
9 I think it's the same. You added it together, and so, briefly,  
10 the IFQ landings, and, again, you can find all of these landings  
11 on our website. They are updated weekly. IFQ landings are updated  
12 daily.

13  
14 Red snapper, the final landings for 2024, were 7.4 million pounds,  
15 and we landed 99.5 percent of the ACL. As of this morning, we're  
16 currently at 2.1 million pounds, which is 28 percent. Red grouper,  
17 last year, we landed 90.5 percent of the ACL. To date, it is  
18 797,000 pounds, which is 29 percent.

19  
20 Gag, last year, we landed 94 percent. As of today, we've landed  
21 54,791 pounds, which is 27 percent. The next slide, we can sit on  
22 this one for a minute, and so I added some dotted lines to this  
23 graph that show the proposed ACLs that you're going to discuss in  
24 the shallow-water grouper framework.

25  
26 Currently, the council's preferred alternative is 245,000 pounds,  
27 which is red. You can kind of see where recent landings and trends  
28 are compared to where you guys are looking to set the ACL for  
29 shallow-water grouper in the framework action. Any questions on  
30 that? Okay.

31  
32 The last slide is black grouper. This was kind of a remnant from  
33 58A, where we're going to look at splitting the complex, and black  
34 grouper drive that second subcomplex. That's it for me, if you  
35 have any questions.

36  
37 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, Frank, for that update. Any  
38 follow-up questions on any of the reef fish IFQ things? Andy.

39  
40 **MR. ANDY STRELCHECK:** I'll just add, for the review of Science and  
41 Technology, so I've gotten kind of a preliminary report, and we  
42 have had a longstanding internal review process. We've also been  
43 working with the states on review of wave estimates, and so there's  
44 been a number of things that have been flagged, and adjustments  
45 are expected for some of the catch estimates, and so I just wanted  
46 to note that, that we are scrutinizing all of these landings  
47 estimates very carefully, and that, before we, obviously, announce  
48 any accountability measures, seasons, we want to make sure that

1 those have all gone through a thorough review, and so that's  
2 happening right now.

3  
4 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Andy, and we may get to this in Other  
5 Business, under gag, and I don't need numbers necessarily, but,  
6 just thinking ahead, any idea when we might hear a season  
7 projection for gag?

8  
9 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Yes, and so, for gag, our goal would be to announce  
10 it by the June council meeting, or by the start of summer. Right  
11 now, we know that it's important to get an announcement out for  
12 any red grouper season and for-hire red snapper, and so those are  
13 the two we're focusing on in the immediate term.

14  
15 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you. All right. Any other questions for  
16 the folks at SERO? I am not seeing any, and so we'll go ahead and  
17 move into the state red snapper landing updates, and we'll start  
18 off with Florida and Dr. Sweetman.

19  
20 **FLORIDA STATE RED SNAPPER LANDINGS**

21  
22 **DR. C.J. SWEETMAN:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll wait for Bernie to  
23 pull up that presentation. Thank you, Bernie. Okay, and we can  
24 go to the next slide. All right, and so just a standard -- It's  
25 cut off there, but that's okay. A standard slide that we have  
26 here just kind of about Florida's State Reef Fish Survey.

27  
28 It ultimately replaced our Gulf Reef Fish Survey in July of 2020,  
29 applying it to the entire state. It's required for all fishers,  
30 in both the Gulf and Atlantic, that are targeting thirteen reef  
31 fish species from a private vessel. It's an annual, no-cost  
32 designation. There are two separate components of this. The first  
33 is the mail survey and dockside interviews, and, as I've mentioned,  
34 we supplement SRFs with MRIP angler interviews as well.

35  
36 It is not designed for real-time monitoring, like other states.  
37 That's something that I consistently harp on here, and this is  
38 mainly just due to the numerous access points that we've got and  
39 the number of anglers in Florida.

40  
41 Okay, so this was the season structure that was set up for the  
42 2024 season. The quota for Florida, after a quota bump, was about  
43 2.7 million pounds. We had two separate seasons, basically a  
44 summer component that was continuous June 1 through July 31, and  
45 then you can see the season structure in what we're considering  
46 the fall season there, and it extended all the way through the end  
47 of December.

1 Okay, and so we didn't land our quota in 2024. It was only about  
2 45 percent of the quota, despite it being 120 days, and so 1.2  
3 million pounds, a little more than that, on that 2.7-million-pound  
4 quota.

5  
6 On the next slide we can kind of start to dive into some of the  
7 patterns here that we saw. We did see a decline, as you can see,  
8 in just the average weights here, but, overall, it's typically,  
9 you know, about the average across. We see a little bit smaller  
10 fish in the state charters, which makes sense. They're typically  
11 targeting in state waters, obviously. Those fish are smaller, and  
12 so we do expect to see, you know, on average, smaller fish in the  
13 state charter weights, versus the private weights, which are  
14 typically targeting more offshore, but we do see a decline in the  
15 weights.

16  
17 We do see a decline in the private length as well, but, overall,  
18 as you can see, it's more or less about the long-term average, as  
19 it relates to that, and so this is where we are looking at the  
20 effort estimates.

21  
22 There's a lot going on in here, but, typically, the main things  
23 that I kind of want to point out for 2024, and the high effort  
24 seasons is typically in the summer, and so that June and July  
25 component, and you can see that effort slightly reduced compared  
26 to last year, and, if you were looking across the entire time  
27 series, you can definitely see that there's some reduction in  
28 effort across, from all the way from 2021, but, comparatively to  
29 last year, the numbers are essentially similar. Did you want to  
30 ask a question on this?

31  
32 **MR. ED WALKER:** Yes, please. Maybe I'm not understanding the  
33 graph, but how are there -- Or this is just reef fish overall, and  
34 I was going to say, how are there red snapper in months that are  
35 closed, but I --

36  
37 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and this is effort across the entire State  
38 Reef Fish Survey that we use, and so for all thirteen species, and  
39 then we kind of dive into, in the next slide, the CPUE. All right.  
40 Next slide, Bernie.

41  
42 Then here's just the catch per unit effort that we've got, where  
43 we're teasing out Gulf red snapper there. You can see, just  
44 comparatively, from last year, in 2023, to 2024, there is a little  
45 bit of reduction in the CPUE, but, overall, it's nothing that's  
46 too drastic, and then, obviously, you can see that there's that  
47 summer -- Or that fall component, where we extended into December  
48 last year, and not too much to compare to relative to previous

1 years, because that was the first time that we were opening up in  
2 December a little bit. I think that's it. Okay, and I'm happy to  
3 take any questions.

4  
5 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Andy.

6  
7 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Yes, and, I mean, you're presenting the results,  
8 obviously, on a west coast basis. What did you see post-  
9 hurricanes? Did you see some substantial disruptions in effort on  
10 the west coast of Florida?

11  
12 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and, I mean, last year, we had several major  
13 hurricanes that undoubtedly played an impact in terms of people's  
14 ability to even get on the water a little bit there, and so that  
15 probably accounts for some of the decline in effort that we saw a  
16 little bit, but, overall, the decline in effort wasn't too drastic,  
17 but undoubtedly the hurricanes had an impact, in terms of Florida's  
18 ability to catch that quota.

19  
20 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Any other questions for Dr. Sweetman? All right.  
21 I'm not seeing any. Thanks, C.J. Okay. Next on the list is  
22 Alabama. Mr. Anson.

23  
24 **ALABAMA STATE RED SNAPPER LANDINGS**

25  
26 **MR. KEVIN ANSON:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. So, to summarize our 2024  
27 season, we opened, again, the Friday before Memorial Day weekend,  
28 which historically, since we've been involved with state  
29 management, is when we've opened.

30  
31 It remained open through the end of the year, closing Monday the  
32 30<sup>th</sup>, and so we had a four-day season structure, which we've had  
33 for the last two years or so prior to that, a sixteen-inch minimum  
34 size, and a two-fish-per-person-per-day creel limit. Our  
35 allocation, our catch limit, included a payback from a 2023 overage  
36 of just about 5,000 pounds, and our final harvest was 570,856  
37 pounds.

38  
39 Here's a summary of our daily harvest from 2018, the start of the  
40 EFP, the state management EFP, through 2024. You can see 2024  
41 there in red. It is comparable to the previous two years, 2022  
42 and 2023. We also -- C.J. mentioned about some of the weather and  
43 such, and we had some impacts in the early part of our season,  
44 which historically is where we would harvest most of the red  
45 snapper, is in that first fifty or sixty days. When you get into  
46 the first part of July, effort starts to fall off, and you can see  
47 a little downturn there in 2024 and, again, that first forty-day  
48 or so period.

1  
2 Here's the average weight for the state charter and private  
3 recreational anglers on the left. You can see the state charter,  
4 there in blue, had that peak there in 2023. We discussed that  
5 last year. Basically, it was influenced by just a couple of trips  
6 where they specifically target those larger fish, and those larger  
7 fish were included in the sample weight, but generally declining  
8 trends there in weight, and in length, from about seven-and-a-half  
9 pounds, when we started the EFP in 2018, to about six pounds now  
10 for private red snapper, and about six-and-a-half pounds in 2018  
11 for state red snapper, down to about four pounds in 2024.

12  
13 The length, on the right-hand side, follows those trends, with the  
14 spike, and down at the bottom is just the number of fish that go  
15 into those statistics for the time period. They're fairly  
16 consistent. Our staff try to get both length and weight for the  
17 samples, except for this last year, when we just had the one extra  
18 fish that was measured and not weighed in private mode.

19  
20 Here's a summary of the vessel trips on the left, and it's broken  
21 out by private and state charter. Private is in green. You can,  
22 see there in 2018, there was an increase in -- In 2019, there was  
23 an increase there to 2020. Since 2020, we've had generally a  
24 reduction in trips, and these are vessel trips for private mode  
25 and then for state charter. It's fairly consistent. You can see  
26 some variability there amongst the estimates, as far as the  
27 statistics go.

28  
29 Then, in the center, we have the mean anglers per vessel trip.  
30 That's fairly consistent, and basically just a general decreasing  
31 trend, but slight, and on the right-hand side there is the mean  
32 harvest per vessel trip, and harvest includes dead discards that  
33 are reported by the landing reports for each vessel trip. As you  
34 can see there, it's fairly consistent amongst the two modes, with,  
35 again, just a slight declining trend.

36  
37 Just a summary of our season length, our season structure, the  
38 total number of days, and the allocation that we had by year from  
39 2018 to 2024. We just had, again, four-day weekends for some time,  
40 and we've been able to go all the way pretty much to the end of  
41 the year, for the last three out of the last four years. 2023 was  
42 a reduced season, because we went to a different FES calibration  
43 to state landings.

44  
45 For 2025, our recreational season will again start on the Friday  
46 before Memorial Day, that weekend. We'll be going through June  
47 30. Actually, that's an error there. I apologize. We are going  
48 to seven-day season lengths this year, and not four-day seasons,

1 and so we -- Because we've not been meeting our quota, we have  
2 heard from folks that, you know, have to work weekends and such,  
3 that, you know, a four-day weekend limits their abilities, and so  
4 we are going through a seven-day season structure from May 23 to  
5 June 30, and then beginning July 4 through the end of the year, or  
6 until the allocation is caught, or projected to be caught, we'll  
7 be going to a four-day season.

8  
9 Allocation will be the same as in 2024. Again, we did not exceed  
10 our quota last year, and so no payback in 2025, and we'll still  
11 have the same minimum size limit and creel limit as we've had  
12 previously, and I think that's it. Thank you.

13  
14 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Kevin. Any questions for  
15 the folks in Alabama? Captain Walker.

16  
17 **MR. WALKER:** I just had a question about your mean harvest graph  
18 back there a couple of pages back. You said that includes dead  
19 discards as harvest, and those are self-reported dead discards,  
20 and what percentage of your catch -- Or how many of those do you  
21 really get, self-reported dead discards?

22  
23 **MR. ANSON** Yes, and so all of this -- All of the three graphs here  
24 are derived from our landing reports. The vessel trips though is  
25 adjusted for under-coverage, based on our dockside survey, and so,  
26 when we encounter a vessel, and record that vessel as having red  
27 snapper, we then compare it to the landings database and look for  
28 that vessel registration number, and, if that number is not in  
29 there, it goes into the not reported category, and so we adjust  
30 for trips that are not being reported. That's what that number  
31 represents.

32  
33 The other two graphs are strictly the data as it's supplied by the  
34 angler, and so it's just from the landing report database, with no  
35 adjustments or anything, and that does include -- Specific to your  
36 dead discard question, it does include dead discards, because that  
37 is to be counted towards our allocation, and it accounts for  
38 roughly -- It's 5 to 7, or seven-and-a-half, percent for the  
39 private rec, as I recall, is what the dead discards make up by  
40 weight.

41  
42 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** So you guys had 131 days, I think this past year,  
43 right, which is pretty good, but when you go -- You're thinking  
44 about moving to a seven-day, and what do you project you'll get,  
45 in terms of days?

46  
47 **MR. ANSON:** We still think that we will come very close to the end  
48 of the year. You know, it depends on a couple of big factors, and

1 one of those is the weather. Again, if we have a good season, a  
2 good season weather-wise, we'll probably end up, you know,  
3 November-ish, but, if we don't, we'll probably get closer to  
4 December. You know, the other impact is just going to see what  
5 the economy does and what impact that has on trips.

6  
7 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, Kevin. Mr. Strelcheck.

8  
9 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Thanks, Kevin, for the presentation. With regard  
10 to the graphic on the left, the error bars for fishing, for vessel  
11 trips, is that driven by the number of people that are encountered  
12 with or without a Snapper Check license? What's causing the large  
13 error bar?

14  
15 **MR. ANSON:** It's the adjustment factor, and it's, you know, not a  
16 license, per se. It's just whether or not they've reported or  
17 not. We don't compare against our reef fish endorsement, because  
18 that's to the angler for the private recs, and so that's what it  
19 includes and why we have the large error there.

20  
21 **MR. STRELCHECK:** What are you dealing with in terms of an  
22 adjustment factor these days for Snapper Check? I remember it  
23 kind of being in the 50 percent range at one point.

24  
25 **MR. ANSON:** Our estimate on reporting rate is around -- It's just  
26 slightly below 50 percent, yes.

27  
28 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Any more questions for Mr. Anson? Not  
29 seeing any, thank you, Kevin. Next on the list is Mississippi.  
30 General Spraggins.

31  
32 **MISSISSIPPI STATE RED SNAPPER LANDINGS**

33  
34 **GENERAL JOE SPRAGGINS:** Thank you very much, and we'll get the  
35 slides up. Okay. As you can see there -- Our 2021 season was  
36 around, you know, 145,000 pounds, and then, in 2022, around  
37 128,000, or 129,000. Then we had a drastic drop in the allocation  
38 and went back and then overfished in 2023.

39  
40 We caught a little over 80,000 pounds. We had to pay that back in  
41 2024, and so we did, and, in 2024, we had just under 60,000 pounds,  
42 which was under our 62,000 that we allocated for it. Our season  
43 last year was about forty-five days.

44  
45 As you can see that our length, average weight, I mean, has come  
46 down, and it's a little over five pounds. It dropped a little bit  
47 from -- You know, about a quarter of a pound from last year, and  
48 our average length dropped about the same, and it dropped about,

1 you know, about half an inch, or something like that, over the  
2 last year.

3  
4 As you can see, our anglers per trip stayed about the same, you  
5 know, about 3.7, and then we had our vessels, obviously, went way  
6 down over the years, as you can see, because of the allocation  
7 that we have been given, that the trips have went down accordingly,  
8 and our vessel CPUE is staying about the same as we had before,  
9 four per fish. I mean, per vessel. Excuse me.

10  
11 Our season this year, we plan to open on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, the same  
12 day as Alabama, and we will stay open to the 6<sup>th</sup> of July, unless  
13 we have the allocation caught prior to that, and then we'll  
14 reevaluate at that point. Any questions?

15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Any questions for the folks from Mississippi?  
17 Okay. Not seeing any, thank you, General. All right. Next on  
18 the list is Louisiana. Mr. Schieble.

19  
20 **LOUISIANA STATE RED SNAPPER LANDINGS**

21  
22 **MR. CHRIS SCHIEBLE:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Our 2024 season last  
23 year opened April 15<sup>th</sup>. As you all recall, we tried an earlier  
24 season. Our commission recommended an earlier start date, just to  
25 see what opportunity that presented for anglers, and this is a  
26 pretty good summary of all of that.

27  
28 We opened seven days a week, with a four-fish bag limit. Our quota  
29 was the same, the 934,587 pounds, as the previous year. We ended  
30 up closing on July 7<sup>th</sup> and reopening as a weekend-only season,  
31 which is a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, the weekend-only, on July  
32 12<sup>th</sup>, and then we closed again on August 18<sup>th</sup> after that, and we  
33 resumed the daily season, beginning August 19<sup>th</sup> through the  
34 remainder of the year up, until October 6<sup>th</sup>, for a total duration  
35 of a 151-day season.

36  
37 We ended up going over by roughly 4 percent. Our total harvest  
38 was 974,219 pounds, and so the harvest broken down by sector, and  
39 you can see the private recreational harvest was 906,641 pounds,  
40 and state charter was 67,578. I also include the federal charter  
41 landings here, and those are a reminder. It's not included in our  
42 allocation, but we can monitor it through LA Creel, and so that's  
43 why it's here, for illustrative purposes.

44  
45 We exceeded the allocation by 39,632 pounds, and so that's within  
46 about our 6 percent relative error that we have in LA Creel, and  
47 so it could just as easily have been under by 39,632 pounds, and  
48 that's really a small weekend for us, and so, if you look at our

1 weekend-only season, we average close to about 40,000 pounds  
2 throughout the course of the year with that, just for perspective.

3  
4 This is the landings graph that you guys typically see throughout  
5 the season. We put these out weekly, and it shows a difference of  
6 a payback for next year of 39,632 pounds, or for this year, I  
7 should say, for this season, 2025.

8  
9 This is a comparison of the past four years over time. I think I  
10 showed you guys this in November as well, and it's interesting  
11 because the early start date, and that's the red line from 2024,  
12 and, if you were to just shift that entire line over to the same  
13 start date as the previous years, you would see that it virtually  
14 overlaps the previous seasons that we've had, but, because it  
15 started so much earlier, it's offset to the side, but it still  
16 ends up pretty close to the allocation by the end of the year.

17  
18 These are the trends for weights over time, and keep in mind that  
19 the time series on these graphs is starting in 2014, and so that's  
20 the start of LA Creel, and so it's a ten-year time series on this  
21 graph, and it's showing the average weight over that time period  
22 caught on the left side.

23  
24 On the right side, those two graphs, for illustrative purposes,  
25 are the weights broken down by the different geographic basins in  
26 Louisiana. I showed you guys this in November as well, but it  
27 breaks it down to give you an idea that the average weight is not  
28 the same statewide, and so, for example, in the upper-right graph,  
29 the orange line is our Barataria Basin, which would include Venice  
30 and Grand Isle, our major marinas.

31  
32 However, the average weight is higher in the yellow line on the  
33 most recent years of the time series, leading up to this past year,  
34 coming out of the Terrebonne Basin, but then most of those weights  
35 all sort of seem to, I guess, homologize, whatever you want to  
36 call the word, but coincide the most recent end of the year in  
37 2024, which I find is kind of interesting. The bottom graph is a  
38 comparison between the charter weights, and the difference there  
39 is the Terrebonne Basin seems to be popping up above the others in  
40 the most recent two years.

41  
42 These are the average lengths, and a similar trend over the time  
43 series of the decade from 2014 until now, and you can see the  
44 geographic differences in the upper-right, the same trend,  
45 obviously, as the weight between those different geographic  
46 basins.

47  
48 I included the ages in here because we hear a lot of discussion

1 about a trend in average weight and length declining over time,  
2 but I think ages, again, sort of tells the story of what's really  
3 happening in the fishery, and you can see that there's a lot of  
4 inter-annual variation in those ages in the graph to the left over  
5 time, but, most recently, the ages are going up.

6  
7 The data is on the bottom, the actual average, and then the basin-  
8 specific age representations are on the upper-left, and then the  
9 charter is the lower -- I'm sorry. The upper right, and the  
10 charter is the lower-right graph there, similar to the lengths and  
11 weights, just for illustrative purposes.

12  
13 Okay, and so these are our catch efforts, and the upper-left is  
14 angler trips, and so blue is the charter, and then the orange color  
15 is the private angler trips, and you can see that, really, the  
16 charter trips are pretty much very similar to the previous year,  
17 in 2023. The private angler trips have dropped off a little bit  
18 in 2024, and the lower graph illustrates the vessel trips, and  
19 there was a significant drop in the charter vessel trips this past  
20 year.

21  
22 That's the blue line in the lower graph, and the private angler  
23 vessel trips also went down, and, you know, it could be a change  
24 in effort, or what angler, I guess, you know, preference is, but  
25 I'll kind of lead to that when I get into some of the later slides  
26 in here, as to what may be going on as far as angler preference  
27 goes.

28  
29 This is just a summary table of our seasons since really we had  
30 the two EFP years in 2018 and 2019. This most recent year was the  
31 second longest, at 151 days, and so it makes sense, when the angler  
32 trips have reduced, and you're probably going to end up with a  
33 longer season, just because of the number of trips going downhill,  
34 as well as participation may be protracted. The earlier start to  
35 the season also led, obviously, to a little bit longer season as  
36 well, and perhaps the overage.

37  
38 This is going into this season, our recommendations to the  
39 commission. I put a few extra slides in here just to kind of give  
40 you an idea of what we did, and so, around this room, we always  
41 talk about trying to find that optimal season for our anglers, as  
42 state directors, and what's the best to do, and you can see, by  
43 the previous table, that we really sort of are honing-in on that,  
44 but we're not quite hitting the target.

45  
46 We did a survey this year to help our commission to select perhaps,  
47 you know, their choices for season length, bag limit, et cetera.  
48 We did an email survey that went out as well as a web-based survey.

1  
2 The email survey was sent to 13,628 Louisiana residents who held  
3 the recreational offshore landing permit, and so we used the same  
4 universe that we defined for effort to solicit for the survey, and  
5 then the web-based survey was open to anyone, starting on February  
6 11<sup>th</sup>, and you can see the response rate.  
7  
8 We got 3,667 responses for the survey, out of the 13,628, which I  
9 thought was a pretty good response rate, above most surveys, and  
10 it shows you that we really don't know what's going on.  
11  
12 Basically, no matter what you pick, as far as your season  
13 structure, you're going to make two-thirds of your anglers mad, is  
14 what this says, you know, or not happy. Basically, the choices  
15 were, you know, what percentage of anglers preferred the following  
16 season opening date, the Memorial Day weekend, which is what we've  
17 had in the past, a May 1 date, or the mid-April one, like we had  
18 last year, and it's really roughly a 33 percent spread for each  
19 one of those options. It didn't help us very much.  
20  
21 This was the -- They preferred the following schedule as far as  
22 what days of the week to fish. A seven-days per week seems to  
23 stand out pretty strong, and then the three-day weekend, Friday  
24 through Sunday, which we've had in the past, was fairly low, lower  
25 than we expected, and then the Thursday through Sunday option, we  
26 stuck in there, and we haven't had that season structure in the  
27 past, but it was the second-most highest response rate.  
28  
29 This was the -- So our commission always asks us to make sure we  
30 still have some allocation to get through Labor Day weekend. That  
31 seems to be, you know, a preference for them, and we wanted to  
32 find out, from the anglers, how many people feel that's important,  
33 and so not important at all, somewhat important, or extremely  
34 important to make sure you get to fish through Labor Day.  
35  
36 There really isn't a clear-cut preference here either, and, again,  
37 you're really going to make, you know, a good portion of the group  
38 upset, and then some happy, when you decide how that season is  
39 going to go, and so somewhat important seems to stand out a little  
40 bit, but, obviously, that's the median in the survey.  
41  
42 Our commission took the advice of the survey, as well as the advice  
43 of the department, and chose to open on Thursday, May 1<sup>st</sup>, and a  
44 seven-day-a-week season, open until either we reach our allocation  
45 or until we get to the end of the year. We're going to have a bag  
46 limit of four fish per person, as we did the past two seasons, or  
47 the past two years, and that should be it.  
48

1 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Mr. Schieble. Any  
2 questions for the folks from Louisiana? Okay. Not seeing any,  
3 Chris, thank you very much. All right, and we're going to move on  
4 to our next agenda item. Sorry. How could I forget about Texas?  
5 Dakus, sorry about that. Go ahead, man.

6  
7 **TEXAS STATE RED SNAPPER LANDINGS**  
8

9 **MR. DAKUS GEESLIN:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Next slide, please,  
10 Bernie. All right. Our 2024 red snapper season, we opened on  
11 June 1. It's been our traditional opener. Our state waters, as  
12 you all know, are open year-round. We're still fishing under the  
13 same quota, 286,000 pounds.

14  
15 We were able to get through Labor Day. That was a ninety-eight-  
16 day federal water season. We landed 81 percent of our quota, and  
17 that includes the January through May headboat landings that we  
18 attribute to our private rec quota. That ended up being just under  
19 10,000 pounds, is the number that was provided to us by the  
20 service.

21  
22 I just wanted to highlight that we do kind of double-down our  
23 effort for creel surveys during the federal red snapper season. I  
24 had our creel agents provide some information to me. We conducted  
25 over 400 creel surveys in that ninety-eight-day federal red snapper  
26 season. That resulted in over 8,000 angler trip interviews, and,  
27 of course, not all those had red snapper landings, but that does  
28 show just the magnitude of the effort for the creel surveys.

29  
30 This shows our cumulative landings over time. You can see our  
31 2024 graph there, in green, and a little bit lower than the  
32 previous years, and certainly not as high as our 2019, where we  
33 did exceed the ACL and underwent a payback.

34  
35 Our bag distribution, just showing the number of fish being  
36 harvested per angler, you can see most folks are sticking with  
37 that federal bag limit of two fish. However, we do have the four-  
38 fish bag limit within state waters. Two of those can be harvested  
39 from federal waters, and so you're seeing the majority of folks,  
40 at 50 percent, are landing two fish

41  
42 I thought this was rather interesting, our length frequency between  
43 the two sectors there. You can see that the private rec anglers  
44 are harvesting smaller fish, and the state charter-for-hire sector  
45 are landing more larger fish. I'm kind of puzzled by that, but it  
46 is what it is.

47  
48 You're seeing some of those private -- Again, we do have a fifteen-

1 inch minimum size limit in state waters, and so some of those  
2 private rec anglers may be prosecuting the fishery in different  
3 waters and simply landing and choosing to keep some of those  
4 smaller fish.

5  
6 Here's our mean length for our private anglers. It hasn't varied,  
7 you know, within a couple of inches over time. We saw a decline  
8 in 2022 and 2023. It looks like we bumped off about a half-inch  
9 for the mean length within the private rec sector.

10  
11 Our weight frequency, and you can see -- What really stands out to  
12 me is the state charter-for-hire mean weight of 9.63 pounds. Even  
13 within our private anglers, almost a six-and-a-half average size,  
14 average size fish, and certainly some larger fish, on the end of  
15 that spectrum, through the eleven to fifteen-pound size classes,  
16 but you can see a lot of the higher percentage of the private rec  
17 anglers are catching and keeping those two to three-pound fish,  
18 which also is mirrored in the length frequency from the previous  
19 graph.

20  
21 Just another bag distribution showing that, you know, those federal  
22 waters, where you do have the two-fish bag are staying under their  
23 bag limit. The pounds of snapper per angler trip are just right  
24 over eleven, and, within state waters, again, the four-fish bag,  
25 you're seeing a little bit higher bag distribution per angler trip,  
26 and those pounds, you know, if you're able to catch a few more  
27 fish, and the pounds per snapper per angler trip is almost twenty  
28 pounds, a little over twenty pounds.

29  
30 Our mean weight for private anglers, again, there's that six-and-  
31 a-half-pound average weight, and you see some variability over  
32 time, but I find it interesting that it stayed within, you know,  
33 that five to upper six-pound kind of weight range there over time.

34  
35 Our number of fish per angler trip, that has decreased over the  
36 last of couple years, both in our federal water and state water  
37 fisheries, and so you're seeing just a little smaller -- Or a  
38 decline in those number of fish per angler trip.

39  
40 Okay, and so really our effort estimate here, our angler trips,  
41 with the harvest, and these are our expanded angler hours divided  
42 by the mean trip length. You can see a little decline in the  
43 private effort over the last year, but about the same as it has  
44 been from 2021 to 2022. Our charter-for-hire effort is probably  
45 the highest we've seen in the last seven years, and so kind of an  
46 interesting trend there.

47  
48 To my Louisiana colleague's point, Chris, we did a similar survey

1 years ago, three to four years ago, and I think our anglers were  
2 still experiencing some PTSD of a thirteen-day season, and so they  
3 simply wanted the longest season they could get, and I think we'll  
4 probably redo a survey soon.

5  
6 I think they're over some of that shortened season, and I think  
7 there's some creative ways we can structure our season to allow  
8 for, you know, some of that harvest in the fall season, in that  
9 November timeframe, when we hear the fishing is really good, and  
10 really some of those fish are moving closer to shore, and so I'm  
11 impressed that you all have kind of been proactive in conducting  
12 that survey effort, and I think that's my last slide.

13  
14 For 2025, we are planning to stick with the kind of status quo,  
15 open up on June 1, and run it as long as we can, and close down  
16 when we're projected to meet our allocation. I'm happy to take  
17 any questions.

18  
19 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Well, thank you, Dakus, and I really  
20 didn't mean to pass over you. Sorry about that. Any questions  
21 for the folks from Texas? I am not seeing any. Dakus, thank you  
22 for the presentation.

23  
24 All right, and so now we will move on to Agenda Item Number V,  
25 which is Draft Reef Fish Amendment 58B: Modifications to Deepwater  
26 Grouper Management Measures. Mr. Rindone, if you want to go  
27 through the action guide.

28  
29 **DRAFT: REEF FISH AMENDMENT 58B: MODIFICATIONS TO DEEPWATER**  
30 **GROUPEr MANAGEMENT MEASURES**

31  
32 **MR. RINDONE:** Sure, and so I'm going to present some updated  
33 management alternatives to you guys for the deepwater grouper  
34 complex.

35  
36 Deepwater grouper includes the yellowedge, snowy, warsaw, and  
37 speckled hind groupers, and you guys are also going to hear  
38 feedback from the Reef Fish Advisory Panel on the actions and  
39 alternatives that are presented. You guys should discuss the  
40 actions and alternatives, and suggest any revisions, and indicate  
41 preferred alternatives, as desired. Our plan is to bring a public  
42 hearing draft back to you for the June 2025 council meeting.

43  
44 At the January meeting, you guys indicated that there's just a few  
45 locations in Florida that you would like to have in-person public  
46 hearings and the rest -- Those would be done via webinar, and so,  
47 Mr. Chair, if you want to lead off with the Reef Fish AP comments,  
48 and then we can get into the document.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** That would be great.  
3

4 **MR. RINDONE:** The Reef Fish AP Chair, Captain Dylan Hubbard, is  
5 also here.  
6

7 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Good to see you, Dylan.  
8

9 **MR. DYLAN HUBBARD:** Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to  
10 speak. This was a majority of our Reef Fish AP meeting, and it  
11 ate up most of the time and discussion. For Action 1, the Reef  
12 Fish AP selected Alternative 2, and that was where the easy part  
13 ended.  
14

15 In Action 2, there was a lot of discussion, and a lot of back-and-  
16 forth, and a lot of contention around kind of where to go and what  
17 to do. There was agreement on removing the 4 percent buffer that's  
18 in place right now for the flexibility measure. As the flexibility  
19 measure is removed, removing that 4 percent buffer was something  
20 everybody agreed to.  
21

22 As far as trying to select an alternative in Action 2, the Reef  
23 Fish AP originally was hesitant to move forward, because of  
24 previous motions at the Reef Fish AP to hold off on any allocation  
25 discussion until the FES pilot study is done, but our council  
26 liaison, Captain Walker, urged the AP to have some discussion and  
27 try to flesh this out, because, obviously, the council is going to  
28 have to, and so there was some discussion, or actually a lot of  
29 discussion, around different alternatives to select.  
30

31 There was a motion to try to select Alternative 3, and it failed.  
32 Ultimately, the AP settled on Alternative 1, which was no action,  
33 essentially leaving things alone, and there was more discussion  
34 around the next action, which was the accountability measure for  
35 recreational fishermen, and, ultimately, we led to selecting  
36 Alternative 5.  
37

38 Previously, we had selected another alternative that, at the last  
39 council meeting, you guys chose to remove, because of the concerns  
40 over the ability for the council to select that from a legal  
41 standpoint, and so the AP decided to select and continue with the  
42 new Alternative 5 that was presented at the last council meeting.  
43

44 Essentially, there was a lot of concern over recreational landings,  
45 and the incredibly high PSE that surrounds them for deepwater  
46 grouper, and so the AP was trying to give recreational fishermen  
47 an accountability measure which selected the most flexibility  
48 moving forward, and so I think the main message that I would like

1 to relay to the council is there was a lot of contention, and not  
2 really any decisive decision and action, to ultimately deciding no  
3 action by the AP, and that's all I've got on this specific agenda  
4 item.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Great. Thank you, Captain Hubbard. Any  
7 questions for the AP Chair? Ms. Levy.

8  
9 **MS. LEVY:** I didn't get to listen to the whole meeting, and so was  
10 there a reason why, and I'm sure there is, in Action 2 the AP did  
11 not go for Alternative 2, which is essentially the same as  
12 Alternative 1, right, except you're specifying the recreational  
13 catch limit, which allows you to do that accountability measure?  
14

15 **MR. HUBBARD:** Yes, and so, originally, the AP had a motion in place  
16 not to do anything, not to choose any alternative, and then, at  
17 Captain Walker's behest and urging, we moved forward with  
18 discussions on it, to try to suss something out, and there was  
19 some recreational voices that were trying to urge towards some  
20 more recent histories, which would be Alternatives, I believe, 3  
21 or 4, off the top of my head, and ultimately made a motion for  
22 Alternative 3.

23  
24 Then that failed, and then there was discussions over going towards  
25 Alternative 2, but the commercial voices around the table were  
26 very adamant on no allocation discussions until the FES pilot study  
27 was completed, and that was why there was a majority vote for  
28 Alternative 1, no action, and so it's essentially, in my personal  
29 opinion, Alternative 2 or Alternative 1, but there was a sentiment  
30 on, hey, we're not going to make a decision on allocation until  
31 the FES pilot study is done. We kept reverting back to that  
32 previous motion that the Reef Fish AP has made.

33  
34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Dylan. I'm not seeing any other  
35 questions. I just have a quick follow-up for Mara with regard to  
36 that discussion of Action 2, Alternative 1, which is essentially  
37 no action, right, and, I mean, you're not specifying an ACL, and  
38 is there an issue, from the agency's perspective?  
39

40 **MS. LEVY:** Well, I mean, it's no action in the sense that it's --  
41 It's no action in the sense that it's not changing the way we've  
42 specified the catch limits, but it is in terms of we're assuming  
43 that Alternative 2 in Action 1 is picked, right, and so it's  
44 changing the catch limits. It's updating them based on the  
45 assessment, and we're just not changing the method in the Generic  
46 ACL Amendment, and so it's not specifying a recreational catch  
47 limit, but otherwise it's changing everything else.

48

1 The issue with that is going to be then, if you don't have a  
2 recreational catch limit, you can't do the accountability measures  
3 that are in the next action, and that can be problematic, because  
4 we have to be able to say that we're going to constrain catch to  
5 the catch limit, and so, unless we can come up with a rationale  
6 for how we can do that without a recreational catch limit, then  
7 there is a potential issue with selecting Alternative 1.

8  
9 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and I just wanted to start having that  
10 discussion. I mean, we're, obviously, going to walk through the  
11 document, through various action items, and I think there will be  
12 a fair amount of discussion on that particular issue, as well as  
13 the new Alternative 5 in Action 3, and so any other questions for  
14 the AP chair? All right. Not seeing any, Mr. Rindone, if you  
15 want to walk us through the document.

16  
17 **MR. RINDONE:** Can do, and so we can just go straight to Action 1.  
18 Okay, and so this would modify the deepwater grouper maximum  
19 sustainable yield proxy, overfishing limit, acceptable biological  
20 catch, and the complex annual catch limit.

21  
22 Alternative 1 is our status quo, which would maintain the current  
23 MSY proxy, which is at 30 percent SPR, and the OFL, ABC, and  
24 complex ACL. The OFL is currently 1.113 million pounds gutted  
25 weight, and the ABC and complex ACL are 1.105.

26  
27 Alternative 2, which is the only other alternative here, and is  
28 also the only viable alternative, since the Alternative 1 doesn't  
29 -- Or is no longer considered consistent with the best scientific  
30 information available. Alternative 2 would revise the MSY proxy  
31 and catch limits for the deepwater grouper complex based on the  
32 council's SSC's recommendations for OFL and ABC.

33  
34 The OFL and ABC for yellowedge would be based on an MSY proxy of  
35 40 percent SPR, and the ABC at the yield when fishing at 75 percent  
36 of that proxy, respectively. The OFL and ABC for the three  
37 remaining species, and that's snowy, warsaw, and speckled hind,  
38 would be based on Tier 3b of the council's ABC control rule and  
39 would also be set at the yield when fishing at 40 percent SPR.

40  
41 When combining the OFLs and ABCs for yellowedge and the other three  
42 species, you get a complex OFL of 731,035 pounds gutted weight and  
43 an ABC of 555,026 pounds gutted weight, and this would keep the  
44 complex ACL set equal to the ABC. Just for reference, this is the  
45 alternative that the Reef Fish AP preferred, and so, Mr. Chair.

46  
47 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right, and are there any questions with  
48 regard to this action item? It's pretty straight forward. We've

1 got two alternatives, and one of them is not viable.  
2  
3 **MR. RINDONE:** If you guys are inclined to select preferreds, by  
4 the way, you're welcome to do that.  
5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and so, again, to remind folks, with regard  
7 to the schedule for this, we're scheduled to get a public hearing  
8 draft in June, and this goes final in August, and so, anytime we  
9 can get preferreds in advance of that public hearing draft, that  
10 would be great. All right. It looks like we'll revisit that,  
11 perhaps. Mr. Strelcheck.  
12  
13 **MR. STRELCHECK:** I'll make a motion then to select Alternative 2  
14 as preferred in Action 1.  
15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Andy for that, and, while  
17 we put it up on the board, there's a motion in Action 1 to select  
18 Alternative 2 as preferred, and is there a second for that motion?  
19 It's seconded by Dr. Sweetman. Care to follow-up, Andy?  
20  
21 **MR. STRELCHECK:** I think we've had lots of discussion about the  
22 reference points and, obviously, the scientific advice that's been  
23 provided to us. It's, obviously, the only viable option at this  
24 point, and so I think it's logical to select this as preferred.  
25  
26 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right, and so we have a motion on the board,  
27 and rationale for that motion, and is there any opposition to the  
28 motion? I am not seeing any, and so the motion carries. I think  
29 we will proceed to -- Mr. Sanchez.  
30  
31 **MR. SANCHEZ:** It doesn't have to do with the motion. I wanted to  
32 ask, and I'm just curious, but are there measures that we've used  
33 in the past to constrain ACL, to constrain catch where we don't  
34 have an ACL established? Is there a mechanism to do that somehow?  
35 In our past management, are there other examples of that?  
36  
37 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Froeschke.  
38  
39 **DR. JOHN FROESCHKE:** Not popular ones. I mean, if you look at  
40 goliath or red drum.  
41  
42 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** We'll put those worms back in the can, John.  
43 Mr. Sanchez. Excuse me. Mr. Strelcheck.  
44  
45 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Yes, and maybe John is kind of asking how we've  
46 been implementing accountability measures, and so, with deepwater,  
47 we have the IFQ program, obviously, for the commercial, and the  
48 quota and catch level that's set for that, and we don't specify a

1 recreational catch level, and we have a stock complex catch limit  
2 at that point, right, and so it's the combination of recreational  
3 and commercial.

4  
5 If that exceeded, then we would trigger the accountability measure,  
6 but it's not essentially a hard recreational annual catch limit  
7 for the recreational portion of the deepwater grouper, but it then  
8 ties it to the commercial catches as well.

9  
10 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Andy for that feedback. Does that help,  
11 John?

12  
13 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Yes, that was helpful, and I guess I would encourage  
14 the public, during comment, to see if the way that we have been  
15 doing it -- If that would be acceptable or desirous for them until  
16 we complete that FES pilot study.

17  
18 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Thank you. Ms. Levy.

19  
20 **MS. LEVY:** Well, just to that point, I mean, in Action 3, it  
21 explains why the status quo is not really workable. The issue is  
22 it's written like that, and we've never had to implement it,  
23 because catch levels have been high enough that we've never had an  
24 issue of reaching the total, but what that assumes is that the  
25 agency has to assume that the IFQ system will harvest all of the  
26 commercial quota, but it's not expressly written like that, and  
27 so, if we want to keep it the same, but be expressed that the  
28 agency is directed to assume in a particular year that the total  
29 commercial quota will be met, and then constrain recreational  
30 harvest to its piece, we can rewrite it, but it's essentially the  
31 same thing, right?

32  
33 Whether we specify the recreational ACL or not, we are allowing a  
34 certain portion of the catch for the recreational sector, and so,  
35 either way, whether we put it in there in a number or we don't,  
36 we've done it, essentially, right?

37  
38 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Mara. All right. I think we're going  
39 to kind of carry on with this issue a bit in Action Item 2. Mr.  
40 Rindone.

41  
42 **MR. RINDONE:** Yes, sir, and so let's move on to Action 2, please.  
43 All right, and so this one, this action, considers modifications  
44 to the deepwater grouper sector ACLs and sector allocations, and  
45 an important note here, and so this action assumes that you guys  
46 would do exactly what you just did, which is to prefer Alternative  
47 2 in Action 1, since it's the only viable alternative that we have  
48 listed there, and so Alternative 1 reflects the status quo method

1 of specifying the catch limits that uses the ABC from Alternative  
2 2 in Action 1 to specify the complex ACL.

3  
4 Under that, Alternative 1 would use the Generic ACL/AM Amendment  
5 specification, which is that the deepwater grouper ACL would  
6 provide 96.5 percent of the complex ACL for the commercial sector,  
7 based on landings from 2001 to 2004, and the recreational sector  
8 ACL would be unspecified.

9  
10 The complex ACL would be set equal to the ABC, and, based on a  
11 complex overfishing limit of about 731,000 pounds, and the ABC of  
12 about 555,000 pounds, the commercial ACL would be 535,600 pounds  
13 gutted weight, and the quota would be reduced 4 percent from  
14 that, to 514,176 pounds, and everything is shown down there in  
15 that table for you.

16  
17 Alternative 2 is essentially the exact same thing as Alternative  
18 1, except that the recreational ACL is defined as that actual  
19 remainder, and it's 19,426 pounds gutted weight, which is equal to  
20 about 3.5 percent of the complex ACL, and so you can scroll on  
21 down to the next table and see that it's essentially the same thing  
22 as Alternative 1, except, instead of saying undefined under  
23 recreational ACL, it's the actual remainder there.

24  
25 Alternative 3 would also set the ACL, the complex ACL, equal to  
26 the ABC and establish a recreational ACL and sector allocation  
27 based on the average recreational landings from the most recent  
28 five years, and you guys can review those landings if you like in  
29 Table 1.1.2.

30  
31 This churns out a recreational ACL of 56,649 pounds gutted weight,  
32 or about 10 percent of the complex ACL, in MRIP-FES units, and the  
33 commercial sector would get the rest, just a hair under 90 percent,  
34 or 498,000 pounds. The commercial quota would then be reduced 4  
35 percent from that, to about 478,000 pounds, and the recreational  
36 and commercial ACLs would sum to equal the deepwater grouper  
37 complex ACL, and you can see those poundages there.

38  
39 If we scroll on down to Alternative 4, which also sets the complex  
40 ACL equal to the ABC, and this is the equal haircut alternative,  
41 where we looked at the mean landings from the last five years for  
42 the recreational and commercial sectors and equally reduced them  
43 such that the complex ACL wouldn't be exceeded.

44  
45 This results in a recreational ACL of just under 38,000 pounds, or  
46 about 6.84 percent of the complex ACL in MRIP-FES units, and the  
47 commercial sector gets the rest, about 93 percent of the complex  
48 ACL, or about 517,000 pounds, and then the commercial quota again

1 is reduced 4 percent from that, to about 496,000 pounds, and  
2 everything sums up to the deepwater grouper complex ACL, and those  
3 are your alternatives for Action 2, Mr. Chair.  
4

5 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Mr. Rindone, and so, again, we're in  
6 a position now where, perhaps by the end of this meeting, we should  
7 lean towards picking a preferred, but we should definitely have  
8 some discussion about these alternatives, and so I'm opening it  
9 up. Captain Walker.

10  
11 **MR. WALKER:** I agree, and I think we could probably pick preferred  
12 on that one a little bit easier, and I think the AP might echo  
13 this, but I think I recall that the only alternative that might  
14 not lead to a season closure was Alternative 3, and I think that  
15 was popular, and, you know, we can hear from them about that, but  
16 I also speak in favor of that myself. You know, it gives  
17 essentially a 90-10 split, which, you know, I think that's the  
18 most favorable to the recreational side out of these options, and  
19 it might allow them to keep their season open all year.

20  
21 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Captain Walker. Any other questions?  
22 Captain Walker.

23  
24 **MR. WALKER:** Along those lines, a seasonal closure on a deepwater  
25 species can open up a lot of issues, because of discard issues out  
26 there too, and so it's just another reason to try and avoid a  
27 closed season there.

28  
29 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Banks.

30  
31 **DR. KESLEY BANKS:** Thanks, and I would just echo Captain Walker's  
32 statements. I also would be in favor of Alternative 3.

33  
34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay, and I have actually a question for Captain  
35 Hubbard. Dylan, we're on Action 2, and I know you talked a little  
36 bit about Alternative 3, and the fact that that failed in the AP  
37 meeting. Ultimately, I think you came around to maybe perhaps  
38 considering Alternative 1, but I didn't hear anything about  
39 Alternative 4. Did you have some discussion there?  
40

41 **MR. HUBBARD:** I would have to speak personally, and not in the  
42 AP's voice, but, personally, I think the discussion was very  
43 heavily geared towards, in Action 2, Alternative 1 or 2. The AP  
44 is made up I think a little heavy commercial, and so the one little  
45 bit more outspoken recreational voice, one or two more outspoken  
46 recreational voices, I think we're a little frustrated maybe, and  
47 just shot for Number 3 because it was the biggest recreational,  
48 and a lot of what Captain Walker's sentiment was, is it the one

1 alternative that allows for a year-round season.

2  
3 Guessing at what they were thinking, these two members who voted  
4 for Alternative 3, I would say that they were a little frustrated  
5 at the overall sentiment, and keeping it status quo, and so they  
6 went for the biggest piece of the pie, and the longest possible  
7 season, but that is, again, speaking personally and trying to guess  
8 at what their thought line was, but, ultimately, the motion failed,  
9 and you can see in the AP report the Alternative 3 vote was -- It  
10 failed eight to two, or two to eight, however you say that.

11  
12 Then, moving forward in voting, Alternative 1 as the preferred was  
13 the reverse of that, eight to two, and so it was pretty clear where  
14 the majority sat on the AP, but there was no discussion around  
15 Alternative 4, because it was so short lived, right, and the  
16 recreational component said, hey, let's do Alternative 3, and it  
17 got shot down pretty quickly, and then we went Alternative 1 and  
18 moved on.

19  
20 That was, again, after a very lengthy discussion over, hey, let's  
21 not do anything until the FES pilot study is done, and, oh, we've  
22 got to do something, and the council is going to move forward, and  
23 Captain Walker and staff were urging the AP to have discussions  
24 around some other alternatives, and so, once the voting started,  
25 it was pretty quick, and so I think that's, in my opinion  
26 personally, what the thought line was, to answer your question.

27  
28 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Great. Thank you, Dylan, for your time. Any  
29 other questions about this action item? Mr. Dugas.

30  
31 **MR. DUGAS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. This is for Mr. Rindone. On  
32 the next page, Ryan, page 18, can you give us an explanation, or  
33 me an explanation maybe, about the commercial allocation from 2001  
34 to 2004 and how these numbers were created? Why is the date --  
35 Why are we using data from 2001 and 2004?

36  
37 **MR. RINDONE:** So, for Alternative 1, that's the status quo, and so  
38 that's just a repeat of what was done there. For Alternative 2,  
39 it's just codifying a recreational ACL using what was done in  
40 Alternative 1, and so the only difference there is that, in  
41 Alternative 1, there is no recreational ACL defined.

42  
43 In Alternative 2, the remainder, and that's that undefined amount  
44 from Alternative 1, becomes codified as the recreational ACL in  
45 Alternative 2. We had alternatives in here that were recommended  
46 at a previous council meeting that used updated data in MRIP-FES,  
47 like the updated fraction that would be represented by the MRIP-  
48 FES data, for calculating the difference between the commercial

1 and recreational ACL, but you guys ultimately decided to remove  
2 those to Considered but Rejected, and they're in that appendix, if  
3 you want to look at what those percentages look like there.

4  
5 They also came out to approximately like five-and-a-half to 6  
6 percent, or something like that, but you guys' justification for  
7 removing those -- What I'm kind of inferring from your question is  
8 why are we using these old data, and it was for that reason, that  
9 you guys ultimately decided to remove those alternatives.

10  
11 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you J.D. and Mr. Rindone. Any  
12 further discussion on this action? Mr. Broussard.

13  
14 **MR. BILLY BROUSSARD:** Ryan, so Alternatives 3 and 4 both use the  
15 same time series?

16  
17 **MR. RINDONE:** Yes, sir. They both rely on data from 2019 to 2023,  
18 but the key difference is that, for Alternative 3, what we did is  
19 we just used the average recreational landings from 2019 to 2023,  
20 and then gave that average amount to the recreational sector, and  
21 then the commercial sector got the remainder.

22  
23 For Alternative 4, and that's the equal haircut one, and so we  
24 looked at the average landings for both the recreational and the  
25 commercial sector over that same five-year period and then reduced  
26 them equally by the amount necessary to make sure that the ACL  
27 wouldn't be exceeded, and so that's why that value ends up being  
28 different than Alternative 4, because the correction is applied to  
29 the --

30  
31 **MR. BROUSSARD:** That recreational data is, at best, cloudy. I've  
32 been deep dropping for over twenty years, and I've never been  
33 intercepted, because of where we come in at, and not because we  
34 were trying to avoid anything, and so, realistically, that's  
35 probably a bit larger than even that 10 percent.

36  
37 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Ryan.

38  
39 **MR. RINDONE:** Sir.

40  
41 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Do you want to respond to the uncertainty  
42 surrounding that?

43  
44 **MR. RINDONE:** So we've had this discussion a little bit, about  
45 what we think the precision of these landings might be, and these  
46 are species, as you know intimately, that occur in much deeper  
47 waters, and to be able to safely get out to where you have to get  
48 out to in the Gulf to catch these species requires a considerably

1 larger vessel, and it's less likely that thirty-foot-plus center  
2 consoles and larger boats are going to be launched from public  
3 boat ramps at the local park, where you might be more likely to be  
4 intercepted, and be included as part of the APAIS survey.

5  
6 Now the effort side of the survey, FES, is still sent to everybody,  
7 but the difference here is that the catch side might be  
8 underrepresenting actual deepwater grouper landings, like you  
9 inferred, and so it's -- The proportional standard error, for any  
10 one of these species, tends to be well over 50 percent in any given  
11 year, regardless of how much you try to aggregate those data, and,  
12 even when you aggregate all four species together, it's not much  
13 better, and so these data are considerably more uncertain than we  
14 experience with some of our other more heavily targeted species.

15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Ryan. Mr. Strelcheck.

17  
18 **MR. STRELCHECK:** One thing I guess I just wanted to note is the  
19 AP's comments about the 4 percent reduction for commercial, and so  
20 we have, in 58A, I think consideration of changing the flexibility  
21 measures, which would come after 58B. I'm not prepared to, I  
22 think, talk about it during committee, but I think we need to come  
23 back to this at Full Council, if there's a preference to eliminate  
24 the 4 percent, based on the AP's recommendation. We need to figure  
25 out how to handle that in 58B, since it will come before the other  
26 amendment.

27  
28 Then just more of a comment, and, obviously, there was note in the  
29 AP report about the, you know, statement by the council, a year or  
30 two ago, with regard to not making any allocation decisions based  
31 on MRIP-FES. I've been in disagreement about that statement, just  
32 from the standpoint of, right now, that stands as best scientific  
33 information available, until changed, right, and, ultimately, that  
34 number will change, and we will get updated information, but, in  
35 the meantime, it shouldn't be a reason not to proceed with any  
36 sort of decisions before the council, and so, with that, I think  
37 it's just important to weigh that as we make any sort of preferred  
38 decision about allocation. Thanks.

39  
40 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Andy. Dr. Sweetman.

41  
42 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Just kind of hitting on some of the points that  
43 were discussed earlier, I mean, with PSEs as high as 50 percent,  
44 the guidance there is to not use that information, and we are  
45 explicitly using that to drive what this fishery is going to look  
46 like, and making drastic changes, and so I understand that we've  
47 got overfishing occurring in the stock, but just the level of  
48 frustration I have with the decisions that we have to make, based

1 on just crappy data, quite frankly, data that we know is not  
2 accurate in the slightest bit, and so a little frustration, but I  
3 get that we have to make some hard decisions here, and that's part  
4 of the job.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Dugas. Dr. Froeschke.

7  
8 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Just as a follow-up to Andy's question on the 4  
9 percent, and so what I would interpret that as is moving that  
10 action to eliminate the transferability of deepwater and shallow-  
11 water grouper quota, which is currently in Amendment 58A, to 58B,  
12 because we already have that action, and I'll just give it to Ryan,  
13 and is that what we're thinking?

14  
15 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Well, as I said, I'm not prepared to determine  
16 the path in committee, but that could be one option, based on my  
17 comments yesterday that we also have to be thinking about this in  
18 light of that executive order, which is, you know, routine council  
19 actions, versus more fundamental changes, and how that will be  
20 interpreted with regard to regulatory versus deregulatory aspects,  
21 and so I'm trying to keep things simple and straightforward, so  
22 that they kind of meet that routine regulatory action bar, and so  
23 let us give some more thought to that, and we'll come back to it  
24 at Full Council.

25  
26 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Andy, and so we've had a  
27 fair amount of discussion on this action item, and we can certainly  
28 circle back to it in Full Council, after we get some public  
29 comments, and some behind-the-scenes discussion as well. I'm going  
30 to try to keep us on schedule, to the best of our ability, and  
31 we'll move to Action Item 3. Mr. Rindone.

32  
33 **MR. RINDONE:** Thank you, sir, and so Action 3 would modify the  
34 deepwater grouper recreational accountability measures. The  
35 current accountability measure states that, if the total complex  
36 ACL is exceeded in a fishing year, then, in the following fishing  
37 year, the Regional Administrator will close the recreational  
38 sector for the remainder of the fishing year if the sum of the  
39 commercial and recreational landings reaches or is projected to  
40 reach the total complex ACL.

41  
42 This AM directs them to close the recreational sector only if the  
43 total ACL is exceeded, but, because the IFQ program allows those  
44 recreational landings to occur year-round, it's unlikely that this  
45 AM can effectively constrain recreational landings, like Ms. Levy  
46 said, unless NMFS assumes that the commercial quota is going to be  
47 landed, and so then they know that, all right, this amount is  
48 definitely going to be taken, and then we know that this amount is

1 definitely what's going to be left available to be considered for  
2 recreational harvest.

3  
4 This assumption is not clearly stated in the current accountability  
5 measure, and so this direction to NMFS is absent, as far as like  
6 what to do in order to properly implement this AM.

7  
8 Alternative 2 -- I guess just a note. If the AP preferred  
9 Alternative 1 in Action 2, which is to not do anything with  
10 reallocation, and that also leaves the recreational ACL undefined,  
11 and, again, like Ms. Levy stated, that makes doing any of these  
12 other alternatives in Action 3 problematic, because Alternatives  
13 2, 3, and 4, which we'll get to why that's grayed out, and  
14 Alternative 5 all rely on the existence of a recreational ACL, and  
15 so, if there's not one, doing any of those becomes difficult,  
16 obviously, and so it almost defaults to Alternative 1 for Action  
17 3.

18  
19 Anyway, for Alternative 2, it would revise the post-season  
20 recreational AM for the deepwater grouper complex such that, if  
21 the recreational ACL is exceeded, then, in the following fishing  
22 year, the Regional Administrator would close the recreational  
23 sector for the remainder of that fishing year when the recreational  
24 ACL is projected to be met. It's pretty standard.

25  
26 One of the difficulties with this alternative though is, obviously,  
27 the precision and timeliness of those recreational data, and so  
28 implementing this could get a little bit hairy, just because of  
29 the data quality that we're working with.

30  
31 Alternative 3 would revise the post-season AM for the rec sector  
32 such that, if the recreational ACL and total ACL are exceeded for  
33 deepwater grouper, then, in the following fishing year, the  
34 Regional Administrator would close the rec sector for the remainder  
35 of that year when the rec ACL is projected to be met, and so this,  
36 in a way, allows the recreational sector to use that current 4  
37 percent buffer as a buffer itself, if you will, to avoid the  
38 implementation of that accountability measure, but, if you guys  
39 are discussing what you want to do with that, with whether you  
40 want to have flexibility measures or not, and keep or remove that  
41 4 percent buffer, obviously how this AM would perform would change  
42 based on that decision.

43  
44 Alternative 4, which is all greyed out and italicized, and I'll  
45 get to why, would revise the post-season recreational AMs for the  
46 deepwater grouper complex such that, if the rec landings exceed  
47 the recreational ACL in two consecutive years out of the previous  
48 three fishing years, then, in the following fishing year, the

1 Regional Administrator would close the rec sector for the remainder  
2 of that year when the rec ACL is projected to be met.

3  
4 The issue with this alternative, as has been identified by General  
5 Counsel, has been that they think that it's in violation of  
6 National Standard 1, in regards to monitoring the landings against  
7 the ACL annually, and Ms. Levy can speak a little bit more  
8 precisely to that, but the short version of it is this one needs  
9 to come out, and so, Ms. Levy, if you want to speak to that any  
10 more than I did.

11  
12 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mara.

13  
14 **MS. LEVY:** I mean, I don't need to, unless there are any questions  
15 about it.

16  
17 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** C.J.

18  
19 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Why does it need to come out?

20  
21 **MS. LEVY:** Well, I think we talked about this last meeting, and  
22 the issue is that it doesn't require any action until there are  
23 two consecutive annual catch limits exceeding, right, and the  
24 requirement is to look at it each year, and then, if there's an  
25 exceedance, to do something about it, and this basically says we're  
26 not going to do anything about it unless it happens twice.

27  
28 I did say, at the last meeting, that we could brainstorm about  
29 potential ways to maybe do this. Part of my problem with this is  
30 it's not linked to anything, like how high was the exceedance, and  
31 did we exceed the OFL, and is there overfishing now, and what's  
32 the status of the stock, and like there's nothing that actually  
33 links this to anything related to the stock status, which is an  
34 extra problem for me, but the essential thing is the two years  
35 without any action.

36  
37 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Mara, for that. C.J.

38  
39 **DR. SWEETMAN:** So I guess I'm a little confused then, because I  
40 feel like Clay presented on this, this exact topic here, and said  
41 it was a sustainable method, that could be utilized, and this was  
42 back in 2023, and now I'm just super confused as to why legal is  
43 saying, no, what the Science Center presented is not something  
44 that we can actually do.

45  
46 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mara.

47  
48 **MS. LEVY:** So I'm just expressing my concerns about this, and I

1 know that we talked about doing it, and then NMFS was having a  
2 discussion internally about this particular action. I mean, still,  
3 from my perspective, I see a legal issue with the two consecutive  
4 years and not doing anything, especially given that there are no  
5 bounds to this.

6  
7 We go over in one year, and we're overfishing, and the stock is  
8 overfished, and we're still not looking at it for a second year,  
9 but I guess I can let Andy speak to that. I mean, that's just my  
10 personal legal concerns. Like I said, if we can explain how this  
11 complies, and how we're actually doing something on an annual  
12 basis, and we can articulate that rationale, you know, ultimately  
13 NMFS has to determine whether it's consistent with the guidelines  
14 and the act.

15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Strelcheck.

17  
18 **MR. STRELCHECK:** C.J., I appreciate the question, and so I, you  
19 know, think there's two different things here, right, and so  
20 there's what Clay presented, and, you know, kind of scientifically  
21 how this could work, and make sense, right, and then there's,  
22 obviously, the legal aspects of this, in terms of the National  
23 Standard requirements and what we have to do in terms of  
24 implementing accountability measures.

25  
26 Kind of looking at that more carefully, right, that's where  
27 conversations with Mara and General Counsel have gone since that  
28 discussion with the Science Center about whether or not this is  
29 something that is a viable approach.

30  
31 While I have the mic, right, the other piece to this, and this is  
32 part of the recreational initiative, although not really a  
33 component of what we're going to hear about from the workgroup  
34 shortly, but, as part of that recreational initiative, we talked  
35 about how do we deal with uncertainty in the catch estimates,  
36 right, and so one of my frustrations is you have species like  
37 deepwater grouper, with high levels of uncertainty, that we're  
38 having to manage by, and that we could potentially trigger  
39 accountability measures, based on highly uncertain landings data,  
40 and have not figured out a way to kind of crack that nut, so to  
41 speak, and come up with a way that diminishes, or reduces, the  
42 potential for triggering an accountability measure based on just  
43 scientific uncertainty.

44  
45 Point well taken, and we're certainly trying to test the waters  
46 with regard to options that we could consider, and we just feel  
47 like we've gotten to a point, with the legal advice, that we can't  
48 move this one further.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Andy, and so we have one  
3 remaining alternative. I'm going to try to -- Again, we're a  
4 little over schedule here, but it's Alternative 5 in Action 3 is  
5 new since the last time that we talked about this, and so, Ryan,  
6 if you want to just introduce that alternative perhaps, and then  
7 we can come back to 58B in Full Council.

8  
9 **MR. RINDONE:** Sure, and so Alternative 5 states that, if the  
10 average deepwater grouper landings exceed the average ACL over a  
11 three-year moving period, that the Regional Administrator would  
12 reduce the duration of the recreational fishing season by the  
13 amount necessary to ensure that the recreational ACL is not  
14 exceeded during the following fishing year, unless BSIA suggests  
15 no adjustment to that fishing season is necessary.

16  
17 Different from Alternative 4, there would still be an annual  
18 evaluation of the recreational landings against the recreational  
19 ACL. However, the AM wouldn't be triggered unless the average  
20 landings for that three-year period exceed the annual recreational  
21 ACL, and so important for the implementation of this particular  
22 alternative is that, you know, in the year of implementation, it's  
23 still based on one year's data.

24  
25 Then, the second year after implementation, it would be based on  
26 two years of data, and then, the third year after implementation,  
27 that's when that full three-year average would be able to be put  
28 in place, since we can't retroactively enforce an accountability  
29 measure, based on data, you know, from like two years ago, and so  
30 -- Because that's not the -- That's just not how it would be  
31 allowed to work, and that's written into the discussion for this  
32 particular alternative, with a little bit more clarity.

33  
34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Mr. Rindone, and so,  
35 again, hopefully we'll get a little public comment on these three  
36 action items and the various alternatives, and we will circle back  
37 on that in Full Council. Mr. Chairman.

38  
39 **MR. DUGAS:** Thank you, Dr. Frazer. Let's take our break and  
40 reconvene at 10:30. Thank you.

41  
42 (Whereupon, a brief recess was taken.)

43  
44 **MR. DUGAS:** Okay. Welcome back, folks. Thank you. Before I give  
45 it to Dr. Frazer, I would like to recognize a past council member.  
46 Mr. Johnny Greene is here. Thank you, sir. Dr. Frazer.

47  
48 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and so we

1 will move on to Action Item -- Where are we at here? We're going  
2 to work on the recreational initiative, and I guess, Ms.  
3 Muehlstein, if you will lead us through the action guide.

4  
5 **FINAL REPORT: RECREATIONAL INITIATIVE**  
6

7 **MS. EMILY MUEHLSTEIN:** Okay, and so we are moving on to working on  
8 our recreational initiative. As you remember, this is a sort of  
9 endeavor that the council took on at the beginning of the year,  
10 and we hired contractors Dr. Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus to  
11 help us through this.

12  
13 We have held three meetings of the recreational working group,  
14 which, if you remember, is a group of anglers, mostly some tackle  
15 representatives and some other folks who are part of the  
16 recreational community, that you all appointed, and we've worked  
17 through three meetings with them now, and, essentially, sort of  
18 the main goal of what we're doing is to review recreational  
19 management for five focal reef fish species and really explore  
20 some innovative management strategies.

21  
22 Today, we get our final report-out from the work on the effort.  
23 We are going to hear sort of the primary consensus recommended  
24 goals, and sort of strategies for the council to undertake from  
25 here on out to improve angler satisfaction in the recreational  
26 reef fish fishery.

27  
28 First, we will have the gentlemen from Pelagic Strategies give us  
29 a report-out on the initiative. Second, I will provide the  
30 feedback from the public that we have gotten so far on the  
31 recreational initiative, and then, finally, last, but not least,  
32 Bob Hilliard is here. He is a member of the recreational  
33 initiative working group, and he will provide his perspective.

34  
35 What we are hoping is that today the committee is going to review  
36 all of the information that is presented, and the recommendations  
37 that are presented from the recreational initiative working group,  
38 and help us prioritize action items for the council to consider,  
39 and so you're going to see a suite of recommendations, and we would  
40 really like to understand if there is anything that is not  
41 interesting to you, and then maybe we should take it off the table  
42 now, and, if there is anything that the council really wants to  
43 prioritize, it would be helpful for us to hear that today.

44  
45 We do have a decision tree available that we can work through, if  
46 you guys think that you need that. If not, you know, if it's kind  
47 of on the back burner, and then I also wanted to mention, before  
48 we move on, is, before Full Council, tonight, immediately following

1 Reef Fish Committee, we will be holding one final special  
2 recreational engagement session for the public to come and give  
3 feedback.

4  
5 Those of you that want to stay and listen, you are welcome to do  
6 that. If you have other plans, because it is after the meeting  
7 adjourns, we will be producing a comment summary of those meetings,  
8 and sharing them with you by Full Council, in case you can't make  
9 it this evening.

10  
11 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Ms. Muehlstein, and so we  
12 will go ahead and look at the presentation on the recreational  
13 initiative outcomes, and that would be Tab B, Number 6(a) in your  
14 briefing materials, and we've Dr. Goldsmith and Mr. Loftus here,  
15 and so, guys, take it away.

16  
17 **DR. GOLDSMITH:** Thank you, Dr. Frazer, and thank you, Emily, for  
18 teeing this up. Good morning, everybody. My name is Willy  
19 Goldsmith, as Emily mentioned, and I'm here with my colleague,  
20 Andrew Loftus, and we're happy to be here today to share with you  
21 all some of the key final outcomes and consensus recommendations  
22 from the recreational initiative.

23  
24 This has been an enormous amount of work on the part of the working  
25 group, the steering committee, and council staff, over the better  
26 part of the last year, and we're excited to be here to share with  
27 you all some of the key takeaways.

28  
29 I'm going to be providing just a brief overview of the recreational  
30 initiative, and a summary of those three working group meetings  
31 that we've held over the past few months, and then I'm going to  
32 turn it over to Andy, who is going to walk through some of the key  
33 consensus recommendations that the working group arrived at, as  
34 well as some potential avenues for next steps for the council to  
35 take.

36  
37 Okay, and so, first off, just a brief review of what the  
38 recreational initiative is. As Emily mentioned, this came out of  
39 a motion in 2023 by the Gulf Council, and it's an effort to engage  
40 the recreational community both to review and evaluate past and  
41 current management strategies for recreational reef fish  
42 management as well as to explore potential innovative management  
43 strategies that could be applied in the future.

44  
45 There are seven key items, and they're not listed here, but there  
46 were seven key elements of this that were specified in that initial  
47 motion. This included aspects such as reviewing stock status and  
48 management for key reef fish, exploring innovative management

1 strategies, and many other elements as well, and there were --

2  
3 This endeavor is really focused on the entire reef fish complex,  
4 but there were five species that were identified as focal species,  
5 areas for the group to really orient a lot of their discussion  
6 around and to examine some of the past and ongoing challenges in  
7 management, as well as to evaluate some of these potential new  
8 approaches. These included gag grouper, red snapper, greater  
9 amberjack, red grouper, and gray triggerfish.

10  
11 In terms of who is involved, we had a six-member steering  
12 committee. This group was comprised of six folks, including  
13 leadership from the Gulf Council, NOAA Fisheries, and the Gulf  
14 States Marine Fisheries Commission, as well as Captain Ed Walker  
15 and Michael McDermott as our recreational representatives from the  
16 Gulf Council.

17  
18 This group met no less frequently than monthly, virtually, to kind  
19 of conduct the -- Or planning activities of the recreational  
20 initiative and kind of discussing previous working group meeting  
21 outcomes and next steps.

22  
23 In addition, and really at the core of this initiative, was this  
24 twelve-member working group, comprised of diverse recreational  
25 fishery stakeholders from across the Gulf. I think three of them  
26 are here with us in the room this morning. We'll be hearing from  
27 one of them, Bob Hilliard, as Emily mentioned, to hear his  
28 perspective a bit later.

29  
30 This group was selected by you all, through an application process  
31 last summer, and was tasked with reviewing management successes  
32 and failures, as well as advising the council on potential novel  
33 management measures to consider for reef fish management, really  
34 focused on exploring ideas, rather than reacting to any discrete  
35 proposed regulatory decisions stemming from the council.

36  
37 There were twelve folks selected in total, from across the Gulf  
38 again, and this group really worked to find consensus on a broad  
39 array of issues.

40  
41 I'm not going to walk through this slide in great detail. There's  
42 a lot of information here, but I do just want to note that, as  
43 part and parcel of this process, there was a robust stakeholder  
44 engagement strategy to ensure that, in addition to what we heard  
45 from the working group, there was a lot of work put toward engaging  
46 the recreational community more broadly here in the Gulf.

47  
48 Some of the strategies that were implemented here were, of course,

1 presenting updates at council meetings, both here at this meeting  
2 and back in January in New Orleans, and allowing for public comment  
3 on the recreational initiative. As Emily mentioned, there will be  
4 a dedicated public comment session available both in-person and  
5 virtually this evening.

6  
7 There's also the recreational initiative landing page on the Gulf  
8 Council website, which is largely a repository for all recreational  
9 initiative meeting materials, and there is also a public comment  
10 portal there, where folks can submit their thoughts, and those  
11 thoughts are also available to be viewed by other members of the  
12 public.

13  
14 Lastly, after each of the three working group meetings, there was  
15 a three-hour virtual public engagement session, during which we  
16 provided a brief summary of the previous working group meeting and  
17 opened up the floor to members of the public to share their  
18 thoughts on some of the major outcomes and recommendations from  
19 that meeting, or just on the topics that were discussed in general.  
20 As a result, with all these opportunities, there was not a  
21 dedicated public comment period at each of the working group  
22 meetings that were hosted.

23  
24 I'm going to briefly run through the key outcomes of the three  
25 working group meetings that were held. These were held in October,  
26 January, and February in Tampa, New Orleans, and Tampa,  
27 respectively.

28  
29 The first meeting was held last October, and it was really oriented  
30 around developing a vision and goals for recreational reef fish  
31 management, as well as kind of hearing the working group's overall  
32 broad perspectives on recreational reef fisheries in the Gulf.

33  
34 There were a number of themes in the discussion to develop a vision  
35 that really permeated the rest of our discourse throughout the  
36 process. These included questions around data, generally trust  
37 between the recreational community and managers, the idea of  
38 regional flexibility, or regional management, in reef fish  
39 fisheries, to accommodate some of those more local-scale  
40 differences in fishery characteristics, the idea of improving  
41 collaboration between the recreational community and managers, the  
42 idea of balancing both predictability and stability and access,  
43 and, lastly, recognizing the dynamic status of recreational reef  
44 fish fisheries here in the Gulf, with participation and efficiency  
45 both increasing.

46  
47 With all this in mind, the working group arrived at the working  
48 vision of a sustainable recreational fishery that is based on

1 trusted data, offers predictable and reliable access, engages and  
2 empowers anglers and management, maximizes angler satisfaction,  
3 and accommodates growth and regional flexibility, and so there's  
4 a lot packed in here, but this is really encapsulating the broad  
5 swath of priorities that the working group had identified at this  
6 first meeting.

7  
8 In addition to this overall vision, the working group came up with  
9 a total of six goals to support its achievement, and, under each  
10 of these goals, I do want to note that there were several  
11 objectives nested under each one. Many of these objectives were  
12 later repurposed and modified into the consensus recommendations  
13 that Andy will be discussing in a few minutes.

14  
15 These six goals included trusted data, more broadly establishing  
16 trust with the recreational community, developing predictable and  
17 reliable recreational access, allowing for regional flexibility  
18 and management, increasing recreational engagement in the  
19 management process, and, lastly, maximizing angler satisfaction  
20 and accommodating fishery growth.

21  
22 Our second working group meeting was held in January in New  
23 Orleans. This meeting was focused on giving the working group an  
24 opportunity to really dig down into the specifics of management  
25 and stock status for each of those five focal species.

26  
27 As you all may recall from the January meeting, folks heard a  
28 series of presentations and updates on kind of the stock status of  
29 these species, and how they had been managed in the past, and then  
30 had a chance, through a series of breakout sessions and group  
31 discussion, to think critically about how that all went and were  
32 there potential other strategies that the council might want to  
33 consider pursuing.

34  
35 This is a very abbreviated summary of some of the key messages  
36 that we heard. For seasons, we heard that, for-hire and tackle  
37 industries, there was generally interest in having a season open  
38 across the reef fish complex at all times, in order to allow those  
39 businesses to continue to be profitable.

40  
41 That being said, for the average private angler, there was often  
42 a desire for more overlap in seasons, kind of from an increasing  
43 efficiency standpoint, allowing folks to harvest multiple species  
44 on a given trip, as well as reducing discards.

45  
46 In addition, whereas the for-hire fleet generally preferred more  
47 predictable seasons, private anglers were more willing to  
48 accommodate instability, or unpredictability, if it resulted in

1 longer seasons at times, and so we did note that this difference,  
2 or this perceived difference, recognized that the working group  
3 did have a predominant share of private anglers as its composition.  
4

5 On the issue of accountability measures, there was a lot of  
6 discussion about whether there could be flexibility for post-  
7 season accountability measures. For example, if an overage  
8 occurred, could there be paybacks distributed across multiple  
9 years, and this came up specifically around accountability  
10 measures, but it was kind of a broader conversation in general  
11 around working group members' perceptions that it was often  
12 difficult to understand kind of what the potential impact, or  
13 benefit, could result from a given management action.  
14

15 There was a lot of discussion around is it possible to better  
16 message on, you know, where is the fishery going, what could  
17 ultimately be possible for us, in terms of a season length, and in  
18 terms of harvest limits, and so that was kind of an interesting  
19 corollary to that AM discussion.  
20

21 Then lastly, again, this prevailing theme around regional  
22 considerations, as well as this sector conversation, and so there  
23 was a lot of discussion about the potential for exploring finer-  
24 scale management spatially, for example between the eastern and  
25 western Gulf, while maintaining the council's management  
26 authority, and there was also a fair amount of discourse around  
27 different season preferences for private and for-hire, as  
28 mentioned earlier, and whether that might be a reason for pursuing  
29 differential management for these sectors.  
30

31 However, for both of these cases, it was unclear whether the  
32 mechanics would look something like different annual catch limits  
33 for each of these groups or whether it would be kind of a shared  
34 -- Different management measures under one shared catch limit, and  
35 so that was -- That conversation was never, you know, kind of  
36 brought to fruition there, but the interest was certainly there.  
37

38 Our third and final working group meeting was held about six weeks  
39 ago at Gulf Council headquarters in Tampa, and this meeting was  
40 really focused on recognizing that the working group, in its first  
41 two meetings, had assembled a lot of information and gathered, you  
42 know, a lot of information around different stock status and  
43 management, what they wanted the fishery to maybe look like in the  
44 future, and this third meeting was really about trying to make  
45 those goals, and that vision, actionable, and so what are the  
46 mechanisms, and what are the strategies, that the council might be  
47 able to pursue to achieve some of the outcomes identified at the  
48 first meeting.

1  
2 A couple -- So, broadly, the idea was to explore some innovative  
3 management strategies, again using the five focal species as case  
4 studies, and some of the specific activities included evaluating  
5 and considering a harvest control rule approach for setting bag,  
6 size, and season limits, reviewing a suite of alternative  
7 management approaches that have been previously proposed for Gulf  
8 reef fish fisheries, and evaluating their applicability for use in  
9 reef fish management, determining whether some of these approaches  
10 might be better suited to some fisheries than others, and then,  
11 lastly, developing a series of consensus statements and  
12 recommendations, really encapsulating the recreational initiative  
13 process in the working group's priorities for the full council to  
14 consider.

15  
16 Before we got into the innovative management strategies, because  
17 there had been so much interest and discussion around seasons at  
18 the second working group meeting, Dr. Froeschke, at the Gulf  
19 Council, developed an interactive tool that working group members  
20 were asked to fill out prior to the meeting.

21  
22 Basically, what this tool allowed was for folks to select their  
23 preferred season timing for each of the five focal species, given  
24 restrictions on each of those seasons as they currently are, and  
25 so, for example, you could select any month for gag, but it could  
26 only be one month, and so this was kind of just really used as a  
27 springboard for discussion.

28  
29 I do want to note that, you know, these results only represent, I  
30 believe, ten working group members, as well as some who may have  
31 filled out more than the maximum number of months, and so it is  
32 just a snapshot, but it gives a sense of kind of how different  
33 folks, you know, were thinking about this question.

34  
35 It's worth noting as well that we did include, or Dr. Froeschke  
36 did include, some spawning timing information that was factored in  
37 by some folks as well. Just a note that some of like the key  
38 takeaways that we observed here, or that the working group members  
39 noted, was a general preference for a lot of season overlap across  
40 the five species, in particular during the summer months.

41  
42 That was kind of one key element, and the second one was that,  
43 while regional preferences, for example between Texas, Louisiana,  
44 and Florida, might vary, in terms of the combinations of species  
45 they most desired, there was a general interest in maximizing  
46 overlap in all reef fish species with red snapper, just recognizing  
47 that that was sort of the main, or the anchor, species and the key  
48 priority for anglers across the Gulf, and so those are some of the

1 key messages that we heard across this.

2  
3 Again, there was some discussion around the fact that there wasn't  
4 as much interest in seasons being open during those kind of off-  
5 peak times of year, from the late fall through early spring, and,  
6 again, recognition that this was predominantly a private angler  
7 composition on this group as well.

8  
9 I'm not going to walk through this entire table here. This was  
10 provided by Julia Beaty at the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management  
11 Council, who came down to Tampa, at Working Group Meeting 3, to  
12 provide an overview of the history and application of the Mid-  
13 Atlantic Council's harvest control rule approach.

14  
15 This was an effort implemented for four key Mid-Atlantic species,  
16 with the three goals of providing stability in management measures,  
17 increasing -- Developing strategies to increase flexibility, and  
18 better achieving accessibility aligned with availability and stock  
19 status, and so this is just a schematic of how this all works.

20  
21 At a very high level, it basically uses a combination of projected  
22 harvest, compared to catch limits and stock status, to dictate  
23 what percent change in harvest, either liberalization or  
24 reduction, might be required.

25  
26 So, for example, on the -- I suppose one example would be on the  
27 bottom-left here, and so, if the harvest is expected to exceed  
28 what is called the recreational harvest limit in that case, if the  
29 stock status is very high, then only a 10 percent reduction is  
30 needed, but, if the stock status is low, and so under 100, the  
31 biomass is less than 100 percent of the target, then the reduction  
32 would have to be greater, to reflect that stock status, and so  
33 this was kind of a schematic, and a framework, that the Mid-  
34 Atlantic Council has been using for these four species.

35  
36 In addition, working group members heard from council staff and  
37 steering committee members about a number of other alternative  
38 management measures, or alternative management approaches, that  
39 have been proposed for reef fish management in the past.

40  
41 These included harvest rate management based on fishing mortality,  
42 the use of harvest tags or days-at-sea, to regulate harvest and  
43 effort, respectively, potential depth or distance-based  
44 management, basically regulating whether harvest can be restricted  
45 based on how far from shore, or how deep the water is, conservation  
46 equivalency, or providing states, or regions, the ability to  
47 develop quantifiably similar, or equivalent, conservation impacts  
48 through differential management, or regulations, for those

1 regions.

2  
3 Permits, endorsements or stamps, and so this idea of better  
4 identifying the universe of federal-water anglers, recognizing  
5 that four of the five Gulf states already have some program along  
6 these lines, voluntary and mandatory catch reporting, which kind  
7 of has persistently come up as a topic of interest to the working  
8 group, release mortality reduction, broadly, management changes  
9 aimed to reduce release mortality of fish, and then, lastly,  
10 carryover provisions, allowing not only for potential payback over  
11 multiple years of overages, but also for carrying over any uncaught  
12 provision of -- Any uncaught portion of an allowable catch, if  
13 there is an underage in a given year.

14  
15 This is just a very quick general schematic of the level of  
16 interest in each of these topics. The green are the kind of the  
17 more -- The topics that the working group was more interested in.  
18 These included the harvest control rule approach that the Mid-  
19 Atlantic Council had shared, continued efforts to reduce release  
20 mortality, such as continuing the requirements through the DESCEND  
21 Act, and this idea, again, of enabling underages in harvest to be  
22 carried over, or overages to be paid back, over multiple seasons,  
23 and also continuing voluntary or mandatory reporting, both from a  
24 transparency perspective and from a data quality and timeliness  
25 perspective.

26  
27 For harvest rate management and conservation equivalency, there  
28 was interest, but both of these were viewed as pretty data-hungry  
29 efforts, both on the biology side of the species as well as on the  
30 management side and the landings standpoint, and so they were  
31 viewed as potential opportunities, but likely not in the near-  
32 term.

33  
34 For permits, endorsements, and stamps, there was, again, the  
35 recognition that there were programs extant for four of the five  
36 Gulf states, and also the idea that maybe some kind of low-level  
37 barrier to obtaining those permits could be helpful for identifying  
38 the true universe of federal waters anglers, and so as opposed to  
39 just checking a box for a free permit when you get your normal  
40 saltwater fishing license, and should there be additional  
41 potential strategies to have folks take to obtain those permits.

42  
43 Then we heard little to no support for depth or distance-based  
44 management, the major concerns here being around enforceability,  
45 as well as potential discard concerns, and then harvest tags also  
46 were viewed as a challenge, in particular when it came to how could  
47 the council, or how could a management entity, achieve equitability  
48 in allocating those harvest privileges. Okay, and I'm now going

1 to pass it over to Andy, who is going to give an overview of the  
2 key consensus recommendations that the working group came to.

3  
4 **MR. ANDREW LOFTUS:** Thanks, Willy, and so we had all this  
5 information generated through, you know, not only the three working  
6 group meetings, but also through the public input sessions that  
7 Emily will talk about in a little bit, and so, basically, the last  
8 day of the Working Group Meeting 3 we spent on pulling all that  
9 information together, you know, working with the working group to  
10 identify what are some consensus recommendations that you want to  
11 make, based on all of this information.

12  
13 A couple things about that. Number one, remember that these are  
14 consensus recommendations. They aren't the entirety of all of the  
15 input, and all of the recommendations, that were made throughout  
16 the working group process. To get those, and to make sure that  
17 that isn't lost, when you look at the final report that we  
18 assembled, it's pretty long, and the reason it's long is that we  
19 have a consensus report, and then we have, as appendices, the  
20 report of each of the individual working group sessions, and then,  
21 also, a summary of all of the public input that has been received.

22  
23 We did that on purpose, because we want to make sure that, if you  
24 want to look -- If you want to find information that relates  
25 perhaps to something outside of these consensus recommendations,  
26 you only have one place to go, and that's, you know, the final  
27 report, and so I encourage you, as you move forward with this, to  
28 continually revisit those individual meeting summaries and, you  
29 know, look at some of those more -- I'll call them minor, but they  
30 aren't minor in the extent that they're less important, but minor  
31 recommendations that didn't meet these -- Or didn't make these  
32 final consensus recommendations that I'm going to present here.

33  
34 We worked with the working group to identify the recommendations,  
35 and to basically categorize them, and, if you remember Willy's  
36 summary of the goals that came out of Workgroup Meeting 1, we  
37 summarized them under those goals, and they all fit, you know,  
38 fairly nicely, and, in saying that though, as I go through the --  
39 I think there's nineteen recommendations, but, as I go through  
40 them, don't look at them in isolation.

41  
42 Don't look at them as an individual recommendation, but look at  
43 them combined with each other, because if you, for example, improve  
44 the trust in data, you have therefore hopefully improved the trust  
45 of the recreational community, which are two separate goals, and  
46 so look at them in combination with one another and not in  
47 isolation.

1 Once we developed that, during the workgroup process, we had to,  
2 of course, finalize the verbiage and so forth, and so we did that  
3 following that Workgroup Meeting 3, and then, as I go through them,  
4 you'll notice that some are focused on individual species, whereas  
5 some of the recommendations are more broadly applicable to the  
6 Gulf reef fish complex.

7  
8 Setting expectations, remember there are six goals, and so there  
9 will be six slides here, and there are recommendations under each  
10 of these goals, and so the first one is trusted data. The workgroup  
11 wanted to emphasize that it was important to set specific and  
12 measurable guidelines and, importantly, expectations for data that  
13 is presented to the council for action, beyond the ambiguous best  
14 available data.

15  
16 There are a number of -- Not only in the Gulf Council, but in other  
17 councils, a number of instances where, when you dig into the data,  
18 it's based on one or two or three intercepts, and, of course, you  
19 know, people look at that, and they lose trust in the data, because  
20 it isn't perhaps as robust as they would expect, and so, when  
21 presenting the data to the council to be used, it was important  
22 that the council set the expectations to the data providers about  
23 how to characterize that data and the quality of data that they  
24 wanted to look at as being acceptable.

25  
26 The second recommendation was that electronic self-reporting by  
27 anglers should continue to play a role in estimating the  
28 recreational Gulf reef fish catch, including both mandatory and  
29 voluntary programs. There is a great deal of I will say acceptance  
30 in some of the app-based reporting that's being done right now,  
31 particularly in Mississippi and Alabama.

32  
33 I know there are some revisions that are coming up to those  
34 programs, but I think there's a lot of value in perhaps looking at  
35 those and asking yourself how can we continue to incorporate  
36 perhaps components of those programs where the anglers are  
37 providing this electronic reporting, self-reporting, given that  
38 you've already invested in it and gained quite a bit of faith and  
39 trust in the recreational community by using that.

40  
41 The third recommendation under the trusted data goal is to explore  
42 opportunities to increase the applicability of voluntary self-  
43 reporting of catch and effort, including pilot studies that are  
44 used to evaluate how best to both validate and utilize that self-  
45 reported data and incorporate it into the fisheries management  
46 process.

47  
48 Goal 2 is establish trust with the recreational community. The

1 first recommendation is to improve messaging regarding the  
2 potential on-the-water impact of management actions. In other  
3 words, you know, what increase in catch limits anglers could expect  
4 from a decrease in discard mortality, and what is the ultimate --  
5 You know, perhaps, what is the ultimate vision for what a fishery  
6 could look like for a particular species if it was completely  
7 rebuilt, and things like that, and so, basically, improve the  
8 messaging, and, in doing that, establish, again, expectations.

9  
10 You'll hear me say the word "expectations" quite a bit, because I  
11 think that's prevalent throughout a lot of these recommendations,  
12 setting expectations for anglers.

13  
14 The second recommendation is to better communicate the  
15 conservation implications of different fishing activities, so that  
16 anglers can basically utilize that information to perhaps tailor  
17 their fishing activities voluntarily to improve conservation. For  
18 example, is there a certain depth, or location, where spawning is  
19 occurring at particular times of the year that anglers might  
20 voluntarily avoid those areas, and so forth, and so kind of  
21 communicate those, you know, the biology, if you will, and the  
22 implications of different fishing activities, so that anglers can  
23 take, you know, proactive actions on their own.

24  
25 The third recommendation under this goal is to improve the  
26 awareness of the tremendous volume of outreach and education  
27 material that's already available. Several of the workgroup  
28 members that you chose were fairly new to the fishery management  
29 process, and to the council's process, and, in preparation for  
30 some of the workgroup meetings, and even before we had them, they  
31 started looking for information, and we heard comments from them  
32 that they didn't realize there was so much information that was  
33 already available out there, but it was difficult to find.

34  
35 I guess this is a recommendation, or a kudos from them, that, hey,  
36 you know, the council, and other council members, have developed  
37 a lot of information, but we just didn't know it was available,  
38 and so it's, you know, a communication thing, that perhaps you  
39 should look at, and I would almost consider this kind of a low-  
40 hanging fruit type of thing to improve.

41  
42 The third goal is develop predictable and reliable recreational  
43 access. The first recommendation is to explore the development  
44 and implementation of the harvest control rule approach.

45  
46 As Willy mentioned, we had the Mid-Atlantic Council come down, at  
47 the third workgroup meeting, and present how they are applying  
48 this up in the Mid-Atlantic Council, or the Mid-Atlantic region,

1 and I'll say the council members had the opportunity to defend  
2 their approach through the legal setting, through a court filing.

3  
4 I don't think they would look at it as an opportunity, but it was,  
5 and it was upheld, and so there's some legal precedence here that  
6 it is a valid approach, setting -- You know, by allowing the  
7 setting of seasons, and harvest limits, over a two-year period, as  
8 opposed to changing it year by year.

9  
10 The working group thought that was, you know, potentially a good  
11 idea, although it might look different on how it could be applied  
12 in the Gulf, because of some of the data limitations between the  
13 Gulf and the Mid-Atlantic that the Mid-Atlantic utilizes to do  
14 this.

15  
16 The second recommendation under this goal is to examine the  
17 feasibility of implementing carryover provisions of the uncaught  
18 portion of the ACLs for reef fish species, along with distributing  
19 paybacks for ACLs across multiple years, as opposed to -- As  
20 opposed to having to take it in a single year. It's kind of like  
21 the stock market and looking at how can we even out, you know,  
22 over the years, as opposed to boom and bust years of being able to  
23 fish and harvest. Can we even that out over a period of two or  
24 three years, as opposed to one year?

25  
26 Goal 4 is allow for regional flexibility in management. I think  
27 Willy alluded to this came up throughout the entire process, and  
28 it's clear that the working group meeting -- Our working group  
29 members appreciated the ability for regional -- Or, you know,  
30 desired the ability for regional or state flexibility in  
31 recreational reef fish management, while maintaining the authority  
32 of federal management in the fisheries, whenever it's possible.

33  
34 Now, you know, again, data limitations might necessitate that that  
35 isn't possible in some cases, but clearly, you know, the  
36 differences in regional fisheries by state, and by regions within  
37 a state, and they were looking at is there a way to perhaps  
38 regionalize some of the -- Or make more flexible some of the  
39 fishing opportunities and regulations to accommodate, or meet,  
40 those regional differences.

41  
42 The second recommendation under this goal is to explore a regional  
43 management approach for red and gag grouper, maintaining a single  
44 Gulf-wide ACL that splits management measures between Florida,  
45 where the vast majority of both species are caught, and the other  
46 four Gulf states, where gag and red grouper are only encountered  
47 rarely.

1 The third recommendation is to explore differentiating management  
2 measures, for example size limit and bag limits and so forth, for  
3 greater amberjack between the eastern and western Gulf states,  
4 given the regional differences in the fisheries.

5  
6 Then Recommendation r under this is they want to emphasize that it  
7 was important to continue to delegate the authority for setting  
8 red snapper management measures for the private recreational and  
9 state guide boats. It seems like that action has taken -- It has  
10 had a lot of benefits, and it has resulted in greater angler  
11 acceptance for the management regulations and restrictions for  
12 managing red snapper.

13  
14 Goal 5 is increase recreational community engagement in the  
15 management process. The working group thought it was important to  
16 seek opportunities to partner with the recreational fishing  
17 community leaders in educating them and engaging anglers to be  
18 more active participants in the council's management process. One  
19 of the ideas thrown out was, you know, a leadership program, for  
20 example, that could be sponsored by the Gulf Council.

21  
22 The second recommendation under this goal is to work with the  
23 partners to develop scaled-down modules of the MREP, the Marine  
24 Resources Education Program, to share that information with the  
25 wider Gulf audience. I think the majority of the working group  
26 members had -- Not all of them, but I think the majority had gone  
27 through the MREP program, and they found it very, very valuable,  
28 and, of course, it's not possible to have, you know, all of the  
29 recreational anglers, the recreational community, go through that  
30 process.

31  
32 It's just too costly, and time consuming, but their thought was  
33 are there ways that we could perhaps develop some scaled-down  
34 modules that could be taken out to a more regional or localized  
35 basis and, you know, engage the recreational community in a greater  
36 awareness of the management process, and so I think there's some  
37 things to think about there and how it might be able to be done.

38  
39 The third recommendation under this goal is to promote  
40 opportunities for anglers to report catch and effort information  
41 for their on-the-water observations. This is getting at the --  
42 You've probably heard it over and over, but there's a disconnect  
43 sometimes between what anglers are seeing on the water versus what  
44 is being reported in the data, and so they thought it was important  
45 to continue to allow anglers to report this, perhaps through the  
46 council's Fisherman Feedback tool.

47  
48 Finally, the last goal is maximize angler satisfaction and

1 accommodate growth. The first recommendation under that is to  
2 implement a replacement, or enhancement, of the DESCEND Act, and  
3 I think the council is on track to perhaps consider that, and so,  
4 again, that might be something that you want to emphasize.

5  
6 The second recommendation under this goal is work with the  
7 recreational community to develop seasons that maximize overlap in  
8 the focal species, to enable harvest of multiple species on a given  
9 trip and reduce discards. There was quite a bit of discussion  
10 throughout the process of, you know, ways, on-the-water ways, of  
11 reducing discards and discard mortality.

12  
13 Recommendation 6.3 is explore the use of a vessel, rather than  
14 individual, bag limits for greater amberjack, possibly scaled to  
15 the number of anglers onboard, and all of that as a way to perhaps  
16 extend the season length.

17  
18 Then the final recommendation under this goal is to explore the  
19 concept of an aggregate reef fish season and bag limit, and again  
20 the discard issue, to reduce discards and allow harvest of multiple  
21 species on a single fishing trip, also recognizing the challenges  
22 that this might present, as the requirements of the Magnuson-  
23 Stevens Act might limit this.

24  
25 With that, again, I'll just repeat the two things I said before.  
26 These are consensus recommendations. That's certainly not all of  
27 the input that was received through the three working group  
28 meetings, and look at these recommendations, and all the  
29 recommendations, not as, you know, individual standalone  
30 recommendations, but in conjunction with one another, and so, with  
31 that, I'm going to pause and give one of the working group members,  
32 Bob Hilliard, an opportunity to provide his overall working group  
33 perspective. Bob.

34  
35 **MR. BOB HILLIARD:** Good morning. Thank you for having me. I  
36 really appreciate the opportunity. Just a little background on  
37 myself, and I'm a recently retired engineer, private recreational  
38 fisherman, and spear fisherman from Clearwater, Florida. I've  
39 been fishing the central west coast of Florida since the early  
40 1970s, and so I've been around for a while.

41  
42 The working group was made up of twelve members from five states  
43 with various backgrounds, from the sport organizations, industry,  
44 for-hire charter people, and private recreational folks. There  
45 was a -- We built a good rapport with everybody in there, but we  
46 really learned how different the fishing environment is in the  
47 Gulf and how the priorities for people vary from state to state.

48

1 That being said, the consensus from the group was for regional  
2 management. The Gulf is too large for one set of rules, and so  
3 explore transitioning to regional or state-focused management.  
4 Management and regulatory approaches need to have more predictable  
5 seasons. It's tough to wait until a month or two before the season  
6 to get ready.

7  
8 Implementing harvest control rules to give us more predictable,  
9 and spread the ideas, and explore implementation of carryover  
10 provisions. Carryover hasn't really been an issue recently, but  
11 the accountability measures have been, and so maybe spread those  
12 for a couple years, instead of having a drastic impact, like we  
13 did with gag grouper.

14  
15 Let's see. Implementing and replacing the DESCEND Act. That has  
16 really helped. I mean, when we went from j-hooks to circle hooks,  
17 everybody hated it for a while, and everybody got used to it, and  
18 so now the same thing with descending stuff.

19  
20 Data, validating voluntary data collection, and that's one of the  
21 major things. Setting guidelines and expectations for the regional  
22 data providers. The thing that really gets people wound up is  
23 saying this is all based on the best available science, and nobody  
24 really knows what that is, in the recreational community anyway.

25  
26 Get more emphasis on the state catch and effort data and develop  
27 a user friendly-way to report catch information. Possible  
28 incentives for people to report, and everybody loves koozies, and  
29 so maybe, you know, give those out, and they're cheap, too.

30  
31 Angler outreach and engagement, one thing that seems to be missing  
32 is, whenever there's changes to the rules, it always seems to be  
33 negative. There's no, if we do this now, then we get this, and so  
34 that's been one thing that really seems to be lacking. I think  
35 it's getting more out there now, especially with gag grouper. I  
36 know guys, in our breakout sessions from the other states, got  
37 tired of me talking about gags, because that's our premier species  
38 in west-central Florida, but they don't have them. I didn't know  
39 that, and so anyway.

40  
41 Let's see. Better demonstration of impacts when you do have  
42 management actions. I was mentioning earlier about the fisheries  
43 science and management, the MREP lite modules, and I think that  
44 would help a lot. Between the education I got through the working  
45 group, and also with MREP training in the fall, and I didn't  
46 realize how ignorant I was, but, you know, a little training, and  
47 a little knowledge, helps.

48

1 Establish a Gulf education leadership program, trying to embed  
2 some leaders that are in the fishing community to help out in  
3 getting the word out, and increase participation of anglers in the  
4 process, kind of like myself, and I didn't know what went on, and  
5 so that's kind of the consensus for the group.

6  
7 Now I've got a couple things for myself here. You really need to  
8 determine the actual private recreational fishing effort and the  
9 releases. That seems to be one of the main things that's lacking,  
10 going to the LA Creel stuff for Louisiana, Mississippi, and  
11 Alabama, kind of going to one reporting system, but Florida and  
12 Texas are still on their own, and so we'll see how that goes.

13  
14 Increase the sample size of people reporting. That always helps.  
15 More data gives you more confidence, and you don't have to guess  
16 as much. Let's see. What else? Determining what the effort is,  
17 and count boats in the passes, and cameras on channels will tell  
18 you how many boats are going in and out. You can determine if  
19 somebody is fishing or going to the sandbar very easily. I think  
20 Alabama is already doing that, and so maybe it's something else we  
21 could do in the future.

22  
23 Increase the incentives, and also the penalties, for not reporting  
24 or for being caught with something out of season. Right now, the  
25 seasons are so restrictive on certain species that people are  
26 taking the chance, and going out and taking their fish anyway, and  
27 so make the make the penalties a little more severe.

28  
29 Then one thing, just for these common species, is if we could  
30 overlap the red snapper and red grouper seasons, since they're on  
31 the boat, on the same general environment, the areas, and that  
32 would help people get their fish, and also reduce discards too,  
33 and so I think that's all I've got. Sorry I was a little nervous,  
34 and go Gators, by the way.

35  
36 **MR. LOFTUS:** Thanks, Bob. I appreciate that perspective, and I  
37 appreciate you coming down and giving that perspective.

38  
39 **MR. HILLIARD:** If you have any questions, let me know, either now  
40 or anytime in the next couple days.

41  
42 **MR. LOFTUS:** Thank you. So, real quick, just a couple of wrap-up  
43 slides for this. The recommended next steps, we encourage the  
44 council to expeditiously develop a process implementation plan. I  
45 learned not to say "implementation team", but an implementation  
46 plan to establish priorities and timelines for acting upon these  
47 recommendations.

48

1 I'll also say, in doing that, make sure to engage the recreational  
2 community, and hopefully some of the members of the working group,  
3 as you're available to through the council process. Prioritize  
4 and implement some of the low-hanging fruit actions quickly, and,  
5 also, when you're doing that, tell people what you're doing.  
6

7 You know, a lot of times -- I had worked with somebody, years ago,  
8 that said one of our big downfalls is we hide -- What did he say?  
9 We hide our light under a bushel basket, and we've got to make  
10 sure that, when things are being done, you tell people that it's  
11 being done, and then, also, and I mentioned this before, but  
12 consider the intent, and the motivation, behind these  
13 recommendations that are perhaps deemed difficult, or impossible,  
14 under existing authorities, for example, to implement.  
15

16 If something was recommended that you say, well, Magnuson doesn't  
17 allow us to do that, think about what the intent of that  
18 recommendation is, and, you know, what actions that the council  
19 and NOAA could take to implement the intent of that, and then,  
20 again, provide feedback and updates on everything that's done, and  
21 particularly in response to these recommendations. Tell people  
22 that we heard you, and here's what we're doing about it. I think  
23 that's very important.  
24

25 Some reflections on the process, and the Gulf reef fish fisheries  
26 are very diverse, and that's no surprise to you all, and they  
27 necessitate flexible and innovative management.  
28

29 Much of what we heard was related to communication and engagement,  
30 rather than process and outcomes, and that's no reflection on the  
31 tremendous efforts that are being done right now to engage and to  
32 communicate with the recreational anglers, and it perhaps might be  
33 a reflection on the resources that are available.  
34

35 Implementation of some of the recommendations, for example related  
36 to data, are already in process, and the committee, the working  
37 group, was very aware of those processes that are being undertaken.  
38 Some recommendations could take years, or decades, to implement,  
39 and they need very careful prioritization and consideration.  
40

41 Then, again, review all the materials and recommendations,  
42 including the individual meeting summaries and the public input,  
43 and not just the contents of the main final report, and, as I  
44 mentioned before, we've incorporated it all into one document, and  
45 so you don't have to go searching around for various documents.  
46 All the information is in one large PDF document, and that was a  
47 recommendation that the steering committee had made for us to do.  
48

1 Perhaps this is the most important slide, and I hesitate to say  
2 that, but I will say that, when Willy and I first looked at this  
3 project, we scratched our heads, and we talked about it and said,  
4 gee whiz, can this be done in, you know, eight or nine or ten  
5 months, and here we are at the end of it, after a relatively few  
6 short months, and a lot of it is due to the -- Well, all of it is  
7 due to the people that you see on the screen here, the steering  
8 committee members who, you know, took time out of their already  
9 busy schedules to meet and provide very constructive feedback and  
10 direction and so forth.

11  
12 Certainly the working group members, who took their time away from  
13 their jobs and their families and so forth to participate in this  
14 process, and then absolutely the Gulf Council staff, who, again,  
15 other duties assigned, spent a lot of time making sure that this  
16 process continued on track, and provided the resources to do it,  
17 and then also, you know, you all, the Gulf Council members, and  
18 the members of the public, who contributed their input through the  
19 various mechanisms that we set up for them to do this.

20  
21 So, again, take a good look at those names on the screen, and they  
22 deserve a lot of credit, and we certainly, Willy and I, have a lot  
23 of appreciation for that, and so I think, with that, am I turning  
24 it over to Emily? Okay.

25  
26 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I think what I would like to do, again in the  
27 interest of time, right, is to go ahead, Emily, and do you want to  
28 do the public engagement slides now, and then we can circle back,  
29 and I'll try to lead a discussion before lunch.

30  
31 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** Okay, and so, Bernie, if you can please pull up  
32 Tab B, Number 6(b)(i), to begin with, and I want to give you sort  
33 of two parts of the public comment summary. First is a summary of  
34 the third engagement session that we held, and then I will move  
35 into the written public comment that we've gotten throughout this  
36 entire effort.

37  
38 We did hold three public input sessions, each one was done  
39 reasonably immediately following the working group meeting, and  
40 was sort of themed, with some pointed questions on those meetings.  
41 We did that because we didn't want to take away from the working  
42 group process and hold a public comment session during the working  
43 groups themselves, like we do with our APs and our SSCs, and so we  
44 really kind of tried to distill what happened with the working  
45 group meeting and provide a little bit of a primer for public  
46 comment in these special sessions that we held.

47  
48 The slides that I am about to summarize is feedback that we heard

1 during the final third input session that was held on March 6, and  
2 these were held virtually, and you already heard summaries from  
3 Dr. Birdsong, during our January meeting, on the first two sessions  
4 we held.

5  
6 We did hear a lot about season overlap preferences during this  
7 meeting, and we heard a commenter that supported overlapping  
8 seasons for red snapper and red grouper, because they're often  
9 caught together. Another person favored a peak season from May to  
10 August that would maximize fishing opportunities through the sort  
11 of warmer months. We heard support for spreading out seasons for  
12 the focal species, to allow year-round fishing, right, and so no  
13 surprise that these things are often in direct conflict with one  
14 another.

15  
16 We heard that there are regional differences in fish availability,  
17 and so making a single Gulf-wide approach to management is really  
18 difficult, and also to, you know, setting appropriate seasons,  
19 right, and I think maybe folks in different regions would have  
20 different answers for you if you polled them.

21  
22 We did hear concerns about gray triggerfish specifically, and their  
23 overabundance in the Panhandle, and then we heard from several  
24 participants that they preferred longer seasons, with stricter bag  
25 or possession limits, over those short, high-limit seasons.

26  
27 We heard a number of pieces of feedback about alternative  
28 management strategies, and there was skepticism about using  
29 harvest tags, and also using days-at-sea programs, and concerns  
30 about the fairness and implementation challenges associated with  
31 using those methodologies.

32  
33 We heard interest in using permits, or endorsements, for offshore  
34 reef fish fishing, particularly at the state level, in order to  
35 quantify angler participation. We also heard support for carryover  
36 provisions that would allow unused quota to roll over into the  
37 next year, and we heard interest in release mortality reduction  
38 strategies, which included education on best practices for both  
39 handling and releasing fish.

40  
41 We did hear about some priority regulatory changes were suggested,  
42 and one was for a desire for more regional flexibility in  
43 management, since fishing pressure varies, and, you know, as we  
44 sort of already mentioned, so does the structure of the fishery as  
45 you change locations in the Gulf.

46  
47 We heard suggestion to increase the red snapper minimum size limit  
48 from sixteen to eighteen or twenty inches, and we also heard

1 multiple concerns about depredation from sharks, and we heard  
2 increased interactions are impacting catch rates. We also heard  
3 a suggestion to increase reliance on state-collected data programs  
4 for federal decision-making, and we heard for a call for simplified  
5 management measures to improve compliance and enforcement.

6  
7 Bernie, I think, before I take questions on this one, can you  
8 please pull up Tab B, Number 6(b)(iii), and I will go over that  
9 one, and so what I just gave you was just a summary of what we  
10 heard from that third public engagement session that was linked to  
11 the third working group meeting.

12  
13 This, however, is a little bit different. This is a summary of  
14 all of the written public comments that we heard from when we  
15 initiated work on the recreational initiative until last Tuesday,  
16 right, and so this has been open for about nine months.

17  
18 Now, we did only receive ten comments through that public comment  
19 form, but I will tell you that those comments were quite meaty,  
20 and so it's kind of a long comment summary for the number of  
21 comments that we did receive, and so I'll just run through these  
22 quickly.

23  
24 We did hear support for re-evaluating sector allocations, because  
25 those allocations should be based on objective metrics like angler  
26 participation and economic contribution and not just historical  
27 participation. We heard that the recreational sector provides  
28 substantial local economic benefit, through gear, fuel, boats, and  
29 travel, and that the current recreational quota is not reflective  
30 of the recreational value of fishing.

31  
32 We heard a call to prioritize recreational fishing over commercial  
33 harvest. There was a suggestion that maybe banning commercial  
34 sale of pelagic and reef species, because of low community return  
35 and environmental pressure, was something to consider.

36  
37 We heard that comparisons drawn between banning of state sale of  
38 terrestrial wildlife, right, and so the idea that there's not  
39 commercial hunting, and things like that, and so those comparisons  
40 were made.

41  
42 We also heard support for banning mechanized spear guns, because  
43 it's too effective and contributes to depletion of stocks, and we  
44 heard that designating some species, like hogfish or red grouper,  
45 as pole, spear, or hook-and-line only.

46  
47 We heard recommendations to allow winter or extended seasons.  
48 Shark depredation is lower in the winter, and it may reduce release

1 mortality, is what we heard, and that overlapping seasons would  
2 minimize bycatch on long offshore trips. We also heard support  
3 for shifting to year-round weekend-based seasons, because it would  
4 reduce crowding, improve safety, and allow consistent access, and  
5 there was a specific proposal pitched that maybe a 100-day season,  
6 spread across Sundays and Mondays. We also heard support for  
7 holiday extensions and a consideration for spawning closures.

8  
9 We heard concern over weather-driven inequities, that anglers lose  
10 trips due to weather, despite holding permits or maintaining boats,  
11 and that individual season tags may allow more flexible seasons,  
12 and so, again, lots of things that are directly in controversy  
13 with one another.

14  
15 We heard frustration over declining recreational returns, right,  
16 and there's the rising cost of boats and fuel and gear, but then  
17 there's declining success in catch, and there was questions about  
18 what defines success for recreational fishing and if there should  
19 be expectations for at least being able to have one keeper fish  
20 per trip.

21  
22 There was a perception of unfair treatment in comparison to the  
23 commercial and charter sectors by the private recreational  
24 anglers. We heard that recreational effort and investment are not  
25 reflected in our management decisions, and calls for metrics like  
26 angler days and satisfaction rates to be used more intentionally.

27  
28 We also heard mixed views on charter captain behavior. Some folks  
29 praised the stewardship from charter captains, and some accused  
30 them of illegal discard practices and poaching. We also heard  
31 support for an anonymous reporting system, like a hunting tip line  
32 to report folks who are breaking rules.

33  
34 We heard criticism of the current survey design and data quality,  
35 saying that the surveys don't separate kept, released, and targeted  
36 species, and they lack the granularity necessary, which undermines  
37 stock assessments and trust in the data, and we also heard support  
38 for better design data collection, rather than simply more data.

39  
40 There was a suggestion that drawing from political polling and  
41 survey science would help us do this better and that smart survey  
42 design would yield better insight with fewer responses.

43  
44 We also heard that management should be long-term and adaptive and  
45 not reactive. Compared to business planning, balancing quarterly  
46 performance with long-range strategy, and also our current year-  
47 to-year shifts are disruptive and unsatisfying. We are concerned  
48 that fishing is becoming financially unstable, and the cost of

1 things is increasing, and costs thousands year-round, and, if  
2 opportunities are too limited, anglers may leave the sport  
3 entirely.

4  
5 We heard support for expansion of artificial reef projects. We  
6 heard about interest in voluntary reporting systems that were not  
7 associated with fish tags, something that would be modeled after  
8 game species, like deer and turkey, and the aim to improve harvest  
9 data to inform management without burdening anglers.

10  
11 We heard a suggestion to end the free reef fish permits, and so  
12 free permits inflate angler counts and distort harvest estimates.  
13 I think this was targeted to sort of the state reef fish permit  
14 efforts that are going on, and we heard that modest fees associated  
15 with those programs could ensure more accurate participation  
16 numbers.

17  
18 We also heard a proposal to restrict reef fish harvest using an  
19 aggregate bag limit across species, and one suggestion was a one-  
20 fish-per-day limit over an eight-month season, through the warm  
21 summer months, with maybe two angler-selected months, allowing a  
22 two-fish-per-day limit, right, and so expanding and contracting  
23 possession limits throughout the longer seasons.

24  
25 We heard that we should intentionally simplify regulation, and we  
26 should -- We also heard that it would reduce bycatch mortality, by  
27 making sure that regional inequities and enforcement burdens are  
28 taken care of through this idea to restructure reef fish harvest.

29  
30 We also heard support for implementing a species-specific reef  
31 fish stamp, with a small fee for targeted species, where anglers  
32 would select species they intend to harvest during a licensed  
33 purchase and suggested a more accurate way to estimate true  
34 participation.

35  
36 We also heard suggestion for voluntary a reef fish surveyor  
37 program, where recreational, charter, and commercial participants  
38 could opt in to collect underwater video of reef fish sites, with  
39 narration and geolocation data suggested. We also heard that  
40 those types of videos and self-reported information could be  
41 reviewed publicly during management discussions and stock  
42 assessments, and that it could be framed as a way to boost  
43 transparency, the stakeholder voice, and also to supplement  
44 traditional stock assessment methods. That is a summary of what  
45 we heard, which is quite a large amount, and I'll take any  
46 questions.

47  
48 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right, and so I guess let me preface this by

1 saying that it was a tremendous amount of work on behalf of the  
2 working group, the steering committee, and all the participants  
3 there. I appreciate the summaries both by Willy, Andy, and Bob,  
4 and, Emily, thanks for all of your work as well.

5  
6 I think I'm just -- Again, my overview of this is that I think  
7 what you guys have been able to capture here is the incredible  
8 complexity which is fisheries management. There's a lot of things  
9 involved. You know, we would all, I think, like better information  
10 to base our decisions, and we would all like better stability in  
11 the fishery, more flexibility, and we want to maximize our  
12 opportunity and grow -- You know, provide growth in the industry,  
13 perhaps.

14  
15 That's a difficult thing to do with a limited resource, and so  
16 it's going to be challenging, but just acknowledging the fact that  
17 we have these issues, and laying them out on the table, does allow  
18 us an opportunity to start to identify where our priorities might  
19 be, and I wholeheartedly support the recommendation, right, that  
20 we need to develop a process to begin some type of an  
21 implementation plan.

22  
23 We're not going to do that in ten minutes, right, or whatever we've  
24 got here today, but I think, Emily, I mean, you started to put  
25 together a framework, and can you show that?

26  
27 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** I can. Bernie, if you can pull up the flow chart  
28 that I just put together, and we'll sort of walk through maybe  
29 some of the things that we could be doing next, and please excuse  
30 me, and this isn't super ready for primetime, because I just  
31 started it this morning, hoping that we could sort of provide some  
32 direction on where to go, but, you know, the suite of  
33 recommendations.

34  
35 If you look on the full report, they start on page 15, and I know  
36 that Andy and Willy did review them, but it was six goals, and,  
37 you know, upwards of twenty recommendations, and I am suggesting  
38 that I think that we, either we the council or we staff, need to  
39 systematically go through each one of the recommendations and  
40 consider a couple of decision points.

41  
42 The first one, and sort of one of the things that we tend to do  
43 when we're looking at a document and a suite of alternatives, is  
44 the first low-hanging fruit, I guess, is to identify which items  
45 we don't have interest in addressing, and so I think, if we take  
46 those off the table, then prioritizing the rest of this is great,  
47 and there might be nothing, but that's one thing I think that we  
48 can maybe consider doing by Full Council.

1  
2 However, if we look at all the other recommendations, and if we  
3 are interested in them, you know, we need to take one thing -- The  
4 first question is, is it under the council purview, and a lot of  
5 the data-specific recommendations -- I've kind of gone through  
6 this, and done this as an exercise on my own, but a lot of the  
7 data-based recommendations might not be directly council action  
8 oriented, or they might be partially based on what the council can  
9 do, and then partially based on the council's partners, such as  
10 the states or the feds doing something, and so, in that case, what  
11 can the council do, and how can the council encourage, or support,  
12 our partners in making sure that that moves forward.

13  
14 If it is, however, something that is under the council purview,  
15 you noticed probably that a lot of the things that were in here we  
16 can categorize as an education action, rather than a management  
17 action, in which case we will commit to bringing those education-  
18 based items to the Outreach and Education Technical Committee, and  
19 also through staff action, and we can sort of systematically come  
20 up with a timeline for accomplishing those.

21  
22 However, if it is a management decision, then I think what we need  
23 to do is a couple of things. We need to figure out if it's  
24 something that we've already completed, something that we have in  
25 progress, or something we haven't initiated at all.

26  
27 A number of the recommendations are in progress. One of them has  
28 been completed. Once we go through that exercise, we need to kind  
29 of understand the magnitude of the action, right, and who is it  
30 going to affect? For example, is it just the private guys, or is  
31 it private and for-hire? Are the commercial guys -- Are they  
32 impacted by it? We have to decide the magnitude of who it's going  
33 to impact.

34  
35 We have to look at the timeline. Is this something that we can do  
36 in short order, through a framework, or is it something that needs  
37 to be done through a long-term, right, and we'll sort of understand  
38 the magnitude of the action once we start going through this  
39 timeline, and then what type of action will the council be taking?  
40 How quickly can we do this, and in what process do we want to take?

41  
42 Then, once we sort of come up with that list, and do this exercise,  
43 I think that's when we can determine a priority of action of these  
44 recommendations. Just like we have our action schedule for the  
45 council, I think we can probably almost make a stand-alone sort of  
46 action list and say, yes, we want to address all these things, and  
47 here's the magnitude of it, and so, with that in mind, and workload  
48 in mind, here's how we want to start, you know, systematically

1 going through each one of these recommendations, and so this is  
2 just one approach.

3  
4 This is what I came up with this morning. Again, just an example  
5 of maybe how we can do this. I do want to emphasize though, that  
6 throughout this entire process, the working group, the steering  
7 committee, staff, and the council have all reiterated, over and  
8 over again, that we want to make sure that this effort takes us  
9 somewhere meaningful, and so, if you don't use this flowchart,  
10 that's fine.

11  
12 You know, no feelings are involved here, but I want to make sure  
13 that we walk away, not maybe at this meeting, but maybe at the  
14 next meeting, and, at some point, we walk away and we can show to  
15 the public that here's what we got from the working group, and  
16 here is where we went with it, right, and I really want to find a  
17 way for us to hold ourselves accountable in making this plan and  
18 executing a plan to really honor the work that was done here.

19  
20 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Emily, and, again, I do think that's a  
21 great approach. I mean, from my perspective, you know, we  
22 certainly have to identify a lead person, probably within the  
23 council, to kind of wrap their arms around this, to help, you know,  
24 usher the process, for lack of a better phrase, and I think we are  
25 -- I think the recommendation coming out of the workgroup was good,  
26 right, but, when we look at those six goals, and there's like all  
27 these sub-recommendations, we're going to have to tick them off  
28 one at a time.

29  
30 You know, all of them involve cost, and, like you said, some of  
31 them can be easily bent into communication space, and some are  
32 into data space, and some are a combination of both, but, at the  
33 end of the day, I think we have to weigh-in, take the time to  
34 weigh-in, on all of them, and then only then will we be able to  
35 prioritize things, and so it's going to take a couple meetings to  
36 do that, and so maybe we can, you know, mull it over a little bit,  
37 and come back at either the next meeting or something, and start  
38 to embark upon the process. I don't think we have to nail it down  
39 right now.

40  
41 In the few minutes that we have left though, I certainly would  
42 like to provide the opportunity for any of the council members to  
43 ask specific questions of Willy, Andy, Bob, or yourself, and so  
44 I'll open the floor up, and we've got Mr. Anson.

45  
46 **MR. ANSON:** I appreciate all the information provided, but, Emily,  
47 can you say approximately, or if you know the numbers, how many  
48 people attended each of the workgroup meetings virtually, in-

1 person, that type of thing? Do you have that number handy, and  
2 then I have just a follow-up comment.

3  
4 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** I do have it handy. I just have to find it. In  
5 the appendix of the full summary, and I believe we have each one  
6 of the session overviews, but I have to tell you -- I'm not calling  
7 them up. I can provide them for you. They are in the full summary  
8 somewhere, and I'm just going to panic look for them.

9  
10 **MR. ANSON:** Okay, and then just a comment. I appreciate that this  
11 is all the work you did just quickly this morning. It's a great  
12 start. I think it captures at least the essence of where I think  
13 we need to go to address the issue at-hand, and that is to try to  
14 give some sense, and feedback, to the public that, you know, the  
15 council is interested, it is engaged, and it has a plan.

16  
17 Just potentially, you know, for consideration, is that you add,  
18 you know, specifics as to why things are not -- Not just it was,  
19 you know, decided not to go forward, but provide a pretty good  
20 explanation as to why a decision was made for a particular  
21 recommendation, or topic, to not go forward, and then it might be  
22 considered also, as far as the evaluation, and this might be for  
23 something -- For further discussion among the council, is just,  
24 you know, cost of each of these items too, and kind of using that  
25 to help prioritize, you know, what things go forward. Thank you.

26  
27 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Great. Thank you, Mr. Anson. Mr. Strelcheck.

28  
29 **MR. STRELCHECK:** If we go back to the flowcharts, I did want to  
30 comment, maybe more on process, but I guess, first of all, it was  
31 a little over two years ago that I floated the recreational  
32 initiative, and it was out of kind of this frustration of like  
33 we're hearing a lot of complaints about recreational fisheries,  
34 but we're not really addressing or doing things.

35  
36 I think what I am taking away from this process is it was a very  
37 positive experience, and I think there's a lot of great  
38 recommendations here, and, like others are sharing, we need to,  
39 obviously, now prioritize, obviously, the work that been done.

40  
41 A couple of suggestions, and one is I think it could be beneficial  
42 for, you know, Gulf Council staff, maybe even working with the  
43 steering committee members, to take kind of a first cut at this,  
44 and that would be brought back to the June council meeting, or  
45 August Council meeting, depending on timing, and one change I would  
46 recommend making is, rather than the first step being is this of  
47 council interest, is saying is this under council purview, kind of  
48 immediately going to that and working your way down the chart.

1  
2 Then, by the time you kind of compartmentalize everything, then we  
3 can decide, as a council, is this of interest or not to pursue, if  
4 so yes, and, if not, or under, you know, what timeframe do we want  
5 to pursue it, and I think there's also going to be a few things  
6 that are going to fall outside this process, where we're kind of  
7 pointing to who do you recommend it to, and then another layer is,  
8 and I've talked about this several times, and we'll talk about it  
9 in more detail the regulatory versus deregulatory aspects of these  
10 potential actions.

11  
12 These are going to take a while to work through the process, but,  
13 to the extent we need to be looking at things that are  
14 deregulatory, and prioritizing those over regulatory actions, I  
15 think this can be really key.

16  
17 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** There you go. Thanks, Andy, for that input.  
18 Are there any other questions for either Willy, Andy, Emily, or  
19 Bob? Okay, and so, Dr. Simmons, I think, based on the conversation  
20 that I've heard, we're going to punt this one back to staff, for  
21 you guys to work it out internally, and perhaps come back with a  
22 flowchart, or some type of a framework, that we can work from and  
23 evaluate, perhaps. I'm not going to dictate what the schedule is.  
24 That's under your control, but possibly in June, or maybe not.

25  
26 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's highly  
27 unlikely for June, but we can certainly work on this. We need to  
28 think about, you know, keeping the steering committee around or  
29 not. That would be maybe a council, larger council, decision that  
30 we could talk about at Full Council, because there's a little bit  
31 of cost associated with that.

32  
33 I think it's a good approach, but then, again, just remember that,  
34 after today, and you guys are leaving, what, Thursday, right? Then  
35 we won't have the consultants here anymore, nor Bob I don't think  
36 either, and so just be sure you ask your questions and talk to  
37 folks that are on the working group.

38  
39 We have several here that are in the audience, at least three, I  
40 think, or four, in the audience that are out there, and so please  
41 talk to those working group members, get their input, and we can  
42 come back and, you know, go through this process and refine it.

43  
44 Maybe there's something we can streamline. Maybe there's something  
45 we could fast-track, potentially. There are a couple things in  
46 progress, potentially, that came out of that list, but, again, I  
47 just want to thank everyone that was involved. I want to thank  
48 the consultants, and thank the working group members, and

1 especially the steering committee, and I appreciate everyone's  
2 hard work on this. Thank you very much.

3  
4 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Again, I think everybody around the  
5 table here extends the same thank you to everybody, and so we've  
6 got a little bit of work to do, but I appreciate the commitment to  
7 making the effort, you know, whether it's in June, August, or  
8 whenever, and we'll keep plugging this along. I think, Mr. Chair,  
9 with that said, we're ready for a break for lunch, perhaps.

10  
11 **MR. DUGAS:** Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We'll go ahead and break for  
12 lunch and return at 1:30.

13  
14 (Whereupon, the meeting recessed for lunch on April 8, 2025.)

15  
16 - - -

17  
18 April 8, 2025

19  
20 TUESDAY AFTERNOON SESSION

21  
22 - - -

23  
24 The Reef Fish Management Committee of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery  
25 Management Council reconvened at The Lodge in Gulf Shores, Alabama  
26 on Tuesday afternoon, April 8, 2025, and was called to order by  
27 Chairman Tom Frazer.

28  
29 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** We will pick up with Agenda Item Number VII,  
30 which is the Summary of the February 2025 Gulf and South Atlantic  
31 SSC, and Dr. Allen, the chair of the SSC, is going to give us a  
32 presentation. That will be Tab B, number 7(a) in your briefing  
33 materials, but, essentially, we're going to go through the mutton  
34 snapper stock assessment, the yellowtail snapper stock assessment,  
35 and the red grouper stock assessment. Mike, it's all yours, man.

36  
37 **SUMMARY: FEBRUARY 2025 GULF AND SOUTH ATLANTIC SSC**  
38 **SEDAR 79: MUTTON SNAPPER STOCK ASSESSMENT**  
39

40 **DR. MIKE ALLEN:** Thank you, Tom. Bernie, if you would get the  
41 slides up, and I'll echo some of the earlier folks and say, go  
42 Gators, although, as my buddy Tom knows, I was actually originally  
43 pulling for Auburn, but, once they lost, I pulled for the Gators,  
44 and so I'm really happy. It sounds like it was quite the  
45 celebration in Gainesville last night.

46  
47 I'm happy to have the chance to summarize our meeting. The first  
48 thing I'll summarize is the joint meeting of the South Atlantic

1 and Gulf Council SSCs at the end of February, and we're going to  
2 -- This was really a productive meeting of both SSCs, with a lot  
3 of stuff for us to talk about, and it was great to -- We had a  
4 really good interaction with them in the Tampa office.

5  
6 I'll start with a summary of the mutton snapper assessment and  
7 then go from there. Thank you, Bernie. We started off with Emily  
8 reviewing the Fisherman Feedback Tool for mutton snapper, SEDAR  
9 79. There were seventy-four responses, and not a lot of strong  
10 sentiment there, either one. As you know mutton snapper are  
11 jointly managed in the South Atlantic and the Gulf.

12  
13 There was not strong public sentiment on stock status in the Gulf  
14 responses. The South Atlantic reviewed angler perceptions with  
15 the fishery performance report and generally found there was a  
16 positive perception of the fishery. They noted that there were  
17 increases in recruitment, as well as the medium-sized fish, in the  
18 sixteen to eighteen inches, just below the eighteen-inch minimum  
19 size limit, and so that was a good start.

20  
21 This assessment was conducted by FWRI and USF staff, who did a  
22 really nice job on this assessment and the yellowtail that will  
23 follow. Just to summarize, and so I'm going to give some summary  
24 slides about the assessment itself and then the recommendations  
25 coming out of the SSCs.

26  
27 The mutton snapper uses the SRFs, the State Reef Fish Survey, in  
28 place of the MRIP-FES for recreational private landings. That's a  
29 Florida-based survey, as you know, which was considered  
30 appropriate, because 95 percent of the landings of mutton snapper  
31 occur in Florida.

32  
33 The start year of the assessment was 1981, and the terminal year  
34 was 2023, and it was a single closed population, and so it was a  
35 single population model that included both the Gulf and the  
36 Atlantic stocks, and so there wasn't any spatial segregation in  
37 the model itself.

38  
39 Just to show a little bit about some of the input parameters and  
40 the parameter estimates that went in the model, the von Bertalanffy  
41 growth model, which is that curve you see on the right, had a  
42 length, and  $L_{\infty}$ , again, is the average asymptotic length,  
43 and so, of course, you'll have fish larger than that, or you should  
44 have fish larger than that, in the sample, but  $L_{\infty}$  was 847  
45 millimeters, and so that's the estimate of the average maximum  
46 length.

47  
48 That K parameter, which is the Brody growth coefficient, is 0.163

1 and T0 is minus-1.12 years. Mutton snapper don't have any sexual  
2 dimorphism in growth. They're not hermaphroditic either, and so  
3 it's a gonochoristic species. Natural mortality was done using  
4 maximum age as a surrogate measure, using the Hamel and Cope  
5 method, and M there came out to 0.129, and so a relatively long-  
6 lived fish in the snapper family, among the lutjanids.

7  
8 There was no change in the assessment to the age at maturity. Age  
9 at 50 percent maturity was at about three-and-a-half years old,  
10 and no change from the previous assessment. The discard mortality  
11 was set at -- Commercial longline was 41 and 44 percent pre and  
12 post-IFQ, and the recreational discard mortality was 11.6 percent,  
13 which was the same used in SEDAR 66, and so no changes there.

14  
15 As I mentioned, this assessment used the SRFS data, the headboat  
16 data from SRHS, charter data from MRIP-FES, shore mode data from  
17 MRIP-FES, and the private mode data from recreational boats was  
18 the SRFS data from 2021 to 2023, and the MRIP-FES, going back in  
19 time, was calibrated to the SRFS from 1981 to 2020, and so went  
20 through that process, and not too much discussion there, because  
21 we had already dealt with some of those conversions at past SSC  
22 meetings.

23  
24 These are some of the indices that were used in the assessment,  
25 just to give you a sense of some of the data sources. There's  
26 some juvenile indices, which is the young of the year, YOY, like  
27 the Indian River Lagoon fisheries-independent monitoring sampling  
28 from FWRI. That's a pretty reasonable YOY index for a lot of  
29 species. The RVC data in the Keys, and the combined Gulf video  
30 went from 1996 to 2022. That's post-young-of-the-year, and so it  
31 includes some juveniles and adults.

32  
33 A commercial longline index as well, and so it had multiple  
34 fisheries-dependent and independent indices in there, and I'll  
35 show you some of those as we go.

36  
37 This is the landings of the mutton snapper. They're in some  
38 slightly different units, and the top is the commercial longline  
39 and commercial other, and those are in metric tons, and then the  
40 bottom graph is the recreational in the east zone, and so the South  
41 Atlantic, and the recreational in the west, which is the Gulf.  
42 It's hard to see the trends there, but they're relatively flat  
43 trajectories over the last twenty years or so. In both cases,  
44 there's not a lot of contrast in the data or a strong trend either  
45 way for the landings data.

46  
47 One of the striking things about this assessment is that it showed  
48 strong biomass increasing, and that included both young fish and

1 older fish, age-ten-plus, and I'll show you that. I love that  
2 photograph. It's a beautiful picture of a mutton snapper.

3  
4 This is a stock-recruit curve that was estimated in the model, and  
5 they were actually -- The assessment team was actually able to  
6 estimate the steepness. I'll remind you that the steepness is the  
7 percent change in the recruitment as the stock goes from unfished  
8 down to about 20 percent of unfished level. A steepness there of  
9 0.64 means that, if you take the stock from unfished to 20 percent  
10 of the unfished biomass, the recruitment would decline by about 64  
11 percent, or the recruitment would be 64 percent of what it would  
12 be at the unfished level. That's the way to think about that.

13  
14 Now, this assessment, and this is actually going to be a recurring  
15 theme for the next two assessments that we'll talk about, it was  
16 estimable, and that means that the model could find a solution for  
17 steepness, and it had a likelihood profile that said that there  
18 was some confidence in estimating that steepness parameter, but it  
19 was still really highly uncertain.

20  
21 That's something that our SSC spent a lot of time, probably in  
22 some people's eyes, and maybe Ryan's eyes, maybe too much time  
23 talking about that in the SSC meeting, because it was a challenge  
24 for us, and I'll talk about that as we move forward too, but it  
25 was estimable here, and recall that, if you can estimate steepness,  
26 you have the potential to estimate maximum sustainable yield  
27 directly and not have to use a proxy value, and so that's a  
28 consideration here for discussion and that we discussed a lot on  
29 the SSC.

30  
31 This is the estimated recruitments in the model through time for  
32 mutton snapper, and, you know, it's a very positive picture of  
33 increasing recruitment, you know, over the last fifteen to twenty  
34 years, a fairly strong trend of increasing recruitment.

35  
36 Prior to that, it's showing fairly stable recruitment, and a couple  
37 of stronger years in the early 2000s, but, overall, since 2010,  
38 the stock has been estimated to be on an increasing recruitment  
39 trajectory.

40  
41 That increasing recruitment, as you would expect, if you have more  
42 young fish surviving into the population of adulthood, you're going  
43 to get more biomass, or at least we would expect more potential  
44 biomass, and we see on the -- I'll start with the upper-right-hand  
45 plot, the spawning stock biomass. That was an increasing biomass  
46 through the time series, similar to the increasing recruitment,  
47 and you can see there on their graph, the assessment team's graph,  
48 that the spawning stock biomass for the SPR 30 percent is indicated

1 by the dashed line, and so the biomass is well above that, and on  
2 an increasing trajectory.

3  
4 Similarly, the age-three fishing mortality, on the lower-left, is  
5 also lower in the most recent years, the most recent five or six  
6 years, with expected lower fishing mortality rates, was the  
7 estimate from the model, and so a consistent story here of  
8 increasing biomass and fishing mortality that's lower than would  
9 be expected to create any metric that would be associated with  
10 overfishing.

11  
12 I'll start with the one on the right here, the colorful graph.  
13 This is one of the more compelling figures that I've seen in my  
14 time on the SSC, and, basically, it shows that, through time, and  
15 this is in numbers of fish, and you have the numbers of fish in  
16 the different age groups, and it starts with age-one on the top of  
17 those bars, and it goes down to age-ten, which is the magenta color  
18 at the bottom of the graph.

19  
20 The point here is that what this is showing is increasing numbers,  
21 basically, of all ages of mutton snapper, including age-ten-plus  
22 fish, in that magenta color at the bottom, that there's an  
23 increasing trend in the number of old -- You know, when I say old,  
24 fish that are age-ten-plus, in the data, and these are data, and  
25 so this is a pretty robust indication of a stock that's increasing,  
26 which is something we don't see all that often, and showing a  
27 robust increase in the population.

28  
29 Total biomass, on the lower left, is increasing as well, as you  
30 would expect with these two graphs together, and so it's on a  
31 trajectory of increasing biomass.

32  
33 Based on that, and we discussed this at length with both the SSCs,  
34 we considered SEDAR 79 to be consistent with BSIA. The SSCs  
35 conclude that, based on SEDAR 79, the results are the mutton  
36 snapper stock is not undergoing overfishing, nor is it overfished,  
37 and this is based on a currently adopted SPR-based MSY proxy of F  
38 30 percent SPR, and so that was our first consensus statement.

39  
40 The two SSCs have slightly different decision-making processes.  
41 We were using the South Atlantic's decision-making process, which  
42 is a consensus-based, which turned out to not have much effect on  
43 the meeting, I don't think, but that was the consensus statement,  
44 and I didn't sense any trepidation about this among any of the SSC  
45 members on either SSC.

46  
47 We did, however, have a very robust discussion about the SPR proxy  
48 values for mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper, which I'll cover

1 next. Mutton snapper have been managed at and SPR of 30 percent,  
2 and, at that level, with an eighteen-inch size limit, saw increases  
3 in stock biomass. Landings have not exceeded the ACL in any of  
4 the recent years.

5  
6 That age composition graph I showed you was really compelling.  
7 That age composition showed older fish were present, and  
8 increasing, in the time series. Total biomass has been increasing  
9 since 2018, in line with the minimum size limit and bag limit  
10 changes. There was a good bit of discussion on the SSC that it  
11 seems like that eighteen-inch minimum size limit has been very  
12 beneficial to the mutton snapper, with the increases really coming  
13 in strong shortly after that.

14  
15 We also discussed that there's several closed areas that may  
16 provide refuge for the mutton snapper population during spawning,  
17 and that could be contributing to the increases in recruitment,  
18 but the life history -- Through our discussion, we decided -- Our  
19 suggestion is that the life history, the relative early maturity,  
20 subtropical, and not hermaphroditic, et cetera, suggests that the  
21 SPR 30 percent is likely a good proxy for MSY, but we had a lot of  
22 discussion about this, because this is an assessment where we had  
23 an estimate of steepness.

24  
25 There was -- In other words, the model would find an estimate of  
26 steepness, but the uncertainty around that steepness -- I think it  
27 was something like 0.66, but the uncertainty around that steepness  
28 was like 0.3, up to like 0.85, and so -- I'm generalizing, but it  
29 was a pretty big range of uncertainty in what that steepness value  
30 was.

31  
32 Through a lot of discussion, we decided to go with the proxy in  
33 this case, because of that high uncertainty, and, even though it's  
34 estimable, it's not estimable with strong confidence, and so that's  
35 where we kind of settled on as the collective SSC decision, and  
36 I'll talk briefly about that in just a second.

37  
38 I'll talk about that point in just a minute, but, first, our second  
39 consensus statement was to use the geometric mean of the most  
40 recent five years of recruitment, 2019 to 2023, for informing OFL  
41 and ABC projections. There was some discussion about that,  
42 because, in cases where this has been done before, it's been  
43 thought that maybe there's a regime shift, or something has  
44 changed, and so we're going to use the most recent average  
45 recruitment for the projections, and so we addressed that here and  
46 said using the geometric mean for recruitment can be interpreted  
47 to indicate a regime shift. However, in this case, for mutton  
48 snapper, the SSCs do not think a regime shift has occurred.

1  
2 We just feel like that recent five years of recruitment is a good  
3 indication of the short-term recruitment in the future, and the  
4 OFL was set at an F 30 percent SPR, with the ABC set at 75 percent  
5 of that value, 75 percent of the F 30 percent SPR, for the years  
6 2026 to 2028, as derived by the provided projections from 2024 to  
7 2028, and so that was our second consensus statement specifically  
8 about the mutton snapper. Bernie, if you would, let me look at  
9 the next slide, just to -- Let's back up, if you don't mind.  
10  
11 Let's talk about that, I guess, first. Let's have a discussion  
12 about that, and then I'll talk about the steepness thing next,  
13 because that's more general than about mutton snapper  
14 specifically, and so I'm happy to answer any questions or  
15 discussion, and, Ryan, anything you want to add to this? Fire  
16 away, please.  
17  
18 **MR. RINDONE:** I was just going to say that we have 2024 and 2025  
19 grayed out here, since there's no expectation of being able to put  
20 these capstones in effect for either of those years.  
21  
22 **DR. ALLEN:** Thank you.  
23  
24 **MR. RINDONE:** Mr. Chair, I think it might be appropriate to have  
25 Dylan follow Mike with the AP's recommendations by species. I  
26 know that's not how we had it on the agenda, but I think that might  
27 flow well for you guys getting the species-specific input and then  
28 being able to provide direction, but, before we get to that point,  
29 does anyone, I guess, have a question for Mike?  
30  
31 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I would just say that I think that's a good idea,  
32 because, I mean, when you go through three species, it would be  
33 good to couple the SSC with the AP report, but I thought, Mike,  
34 you did a really -- I mean, I was encouraged by this assessment,  
35 to begin with. It's a really positive note. I like the idea, or  
36 the explanation, that you provided of, you know, why you moved  
37 away from steepness, which, like you said, it's estimable, which  
38 is rare, right, but then you, you know, provided a pretty good  
39 rationale why you opted for the MSY proxy, and so, again, I'm  
40 pretty happy with that, and thank you for sharing that with the  
41 group. C.J.  
42  
43 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and, just to kind of echo Tom's point, I  
44 appreciate this presentation. I feel like this is the first  
45 positive stock assessment I've seen since I've been on this  
46 council, and so it's refreshing to see that.  
47  
48 **DR. ALLEN:** It feels that way on the SSC, too.

1  
2 **DR. SWEETMAN:** I bet. I bet, but, honestly, I was listening in to  
3 the SSC meeting, when you guys were discussing this, and just the  
4 way that you, Luiz, and some of the other SSC members discussed  
5 this SPR issue, given that it's been, you know, a rampant issue  
6 that we've discussed around here, and I just -- I really appreciate  
7 the way that you guys did this, and so good job.

8  
9 **DR. ALLEN:** Thank you, C.J.

10  
11 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Sanchez.

12  
13 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Yes, I just want to add too that it is wonderful to  
14 have something encouraging, and I want to thank you personally for  
15 chairing this meeting, where you had not one, not two, but three  
16 assessments in a two-day period, and keeping it on track and  
17 getting it done. I think that probably took some doing, and I  
18 hope us, as a body, we never asked them to do three assessments  
19 again in two days.

20  
21 **DR. ALLEN:** These assessments were -- Well, first of all, all three  
22 of them were really well done, and that was -- So that was good,  
23 and so thank you.

24  
25 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right, and so any questions, other questions,  
26 for Mike with regard to the assessment? Not seeing any right now,  
27 Mike, so we'll go ahead and call Dylan up.

28  
29 **DR. ALLEN:** Sure.

30  
31 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Hang tight.

32  
33 **MR. HUBBARD:** Thank you. I would say, for the mutton snapper, the  
34 conversation was pretty short. I think the sentiment was captured  
35 pretty well by the comments just now after Mike's presentation.  
36 It was a positive assessment. Things were positive, and the AP  
37 recommended setting the ACL equal to the ABC, and leaving all the  
38 management measures alone, and I would just like to point out to  
39 C.J. that lane snapper has been positive every year on its interim  
40 analysis, but, yes, it was good to see a positive thing, and we  
41 just wanted to leave it alone.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks. Thanks, Dylan, and so we'll  
44 go ahead and work through the yellowtail snapper, and then we'll  
45 come back and ask Dylan about that as well, but then I think we  
46 might have -- Go ahead, Ryan.

47  
48 **MR. RINDONE:** Never mind.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** You know where I'm headed?

3  
4 **MR. RINDONE:** No, and I just changed my mind.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Excellent. Way to think on the fly,  
7 amigo. All right. Go ahead, Mike.

8  
9 **DR. ALLEN:** Okay. Before I get to yellowtail, and this pertains  
10 to the conversation with -- This was a broader discussion that we  
11 had on both SSCs, but I've got it in here on this slide, and so  
12 I'll go ahead and cover it here, because, in these three  
13 assessments, we were basically in the same place with all three of  
14 them, in that all three of them had a steepness estimate that was  
15 estimable.

16  
17 The models were able to estimate it, and all three of them had a  
18 lot of uncertainty around those estimates, and, actually, the  
19 uncertainty around all three of them was pretty darn similar, and  
20 so we were kind of in the same place with all three of them, where  
21 you could estimate steepness, and so that caused us to have a lot  
22 of discussion about, well, if we can estimate MSY, why aren't we  
23 just using MSY, and why aren't we doing a proxy in that case, and  
24 we had a lot of discussion about that that resulted in this  
25 consensus statement, and I'll read it.

26  
27 The Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs see a clear need to collectively  
28 address the required precision to estimate steepness, and thus  
29 estimate MSY, for management advice, as well as a discussion of  
30 the SPR proxy values, given a range of life history values among  
31 fish species (longevity, age of maturity, growth characteristics,  
32 vulnerability to environmental perturbations, et cetera. The  
33 SSCs, by consensus, felt that a follow-up joint meeting to discuss  
34 this topic is essential to the consistent application of an agreed-  
35 upon decision making paradigm for present and future stock  
36 assessments.

37  
38 The idea here was that we had this conversation with both SSCs for  
39 the mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper, when we were all  
40 together, and we felt like we need to dig into that more generally  
41 as SSCs together, and so we would like a chance to do that, but,  
42 in both the cases here, and the yellowtail, which I'll present  
43 next, we went with the proxy value, and so any questions about  
44 that?

45  
46 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Sanchez.

47  
48 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Thank you. I have a steepness question, and I guess

1 it transcends all three assessments, really, and I might as well  
2 bring it up now that we have this slide. I'm curious as to know,  
3 and please don't get too scientific on me, or you're going to lose  
4 me, but how is it that something that was always so daunting, and  
5 challenging, like estimating steepness, suddenly, let's say,  
6 became estimable in not one, not two, but three assessments, and  
7 boom. I'm curious as to what changed in perhaps the data points  
8 in those assessments, or what have you, that suddenly we were able  
9 to do this, where it's been so elusive before.

10  
11 **DR. ALLEN:** I think that's a really fair question. I can't answer  
12 it exactly in each of these cases, but here's what I think is going  
13 on. All three of these assessments were what I would call medium  
14 to low end of the complexity. These models were not trying to  
15 estimate thousands and thousands of parameters. They were more  
16 like hundreds, low hundreds, of parameters, and so they were -- So  
17 I think that helps.

18  
19 I think that helps somewhat, because there's a model complexity  
20 issue. Some of it is just random chance that there was enough  
21 information in the stock-recruit data for all three, which means  
22 that you have -- You need a mix of recruitment values that are  
23 low, relatively low, and relatively high. You need some contrast  
24 in the data.

25  
26 I think it's fair to say that usually we are not successful in  
27 estimating this parameter, but, in these three cases, we were. I  
28 think that's -- I think that's -- Some of it is just random chance,  
29 but, again, we're in the same place with all three, when there's  
30 just so much uncertainty around each one that we didn't feel  
31 comfortable running with an MSY, because of the uncertainty in  
32 that itself, and so that's a fair question.

33  
34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** A follow-up, John?

35  
36 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Yes, and I guess you're -- I'm kind of getting what  
37 you're saying, and so thank you for dumbing it down for me. It  
38 sounds like, because of the -- There wasn't the complexity in this,  
39 in terms of data points.

40  
41 **DR. ALLEN:** That's me talking, and I'm not talking on behalf of  
42 the SSC, and that's my opinion, based on how these assessments  
43 went. They're all three kind of in that place.

44  
45 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Okay. Can I infer that to mean, perhaps, these  
46 particular three species lended themselves to better data? Would  
47 that be a correct assumption or not?

1 **DR. ALLEN:** I don't think so. I mean, the data sources are  
2 basically the same. I mean, you know, it's possible that some of  
3 the indices, like some of the video indices, and I don't have the  
4 details about those, but it's possible that some of those may do  
5 a better job, mutton snapper or yellowtail, for example, but I  
6 wouldn't attribute it to, you know, these three have better data,  
7 and now we can estimate this.

8  
9 I think there's a bit of a random part of this as well, but, you  
10 know, one of the things that we got involved with in the discussion  
11 is, just because you can't estimate it, does that mean you should  
12 use it, right, and the answer from the SSCs was no, that, when you  
13 have this much uncertainty around it, you probably shouldn't use  
14 it.

15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I know Andy has a question, but I had the  
17 opportunity to sit in on that SSC meeting. I thought it was a  
18 great discussion actually, and your point earlier about the fact  
19 that you need a fair amount of dispersion in the data, right, and  
20 you need a fairly decent difference in your stock size and  
21 recruitment relationship to do it, even though it's noisy, and so  
22 the good part of that is both of these stocks appear to be --  
23 Actually, the data bear out that they're actually increasing, and  
24 they're in better shape, and so that's why you're able to get it,  
25 even though it's still noisy, right, and so, anyways, Andy.

26  
27 **MR. STRELCHECK:** If we could go back to slide 9, and I think Mike  
28 has already made several of these points, right, and so you can  
29 estimate it, but there's a lot of uncertainty in the estimation,  
30 right, and there has to be contrast in the data, but, if you look  
31 at slide 9 in the presentation, it's still not fitting the data  
32 very well, right, and that's the reality of most stock-recruitment  
33 relationships.

34  
35 You would love to have a one-to-one relationship, where, as the  
36 stock grows, the recruitment, you know, is the same, or increasing  
37 at the same rate as the stock is increasing. That just doesn't  
38 happen in natural populations, and so you're fitting a line to a  
39 scattershot of, obviously, data that isn't, obviously, well fit,  
40 but you can at least look at this data, and kind of what Mike and  
41 Tom were both commenting on, and, given the contrast in the  
42 spawning stock size over time, and the spawning stock is at pretty  
43 high levels now, and a lot of those recruitments are in the upper-  
44 right corner, whereas, when the spawning stock is at lower levels,  
45 they're kind of in the lower-left corner of that graphic.

46  
47 **DR. ALLEN:** That's a really good way to show it, Andy. Thank you,  
48 and that's absolutely true. Those recent high recruitments, and

1 high spawning biomass, provide some contrast in the data, whereas,  
2 if things have stayed the same for years and years and years, and  
3 all you have is that glob, and the yellow points in that lower  
4 point, it's a lot more difficult to estimate it.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Any more questions with regard to mutton snapper?  
7 All right. Let's move on to yellowtail.

8  
9 **DR. ALLEN:** Okay, and so we'll start with yellowtail. This will  
10 be a similar story.

11  
12 **MR. RINDONE:** Mr. Chair, if we could go back to the SSC's consensus  
13 recommendation there, in between mutton snapper and yellowtail,  
14 and I think this might be a point of discussion for the committee.

15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Did I miss that?

17  
18 **MR. RINDONE:** So the SSCs, as a function of this motion are  
19 requesting that the councils consider having a joint working group  
20 between the two SSCs to work on this issue that Dr. Allen discussed  
21 explicitly, and, you know, timing, obviously, being open ended,  
22 but, if this is something that the councils agree is, you know,  
23 sort of a pressing matter that the SSCs should try and take up,  
24 this is something that the committee should consider a  
25 recommendation to the council.

26  
27 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Ryan, for that. I guess I have a habit  
28 today of blowing over things. I blew over Dakus, and I blew over  
29 this recommendation. Sorry about that. C.J.

30  
31 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Thanks for bringing that back up, Ryan. Yes, and  
32 I certainly would be supportive of the SSCs having a meeting about  
33 that. I mean, I think we need to have some sort of game plan for  
34 how we navigate this on kind of a standardized basis here, and so  
35 I would definitely be supportive. I think it's a really important  
36 issue, you know, that has drastic impacts towards catch-level  
37 projections, everything along those lines, and so I think, given  
38 some of the uncertainty surrounding some of this, particularly  
39 with highlighting steepness -- I need to make a motion? Okay.  
40 **I'll make a motion, and so this would have to --** This is joint,  
41 right, Ryan, joint SSCs?

42  
43 **MR. RINDONE:** Yes, and it would be a workgroup populated by both  
44 SSCs, and not necessarily the entirety of each SSC, but  
45 representatives from each, I think is what the SSCs had thought  
46 would be appropriate, and so, you know, maybe three or four  
47 representatives from each SSC, something for them to kind of bang  
48 their heads on and make recommendations to the councils

1 collectively.  
2  
3 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Okay. I might need you to help me with some language  
4 here then. **To form a working group amongst members of both the**  
5 **South Atlantic Council and Gulf Council SSCs to --** I might want  
6 to look at that slide again.  
7  
8 **MR. RINDONE:** To form a working group comprised of members of the  
9 Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs.  
10  
11 **DR. SWEETMAN:** To collectively address the required precision  
12 estimates of steepness. I'm pulling language directly from --  
13  
14 **DR. ALLEN:** Yes, and required precision to estimate steepness, and  
15 thus MSY, for management advice.  
16  
17 **DR. SWEETMAN:** You can honestly copy that.  
18  
19 **DR. ALLEN:** Yes, and you can copy that.  
20  
21 **DR. SWEETMAN:** All right. That was a poor way to develop a motion,  
22 but here we are.  
23  
24 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Rindone.  
25  
26 **MR. RINDONE:** So for management advice, as well as -- Then like  
27 the rest of that sentence. It says for management advice, as well  
28 as discussion of SPR proxy values, given a range of life history  
29 values amongst fish species. For example, longevity, age at  
30 maturity, growth characteristics, vulnerability to environmental  
31 perturbations. I mean, you could just say -- You could put the  
32 period there, and that's fine. So, Bernie, from "as well as"  
33 through "fish species", and so, at the end, just delete "longevity  
34 and age at maturity".  
35  
36 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Thank you, and sorry, Bernie.  
37  
38 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** A second by John?  
39  
40 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Second.  
41  
42 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Gotcha, and so, if it's any consolation to the  
43 group around the table, it took the SS a bit of time to construct  
44 this consensus sentence as well.  
45  
46 **DR. ALLEN:** That's an understatement, Dr. Frazer.  
47  
48 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Any further discussion? Mr. Anson.

1  
2 **MR. ANSON:** I'm just curious. Administratively, if they were to  
3 come up with a plan, or process, a format, I mean, would that have  
4 to -- We would have to develop like a framework amendment for that,  
5 like an ABC control rule type thing, or is this going to be  
6 something that they would set up and use internally and not have  
7 any of those -- You know, have it kind of blessed by the council?  
8

9 **MR. RINDONE:** I guess, in my opinion, it could be something that  
10 would ultimately augment the council's respective ABC control  
11 rules, depending on -- You know, depending on what exactly is being  
12 recommended to be tweaked, and it could also be part of just like  
13 a standardized process for review, and so, when we're looking at  
14 -- You know, like when Dr. Allen was talking about how steepness  
15 was estimated, and we're looking at the profiling of steepness,  
16 and, if it's flat for a large swath of the profile, and, you know,  
17 while a local minimum might be able to be estimated, it's still  
18 not very certain.  
19

20 You know, you slide that value in any direction a little bit, it's  
21 going to change your projected estimate for MSY, and are those  
22 really significantly different from one another, if you're sliding  
23 that steepness value along that relatively flat curve? Probably  
24 not so much, but it could have a meaningful impact elsewhere, and  
25 so the SSCs kind of need to put their minds together and say, all  
26 right, well, how tight does this have to be before we're willing  
27 to use this estimate for MSY, and, if it's not as tight as what  
28 we're wanting to see, then they have to decide, you know, what  
29 that means.  
30

31 Then, you know, we think that we should use this proxy instead,  
32 and so this is kind of where those discussions -- Based on the  
33 discussions at the meeting, that's where they would go, and so, in  
34 some cases, that might inform a council's ABC control rule, and,  
35 in other cases, it might just be a best practice for the SSCs when  
36 reviewing the stock assessment.  
37

38 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Strelcheck.  
39

40 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Dr. Porch just wanted to make a comment relative  
41 to the motion.  
42

43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Welcome, Dr. Porch.  
44

45 **DR. CLAY PORCH:** Thank you. I think Dr. Allen did a great job  
46 describing this information, and I'll just follow up on what Ryan  
47 said, that it's more - Precision is not so much the issue, and it  
48 has to do with what other models you may have looked at, and a lot

1 of other information. Just because the model can find a solution,  
2 and it seems precise, it doesn't mean it's actually accurate, and  
3 so I think what would be better to say is best practices for  
4 estimating steepness, and when you would use a proxy, something to  
5 that effect.

6  
7 To that point, I would note that the National Marine Fisheries  
8 Service is producing technical guidance on exactly that matter,  
9 and that should be coming out pretty soon.

10  
11 We're just putting the finishing touches on it now, and so,  
12 ideally, this meeting could happen sometime after that technical  
13 guidance is produced, which, again, I expect would be probably  
14 within a month or so. Thank you.

15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Dr. Porch. Dr. Sweetman, do you want  
17 to amend the motion?

18  
19 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and I'm okay with that friendly edit there,  
20 and so just getting out the precision component. Thanks.

21  
22 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right, and so we've got a motion on the board  
23 to form a working group amongst members of the South Atlantic  
24 Fishery Management Council and the Gulf Council's SSCs to  
25 collectively address the best practices for estimating steepness  
26 for management advice, as well as the discussion of SPR proxy  
27 values, given a range of life history values among fish species.  
28 All right. Is there further discussion. Mr. Sanchez.

29  
30 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Yes, and I'm okay with the wordsmithing, and  
31 supporting it as a seconder still. I just do want to -- You know,  
32 this is kind of chicken and egg, until they have this discussion  
33 and bring forth what they arrive at.

34  
35 I just want to be very clear, and maybe it's not necessary, but I  
36 would rather be clear, that this in no way, shape, or form hinders  
37 our council authority to suggest SPR proxies going forward.

38  
39 I don't want to create a mechanism where we arrive at we can  
40 estimate steepness, and here's your MSY, and we go forward. I  
41 just want to be very clear on that.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Thanks. Any other discussion of the  
44 motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to this motion?**  
45 **Not seeing any, the motion carries.** Thank you, Ryan, for making  
46 sure that we didn't pass that up, and, Mike, if you want to continue  
47 with yellowtail snapper, we'll do that.

48

1                                   **SEDAR 96 YELLOWTAIL SNAPPER ASSESSMENT**

2  
3 **DR. ALLEN:** Okay. Excellent. Thank you. Okay, and so next is  
4 yellowtail snapper. Again, it was still with the joint SSC, the  
5 same situation of South Atlantic and Gulf jointly managed. FWRI  
6 and the University of South Florida team led the assessment, just  
7 like the mutton snapper, and so that's what we're here to do on  
8 this one.

9  
10 We started out with some public comment perspectives from Emily  
11 and the Gulf Council group. There was a little more -- It seemed  
12 like a little more signal of positive feedback here for yellowtail  
13 than for mutton snapper, where it was mostly neutral. She  
14 summarized 363 responses, mostly private anglers. There were  
15 positive responses across the Gulf and South Atlantic.

16  
17 The South Atlantic FMC reviewed their fishery performance report,  
18 and they also noted a range expansion northward into the Carolinas,  
19 which we've also heard many reports of that in the Gulf as well,  
20 but also no reduction in abundance, or I should say there on  
21 perceived abundance, in the historic range. There's some evidence  
22 from the South Atlantic FMC of more large fish, and more small  
23 fish, and they also noted that most releases are in relatively  
24 shallow water, with little evidence of survival problems, not  
25 thinking that there was a lot of discard mortality associated with  
26 this species.

27  
28 This was SEDAR 96. This one also is very similar to the mutton,  
29 in many ways, with how the model was handled and the data sources.  
30 It used the SRFs in place of MRIP-FES for the recreational private  
31 vessels, considered appropriate here as well, because most of the  
32 yellowtail snapper landings are in Florida. The overwhelming  
33 majority are. The start year was 1981, and the terminal year was  
34 2023, and, again, this was assumed to be a single closed  
35 population, just like the mutton snapper.

36  
37 This animal, yellowtail, have high variability in growth for a  
38 given age. Over the time series, there's a tremendous pool of  
39 data there, with 45,833 otoliths total. You know, you can see --  
40 It always strikes me, with some of these species, where you have  
41 a fish that can be four years old, and it can be 225 millimeters  
42 long, or it can be 550 millimeters long, at the same age, and so  
43 tremendous variability in size at age.

44  
45 Age at maturity, this is an important one for most stocks, and it  
46 is for this one as well. 50 percent mature at 192 millimeters,  
47 which is, on average, 1.7 years old, and so these fish are 50  
48 percent of reach of maturity before they turn two.

1  
2 Natural mortality, higher natural mortality, a shorter lifespan  
3 than mutton snapper, of course, a natural mortality of 0.223.  
4 Discard mortality was assumed to be 10 percent for all fleets, and  
5 so, again, somewhat from the shallower-water catch for this species  
6 as well. That didn't come out right.

7  
8 **MR. RINDONE:** Mr. Chair, just a note about the discard mortality.

9  
10 **DR. ALLEN:** Thank you, Ryan.

11  
12 **MR. RINDONE:** Another reason why the discard mortality is low is  
13 due to the primary fishing practice for mutton snapper, which  
14 involves using a lot of chum to get the fish up near the surface,  
15 and so, regardless of the depth fished, most of the fish are  
16 actually hooked within ten meters of the surface, and so things  
17 like barotrauma are not really a concern for yellowtail snapper.  
18 Things like barotrauma aren't really a common concern.

19  
20 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Ryan.

21  
22 **DR. ALLEN:** So I'm not going to ask you to try to look at that  
23 that way, because I'm not going to be very good at it either, but  
24 it's just -- I think it's the PDF printed it this way, but I'm  
25 going to give you the cliff notes of what this figure is. Thank  
26 you, Bernie. She's bringing it up on the PowerPoint.

27  
28 Okay, and so, basically, it's showing the landings in pounds  
29 through the time series from 1992 to 2023. The MRIP/SRFS data are  
30 in red, and the commercial landings are in blue. It's a fairly  
31 flat trajectory overall. We don't see much of a signal on the  
32 headboat landings either. You know, there's some bouncing around,  
33 but there's not a strong trend in the landings up or down  
34 throughout much of the time series, and so just a fairly stable  
35 situation, it looks like, over the time series.

36  
37 These were just some of the indices that were used on yellowtail  
38 snapper, and I thought they were somewhat compelling. What I  
39 wanted to show you is that there's some increases in catch per  
40 unit effort, commercial CPUE, rec CPUE, both fishery-dependent  
41 type CPUEs, the Dry Tortugas index, and the RVC Florida Keys, and  
42 those are all showing, you know, generally increasing trends. Of  
43 course, they're bumpy, but generally increasing trends. There's  
44 certainly no evidence of a decline in yellowtail snapper from any  
45 of the indices.

46  
47 This is a case where -- This is the stock-recruit data from the  
48 model. Age-zero recruitment is on the Y, and spawning stock

1 biomass on the X. The steepness here was estimated at 0.767.  
2 Again, they were able to estimate steepness, but it had almost the  
3 exact same precision as the mutton snapper, in that we did not  
4 have a lot of confidence in that estimate.

5  
6 Fortunately, for everybody involved, we were able to have a much  
7 shorter discussion about this than we did over the mutton snapper,  
8 because we had already kind of hashed this out with the mutton  
9 snapper, but, anyway, it was estimable, but we did not -- We also  
10 did not have confidence in that estimate.

11  
12 Spawning stock biomass, here you can see, relative to the SSB F 30  
13 percent and the MSST, and so our consensus statement here for this  
14 was we found the SEDAR 96 stock assessment to be consistent with  
15 BSIA and appropriate for management advice. Based on the results  
16 of this assessment, yellowtail snapper is estimated to not be  
17 overfished and not experiencing overfishing, and that's certainly  
18 consistent with all the indices and the data that went into the  
19 assessment as well, and so fairly straightforward.

20  
21 Then the consensus statement on the OFL and ABC, and the SSC used  
22 arithmetic means of the most recent five years of recruitment for  
23 informing OFL and ABC projections. Using arithmetic means for  
24 recruitment can be interpreted to indicate a regime shift, the  
25 same conversation we had earlier. However, for yellowtail snapper,  
26 the SSCs do not think a regime shift has occurred.

27  
28 The OFL is set at F 30 percent SPR, and the ABC is set at 75  
29 percent of that value for the years 2026 to 2028, as derived from  
30 the provided projections of 2024 to 2028, and so that was the  
31 consensus statement here, and this, again, took us substantially  
32 less time to work through, but the same kind of thing.

33  
34 This assessment was also really well done, with multiple sources  
35 of data showing the same direction of trends, and the model fit  
36 well, and it seemed to be a pretty robust solution, so the SSCs  
37 were happy with it.

38  
39 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Hold on, and we've got a quick question.

40  
41 **DR. ALLEN:** Okay. Sure. C.J.

42  
43 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Can you explain to me why the catch levels are  
44 decreasing there?

45  
46 **DR. ALLEN:** Let me think about that.

47  
48 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Froeschke.

1  
2 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Well, in general, when you're above MSY, you're  
3 going to fish the stock down to MSY.  
4  
5 **DR. ALLEN:** Yes, and thank you, John, and so it would be headed  
6 back towards MSY.  
7  
8 **MR. RINDONE:** Like we've discussed in the past, each of those years  
9 of projections is predicated on what's been prescribed as available  
10 to be landed in the previous year actually being caught, and so,  
11 if you don't harvest that, then you have, again, a little bit more  
12 excess biomass for the following year, and so --  
13  
14 **DR. ALLEN:** So that may not be what you see in practice, right,  
15 which is good.  
16  
17 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay, and so we have an SSC consensus statement  
18 here, right?  
19  
20 **DR. ALLEN:** Yes, and we just said that we recommend updating the  
21 stock assessments for both of these species at least every five  
22 years, and so just a final consensus statement together on this,  
23 and so I'll take any questions on the yellowtail?  
24  
25 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Let's go ahead, Mike, real quick, and have Dylan  
26 come up and talk about the AP's side of this, and then we'll  
27 address this.  
28  
29 **MR. HUBBARD:** Another super positive one, and I promise my comments  
30 will be longer on the red grouper side of things, but, yes, the  
31 ABC said equal to the ACL, and the AP recommended not moving any  
32 of the management measures for yellowtail snapper, and one thing  
33 that I was reminded of is the AP did discuss how yellowtail snapper  
34 are moving further north, and that was also in the mutton snapper  
35 that I forgot to mention as well. We're seeing more mutton and  
36 yellowtail further north than ever before. Thank you.  
37  
38 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Dylan. All right, and so I think, at  
39 this point, and, Ryan, correct me if I'm wrong, but both of these  
40 species are jointly managed by the Gulf and the Atlantic Fishery  
41 Management Council, and so, at some point, we're going to have to  
42 make a motion to develop a document, right, that provides catch  
43 device for both these species, and so we'll need a motion from the  
44 council to do that. Any takers out there? Go ahead, C.J.  
45  
46 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Okay, Bernie. I'm going to do this one on the fly  
47 again, hopefully better than last time. **To direct staff to develop**  
48 **a document that provides catch advice for mutton and yellowtail**

1 that updates --  
2  
3 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Ryan.  
4  
5 **MR. RINDONE:** That updates catch advice.  
6  
7 **DR. SWEETMAN:** That updates catch advice, yes, and provides --  
8  
9 **MR. RINDONE:** For mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper.  
10  
11 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes.  
12  
13 **MR. RINDONE:** In the Gulf and South Atlantic, in cooperation with  
14 the South Atlantic Council, since these species are jointly  
15 managed.  
16  
17 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Good point.  
18  
19 **MR. RINDONE:** Another thing that will need to be considered for  
20 updating this will be the jurisdictional apportionment between the  
21 councils for both stocks, because, right now, that's based on the  
22 old MRFSS data.  
23  
24 **DR. SWEETMAN:** So I guess I need to add more than just catch device  
25 in here, huh?  
26  
27 **MR. RINDONE:** So Catch device and jurisdictional --  
28  
29 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Allocation?  
30  
31 **MR. RINDONE:** Apportionment or allocation, and do you have a  
32 preference, Mara? It means the same thing, and so we can call it  
33 jurisdictional allocation, and that's fine, and so catch advice  
34 and jurisdictional allocations.  
35  
36 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** While they're putting that up, Mara.  
37  
38 **MS. LEVY:** Well, just to clarify that -- I mean, we say jointly  
39 managed, and it's not really jointly managed. You have a single  
40 OFL and ABC for the stock, that you then divide and manage  
41 separately. It's a little bit different than like CMP, right,  
42 which is actually jointly managed under one FMP. You have separate  
43 FMPs, and you need to decide -- In that apportionment, you need to  
44 decide on that -- The South Atlantic and Gulf have to agree about  
45 the apportionment, but they don't have to agree necessarily about  
46 the other things, like how you manage it on the Gulf or the South  
47 Atlantic side.  
48

1 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and I guess -- It's your motion. I actually  
2 prefer the word "apportionment" here, rather than "allocations".

3  
4 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and let's go "apportionment", if you can,  
5 **Bernie.** Allocations get conflated sometimes, clearly. Thank you.

6  
7 **MR. RINDONE:** Our expectation for this would be to take Reef  
8 Fishing Amendment 55 and Snapper Grouper Amendment 44 and dust  
9 that off, add mutton to it, update it, and then come back to the  
10 councils at the appropriate time with options for that.

11  
12 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right, and so do we have a second for this  
13 motion? It's seconded by Mr. Sanchez. Any further discussion on  
14 the motion? **Not seeing any, is there any opposition to the motion?**  
15 **Seeing none, the motion carries.** All right, and so we will move  
16 into red grouper.

17  
18 **SEDAR 88: RED GROUPER STOCK ASSESSMENT**

19  
20 **DR. ALLEN:** Okay. Thank you. At this stage in our meeting, the  
21 South Atlantic SSC was dismissed, and it was just the whole Gulf  
22 Council SSC to start this assessment for red grouper. This one  
23 was conducted by the Science Center, another well-done assessment  
24 that we spent a lot of time on.

25  
26 Fisherman Feedback, we started off with Fisherman Feedback again  
27 from the council staff, 344 responses. They were generally neutral  
28 comments, and not strong sentiment about the current status of the  
29 stock, either negatively or positively. There were comments of  
30 fishers seeing a higher abundance of smaller fish and, of course,  
31 concerns about shark depredation, which is a common comment that  
32 we hear, but not a directional thing either way that we could take  
33 from that.

34  
35 Okay, and this was the SEDAR 88 operational assessment for red  
36 grouper in the Gulf, and it uses SRFS in place of MRIP-FES for  
37 recreational private vessel landings. Over 95 percent of the  
38 landings for red grouper are caught in Florida, and so that makes  
39 sense.

40  
41 Lower landings estimated and improved, and so the SRFS estimated  
42 lower landings compared to the MRIP, and improved precision  
43 compared to the MRIP, and so that's not worded exactly right, but  
44 the SRFS had lower landings, and they were of better precision  
45 than the MRIP-FES.

46  
47 For red grouper, we had a von Bertalanffy L-infinity, and that  
48 actually should be centimeters, and I just saw that, and so eighty-

1 two centimeters, 82.7 centimeters, and not millimeters, and so it  
2 would be 827 millimeters. The K Brody growth coefficient of 0.12,  
3 T0 of negative-0.899 years in the growth model.

4  
5 Natural mortality, which was a big topic of discussion in this  
6 assessment, was done with Hamel and Cope, which is the same, and  
7 I think Hamel and Cope was used for either the yellowtail or the  
8 mutton snapper, and maybe both, and I would have to look back, but  
9 it's been used often in recent years, and Hamel and Cope is another  
10 method of estimating natural mortality for maximum age, which is  
11 an offshoot of the old Hoenig estimations, and then there's a Then  
12 et al., and then the latest adaptation of that methodology is the  
13 Hamel and Cope, based on longevity.

14  
15 It estimated an M of 0.179. This is a big change in the assessment  
16 compared to SEDAR 61, the previous red grouper assessment, which  
17 had an M of 0.14, and so that's like a 30 percent increase in the  
18 natural mortality rate that was used in this assessment.

19  
20 We had a fair amount of discussion about that, but the SSC felt  
21 like this was the state of what we should use, being that means  
22 that -- What that is saying is that the red grouper population is  
23 a shorter-lived animal, in the absence of fishing, and a more  
24 productive stock, in the absence of fishing, than the older  
25 estimate would be, right, and they don't live as long, and they're  
26 more productive, and so that's the implications of that, and we'll  
27 see that as we go through. We'll see that effect, and other  
28 effects, as we go through this.

29  
30 On the graph there, while we're talking about natural mortality,  
31 you can see that all these models have natural mortality that  
32 changes through the life of the fish. It's higher on young fish  
33 than older fish, but you can see that SEDAR 88, this assessment,  
34 had higher natural mortality rates at all ages, and SEAR 61, that  
35 had the target M of 0.14, had lower estimates of natural mortality,  
36 meaning that the fish would live longer, and so that's a pretty  
37 big change in this assessment compared to SEDAR 61.

38  
39 Age at 50 percent maturity was 3.5 years. The discard mortality  
40 for all fleets was 30 percent, but the center did sensitivity runs  
41 if discard mortality was 15 percent and as high as 45 percent, and  
42 so that was looked at in there. They used age-based selectivity  
43 through this assessment, and not length-based, and I'll show you  
44 a graph of that as we go, but those are some of the input data.

45  
46 This is the landings trajectories from different sectors of the  
47 fishery, commercial handline, commercial longline, the old  
48 commercial trap data, and the private rec data through time, and

1 so, you know, over -- Not a clear trend in like the rec landings,  
2 and it had a peak in the middle 2010s, then lower landings, and  
3 then higher landings more recently, and then down again, and so  
4 nothing real striking here, but I wanted you to see some of the  
5 landings trajectories.

6  
7 This is the combined video survey from the stock assessment report,  
8 the index of abundance for red grouper in the eastern Gulf of  
9 Mexico. Not a huge amount of change over the time series of data  
10 here, but it's noteworthy that, since 2015, it's been on somewhat  
11 of an increase in abundance from the combined video survey, and so  
12 it's one of the indices that was used in the assessment.

13  
14 Stock-recruit, we're kind of in the same boat we were with the  
15 other two species, where steepness was estimable in the model. It  
16 was estimated at 0.661, meaning that recruitment at 20 percent of  
17 the virgin stock size would be 66 percent of what recruitment would  
18 be at the full unfished stock size.

19  
20 The previous SEDAR 61, like many of the assessments, had assumed  
21 that steepness was 0.99, and so basically that recruitment wouldn't  
22 vary with fishing substantially, and so that is a change in here  
23 for the steepness being estimated.

24  
25  $R_0$  is the estimate of virgin recruitment, 44.9 million age-zero  
26 fish, and  $\Sigma R$  is the -- I didn't describe this on the other  
27 two species, but  $\Sigma R$  is the variance in recruitment, and it  
28 often is around 0.6, and, in this case it was 0.647, but we're in  
29 the same exact boat with this species, and for our steepness  
30 estimation, and so steepness was able to be estimated, but the  
31 precision around it was almost identical to what we saw with the  
32 mutton snapper and the yellowtail.

33  
34 Based on that, we ended up saying that we think that you should  
35 use the proxy in this case, because of that high uncertainty in  
36 the actual steepness estimate, and you can see the stock-recruit  
37 data there, and, of course, the line does not fit those data  
38 particularly well, even though it's estimable, and so there's high  
39 uncertainty in that stock-recruit relationship.

40  
41 Okay, and so these are the age-based selectivities, and I wanted  
42 to show these here to bring up another factor that changed a good  
43 bit between this assessment and SEDAR 61. Now, they're not  
44 directly comparable, I should say, because SEDAR 61 used length-  
45 based selectivity, and, in this assessment, they used age-based,  
46 but they did an approximation here that we can look at them to  
47 kind of make an apples-to-apples comparison.

48

1 The difference in selectivity, and I want to focus on a couple  
2 things, and mainly the bottom one, the recreational landings with  
3 this, and what that red line -- That's in this assessment, and so  
4 the red is this SEDAR 88 assessment that we're talking about now,  
5 and what it shows is that the fish are -- The estimate was that  
6 the fish are not vulnerable very early in life, and then, by about  
7 age-two-and-a-half or three, they become fully vulnerable to the  
8 recreational fishery, and they're vulnerable for it looks like  
9 about three years, and then their vulnerability drops  
10 substantially, and they remain relatively invulnerable, low  
11 selectivity for the rest of their life, to the recreational fleet.

12  
13 In the case of the previous assessment, based on the length-based  
14 assessment, but this is also informed by data, the fish took longer  
15 to become vulnerable, but then there was a window of age-five, to  
16 say fifteen or so, that they remain pretty highly vulnerable to  
17 the recreational fishery in there, and I think this is part of  
18 what is one of the things that's also driving the differences  
19 between the two assessments, is how this vulnerability shift  
20 changed on the recreational fishery.

21  
22 There were some other differences with the commercial longline,  
23 and it showed some early selectivity, and then fully vulnerable in  
24 the current assessment, where the older assessment took longer to  
25 recruit to that fishery, and it showed some decline in  
26 vulnerability for the oldest ages, et cetera, and so the change in  
27 vulnerability, which is informed by data, is another difference  
28 between these two assessments that I wanted to point out.

29  
30 Red tide is always one that we think about with red grouper, and  
31 it's susceptible to red tide impacts, and Dave Chagaris, with us  
32 at the University of Florida and on the SSC, had done some modeling  
33 of how to account for red tide effects on red grouper populations.

34  
35 The assessment team modeled red tide specifically as a bycatch  
36 fleet. Basically, what they did is they treated red tide like it  
37 was another fishery. It wasn't a fishery, right, and it was just  
38 killing fish, but they treated it like another fishery, so that  
39 they could allow it to give an episodic mortality event that would  
40 happen in one year to take those fish out. Of course they weren't  
41 harvested, and they didn't go into the landings, but they were  
42 factored in as a way -- A fleet as a way to kill fish off in  
43 certain years within the model. They did that in the years 2005,  
44 2014, 2018, and 2021, to account for some red tide mortality events  
45 in the time series.

46  
47 Those selectivity curves and fixed values were obtained from  
48 outputs from the West Florida Shelf Ecopath model that Dave

1 Chagaris built and explored red tide impacts on red grouper there.  
2  
3 In SEDAR 61, red tide mortality was modeled as a single bycatch  
4 fleet that only operated in years with significant red tide events,  
5 and, at that time, they had had full selectivity, and they assumed  
6 everything was equally vulnerable and constant at age. In this  
7 case, it was assumed that the selectivity curves were not constant  
8 across all ages.  
9  
10 The selectivity curves were fixed values from Dave's West Florida  
11 Shelf Ecopath model, and so the point of all that is that red tide  
12 was accounted for in this assessment as episodic natural mortality  
13 events that were over and above the general natural mortality that  
14 would occur, and so that's how it was handled.  
15  
16 This is the model-estimated recruitment through time. You can see  
17 some very high variability from the late 1990s to 2010. Since  
18 about 2010, there's been like a general increasing recruitment  
19 trend. Not in all the years, but the general trend is an increasing  
20 recruitment through the time series.  
21  
22 Okay, and so we discussed this assessment at length, because the  
23 differences between the assessments are pretty substantial, and  
24 so, to start off, we said that this represents -- It's consistent  
25 with best scientific information available and appropriate for  
26 management advice.  
27  
28 Okay, and so we'll go to the projections next, and this is the  
29 stock status at a 30 percent SPR, and you can see the terminal  
30 year of the assessment is 2022, and so solidly in the green, where  
31 spawning stock biomass is estimated to be nearly two-times the  
32 spawning stock biomass at MSY, based on the proxy of a 30 percent  
33 SPR, and so the conclusion there is that, at an SPR of 30, the  
34 Gulf of Mexico red grouper is not overfished nor undergoing  
35 overfishing, at a 30 percent SPR.  
36  
37 The assessment team ran a 40 percent SPR, and we had a good bit of  
38 discussion about that, but the conclusion in this case was the  
39 same, in that the red grouper is not overfished nor undergoing  
40 overfishing at an SPR of 40 percent, but you can see that this has  
41 shifted over a little bit, where, in some of the years, the  
42 spawning stock biomass would be below the biomass at the proxy  
43 level of MSY, those few points that are there in the orange, and,  
44 in some years, there would be overfishing, where the fishing  
45 mortality is higher than the fishing mortality at FMSY, up in the  
46 yellow at the top of that graph.  
47  
48 We had a lot of discussion about this, and I think that we're --

1 We've had a lot of discussion over the last couple of years. This  
2 is not a new thing for the SSC. We've been working on this for  
3 some time.

4  
5 A lot of the recent literature suggests that, for these  
6 hermaphroditic groupers, the SPR proxy values should range in the  
7 40 percent to 50 percent, which the SSC discussed. There's several  
8 papers, and Bill Harford has led a couple of them, that have done  
9 some pretty robust simulations looking at this for hermaphroditic  
10 groupers.

11  
12 One of Harford's papers, one of the most influential ones, actually  
13 suggests that the SPR proxy should be about 50 percent, but our  
14 consensus, after discussion, was that the SPR 40 percent is  
15 appropriate for red grouper. Red grouper has been quick to respond  
16 after red tides. It's very resilient to these episodic mortality  
17 events. We see it bounce back relatively quickly, and so we --  
18 Our suggestion was that the SPR of 40 percent is what is  
19 appropriate, and that's actually consistent with the  
20 recommendations we've made for some of the other groupers, but we  
21 had a robust discussion about this as well as we went.

22  
23 Okay, and so the motion was that the SSC sets the OFL at SPR 40  
24 percent for red grouper, based on SEDAR 88 based model projections  
25 with a constant catch scenario, for the fishing years 2027 to 2029,  
26 at 11.28 million pounds gutted weight, and the SSC sets the ABC at  
27 75 percent of that value, for the fishing years 2027 to 2029, at  
28 8.78 million pounds gutted weight, and so that was the conclusion  
29 from this, and I don't know if I have another slide. I think that  
30 might be it. It looks like that's it, and so I'm happy to take  
31 any questions.

32  
33 Let me just make one more comment here. I felt like our SSC really  
34 dug into this assessment. I felt like if there was -- You know,  
35 the assessment team did a jitter analysis. They did a robust  
36 sensitivity analysis. They looked at the effect of the change in  
37 natural mortality rate, and they looked at the vulnerability  
38 schedule.

39  
40 They did all the things that you would do to poke and prod this  
41 model to make sure -- To see that it wasn't doing something wacky,  
42 or it wasn't based on one parameter, or that kind of thing, and,  
43 at the end of the discussion, you know, our SSC felt like the  
44 assessment had done a good job. It puts the red grouper as a more  
45 productive stock with a shorter lifespan.

46  
47 There's some changes in vulnerability that had effects, no doubt,  
48 and that changes the status projection here, but we felt like that

1 was justified, given the decisions made in the assessment and the  
2 data and the science on this issue, and so that's where we ended  
3 up. I welcome any questions.

4  
5 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, Mike. We'll definitely, as  
6 a group, come back to this motion, but, in the interim, I think  
7 John has a question specific to one of your other last two slides,  
8 and then we'll get Dylan up here.

9  
10 **DR. ALLEN:** Sure.

11  
12 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Yes, and I just have some concerns with -- It seems  
13 like there's going to -- There's a broad-brush approach to just  
14 paint every hermaphroditic species with 40, or maybe 50, or maybe  
15 higher, depending on the species.

16  
17 I believe, and I've read Harford several times, and I've said  
18 before, and it starts off kind of as a disclaimer for all the  
19 uncertainty going into these assessments, and yet it arrives at  
20 these conclusions. I would think that, while it probably is  
21 correct for some species, hermaphroditic species, to have a 40  
22 percent SPR, and I don't know, and dare I say maybe even higher,  
23 I think it's more life-history oriented.

24  
25 You know, you look at species that live a very long time, probably  
26 slow to sexually mature, and then those might be better candidates,  
27 but, as we just saw, red grouper are -- I mean, a big change in  
28 this assessment from prior assessments. They're far more resilient  
29 to red tide than I would have thought. That's very encouraging,  
30 and they also -- They don't really live as long, and so I don't  
31 see them being a candidate for, you know, they're a hermaphrodite,  
32 and, boom, 40 percent.

33  
34 I would think they might be an appropriate candidate for 30  
35 percent, and so, while this overall assessment is very encouraging,  
36 and I applaud you for that, and I'll go even further than that,  
37 and I'll applaud you for even bringing up during that discussion  
38 in the assessment that maybe we should consider 35 percent.

39  
40 You know, I appreciate you bringing that up, just to stimulate  
41 discussion along the lines of I guess -- I'm not saying your  
42 concerns are mine, but it falls in line with my concerns. I don't  
43 think 40 percent is one-size-fits-all for every hermaphroditic  
44 species, and I just want to say that again. Thank you.

45  
46 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, John.

47  
48 **DR. ALLEN:** I definitely hear your concerns, John.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dylan.  
3

4 **MR. HUBBARD:** Thank you. I would like to also echo Mr. Sanchez's  
5 comments as well. As far as the AP recommendations related to red  
6 grouper, the AP made a motion to set the ACL equal to the ABC for  
7 red grouper. Also, the AP recommended the council explore removal  
8 of the twenty-fathom closure immediately after any implementation  
9 of catch level increases from SEDAR 88, and I have more to speak  
10 about that, but I'll hold it until that agenda item.

11  
12 Then, also, there was a Reef Fish AP recommendation to explore the  
13 option for reallocation, based on updated red grouper landings and  
14 SRFS units, as a secondary document following catch level  
15 increases.

16  
17 I know, earlier, I spoke about allocation, and the Reef Fish AP  
18 was very adamant against exploring any sort of allocation  
19 discussion, but that was in relation to MRIP-FES. This is SRFS  
20 data, and so this would potentially open up exploration of  
21 allocation discussions.

22  
23 Also on red grouper, we had a pretty lengthy discussion, towards  
24 the end of the meeting, about the 2025 recreational season. One  
25 thing that I would like to emphasize from Dr. Allen's report is  
26 this red grouper assessment has a terminal year of 2022. It is  
27 currently now 2025, and so we're dealing with science that's  
28 already pretty outdated in our management.

29  
30 Hopefully we'll catch up as soon as possible, and we're facing, in  
31 2025, a recreational season closure of potentially mid-May, or end  
32 of May, on a species in which we know the quota is essentially  
33 going to more than double, potentially, if the ACL is set equal to  
34 the ABC, and so the AP made a motion that the Reef Fish AP  
35 recommends the council explore every possible avenue for extending  
36 the recreational fishing season for red grouper for 2025, based on  
37 the results and catch projections from the SEDAR 88 stock  
38 assessment.

39  
40 Upon this lengthy conversation about how it kind of flies in the  
41 face of the whole rec initiative idea, and trying to get  
42 recreational buy-in, if you tell recreational anglers, hey, we're  
43 going to close red grouper this year, because the quota is really  
44 small, and the fishery is not doing great, and we close it mid-  
45 May, and to then turn around, on January 1, and be like red grouper  
46 are super healthy now, and fish all year for them, and it just  
47 flies in the face of logic, and it kind of defeats any recreational  
48 buy-in, and so that was a big cause for concern with AP.

1  
2 It also came up of, well, if you're going to explore trying to  
3 lengthen the recreational season in 2025, what about the commercial  
4 allocation? Why not try to bump that up as well, but, in talks  
5 with commercial representation at the AP, it was made clear that  
6 there wasn't an appetite for that, because dumping a bunch of quota  
7 late in the year on them would be very difficult, disrupt their  
8 business models, and most likely not end up being caught anyway,  
9 and so they were not jumping up and down, like the recreational  
10 fishermen were.

11  
12 Apparently, upon doing some research, there is some precedent from  
13 the South Atlantic set, in which you know a big catch level  
14 increase is coming, that an emergency rule or something can be put  
15 in place to potentially see some of those benefits in the current  
16 year, and so those were the main comments that I had on red grouper.

17  
18 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, Dylan, and so I think we're  
19 going to tackle a couple of things right now, and so we clearly  
20 have catch advice, right, or OFL and ABC, that's provided as a  
21 result of the stock assessment, and so we're going to have to work  
22 on a new document there.

23  
24 Dylan's point about some emergency rule, perhaps, to take advantage  
25 of an increase, I'm going to let the NOAA folks speak to that  
26 before I -- Is that something that we can do? Have any of you  
27 thought about that?

28  
29 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Thanks, Tom. So Carrie and I had some opportunity  
30 to talk, before the meeting, about emergency rulemaking, and we  
31 believe there is authority to pursue an emergency rule, if the  
32 council wants to do that. I think on financial grounds, right,  
33 economic grounds, would be probably the strongest rationale.

34  
35 If the council wanted to, obviously, give that direction, I've  
36 told Carrie, given staffing, you know, changes, cuts, and other  
37 priorities, that we would need a lot of help from the council staff  
38 in order to make that happen, and we would also want direction  
39 from the council that this would be a top priority to move forward  
40 between now and I'll say early summer.

41  
42 Once it comes to the -- You know, once the document is finalized,  
43 and we work on rulemaking, the challenge is I don't -- I can't  
44 have any guarantees right now in terms of how quickly that would  
45 happen, but we would work to try to implement any sort of emergency  
46 rulemaking with our administration as quickly as possible, and so  
47 the bottom line is, yes, it's feasible. It's something we could  
48 do, and would prioritize, if that's the desire of the council.

1  
2 What I would expect would happen, on the recreational side, is  
3 there would be a lapse, or a closure, of the fishing season for  
4 some period of time until that emergency rule becomes effective  
5 sometime after the summer closure.  
6

7 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. I have a couple of hands, but, again,  
8 just for process here, in the time that we have remaining, I mean,  
9 it's -- I think there's two -- Again, as I said, two things we're  
10 going to be dealing with here, right, and so we've got updated  
11 catch advice coming from the SSC, and so we're going to have to  
12 recommend to the staff they develop a new document, a management-  
13 focused document, for the following year, or subsequent years, I  
14 guess, right, and so let's dispose, perhaps, of that, and then  
15 let's talk a little bit more about this emergency rule. Ed.  
16

17 **MR. WALKER:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. For me, and I will wait until  
18 Andy is listening, because I'm trying to tell him this would be a  
19 top priority of mine. This would be a top priority of mine,  
20 because I think it's kind of a slap in the face for the rec guys  
21 to -- You know, there's been some talk, and there's nothing  
22 official about it yet, but word on the street is that we're maybe  
23 going to lose a month of red grouper this year.  
24

25 They're maybe not going to get June, like we had it last year, and  
26 I've talked to Frank, and that's maybe not true, but to have a  
27 stock assessment that says everything is really at record high  
28 levels, and take a month away from the fishing community, purely  
29 because of red tape, that you can't get it processed quick enough,  
30 or mostly because of that, in my view, is really not right.  
31

32 I feel like it's my duty, as a representative of people who fish  
33 for red grouper, to say, hey, can we -- Is there a way we can make  
34 this happen, to keep this thing open? Part of that is because  
35 June is opening of red snapper, and, where we are, we catch red  
36 grouper and red snapper on the same spots.  
37

38 Speaking as a charter boat captain, everybody wanted a book with  
39 me in June last year for red snapper, because they could put red  
40 grouper in the cooler at the same time, and nobody wanted to go  
41 fishing in July, if they could help it, because we catch the same  
42 red snapper or red grouper and had to throw it back the next day,  
43 when the season changed, and so I would really like it if this  
44 council could find a way, or NMFS could find a way, to at least  
45 keep the season the same this year, keep us our June season.  
46

47 If we can find a way, with this emergency rule, to get us some  
48 time down the road, that would be a bonus, and I also still have

1 this bet with Dylan that the council can get this red grouper stuff  
2 implemented sometime, and he says we won't get it done for 2026,  
3 and I said we could make it happen, and so don't let me down here,  
4 guys.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I'm just still smiling at Ed. All right. C.J.

7  
8 **DR. SWEETMAN:** To your earlier point, Tom, I have a motion, Bernie,  
9 for -- It's similar to the last one. To direct staff to develop  
10 a document that provides updated catch advice for red grouper  
11 following the most recent stock assessment, but Dr. Froeschke is  
12 going to correct me.

13  
14 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** John.

15  
16 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Well, I don't want to take the fun away, but we'll  
17 also need status determination criteria and allocation.

18  
19 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Let's add it. Anything else?

20  
21 **MR. RINDONE:** So, ultimately, yes.

22  
23 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Can we just say it provides management advice, and  
24 that it's all inclusive?

25  
26 **MR. RINDONE:** Yes, and, I mean, ultimately, those are things that  
27 would need to be considered. You did have a recommendation from  
28 the Reef Fish AP to first address essentially the status  
29 determination criteria and the catch limits, and then worry about  
30 allocation measures after that, and so to try to expedite getting  
31 the new catch limits in place first and let the allocation  
32 situation be addressed secondary to that.

33  
34 If that's something -- If that's a recommendation that you guys  
35 would like to follow, that would ultimately result in two separate  
36 documents. If you put it all together into one, you know, and  
37 "allocation" is a dirty word and everything sometimes, and it can  
38 sometimes require a little bit more debate, and that would  
39 certainly have an impact on the timeliness of getting the catch  
40 limits through.

41  
42 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** John.

43  
44 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Well, without jumping ahead, it would seem to me  
45 you would take care of the catch limits in 2025, and not address  
46 the allocation, but you would just do it as part of the document.  
47 We would try to get that done in 2026, is what I was presuming,  
48 because, if you were to do the emergency rule, and then you were

1 to do catch limits, and then an SDC, and then go back and do  
2 allocations, you're going to have to do the catch limits, because  
3 of all that -- When you start switching allocations, you start  
4 changing OFLs, and all that other stuff, like we did last time.

5  
6 It would seem, to me, that you would want to do the allocations  
7 and the catch limits combined, even if that was part of the  
8 amendment, and you took care of the interim and through the  
9 emergency rule process.

10  
11 **MR. RINDONE:** Just to continue to pile on, Mr. Chair, we asked the  
12 Science Center about how the OFL and ABC would change based on  
13 swings in what the sector allocations would be, and, because of  
14 the health of the stock, the allocations could change by up to 50  
15 percent in either direction, and the net change on the OFL and ABC  
16 is approximately 1 percent, and so it doesn't -- Changes in the  
17 allocation don't result in much of a change to the OFL and ABC.

18  
19 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Ms. Levy.

20  
21 **MS. LEVY:** I mean, I guess I'll just say that -- So, when we did  
22 Amendment 53, right, when we changed the data going into the  
23 assessment, we looked at the allocations, because we were changing  
24 the underlying data that went -- We need to do the same thing.

25  
26 Whether you change the allocations, and whether you have a  
27 rationale for leaving them the same or not, or how you change them  
28 is one thing, but we've got to consider them. We're doing the  
29 exact same thing we did in Amendment 53, except we're using now  
30 new different recreational data, and so we have to explain why we  
31 would not be changing the allocation, if we didn't do it, and I'm  
32 talking about the document. I'm not talking about the emergency,  
33 if there's an emergency rule.

34  
35 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, and so I'm hearing all of this, right,  
36 and I think -- the reason I suggested to C.J. that we use the word  
37 "management" as opposed to "catch advice", is it's a fair amount  
38 of latitude at this point, right, and so I think we can certainly  
39 revisit this in Full Council and, you know, tease it out a little  
40 bit, but I think this gets us moving in at least in the right  
41 direction.

42  
43 Then, over the next day or two, perhaps we can talk to staff about  
44 the preferred kind of way that we want to partition this moving  
45 forward, and so we have a motion on the board. Is there a second  
46 for that motion? It's seconded by Captain Walker. Is there any  
47 further discussion of the motion? Mr. Strelcheck.

1 **MR. STRELCHECK:** I agree with Mara, but I guess the other point  
2 I'll make with -- If we do request an emergency rule, it's only  
3 valid for essentially six months, with a six-month extension, and  
4 so this document would have to be developed very quickly.  
5 Otherwise, we're going to be in a similar situation for 2026,  
6 without a new catch limit being implemented, right?

7  
8 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and so there's definitely some subtleties  
9 there, and, over the next couple of days, I think we can come back  
10 in Full Council and revisit this motion, right, and so is there  
11 any opposition to the motion? Okay. More discussion, John?

12  
13 **MR. SANCHEZ:** Yes, and I'm hearing the recreational sector loud  
14 and clear. They want additional landings, and, if we get into any  
15 kind of allocation things, wouldn't that slow this whole train  
16 down to do that, and so, you know, I don't know if you want to  
17 convolute this for that, and so I just wanted to put that out  
18 there. Then there's the other matter of what does that do to the  
19 bet that I heard was going on?

20  
21 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I'm moving on. **Is there any opposition to the**  
22 **motion? Seeing none, the motion carries.** All right, and so we do  
23 have a couple of minutes to talk about a little more detail with  
24 what might be required with regard to the processing of any  
25 emergency rule. Mara.

26  
27 **MS. LEVY:** Sorry, and I just had a question about the SSC  
28 recommendations, and so it's 2027 to 2029, and I don't recall, and  
29 did the SSC start in 2027 because we didn't think we could  
30 implement anything before that, because, given this  
31 recommendation, we don't have like an ABC recommendation for 2026,  
32 if we were trying to get something implemented for that, outside  
33 the emergency context, but I wasn't sure why we were starting in  
34 2027 with the recommendation.

35  
36 **MR. RINDONE:** Because the expectation was that we wouldn't be able  
37 to have the ACL change and sector allocations implemented prior to  
38 2027, and so thinking about like the current status of human and  
39 other resources that are available to get things done, and just  
40 how long the development of those documents tends to take, and the  
41 fact that it would have to be a full plan amendment, because it  
42 would consider sector allocations, and it would have to go to  
43 public hearings, et cetera, et cetera.

44  
45 **MS. LEVY:** Understood, except I guess we would need to think about  
46 that. If the goal is to get an emergency action in place for 2025,  
47 and, in order to address 2026, we have to have something, a plan  
48 amendment, in place for that, then we would need a recommendation

1 that covers 2026.

2  
3 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Froeschke.

4  
5 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Well, just off the top of my head, the reason that  
6 we did this is, in the past, we've kind of got burned in the  
7 reverse order, where these projections assume, or presume, that  
8 you're doing things previously to that, which we have failed to  
9 get in place, and so then the projections aren't quite correct,  
10 and so, this time, this is what we tried.

11  
12 I see two paths forward. One, we could probably request that the  
13 SSC look at this at their May meeting, and just request a  
14 projection from 2026.

15  
16 I would think that wouldn't be too much work, or two, and, I mean,  
17 I don't know if -- The council isn't obligated to exceed, or even  
18 reach, that level that would be recommended by the SSC, if they  
19 don't want to bring in the full brunt of fish late in the year,  
20 for example, for the commercial sector, and so there might be some  
21 leeway there.

22  
23 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mara.

24  
25 **MS. LEVY:** Well, I guess the problem is we have an ABC on the  
26 books, and, if the goal is to go above that, right, outside of the  
27 emergency context, then we would need that, but I suspect we'll  
28 have to go back to the SSC anyway, if we're going to look at  
29 allocations. We're going to need new catch, and so, at that point,  
30 maybe we could just correct it and have an ABC for 2026, if we end  
31 up going back.

32  
33 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and, I mean, again, there's a lot of  
34 subtlety here, right, and so I think, between now and Thursday --  
35 I mean, we clearly have some, you know, catch advice, and we need  
36 to move forward, and so that pathway that John talked about is  
37 something that we can discuss, and we can outline it a little bit  
38 better, and hopefully I can articulate it in a way that will allow  
39 us to move forward in Full Council with not so much consternation.  
40 All right. I think we're scheduled for a break, Mr. Chairman.

41  
42 **MR. DUGAS:** Yes, and thank you, Dr. Frazer. We can take our  
43 scheduled break, right on time. We will come back at 3:30. Okay,  
44 folks can start making their way back to the table.

45  
46 (Whereupon, a brief recess was taken.)

47  
48 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** We'll pick up with the remaining items in Agenda

1 Item Number VIII, and I'll ask Captain Dylan if he could come back  
2 and finish up the Reef Fish AP discussion items.

3  
4 **SUMMARY OF REEF FISH ADVISORY PANEL DISCUSSION AND**  
5 **RECOMMENDATIONS**  
6

7 **MR. HUBBARD:** All right. I appreciate you having me back. The  
8 main discussion items left on the board here from the Reef Fish  
9 AP, some of them had to do with the reef fish landings in general.

10  
11 The greater amberjack recreational landings, Dr. Frazer brought up  
12 the question about the geographic distribution in committee, and  
13 we actually had the same questions. I myself was extremely  
14 frustrated, and confused, seeing those landing numbers, because  
15 that happened in September and October this last year, following  
16 much of the greater amberjack fleet being decimated by two major  
17 hurricanes back to back, and so it didn't make any sense that the  
18 landings were so off the charts for that time period, with so many  
19 of the vessels being out of the game, but there was some discussion  
20 from folks in the Panhandle, Destin, Panama City, Orange Beach,  
21 that apparently had very successful greater amberjack landings  
22 following those hurricanes in September and October.

23  
24 Also, the federal for-hire red snapper landings, that was a big  
25 discussion around the Reef Fish AP when we saw the landings were  
26 so much lower than the ACL, even with the reopening, and so the  
27 conversation around the table was basically trying to maximize the  
28 federal for-hire season, giving us the amount of days to be able  
29 to land our quota effectively.

30  
31 Also, the jacks complex, if you look at that, the data really  
32 trends down, and it looks ugly, and the conversation around the  
33 Reef Fish AP was there was a couple of NOAA enforcement cases in  
34 which enforcement officers and fishermen were -- Basically,  
35 everyone was arguing about what was a lesser amberjack versus a  
36 small greater amberjack, and so basically charter boat, partyboat,  
37 and a lot of federal for-hire kind of SOPs were don't keep those  
38 lesser amberjack.

39  
40 Essentially, on my vessels we have a rule that we only keep almaco  
41 jacks, and so, that way, there's no confusion. Deckhand, captain,  
42 enforcement officer, everybody can tell an almaco versus a banded  
43 rudderfish or lesser amberjack and a small greater amberjack, and  
44 so that's what the Reef Fish AP felt was causing that decrease in  
45 trend data.

46  
47 Also there was a discussion around midwater snappers. If you look  
48 at that data, it also trends down, and the one Reef Fish AP member

1 that specializes in midwater snapper was commenting how the queens  
2 and both the blackfin snapper catch was almost nonexistent, or  
3 extremely down, in his area in southwest Florida.

4  
5 Moving off reef fish landings, moving to headboat data, in Other  
6 Business we had a discussion around the headboat data, and you  
7 guys talked about it in committee as well, and, basically, the  
8 Reef Fish AP wanted to reiterate the importance of the headboat  
9 data, and the motion that we made was the Reef Fish AP recommends  
10 the council encourage the Southeast Fisheries Science Center and  
11 National Marine Fisheries Service to seek all available means for  
12 continued funding of the headboat survey as to continue and protect  
13 an imperative source of data collection.

14  
15 I think, in the Data Committee, it was pretty apparent to me, when  
16 it was questioned what species do we use the headboat data in, and  
17 the answer was all of them, and so it was reiterated again how  
18 important that headboat data is.

19  
20 Also, we had a discussion around the Return 'Em Right research,  
21 which is coming up on the agenda, but I'll just mention how the  
22 Reef Fish AP expressed some concerns about the adoption and  
23 effectiveness of descending devices, but there was a lot of  
24 conversation around how, when used effectively, and adoption does  
25 occur, that they're very, very successful in what they do.

26  
27 Also, the federal for-hire red snapper date, the Reef Fish AP  
28 members brought up --

29  
30 **MR. RINDONE:** Excuse me, Dylan. Mr. Chair, I don't know if the  
31 committee would like to consider the Reef Fish AP's recommendations  
32 as Captain Hubbard moves through them, as opposed to him just going  
33 through all of them without any interim discussion.

34  
35 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I was listening before I would circle back on  
36 them, and there was three of them, right, three recommendations,  
37 but we can do them. I mean, it's the pleasure of the committee.  
38 Do you want to tackle them one at a time, or we're already ripping  
39 through?

40  
41 **MR. HUBBARD:** I've got two more left. The fed for-hire red snapper  
42 date, we just basically reiterated our motion supporting the Friday  
43 before Memorial Day, and then the last thing was recreational data  
44 collection.

45  
46 There was a motion made, at the end of the Reef Fish AP, that the  
47 Reef Fish AP strongly recommends that the council requests National  
48 Marine Fisheries, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, and

1 the five Gulf states expedite the requirement for a private  
2 recreational federal fishing permit to fish in the EEZ. States  
3 can require similar language to their state fishing license in  
4 lieu of a federal permit. Expedite the implementation of the  
5 revised for-hire SEFHIER program and create and implement a similar  
6 required electronic data reporting program for the recreational  
7 fishery. That concludes the Reef Fish AP report, except for the  
8 twenty-fathom stuff that we'll bring up later.

9  
10 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Dylan. Hang tight. I  
11 think we might have to figure out, as I sped through this, which  
12 one of these motions that we want to tackle. The first one I  
13 thought was -- I mean, we've had a fair amount of discussion about  
14 the value of the headboat survey, and so I'm looking to staff, and  
15 we have a record there, but do you want a motion of some kind?  
16 Mr. Rindone.

17  
18 **MR. RINDONE:** I mean, it's the pleasure of the committee if you  
19 guys want to address any of the recommendations via a motion to  
20 the council.

21  
22 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Simmons.

23  
24 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so we  
25 briefly discussed this in the Data Collection Committee yesterday  
26 but there was no motion made there, just to remind everybody.

27  
28 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** So do you want me to pick up the slack for the  
29 Data Collection Committee? Is that what you're saying?

30  
31 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** As you wish.

32  
33 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** It's the pleasure of the committee, Mr. Walker.  
34 Any takers on the headboat survey recommendation? Dr. Sweetman.

35  
36 **DR. SWEETMAN:** I mean, we previously -- Carrie previously drafted  
37 a letter, or maybe it was J.D., requesting some more information  
38 about the headboat survey, right, and so this would be kind of the  
39 next phase, to request funding of some sort be allocated and  
40 directed towards the headboat survey, given its importance in just  
41 about every stock that we assess as pretty critical data points.

42  
43 To me, \$500,000 is not a lot of money, but, at the end of the day,  
44 that's not our call as to how NOAA spends that money, and so I  
45 would be in favor of that. I would put forward a motion if people  
46 are in favor of that, but -- Yes.

47  
48 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Banks.

1  
2 **DR. BANKS:** I just have a quick question. If we're talking about  
3 SEFHIER, what is the hurt of just wrapping those sixty-eight boats  
4 into SEFHIER, if permanent funding is going to be an issue? We're  
5 already requiring the rest of the for-hire industry to report, and  
6 we're modifying, or taking some of the headboat survey to model  
7 after.

8  
9 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Sweetman.

10  
11 **DR. SWEETMAN:** The problem I see there is you're losing a lot of  
12 historical data by just wrapping it all into a new data collection  
13 program altogether. The questions might be different. That's my  
14 concern, is you're losing some of that historical data points  
15 there. I hear what you're saying, and that could be an alternative  
16 for if this ultimately -- Like I said, it's not our call, how NOAA  
17 Fisheries ultimately allocates their money and decides to spend  
18 it. My thought here is that we don't even know if SEFHIER 2.0 is  
19 going to get put up there, and so putting all your eggs in that  
20 basket is a little concerning to me too.

21  
22 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Walker.

23  
24 **MR. WALKER:** I kind of agree. You know, it might be something to  
25 consider going forward. I've just been kind of protective about  
26 keeping SEFHIER moving, and I think a change like that would be  
27 significant enough to cause us to have to go back and evaluate  
28 something, and so I'm not terribly opposed, but maybe not the time  
29 right now. Did we mention writing a letter asking them about  
30 funding the program yesterday in the Data Collection? It seemed  
31 like I remember some conversation like that.

32  
33 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** We had a discussion about it, right, and I think  
34 that the AP made an explicit motion to recommend, or encourage,  
35 NMFS, right, to pursue all available means to secure that funding,  
36 and the question to the council is do we want to adopt that motion,  
37 or follow-up on it, and I think that's what C.J. is suggesting  
38 that we probably do. Mr. Strelcheck.

39  
40 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Yes, and I'll reiterate a couple of things.  
41 You're welcome to, obviously, write us that letter. Keep in mind  
42 that, at some point, the Science Center was funding the program,  
43 and then it shifted to GulfFIN, and then the Fisheries Service, in  
44 combination with GulfFIN, was kind of standing up the program as  
45 best we could, right, and so any funding that would be directed  
46 out of our budget currently to support the headboat program would  
47 now come out of our base, at the offset of some other priority,  
48 and I think that's really the most important part of this

1 conversation.

2  
3 You're wanting to maintain the headboat program, but at the expense  
4 of what else, right, and Clay -- He's not here, but, you know,  
5 between myself and Clay, we are talking about the potential for  
6 the budget reductions we expect to receive, what that will look  
7 like, and this will be one of many, I think, decision points that  
8 we're going to be facing in the near-term that we'll want to come  
9 back to this council and share with you, in terms of impacts.

10  
11 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Sweetman.

12  
13 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and I hear you loud and clear, Andy. I guess  
14 one of the challenges that the council faces here is we don't  
15 really understand how NOAA is prioritizing what would be cut,  
16 versus if you decided to put money towards the headboat survey,  
17 and so it's really hard for us to balance that, and figure that  
18 out here, and so we're kind of operating in a black box, so to  
19 speak.

20  
21 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Walker.

22  
23 **MR. WALKER:** So maybe we don't need to do this. I mean, Andy, you  
24 hear what we're saying, right, and you see the desire here. Maybe  
25 do we really even need to write a letter, when we don't know that,  
26 if we've already -- If the council has already expressed to you,  
27 or do you think it would help?

28  
29 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Andy, and then Dylan.

30  
31 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Well, I mean, if you're writing it to us, I think  
32 we already know what your position is, and we've even conveyed in  
33 our own letter back to you, right, that, if there is a funding  
34 source to support this, you know, in the future, obviously, we're  
35 willing to work with you and others to stand it back up in the  
36 Gulf states.

37  
38 If it's, you know, more of a lobbying effort, you know, beyond,  
39 obviously, the scope of the Fisheries Service, that's outside of,  
40 obviously, what I can do, and be involved in, but certainly the  
41 council would have to be thoughtful in terms of how you word that  
42 letter.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dylan.

45  
46 **MR. HUBBARD:** Yes, and I just wanted to add, to Dr. Banks' point  
47 earlier, and Dr. Banks brought up rolling it into SEFHIER. The  
48 original SEFHIER, it was separated out for that reason that Dr.

1 Sweetman brought up, is that this SRHS data has been around since  
2 1986. It's the longest-running recreational time series of data  
3 that we have, and it's used in every assessment, and so I  
4 personally feel like it would be a top priority of the council to  
5 preserve the integrity and continuity of that dataset, because,  
6 when we talk about recreational landings, what do we always bring  
7 up? Data issues, right, and so this is the longest-running, most  
8 respected, most used recreational data stream we have, and we're  
9 talking about losing funding. To me, it's a no-brainer to put  
10 this as a top priority to continue its funding, but --

11

12 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Dylan. Mr. Anson.

13

14 **MR. ANSON:** Andy, I realized you've kind of answered the question  
15 that Ed and C.J. had regarding, you know, the value of the council  
16 writing a letter, and that, internally, at least at your level,  
17 local level, you recognize the importance, but I guess I was -- I  
18 brought up, or it reminded me, of a point that was made in one of  
19 the presentations yesterday.

20

21 It was either in Shrimp or the SEFHIER, but they were talking about  
22 funding and such, and I think it was Shrimp, and there was costs  
23 associated with staff time to develop a grant, or do an RFP, or a  
24 request for funding, and so I was struck by that a little bit,  
25 because I always thought the funding was internal, and you didn't  
26 seek external funds outside of NOAA, and so is there a specific  
27 process that's internal to NOAA, where you would be writing to,  
28 again, a level that's higher above you at the national level, where  
29 staff within each regional office writes a grant, if you will, or  
30 a proposal, that seeks funding to fund a particular program that  
31 gets reviewed by someone external to the local folks here, and  
32 that that might be a benefit to have the letter, or is that process  
33 that even exists?

34

35 **MR. STRELCHECK:** I think what you're probably referring to is the  
36 presentation by Christopher Liese, in terms of some of the economic  
37 data, and we have some internal funding competitions that come out  
38 of our base budget that all regions can compete for, or science  
39 centers, and so that's I think what he was referring to, but, in  
40 terms of a survey, or a data collection program, it's very -- Well,  
41 I don't think that would we do it at all funded with just temporary  
42 funds, right, short-term funding.

43

44 It might be something that we add funds to on a temporary basis to  
45 start up a program, but we want to make sure there's a long-term  
46 funding stream for that program, and that's the challenge we're  
47 facing with the headboat program. It had been limping along for  
48 a number of years, and finally it's essentially run out of, you

1 know, funding, at least a portion of it.

2  
3 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. I've been listening to all of this,  
4 and I appreciate that SERO and the Science Center have heard the  
5 discussion. You know, number of comments have been made,  
6 particularly by Mr. Anson and Dr. Sweetman and Captain Hubbard.

7  
8 You know, the motion on the board, that came from the AP, wasn't  
9 to direct the agency to spend money. It was to encourage them,  
10 right, essentially to consider it, and I think that's valuable,  
11 and I'm not telling, or suggesting, that we tell the agency how to  
12 prioritize necessarily, Andy, but, if you did choose, right, to do  
13 that, then at least you have a record here, right, to point to to  
14 say that, you know, there's a need, or an interest in that, and it  
15 strengthens your decision-making, and so I don't see any harm in  
16 doing it, and so my preference is actually to make a motion to  
17 encourage folks to, you know, seek or pursue funding to maintain  
18 the headboat survey. Dr. Sweetman.

19  
20 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and I agree with you. I mean, my main concern  
21 here is that -- I will make a motion, but, before I do that, I  
22 just want to say that my concern here is that putting forward  
23 something like this -- I don't want this to indicate to cut funding  
24 from something else, right, and like just consider trying to find  
25 funds available, as Tom was saying there, and so I'm happy to put  
26 forward a motion about that, Bernie, whenever you get a chance.

27  
28 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Simmons.

29  
30 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I don't  
31 think you have to do it right this second. I think we have a  
32 placeholder in Data Collection, should you want to think on it and  
33 see if we want to help getting some wording together. I'll just  
34 throw that out there. It's up to you.

35  
36 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and I'm tired of making motions on the fly,  
37 and so okay.

38  
39 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Walker, that's going to come back to  
40 your committee. Are you good with that?

41  
42 **MR. WALKER:** Yes.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. We'll put this off then. Are there  
45 any other motions that made by the AP that we might want to consider  
46 at this time?

47  
48 **MR. HUBBARD:** The last one that I had to cover, Dr. Frazer, was

1 just the recreational data collection one, that last one on the  
2 very bottom of the page, Bernie.

3  
4 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Let's go ahead and scroll to that motion.

5  
6 **MR. HUBBARD:** It's pretty basic.

7  
8 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** What's that?

9  
10 **MR. HUBBARD:** It's pretty basic.

11  
12 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Let me read through it, Captain Hubbard. The  
13 Reef Fish AP strongly recommends that the council request that  
14 NMFS, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, and the five Gulf  
15 States expedite the requirements for a private recreational  
16 federal fishing permit to fish in the EEZ. States can require  
17 similar language to their state fishing licenses to expedite  
18 implementation of the revised for-hire SEFHIER program and create  
19 and implement a similar required electronic data reporting program  
20 for the private recreational fishery. I think that's beyond this  
21 group at this time, and perhaps we can bring it back at Full  
22 Council. Thank you, Captain Hubbard. Go ahead, Dr. Sweetman.

23  
24 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Just a quick question for you, Dylan. Can you just  
25 explain how this conversation was brought up relative, and the  
26 justification for a federal recreational permit?

27  
28 **MR. HUBBARD:** It was brought up at the tail-end of the meeting,  
29 and not much discussion around it. We were all pretty beat up,  
30 after a long day, and the person who made it is in the room, and  
31 I can link you up with them, and their thinking, but it was a quick  
32 introduction, and, much like Dr. Frazer's reaction after reading  
33 it, that's kind of how the AP reacted, and so there wasn't much  
34 discussion around it, and so I can't really speak to it.

35  
36 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, Dylan. All right. We're  
37 going to try to keep on schedule here, and so the next item is the  
38 Draft Framework: Other Shallow-Water Grouper Catch Limits, and  
39 that's Tab B, Number 9, and, Dr. Froeschke, if you want to talk us  
40 through the action guide and then move to that.

41  
42 **DRAFT FRAMEWORK: OTHER SHALLOW-WATER GROUPEr CATCH LIMITS**

43  
44 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Okay, and so this document is a spinoff of Reef  
45 Fish 58A. In the development of that document, there was interest  
46 among the council to implement catch advice sooner than what that's  
47 going to take. That's a longer term, and it's going to require,  
48 likely, modification of the IF program and those sorts of things.

1  
2 This document is a streamlined document that considers changes to  
3 the shallow-water grouper catch limits and recreational season,  
4 and so there's two actions. You selected a preferred alternative  
5 for Action 1 at the last meeting, which I will review, and give  
6 you a brief overview of just kind of the rationale. This document  
7 is a little bit different, and then we'll go through the season  
8 alternatives, and hopefully I can talk you all into picking a  
9 preferred.

10  
11 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. We can go to the document.

12  
13 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Okay, and so what I would like to do is kind of  
14 walk you through some of the tables, and then we'll circle back to  
15 the alternatives. I'm going to go through Action 1, just to remind  
16 you where you are at, because it's linked to Action 2, and so if  
17 we could go to Table 2.1.1.

18  
19 This document resulted in part from the results from the scamp  
20 stock assessment, and that was getting old as we speak, SEDAR 68,  
21 and the SSC provided catch advice, illustrated here on the screen,  
22 and there are several changes.

23  
24 This would move the catch advice into FES currency. It's currently  
25 managed in the MRFSS. The catch advice on the screen here is just  
26 for two species, rather than the entire four-species complex that  
27 includes also black grouper and yellowfin grouper.

28  
29 These catch limits are a substantial reduction from the current  
30 catch limits. The ABC and ACL I think is 710,000 pounds for this  
31 combined complex now in MRFSS. It's never been caught, or closely  
32 caught, and so that was kind of where we were at. This assessment  
33 is getting old, and there was some concern that we should probably  
34 get to work on the catch limits, and so we began this document.

35  
36 If you could scroll down, I think there's a figure below that, and  
37 let's look at that table. This table gives you the landings in  
38 MRIP-FES for the commercial scamp and yellowmouth grouper. This  
39 is part of the information that was in the assessment. What we  
40 were trying to do though is the current catch advice that's  
41 considered in this document is in MRFSS, and we weren't trying to  
42 break all those eggs with this document, and so there was a little  
43 bit of translation, and so that's kind of what we did.

44  
45 If you go to Figure 2.1.1, and we've been through this, but just  
46 as a reminder, and what I did for this one is I tried to figure  
47 out, since we're switching currencies, how do you approximate the  
48 reduction necessary from the assessment to the catch advice, and

1 then how do we translate that into the other currency on sort of  
2 an interim basis.

3  
4 What I did on this one is the green line is the recent landings in  
5 the FES currency that I just showed you in the table above. The  
6 orange line is just the average across those five years. The  
7 purple line represents the catch advice from the SSC, and then I  
8 simply calculated the percentage reduction necessary to get from  
9 the orange dashed line to the purple line, okay, and that's this  
10 54.7 percent.

11  
12 If you scroll down now to the alternatives, you kind of see -- You  
13 might have to scroll up, actually. Sorry. We developed some  
14 alternatives. Again, the no action is the 710,000 pounds in the  
15 MRFSS. Alternative 2 would be to reduce it by 54.7 percent. You  
16 would reduce that 710,000 by 54.7 percent.

17  
18 Two other alternatives were trying to give it a slightly different  
19 flavor, given that we never caught that 710,000, and so Alternative  
20 3 would reduce the recent landings by 54.7 percent, and Alternative  
21 4, just to further muddy it, would reduce the landings of scamp  
22 and yellowmouth by 54 percent, but it would leave the black grouper  
23 and yellowfin grouper, which is a minor component of this catch  
24 unchanged, and so it's fairly similar to Alternative 3.

25  
26 Alternative 2 of the action alternatives is the largest catch, and  
27 so you can see the stock ACL is 322,000 pounds. Consistent with  
28 the current practice, the commercial ACL would be 255,000. There  
29 was an ACT that includes the 4 percent buffer for the commercial  
30 quota, and then the remaining portion would go to the recreational  
31 sector, and so none of that is different from how it's done now.

32  
33 You all had previously selected preferred Alternative 2. This was  
34 the recommendation of the AP, and you selected this at the last  
35 meeting, and so there isn't necessarily any business, unless you  
36 want to further discuss this, or if you have questions. Otherwise,  
37 we can go to Action 2, which considers the recreational seasons,  
38 which are linked, obviously, to the catch levels here, and so, if  
39 there are no questions, we can go to Action 2.

40  
41 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Any questions in regard to the first action?  
42 Billy.

43  
44 **MR. BROUSSARD:** Is the flexibility measure removed from this?  
45

46 **DR. FROESCHKE:** No, and that would be required in the amendment.  
47 That's not something we can do in the framework. That's why you'll  
48 see the 4 percent buffer in here.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Good question, though, Billy, and so I think  
3 this -- I mean, we landed on preferred last time, and so I'm not  
4 seeing any other hands around, and so we'll go ahead to the second  
5 action. John.

6  
7 **DR. FROESCHKE:** I think, similar, what I would like to do --  
8 There's a lot of text here, and so what I would like to do --  
9 There's a figure, Figure 2.2.1, and I'll just kind of talk you  
10 through this, and then there's a table, and then we can circle  
11 back to the alternatives, and then there's a Reef Fish AP  
12 recommendation as well.

13  
14 What I did here, and I'll try to thin this down a little bit, but  
15 for each of the action alternatives, there's what I've called 2a,  
16 2b, 2c, et cetera. The a's are consistent with the catch limits  
17 in Action 1, okay, and so that's the largest, and so, unless you're  
18 interested in changing your preferred in Action 1, you can  
19 essentially ignore 2b, 2c, all those, and so I'm just going to  
20 focus on the a's in each of these.

21  
22 Alternative 2a would open -- So the other thing I'll tell you is  
23 the way these were done is consistent with how things were done in  
24 -- It would be a projection based on the catch rate in each month,  
25 and that would be the season, and so, the way the accountability  
26 measures are established for this, it wouldn't be in-season  
27 monitoring or things. If there was an alternative selected, that  
28 would be the season, open and close.

29  
30 Alternative 2 would open in June, and then it would close -- We  
31 don't have the exact date, and you can kind of see it here, but in  
32 September, and so that's -- June is the highest catch rate, and so  
33 you're going to eat the most fish the fastest, and so Alternative  
34 3 would open July, and, as you'll see on 3a, you can go to the end  
35 of the year.

36  
37 Alternative 4 would open in September, and, since Alternative 3  
38 gets you to the end of the year, Alternative 4 also does, because  
39 it's less, and so that may be an alternative that -- I don't know  
40 if you need to remove it, but it doesn't seem to fit.

41  
42 Alternative 5 was introduced at the last meeting, during the  
43 discussion, and it would open in September, but it would also add  
44 April and May, and so it would be a split season. That would be  
45 the season, and so, again, it would get there, and so, really, in  
46 Alternative 4, there isn't a situation you would pick that.  
47 Alternative 5 would get more days, and, in Alternative 3, you would  
48 get more days.

1  
2 At some point, I don't know if Captain Hubbard wants to come up,  
3 but the Reef Fish AP introduced an alternative, or recommended  
4 one, for a new Alternative 6 that would be similar to Alternative  
5 5, although it would open August 1, instead of September 1, and I  
6 think the wording of the motion would say to the end of the year,  
7 or whenever the closure would be expected.

8  
9 There's an appendix in here, and I won't belabor you with the  
10 numbers, but I ran the numbers, and, essentially, that alternative  
11 looks like it would open August 1 and close October 14, and so I'm  
12 not sure if that -- We didn't have that information available at  
13 the time of the meeting. I'm not sure if that would be something  
14 that the AP would support, but that would be how it would look.  
15 The catch rates in November and December are very low. Catch rates  
16 in August are relatively high, compared to the other ones.

17  
18 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dylan.

19  
20 **MR. HUBBARD:** To answer your question, John, normally I wouldn't  
21 really feel super confident speaking on behalf of the AP, but,  
22 since I was the one who suggested this new alternative, I'll feel  
23 more confident speaking more freely about it.

24  
25 Personally, my thinking was I wanted to add this because, looking  
26 at this season alternative options, Alternative Option 5, as it  
27 existed, suggested being open April and May, and then reopening in  
28 August, and it would stay open until the end of the year.

29  
30 There was no projection or evaluation of an August opener, right,  
31 and so, if you open April and May and then reopen in September and  
32 go through the end of the year, why not evaluate if we open April  
33 and May and then open in August? If we get through the end of the  
34 year there, then the more season, the better, right, but, according  
35 to what you just said, if we open a month earlier on that fall  
36 component, and it closes us October 14, essentially losing two-  
37 and-a-half months for an extra month doesn't make any sense.

38  
39 I would personally, if we were back at the Reef Fish AP meeting,  
40 start suggesting Alternative 5, which would -- Essentially, the  
41 conversation around the table was trying to provide the longest  
42 possible season, and that was Alternative 5, according to these  
43 new projections that you just presented.

44  
45 The other thing that the Reef Fish AP talked about was -- I missed  
46 it in the summary, and I apologize. I should have caught it, but  
47 the summary should reflect also that we, as a Reef Fish AP, were  
48 supportive of the current preferred alternative in Action 1, which

1 is Alternative 2. Those are the two things we had on this.

2  
3 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Was there any discussion of -- I mean, what you  
4 just told me was that you're looking for the most access, right,  
5 over the period of the year, but that period that you just talked  
6 about excludes the June, and then we heard Captain Walker earlier  
7 say that there's an interest, right, in having access to multiple  
8 species in that June timeframe.

9  
10 **MR. HUBBARD:** I can speak to that, and I apologize. I should have  
11 brought it up. There was a discussion around the AP. There wasn't  
12 a motion to the effect, because this motion was already raised of  
13 supporting this new preferred Alternative 6, but there was a  
14 discussion in opposition to that motion, because some charter  
15 fishermen felt that they only fish the summer, and so they would  
16 rather see a much shorter season if it was open in June and July,  
17 and so there was a small minority who suggested that, but I think,  
18 through public comment and all that stuff, you guys can get a  
19 better feel for it, but I think there is some regionality to it,  
20 but, as far as the majority, and the motion that was ultimately  
21 passed through the AP, we supported the most possible access.

22  
23 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Just for clarity, I mean, in the absence of this  
24 new Alternative 6, that was Alternative 5?

25  
26 **MR. HUBBARD:** Yes, sir. To be clear, I myself personally would  
27 support Alternative 5, learning now that the suggested Alternative  
28 6 that the Reef Fish AP put forward, which I myself raised that  
29 motion, because I was just trying to get an extra month, but,  
30 hearing from Dr. Froeschke now, that extra month on the front end  
31 takes away two-and-a-half months on the back end, and that wouldn't  
32 make sense, because the whole idea was to get us more time, and so  
33 I would then revert back to Alternative 5, which is the most  
34 possible months.

35  
36 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Thank you. Mr. Frady.

37  
38 **MR. FRADY:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Dylan, I believe you're  
39 correct. I mean, I agree with you on the Alternative 5, having  
40 the longest season that we can. Those of us who make our living  
41 on the water -- Sure, we need fish to catch, but we also need the  
42 longest opportunity, and from August through the fall is not  
43 historically tourist season, for us up here in the northern Gulf,  
44 and so I would concur with Alternative 5. That would be the wisest  
45 and most logical decision that we can make. Thank you, sir.

46  
47 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Captain Frady. Captain Walker.

48

1 **MR. WALKER:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and, yes, my comments earlier  
2 were before I knew about John's math that said we would get a much  
3 shorter season if we were to open in June, July, and I speak in  
4 favor of that, and I would speak in favor of Alternative 5 here.  
5 It has a nice long season here, and, you know, I speak for myself  
6 and our region. We don't like book a scamp season. It's -- For  
7 me anyways, it's a nice bycatch, but we don't book scamp trips,  
8 and so being open longer is beneficial if we bump into one.

9  
10 Now, I know, the guys in the other parts of the Gulf, it might be  
11 a more -- A bigger part of their catch makeup, but, for me, it's  
12 not, but I've definitely changed my views on that since finding  
13 out about it would be a much shorter season if we were to open  
14 them in June and July.

15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dylan, and then Dr. Sweetman.

17  
18 **MR. HUBBARD:** Just to that point, other charter fishermen in the  
19 State of Florida, specifically Destin, have supported the idea of  
20 Alternative 5. They have their rodeo in October, and so, if it  
21 opened June 1, they wouldn't have them open for that rodeo, which  
22 is important to them.

23  
24 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Thank you. Dr. Sweetman.

25  
26 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Just to add my two-cents here, I'm certainly very  
27 interested to see what public comment says on this, maybe before  
28 we select a preferred. I do have some concerns about kind of  
29 splitting MRIP waves here with Alternative 5, because that's  
30 essentially what would be done, and then peak spawning season for  
31 scamp starts in March and April, and we would be harvesting them  
32 during that timeframe in Alternative 5, and, looking at Alternative  
33 3, which --

34  
35 I'm looking at the projections, and it gives us technically one  
36 more day than Alternative 5, and it kind of overlaps - Even though  
37 it doesn't start in June, which is typically when all of our red  
38 snapper seasons start, for the most part at least, and July does  
39 cover a good portion of that, during high-effort months there too,  
40 and so potentially mitigating discards, and so I just offer that  
41 up for consideration. I haven't made my mind one way or the other,  
42 but I do have some concerns with Alternative 5, just based on kind  
43 of the ones picked.

44  
45 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, C.J. Dr. Banks.

46  
47 **DR. BANKS:** Mine is the MRIP-wave discussion, the discards, and  
48 being open the rest of the year, and starting in July would cover

1 some of the things that -- We want to be open in the fall, but  
2 that was where I was going, is for discards.

3  
4 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Hubbard.

5  
6 **MR. HUBBARD:** Speaking for me personally, I think Alternative 5  
7 has been better vetted out and discussed around the industry, and  
8 around the Gulf, and so I feel a little bit more confident in  
9 Alternative 5, but, speaking for me personally, to your point,  
10 C.J., I am definitely conscientious to the fact that, if scamp are  
11 closed in the summer, when we're fishing -- In my area, fishing  
12 deeper than we normally do for red snapper, we do run into scamp,  
13 and so having it open for a period of time like that, starting in  
14 July, I think would still get to our point of having a longer  
15 possible season, and then at the same time getting to some of those  
16 discard issues. I think I would just personally want to reiterate  
17 that we're looking for the most possible access.

18  
19 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Banks.

20  
21 **DR. BANKS:** I think my question is for Dr. Froeschke. Remind me,  
22 and this would be in effect one or two years?

23  
24 **DR. FROESCHKE:** The plan, when we originally started talking about  
25 this, was Reef Fish 58A would require changes to the shallow-water  
26 group complexes and things, and that would likely take until 2027,  
27 and so this would be in effect for 2026. That was our thinking.

28  
29 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** One year.

30  
31 **DR. FROESCHKE:** That would be the plan.

32  
33 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Any other discussion? Is there an  
34 appetite to pick a preferred, or do you want to wait until public  
35 testimony? Billy.

36  
37 **MR. BROUSSARD:** 5 and 6, it doesn't work for Louisiana. It's going  
38 to create a discord mortality issue, because nobody targets scamp.  
39 They're strictly going out during snapper and catch them  
40 incidentally, and so either one of those options decreases the  
41 season in Louisiana substantially.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Billy, for that. Dr. Banks. Captain  
44 Walker.

45  
46 **MR. WALKER:** So does -- Would 3 be better for Louisiana, because  
47 they're both the same length, essentially.

48

1 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Banks.  
2  
3 **DR. BANKS:** So I'm happy to make a motion now, or go to public  
4 comment, and I'll look to the council, but I'm comfortable making  
5 a motion, if people have the appetite for it.  
6  
7 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I think it's okay to make a motion, right? I  
8 mean, we'll get more public comment, and then we can vote and  
9 change it in --  
10  
11 **DR. BANKS:** All right, Bernie, and I'm going to do it on the fly.  
12 I'm going to take a page out of C.J.'s book. **To make alternative**  
13 **3 as the preferred in Action 2.**  
14  
15 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** We'll get the motion up on the board. Motion by  
16 Dr. Banks, and seconded by Mr. Broussard. The motion is, in Action  
17 2, to make Alternative 3 the preferred. All right. Do you want  
18 to elaborate a little bit more, Dr. Banks?  
19  
20 **DR. BANKS:** I mean, I think that conversation captured it pretty  
21 well, but it seems to be the most beneficial for most of the Gulf.  
22 It coincides with snapper season. It would help reduce discards,  
23 and, just to reiterate, it's one year. If it doesn't work out,  
24 we're going to be implementing something else, and so it's not a  
25 set in stone. This one I feel a little more comfortable --  
26  
27 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Further discussion on this motion? Mr.  
28 Broussard.  
29  
30 **MR. BROUSSARD:** Yes, and, I mean, this just reeks of regional  
31 management. You know, we could really -- If there was some way,  
32 and I know that mechanism is not there, but this is one that could  
33 easily be solved, and satisfy everybody, if we had that  
34 established.  
35  
36 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Billy. Any further discussion? **Any**  
37 **opposition to the motion? Seeing none, the motion carries.** All  
38 right. Thank you. John, go ahead.  
39  
40 **DR. FROESCHKE:** I'm just thinking about is there any appetite for  
41 removing Alternative 4 from the document, and there's really not  
42 a situation in which that would be desired.  
43  
44 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Banks.  
45  
46 **DR. BANKS:** I'll make the motion. **Bernie, I would like to make a**  
47 **motion in Action 2 to move Alternative 4 to Considered but**  
48 **Rejected.**

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Motion by Dr. Banks, and seconded by Dr.  
3 Sweetman. The motion is, in Action 2, to move Alternative 4 to  
4 Considered but Rejected. All right. Is there any further  
5 discussion on the motion? **Seeing none, is there any opposition to**  
6 **the motion? Seeing none, the motion carries.**

7  
8 All right. We're going to just keep moving along here, and we're  
9 going to go to the next item on the agenda. All right. This will  
10 be Agenda Item Number X, Presentation on the Twenty-Fathom  
11 Recreational Seasonal Closure for Shallow-Water Grouper. That's  
12 Tab B, Number 10. Dr. Froeschke, if you want to go through the  
13 action guide and then the presentation.

14  
15 **PRESENTATION: TWENTY-FATHOM RECREATIONAL SEASONAL CLOSURE FOR**  
16 **SHALLOW-WATER GROUPE**  
17

18 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Okay, and so this presentation is a follow-up.  
19 We've kind of started and stopped on this. It started in April of  
20 2024, with a motion to consider removal of this twenty-fathom  
21 closure, which is a seasonal closure, which closes harvest to  
22 shallow-water grouper, which includes the other shallow-water  
23 grouper species we just discussed, along with red grouper and gag.

24  
25 We talked about that, and then there was a recommendation to pause  
26 on that, pending the outcome of the red grouper stock assessment,  
27 which we just received, and so now I'm bringing this back to you,  
28 to see how you all want to proceed, and so I have a short  
29 presentation, and we can figure out what you want to do next.

30  
31 Just to try to walk you through, and we've kind of started and  
32 stopped on this a little bit, but it's not exhaustive, I promise  
33 and so this is the motion in 2024, a year ago, to explore the  
34 removal of this closure, and so we developed some presentations,  
35 some options, and we've come to you all, and we've been to the  
36 APs, and got their feedback. Again, like I said, we were awaiting  
37 the red grouper assessment outcome, and so we have that, and here  
38 we are.

39  
40 So just for you all keeping score here, the map illustrates the  
41 geographic bounds of the twenty-fathom closure, and so the cross-  
42 hatched area is the area subject to closures, and it has a fairly  
43 long history of how it's been done, and what species and things  
44 it's been in place for, but you can see it encompasses the entire  
45 Gulf for those two months.

46  
47 This is just the infographic of the affected species. The thing  
48 I'll point out here is, as a result of other management actions,

1 gag is closed during this time to harvest. Red grouper is open,  
2 pending the completion of the document that you just previously  
3 discussed. The scamp yellowmouth, black grouper, and yellowfin  
4 would also be subject, and so it really would become just a red  
5 grouper document moving forward, presuming we went forward, and so  
6 just keep that in mind.

7  
8 Here is just a little bit of the biology. You can see that some  
9 of the rationale for this is that many of the grouper species spawn  
10 during this period, and so it's sort of the reason for part of the  
11 closure, and so you've seen this before, and we'll keep putting it  
12 in front of you.

13  
14 Just here's a little bit of just kind of what we've been up to.  
15 Again, the motion was from April 2024. We made this presentation  
16 in June to the council, and you asked us to begin working on a  
17 document, which we did. We presented it to the Reef Fish AP in  
18 December. They were supportive of this, but, again, they wanted  
19 -- They were curious about the red grouper season.

20  
21 The reason this is sort of tied in is there's some discussion that,  
22 if we opened up harvest outside of twenty fathoms, that fish are  
23 larger out there, and the catch rate may be higher, and so you may  
24 run out of fish faster than you would have otherwise, and so there  
25 was some concern that, while there's already so much pressure on  
26 the red grouper season, shortening year over year, that they were  
27 concerned that this might further exacerbate that, and so they  
28 wanted to see how these pieces fit together before deciding what  
29 to do.

30  
31 In February, the SSC reviewed the red grouper stock assessment.  
32 It was very favorable. It should result in substantial increases  
33 to the OFL and ABC, and likely access for the recreational sector  
34 to the stock. We don't have the particulars of what a season might  
35 be, or any of that yet, although we expect that to be forthcoming,  
36 and so it seems like we'll be quite busy working on that. We kind  
37 of just want to walk through what we might want to do with this,  
38 and I'll give you a couple options here just in the next couple  
39 slides.

40  
41 The next step, next slide, and so this is kind of just some of the  
42 things that we've discussed at council meetings, AP meetings, in  
43 the office kind of things, and so it wouldn't affect gag, based on  
44 how we're currently managing that.

45  
46 The shallow-water grouper document, if that went forward, based on  
47 the preferred alternative you just selected, it wouldn't be subject  
48 to this, and there aren't any alternatives in there that currently

1 have it consider this period to be open, and so there was one that  
2 opened January 1 and essentially ran until you ran out of fish,  
3 and that one was removed by you all at a previous meeting, and so  
4 it doesn't seem like that would come into play.

5  
6 Then some good news, and the red grouper assessment is favorable,  
7 and so we expect favorable trends in access and things, although  
8 I don't know exactly how that will pan out.

9  
10 You know, as far as what data could we calculate if you had this  
11 open, or you didn't, and how would that affect the red grouper,  
12 and that's going to be a very difficult analytical challenge,  
13 simply just by the data availability. I mean, I think what I could  
14 confidently say is that it wouldn't reduce the catch rate during  
15 that period. I don't know that we could quantify it, and there's  
16 some discussion about discards and things like that, but, for that  
17 purposes, you know, it wouldn't slow the catch rate. I'm confident  
18 in that, but there may be enough fish for red grouper to last the  
19 entire year, and so I don't know.

20  
21 This is sort of the management options. I mean, we tried to keep  
22 this short and sweet. We currently have this February to March  
23 closure, and Option 2 would be to remove it. That would be it,  
24 and then I think the next slide, and so the next steps, as I see  
25 them, is either we could develop a document to consider those  
26 options, or we could add an action to the red grouper document, or  
27 we could wait until we figure out what the season projections look  
28 like with red grouper and then decide how to proceed. I'll just  
29 stop there, to see if you have any input.

30  
31 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** C.J., and then Ed.

32  
33 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I've been the person,  
34 much to the chagrin of my colleague over here and Captain Hubbard,  
35 that has kind of been like let's hold on on this, and see what the  
36 actual impacts of removing this twenty-fathom closure are.

37  
38 Now that we've gotten kind of this updated assessment for red  
39 grouper, those concerns of mine are a little bit lower now, but  
40 it's still a challenge for me to understand this, because I would  
41 like to see like the season projections for red grouper in that  
42 assessment. I think that's kind of a baseline for what we need to  
43 figure out here.

44  
45 If, at the end of the day, you know, you've got -- Let's say it's  
46 a ten-month season for red grouper, and this cuts -- We do this  
47 moving forward, and get away with this recreational twenty-fathom  
48 closure, and I don't even know how you could do this, John, but

1 like how would you project to estimate what the reduction in the  
2 season would be?

3  
4 I understand exactly where you're coming from, and why you said  
5 catch rates won't be reduced, and so like point taken there, but  
6 I do think we kind of need to see what the season is going to look  
7 like before we kind of move forward on this, but, from my  
8 perspective, and maybe this could be something for Andy here, this  
9 would be a deregulatory action, if we ultimately got rid of this,  
10 and I think the points are all well taken.

11  
12 This was initially set up for gag, and some of the other species  
13 in there, and we already have closures for them. I've heard loud  
14 and clear about what Captain Hubbard has said, and Captain Walker  
15 has said, about this topic in particular, and so I think I'm maybe  
16 a little bit more in favor of maybe moving forward with this, but  
17 still holding tight until we see what those projections look like.  
18 Thank you.

19  
20 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Walker.

21  
22 **MR. WALKER:** So this was actually my first motion as a council  
23 member, and here it is like a tennis ball, going back and forth,  
24 but so -- I've flip-flopped on it myself, when I found out it might  
25 make the season shorter, and so, to me, the whole issue here is is  
26 it going to shorten the season, and, if we say we have an all-year  
27 season next year, optimistically, you know, would it trim a month  
28 or two off, because that's a yes or no vote for me.

29  
30 I would like to see it go away. I would not trade it for a shorter  
31 season, because open is more important than twenty-fathom or not  
32 twenty-fathom, and so that's -- I'm probably going to ask you to  
33 give us your best estimate on that, because that's going to be the  
34 decision point for me.

35  
36 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Hubbard, if you want to come on up.

37  
38 **MR. HUBBARD:** Thank you. I appreciate that. I was jumping around  
39 in my chair, and so the Reef Fish AP talked about this countless  
40 times. I've been involved in federal fisheries meetings now since  
41 2016, and I've been trying to get rid of this twenty-fathom closure  
42 since I showed up to meetings.

43  
44 Every time it's brought up, it's, oh, we can't do it until this,  
45 or we have to wait for this. This rule is extremely, extremely,  
46 extremely burdensome, and we are ordered to deregulate, and this  
47 is something we can deregulate really easily and be a huge win.

48

1 To Captain Walker's point, I personally would disagree. To me,  
2 this twenty-fathom closure -- I deal with recreational fishermen  
3 on partyboats all the time. That's our business, and recreational  
4 fishermen are sometimes, especially people coming from out of town,  
5 and they're not professionals. They don't fish every day like  
6 you, Captain Walker.

7  
8 They don't know. When you hear a twenty-fathom closure, they don't  
9 know what a fathom is. They just hear the word "closure", and  
10 countless times, multiple times a day, I have to explain to people  
11 that it's not closed. We can still keep them. It just means we  
12 have to fish inside this imaginary line that has been forced down  
13 our throats, and everybody else gets to fish outside of it. We  
14 watch commercial boats fish outside of it the whole two months,  
15 and recreational fishermen pass us, laughing at us as they pass  
16 it, and we watch photos of twelve-pound scamp get posted with red  
17 grouper all February and March, and you have to go past twenty-  
18 fathoms to find those fish.

19  
20 I mean, to me, we've lived with a seven-month, a six-month, and  
21 now potentially a five-month red grouper fishery. We're getting  
22 a huge increase. Now is the time to take this away, even if it  
23 takes a month or two off the end. It prevents confusion, and it  
24 causes more people to book trips. In my opinion, it will help us  
25 to kill less red grouper.

26  
27 Dr. Froeschke was on the boat with us during this closure. We  
28 have to fish inside this imaginary line, and we're forced to  
29 interact with more juvenile red grouper. Our discard mortality  
30 goes up because of this ridiculous rule. We have to be able to  
31 fish more effectively, go deeper, reduce discards, and catch the  
32 same amount of red grouper.

33  
34 We still are going to get our red grouper. We're just forced to  
35 fish longer, fish in an area where there's more juveniles, and  
36 we're killing more fish. Let's please get rid of this rule that  
37 was in place to protect gags, and now gags will be closed at this  
38 time, and scamp will be closed at this time, and now we finally  
39 have a chance to get rid of this rule.

40  
41 It's unequitable. There's so many different litany of reasons,  
42 and I don't want to go into it again, because you guys have heard  
43 me speak on this often, and so I know you know all the different  
44 reasons why, but, I mean, we have to get rid of this rule, please.

45  
46 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay, and so I've heard four things here, right,  
47 that there's a potential problem with enforcement, one. Two, if  
48 we get rid of this, we might alleviate some of the discard

1 mortality issues. Three, there's a deregulation point to be made,  
2 which might be viewed favorably by the agency and the  
3 administration, and then, four, it coincides with an effort to  
4 increase access to red grouper and increase the economic benefit.  
5

6 I think, given the two options here, how you want to do it, and we  
7 also want to know what effect it's going to actually have, right,  
8 and so I'm suggesting to the group, but I'm not going to make the  
9 motion, that you include it as an action in the red grouper  
10 document, so it can be considered at that time, along with all the  
11 other data, but that's only one of two options.  
12

13 **MR. WALKER:** I feel like I just need more information before I can  
14 make that suggestion.  
15

16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and we don't -- I mean, again, so we don't  
17 have to make that motion today. We can make it at Full Council.  
18 I just -- What I've heard is there's an appetite largely to move  
19 in that direction, and there are two options, to treat it as a  
20 standalone or incorporate it into the right document.  
21 Thematically, it's aligned with the red grouper document, and  
22 that's why I thought it made sense. C.J.  
23

24 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and, I mean, I completely agree with you. I  
25 think, if this gets included into the red grouper document, we're  
26 going to have all the information that we would have in there,  
27 that we would need in there, and we're going to see what the catch  
28 level projections would be. We're going to see what the season  
29 projections could possibly be, maybe, but, yes. Anyways, I think  
30 we'll have all the information that we need in order to make this  
31 assessment there, and understood, Dylan, that you've been working  
32 on this since 2016. Another few months ain't going to kill you.  
33

34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Ms. Levy.  
35

36 **MS. LEVY:** It's not really a legal question, but I'm curious,  
37 because it does relate to whatever's going to be in this. John,  
38 when you looked at this, was there any consideration for discards?  
39 Like, if you open it back up, red grouper, but what about discards  
40 of gag? I mean, it's closed, right? Right now, it's all closed,  
41 and so then, if you open it back up, has there been any thought  
42 about that, or is that what would go into this document, like  
43 consideration of discards of the other species?  
44

45 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** John.  
46

47 **DR. FROESCHKE:** We've thought about it. The problem is we just  
48 don't have a lot of data, and the way that the data are collected

1 are not spatially explicit. I mean, the one concern I would say  
2 is, you know, if you did this, you probably would get a few more  
3 discards. I don't know if you'd get more in terms of number. They  
4 might be bigger, and caught in slightly deeper water, but, you  
5 know, that's what's in here for kind of how we're doing it.

6  
7 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dylan.

8  
9 **MR. HUBBARD:** Sorry, and so, to your question, we might not have  
10 the data empirically, but, subjectively, on the water, in February  
11 and March, gags are in shallow. Female gags come inshore, and  
12 especially in our area, where the majority of gags are caught, and  
13 they come in shore in the cooler months, starting in like November  
14 or December, with the cold fronts, and the females come in, and  
15 they gorge themselves before swimming offshore, and they're still  
16 around in February and March.

17  
18 That's the time of year where the bait starts to show up, and we  
19 literally will catch gags on flatlines while we start flatlining  
20 for kingfish in March, when that water temperature gets right.  
21 They're so frisky, and we're catching gags in forty feet of water.  
22 We catch gags in Tampa Bay, trolling the shipping channel, and so  
23 gag grouper discards are going to happen regardless of where this  
24 twenty-fathom closure goes.

25  
26 If we fish deeper, it wouldn't necessarily affect any net change  
27 on gags. If anything, we're going to run into less gags, because,  
28 most of the time, those females inshore are more aggressive, and  
29 so, if you push us -- Or if you allow us to go back out beyond  
30 twenty-fathoms, into an area outside of the grounds, we're going  
31 to be encountering less of those female aggressive gags, and so,  
32 in my opinion, I think we would run into less gags. We might see  
33 a bigger one, because we're fishing deeper, but there's going to  
34 be less concentrations, and they're going to be less aggressive.

35  
36 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Thank you, Dylan. Captain Walker.

37  
38 **DR. WALKER:** To that, I would also point out that we're targeting  
39 red grouper, and targeting gag, and we do fish different types of  
40 bottom features. If I'm going looking for gags, and like I've  
41 been commercial fishing for gags since January, and I've caught  
42 almost all of my gag quota, and I only catch a handful of red  
43 grouper per trip, and so there is certainly some overlap.

44  
45 There can be a gag on some flat, hard bottom, where the red groupers  
46 hang out, and vice versa, but they're not together all the time on  
47 certain spots. It's an issue, but I don't think it's a major  
48 issue.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Any more discussion on this particular  
3 item? Anthony.

4  
5 **DR. ANTHONY OVERTON:** Maybe something to consider with respect to  
6 discard mortality is, if there are bigger, older fish out there,  
7 then it could be likely that it would be less discards, as opposed  
8 to fishing inshore, where there's smaller and more fish, and so,  
9 in terms of the number of discards, it may actually go down, which  
10 is -- You know, I know the older fish are more important, but the  
11 number -- If we're looking at strictly numbers, the discard  
12 mortality could be substantially less. Just something to consider  
13 as we move through this.

14  
15 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Dr. Overton. All right. Any other  
16 discussion on this item? All right, and so I'm not seeing any.  
17 We'll certainly get some discussion during public comment on this,  
18 and we can bring it up at Full Council and decide where we want to  
19 go. So, Mr. Chairman, I think we are about done for the day.

20  
21 **MR. DUGAS:** Yes, sir. Thank you, Dr. Frazer, for taking us through  
22 that. Before we adjourn, a couple announcements. We have an on-  
23 site and virtual public comment session on the recreational  
24 initiative outcomes today from 5:00 to 6:00, and then, at 6:30,  
25 there is a social at Zeke's Marina that the Alabama Charter Fishing  
26 Association is hosting, and, other than that, we'll see you at  
27 8:30 in the morning. Thank you.

28  
29 (Whereupon, the meeting recessed on April 8, 2025.)

30  
31 - - -

32  
33 April 9, 2025

34  
35 WEDNESDAY MORNING SESSION

36  
37 - - -

38  
39 The Reef Fish Management Committee of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery  
40 Management Council reconvened at The Lodge in Gulf Shores, Alabama  
41 on Wednesday morning, April 9, 2025, and was called to order by  
42 Chairman Tom Frazer.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** We will pick up of the Reef Fish committee Agenda  
45 Item Number XI, which is a final action, Framework Action:  
46 Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limits, and Ms. Gardiner  
47 is going to lead us through the action guide.

1           **FINAL ACTION: FRAMEWORK ACTION: MODIFICATIONS TO LANE SNAPPER**  
2                                   **MINIMUM SIZE LIMITS**  
3

4 **MS. SARAH GARDINER:** Thank you. Good morning, members of the  
5 committee. I'm going to be walking through the final action for  
6 the lane snapper minimum size limit today, and so, just reading  
7 through the action guide, I'll present the final action draft for  
8 modifying the lane snapper minimum size limit.

9  
10 Just as a reminder to folks of why this is why this is brought  
11 forward, the recreational sector expressed interest in maintaining  
12 a year-round fishing season for lane snapper, which has recently  
13 -- In recent years, has closed early due, to the ACL being met.  
14 Additionally, the council directed staff to develop management  
15 actions to aim and to extend the fishing season and reduce in-  
16 season closures.

17  
18 Ms. Muehlstein will provide the public comment that's received,  
19 and I'll walk through the final action draft, and then we'll go  
20 through the codified text, and the the committee should evaluate  
21 the management options and the accompanying analysis presented,  
22 review its preferred alternative, and recommend whether the  
23 council should take final action on the proposed regulations. I'll  
24 pass over the mic.

25  
26 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** Okay, and I will take over, and so we did a --  
27 Since this is a framework action, we created a public hearing video  
28 and opened an online comment form. We received comments starting  
29 in January 2025, and have summarized them through Tuesday of last  
30 week, which was April 1. One thing that we did a little bit  
31 standalone special for this one is we did put through a push  
32 notification on the Fish Rules app.

33  
34 We received 3,750 click-throughs from the Fish Rules app on that  
35 push notification. 141 people watched our public hearing video on  
36 the lane snapper modifications, and we received twelve comments,  
37 and I'll just go ahead and summarize those very quickly.

38  
39 We did hear support for no action. We also heard support for  
40 Alternative 2, which would raise the size limit to ten inches.  
41 The rationale provided was that an eight-inch fish is too small to  
42 get any meat off the fillets, and that they're not worth the time  
43 and effort at that small size anyways.

44  
45 We also heard support for Alternative 3, which would increase the  
46 size limit to twelve inches. The rationale provided was that  
47 increasing the size limit to twelve inches would allow fish to  
48 reproduce two or three times before harvest and that anything

1 smaller would not allow enough spawning cycles before harvest.

2  
3 We heard that the larger size would rapidly produce more quality  
4 fish for harvest, that it would take some pressure off other  
5 species, and that anything smaller doesn't yield enough meat. We  
6 also heard that we should not increase the size limit to twelve  
7 inches. We also heard support for reducing the bag limit to ten  
8 per person or five per person.

9  
10 We heard a desire to remove bag limit reductions from  
11 consideration. We also heard that this is a band-aid on a bigger  
12 issue and that the council needs to address the core problem before  
13 it gets worse. We also heard that the council doesn't know how  
14 many fish are out there, and so it doesn't have accurate numbers,  
15 and then we also heard that gag should be open for two more weeks,  
16 and that's it.

17  
18 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Ms. Muehlstein. Are there any  
19 questions with regard to the public comments? Captain Walker.

20  
21 **MR. WALKER:** What was the core problem?

22  
23 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** The idea that we're chasing sort of an increasing  
24 stock and that the annual catch limits are constraining us to  
25 having closed seasons, and short seasons, and that when that we're  
26 modifying harvest, and slowing harvest, despite the fact that the  
27 stock is healthy, is my understanding of what they were getting  
28 after there.

29  
30 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Ms. Muehlstein. All  
31 right, and so I guess we can go ahead and look at the action item  
32 in the document. Ms. Gardiner.

33  
34 **MS. GARDINER:** Yes, and thank you. Bernie, if you could please  
35 pull up the document and go to the purpose and need, Section 1.2.  
36 So, while Bernie is pulling that up, I'll just remind folks of the  
37 timeline here, and so I brought this to the council in November  
38 and then in January of 2025.

39  
40 In January, the council picked a preferred alternative under Action  
41 1 to modify the recreational and commercial size limit to a ten-  
42 inch total length for Gulf lane snapper, and, at the January  
43 meeting, the council also moved the Action 2, any bag limit  
44 considerations, to Considered but Rejected, and so you'll find  
45 that in Appendix C of the document.

46  
47 Under Action 1, Preferred Alternative 2, we've reworked the  
48 document to highlight and discuss the changes that would be in

1 effect based on this preferred alternative, and we added Chapter  
2 3 and Chapter 4. I'm not going to go into those in detail, but,  
3 if there are any questions that the committee might have, I'm happy  
4 to pull up the tables and can get those answered for you.  
5

6 On page 54 of the document, Table 4.2.2 and Table 4.2.3 really  
7 highlight the proposed changes that may be predicted, based on the  
8 change in Preferred Alternative 2. Those are the two I really  
9 want to highlight for the documents, and I think those give a good  
10 summary, or a good view, of what the percent reductions in landings  
11 would be, as well as potential in-season closures as a result of  
12 the preferred alternative. With that, I'm happy to take any  
13 questions, or review anything further in the document, before we  
14 move on to the codified text  
15

16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thank you, Ms. Gardiner. Are there  
17 any questions with regard to the document, the single action item,  
18 or the preferred alternative? Mr. Strelcheck.  
19

20 **MR. STRELCHECK:** In light of many comments I've been making this  
21 week about regulatory and deregulatory actions, one of the things  
22 that I do want to talk to the economists about is the economic  
23 effects section.  
24

25 It's showing a net economic impact of like -- Excuse me. A net  
26 economic change of negative-\$11 million, right, for lane snapper,  
27 which is really a surprise to me, one that it's that high, and  
28 kind of the reasoning behind that, and, obviously, we have  
29 increasing the size limit, which will reduce the number of fish  
30 that people could retain, but then the benefit is that you're  
31 allowing for a longer fishing season.  
32

33 I think we've all talked about the fact that lane snapper isn't  
34 necessarily a species where someone is just going to go out and  
35 target lane snapper, and make a trip solely for lane snapper, and  
36 so, right now, I guess I'm questioning whether or not we're  
37 overestimating the economic impacts or effects of this, and, if  
38 so, how those might be adjusted, or corrected, based on what we're  
39 trying to do with the tradeoff between increasing a size limit and  
40 extending the season.  
41

42 I think we're also essentially counting overharvest, right, and  
43 taking that back away, when we should be, obviously, maintaining  
44 to the catch limit in the first place, and so I just wanted to  
45 note that on the record, and it's not something I think we can  
46 correct today, but definitely we would want to look at before the  
47 amendment is finalized and submitted to us, or the framework is  
48 submitted to us.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** So, given those comments, Andy, so, if we were  
3 to move forward and vote this up, right, as a final action item,  
4 I guess, given the way that that motion typically is written,  
5 right, staff would have the latitude to adjust the language in the  
6 economic section? Okay, and that's what I wanted to know. Okay.

7  
8 Any other questions with regard to the document? I guess we should  
9 take a quick peek at the codified text, and that would be Tab B,  
10 Number 11(c) in the briefing materials. It's pretty  
11 straightforward. Any questions on the codified text? It's just  
12 one simple change. Mara, do you want to? It's pretty simple,  
13 isn't it? All right. So I guess, at this point, we can make a  
14 committee motion, if somebody is willing to do that. Dr. Sweetman.

15  
16 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Sure, and I will start the day off with the motion  
17 on the fly again. Lovely, Bernie, and that is my motion. To  
18 recommend the council approve the Framework Action: Modifications  
19 to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limit and that it be forwarded to the  
20 Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation and deem the  
21 codified text is necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial  
22 license to make the necessary changes in the document. I think  
23 that accounts for the economic discussion that Andy was having  
24 there, and then the council chair is given the authority to deem  
25 any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate.

26  
27 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Excellent. Thank you, Dr. Sweetman. Is there  
28 a second for that motion? It's seconded by Captain Walker. Any  
29 further discussion on the motion? Seeing none, I don't think --  
30 Do we have to do a roll call vote here or at Full Council, Dr.  
31 Simmons?

32  
33 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Full council, Mr. Chair.

34  
35 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Is there any opposition to the motion?  
36 Seeing none, the motion carries. All right. Thank you, Ms.  
37 Gardiner.

38  
39 The next agenda item is Agenda Item Number XII, and that's a  
40 presentation for a greater amberjack flowchart to identify  
41 decision points for regional management. That would be Tab B,  
42 Number 12 in the briefing materials, and Dr. Froeschke can lead us  
43 through the action guide, as well as the presentation, and so we'll  
44 let John get settled.

45  
46 **PRESENTATION: GREATER AMBERJACK FLOWCHART TO IDENTIFY DECISION**  
47 **POINTS FOR REGIONAL MANAGEMENT**

1 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Good morning. This presentation is perhaps long  
2 overdue. It's been kind of a long-standing request to take a look  
3 at regional management, and the potential for that for greater  
4 amberjack, and so we put together a presentation, and a kind of  
5 flowchart, and I don't know if that's really exactly what it is,  
6 but try to go through some of the decision points, if you will,  
7 and kind of what we've learned from red snapper, and get your  
8 feedback on how you would like to proceed, and so I'm ready  
9 whenever you are.

10  
11 Okay, and so I kind of mentioned it, but the idea of this  
12 presentation is just kind of to put a summary together of, if you  
13 all decide to go down this path, these are the things that you may  
14 want to discuss and think about it, and there are several, and so  
15 I'll kind of try to lay those out and get some feedback.

16  
17 The good news is that, for better or worse, you know, we've done  
18 this red snapper, and so we kind of have an idea of what's involved,  
19 and what the pain points are, or might be, and how we might either  
20 look forward, to try to mitigate those in advance, or just enter  
21 with full awareness of they are.

22  
23 Some of the kind of things that we'll talk about are what we're  
24 calling sector separation, and so would the for-hire fleet be  
25 included in this or not, the accountability measures, data  
26 limitations, and how you would evaluate this going forward.

27  
28 I have a few slides in here just to provide a high-level overview  
29 of the history of management of amberjack, just for everyone's  
30 collective information. This has been a -- There's a long history  
31 of management on both the commercial and the recreational side.

32  
33 The green line, and I'll kind of point to that, is, if you look  
34 from the 1990s it was an open all season, and, similar to red  
35 snapper and things, as the allowable harvest has been reduced, the  
36 season access has gotten shorter, to the point now where we're  
37 pretty slim.

38  
39 The stock status of this has been overfished and overfishing,  
40 experiencing overfishing, every single time, and I think we've  
41 done six stock assessments, and so that's been a challenge.

42  
43 One unique problem for this stock is, despite it being overfished  
44 and experiencing overfishing, the fishery has, by and large,  
45 continue to have been fully caught almost every year, which is  
46 typically not something that we consider when it's depleted, and  
47 so there's that.

1 The other thing I'll kind of point, notwithstanding just the most  
2 recent years, but, from the mid 1990s all the way to the 2000s,  
3 there was ups and downs, but the landings were really fairly  
4 stable, either as a product of management or just the way they  
5 were, and so let's go to the next slide. If you have questions,  
6 please just jump in, and I'll try to answer.

7  
8 This slide kind of points to that, and so that the two lines, the  
9 orangish line and then the blue line, represent the annual catch  
10 limits, and I guess what I'll point out to them is, despite all  
11 the management changes, we didn't really change the harvest levels  
12 very much, for good or bad.

13  
14 Amendment 54, that green asterisk down there that you all recall,  
15 we took a very big and painful swing at reducing harvest. We're  
16 slowly creeping up, which is not included in this figure, but we're  
17 optimistic that that has a meaningful impact on the stock. The  
18 red just indicate some of the stock assessments down there, and,  
19 again, those are all met with poor results.

20  
21 I have a couple slides here just to go over the landings by state,  
22 and kind of we might circle back to this at some point, but two  
23 points, I guess primarily, is there are large disparities in the  
24 harvest by states, which is not unusual, with Florida being the  
25 largest component of the landings.

26  
27 What's not totally apparent, and you can kind of see it in this  
28 right panel, is, among years, the estimates of harvest for an  
29 individual state very widely, and so that could be the movement of  
30 the fish, or it could be the imprecise nature of our landings  
31 estimates, or it could be a combination of those, or it could be  
32 something totally different, but you can't see that, and then so,  
33 if you kind of fast-forward all the way to the end, and think about  
34 how you might apportion these and things, the data get pretty  
35 difficult to work with, in that some of them are -- Some of the  
36 state mode combinations are confidential, and the uncertainty  
37 around those is large.

38  
39 The next slide is a table, on the left, of individual years of the  
40 landings by the for-hire and the private mode, and then the  
41 percentages of the recreational landings to the right panel there,  
42 and so they sum to the 100 percent, and it doesn't include the  
43 commercial component of the landings.

44  
45 What you'll see is it's predominantly private landings, with a lot  
46 of intra-annual variability. On the right table, I've summarized  
47 those at a higher level. To give you an idea across the time  
48 series, from 2004 to 2023, it's about a 70/30 private to for-hire.

1 More recently, that's pretty much the same, and then, in the most  
2 recent five years, it's slightly more on the for-hire. I don't  
3 have the variance estimates about those, but that doesn't seem  
4 necessarily indicative of a trend to me. We would have to look.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Ed, you have a question?

7  
8 **MR. WALKER:** Can you go back to slide 5? I'm kind of hung up on  
9 something there. Am I reading this right, that, in 2022 and 2023,  
10 Mississippi caught most of the amberjack in the Gulf of Mexico?

11  
12 **DR. FROESCHKE:** That's the data that we have, and I think there  
13 were some conversations around the table about those landings, as  
14 I recall, and, again, those smaller states, or things on -- When  
15 you drill down to the data, and just by virtue of the size,  
16 Mississippi is almost always a fairly tight drill down. The  
17 uncertainty about those is large.

18  
19 A little bit of background, and I kind of mentioned the stock  
20 status, and I think you're all familiar with the short seasons and  
21 the low annual catch limits, and some stocks are -- Oftentimes,  
22 when the landings, or the catch limits, are low, the landings,  
23 especially in an overfished stock are low, and we don't catch them,  
24 and it's not a problem.

25  
26 This one, we really never have done that reliably. They've always  
27 been caught, for good or bad, you know, and so we've had difficulty  
28 constraining these, and so there have been times when I think we've  
29 had large overages, and we do have accountability measures with  
30 paybacks, and so, when you have very variable landings, with the  
31 payback sometimes, you can run through a lot of fish, and it's  
32 problematic in future seasons, which just makes the whole problem  
33 worse.

34  
35 There's been a long-standing request to explore some of these  
36 alternative management approaches that may improve these outcomes,  
37 state management, or regional management, and I kind use those  
38 terms interchangeably. I mean, that would be something that you  
39 would all have to think about.

40  
41 We've all done this with red snapper, and so some of the advantages  
42 are it's more flexibility on a regional scale, and you might have  
43 ability to tailor bag limits, or size limits, or things like that,  
44 similar to red snapper, and that would all be part of the process,  
45 if you're interested.

46  
47 When I put this together, it made sense to kind of go through red  
48 snapper, and I lived through that, and, from my perspective, we

1 had state management, which was a large undertaking, but, prior to  
2 that, we had sector separation in Amendment 40, and, in my view,  
3 those are together as part of this process, at least in terms of  
4 thinking, and so I'll discuss aspects of both of those, and it  
5 doesn't necessarily mean that's how you would have to go about it  
6 in this situation, but just the collective experience that was  
7 part of it.

8  
9 Kind of how we got here for red snapper, and a similar situation,  
10 where we had a longer season, and then, in about 2010, the stock  
11 started growing, in response to harvest reductions, and the season  
12 got shorter, and, as the season got shorter, the effort increased,  
13 because people wanted to get out there in the very short seasons,  
14 and so the catch -- The reducing the season didn't reduce the  
15 catch. They were no longer corresponding, how you might  
16 anticipate, and so, every year, the season got shorter and shorter,  
17 even though the catch, the ACLs, were increasing, by and large.

18  
19 In 2016, we had nine days, and then, in 2017, I worked with Dr.  
20 Farmer, and we were working on the projections, which were three  
21 days, and that's what -- Just the continuation of that method,  
22 and, as I said, we strained long and hard on that. The Secretary  
23 of Commerce extended that by thirty-nine days, and so there was a  
24 longer season, and there was a large overage as a result.

25  
26 In 2018, there was a pilot program, via an exempted fishing permit,  
27 where the states kind of pilot tested this idea of state  
28 management. There were individual state ACLs, and then states  
29 essentially tried it out.

30  
31 We began working on Amendment 58, which was the state management,  
32 50A being the comprehensive one, and there was a separate amendment  
33 for each individual state, but that's not important, and so this  
34 operationalized the EFP, I'll say, with some changes from what we  
35 learned in working through that, but, essentially, each state now  
36 has their own annual catch limit, and they have some flexibility  
37 on seasons and other regulations that were included in the  
38 analysis, and so that was all part of the process.

39  
40 More specifically, again, we have the annual catch limits for the  
41 states, and minimum size limits within a range. I think it was  
42 fourteen to eighteen inches, bag limits within a range, and then  
43 seasonal closures, and then the states were responsible for  
44 monitoring their individual ACLs through state-run programs.

45  
46 The accountability measures, there were in-season closures, and  
47 each state agreed to close it when their portion of the ACL has  
48 been harvested, and then there were post-season accountability

1 measures, that we call paybacks, and that's typical for that, and  
2 it's in red snapper, although, at least with red snapper, on the  
3 state-specific paybacks, you all have discussed some  
4 unpleasantness with that, and so I'm cognizant of things that have  
5 perhaps not worked as well as we've all intended, and so, you know,  
6 this would be the opportunity to try to be more forward-thinking.

7  
8 Similar to red snapper, my understanding is this would still be a  
9 federally-managed species, and require federal oversight, just  
10 like in red snapper, and there are still default state regulations,  
11 and a private component ACT, in the event that a state didn't  
12 participate in management and things, and so they would still  
13 remain in that way, is how I would intend it or expect it to work.

14  
15 Then, kind of circling back to the Amendment 40, the one that did  
16 sector separation, prior to this, the council elected to split the  
17 federal for-hire component from the private angling, and so, in  
18 this context, they made it simpler, because you were just dealing  
19 with the private anglers. We don't have that decision point for  
20 amberjack, but I expect it would be part of the decision-making  
21 process.

22  
23 I tried to summarize here what I view is at least some of the  
24 initial decision points. Again, I kind of tried to put them in  
25 here how it made sense to me to logically think through them, and  
26 kind of in order, but it doesn't necessarily mean it has -- That  
27 that's the only way to be done, but my first question was would  
28 this be a for-hire or private angling component, and so that would  
29 be sort of the sector separation.

30  
31 The reason I kind of say that is just trying to provide some  
32 context of the magnitude of this. You might recall, and I recall,  
33 the sector separation in public comment was the longest one we've  
34 ever had that I've worked here, and it went to almost midnight,  
35 and so there was a lot of interest, you know, and it was a big  
36 accomplishment for the council, and it was interesting.

37  
38 Then the management units, and I'll kind of go through this a  
39 little, and I think I have a couple of slides other than that,  
40 and, I mean, we've done red snapper by states, but it wouldn't  
41 have to be necessarily states. It could be some zones, regions,  
42 or something else.

43  
44 The big piece of Amendment 50A was this apportioning of fish among  
45 the states, or regions, however you would do it. There are lots  
46 of different ways it could be done. Historically, it's an  
47 allocation, and we've used landings. You know, there are a few  
48 challenges with the landings. There's different programs, and

1 calibration, and all that, and we would kind of have to really  
2 think through that, but it wouldn't -- It's not the only way it  
3 could be done.

4  
5 Red snapper was kind of a combination of using the landings as a  
6 guide, but, ultimately, there was just some agreements among the  
7 states to try to find common ground, where everybody could live  
8 with it, and so I'm not suggesting that any one of those needs to  
9 be done, or something else entirely could be done, but just  
10 thinking out loud.

11  
12 You know, kind of the good news is we've done it before, and so  
13 now hopefully it's better, and at least we understand what we're  
14 trying to get to. The bad news is there's definitely been some  
15 pain points, both during the process and then after the process,  
16 and I think there are things that perhaps we would have done  
17 better, or differently, and then I kind of just had a bullet,  
18 similar to red snapper, and would we want to start with an EFP, if  
19 you were to go down this path, and so just things to think about.

20  
21 These next few slides kind of just go through these in a little  
22 more detail, and so I'll just call this sector separation, and,  
23 you know, essentially, the for-hire fleet, is that something that  
24 they would be included in this or not? We went through this in  
25 Reef Fish Amendment 40 for red snapper.

26  
27 You know, the long-term consequences is just the charter component  
28 has been more stable, and their seasons have grown, but, you know,  
29 this ongoing concern about fairness for private anglers, and that  
30 situation, which you're all well-versed.

31  
32 It doesn't have to include separate separation, and that's just  
33 how that one was done, and so I'm not suggesting that you have to  
34 do it that way, but I think it would be something you would need  
35 to decide. Similar to red snapper, I think it could provide the  
36 stability for the for-hire sector, or perhaps not, and, you know,  
37 the challenge, as I see it today, for however it's done, is that  
38 the harvest, as we sit here today, is so low that it would be  
39 really difficult to divide it up in some meaningful way. Then,  
40 you know, there's, you know, a little bit more management  
41 complexity, I would presume.

42  
43 This, Lisa put together a presentation a few years ago trying to  
44 think about this, either some sort of regional or zonal management  
45 for amberjack, and so the maps on the right I pulled from  
46 presentation that she put together, and so these were primarily  
47 zones, and there's an Alternative 2 and 3, and those are from the  
48 other ones, and they're not in the formal document that we're

1 actually working on right now, but just to give an illustration  
2 of other things other than just specifically states.

3  
4 The other thing I would say is, when we did this conversation, I  
5 think this was the time that we actually went to the split season,  
6 and the split season was initially put in place with the  
7 understanding that different portions of the Gulf preferred to  
8 harvest during different times of the year, and so that was almost  
9 an attempt at a quasi-zonal management, just using a split season,  
10 and now we've gone away from the split season, simply because the  
11 catch limits are so low.

12  
13 Allocation is always a fun topic. Just kind of going through what  
14 was done with the red snapper, there's historical landings. Right  
15 now, that's a little bit challenging. We have new data push coming  
16 online, but the FES system isn't -- The calibration isn't there  
17 yet. We don't know what that's going to look like.

18  
19 We definitely have to think hard about that. If we ever get the  
20 amberjack count done, perhaps something like the biomass  
21 distribution could be looked at, either in part or in total, as a  
22 way of allocating the fish. We did look at that for red snapper  
23 in Amendment 50, and that wasn't -- It was removed from the  
24 document at some point.

25  
26 I mean, the challenge with that, in practice, is that the inverse  
27 is that the fish tend to be where the fishermen are, and that's  
28 kind of common sense, and so it can be difficult.

29  
30 The red snapper ultimately was more of a what I would call a  
31 negotiated agreement, and so that's kind of a combination that was  
32 -- It was formed by landings, but there was some just common  
33 ground, some working together, and I think it would definitely  
34 take something of that nature for this.

35  
36 We did develop a decision tool to kind of lay these out for  
37 amberjack, or, excuse me, for red snapper, as an example of that,  
38 and then, you know, we could always put something together, if  
39 that was helpful. Then the calibration, you know, I just put that  
40 in there. At some point, I think not having the common data unit  
41 on the front end for red snapper was entirely problematic, and so  
42 we would want to think carefully how we did that, and perhaps avoid  
43 some of those problems.

44  
45 This is just kind of a screenshot of a portion of the red snapper  
46 decision tool, and it still actually works. The link is down  
47 there, if you're interested in perusing it. Essentially, what we  
48 did is we had four action alternatives that considered either

1 landings on different time periods, and then, this one, there were  
2 landings, and then there are other components, whether you wanted  
3 to include biomass or other factors, and this is kind of a custom  
4 page, and you could kind of do your own thinking.  
5  
6 Anyway, that was just kind of a part of the process that we worked  
7 through, and it did seem helpful, either to identify that it didn't  
8 -- That, in some cases, the landings were fairly stable over  
9 different combinations of years, or what have you, or they weren't,  
10 and so, either way, it was kind of informative.  
11  
12 What management measures could the states modify, and I'm just  
13 kind of working off this red snapper as an example. This isn't  
14 necessarily -- This is what was done in that one, and it doesn't  
15 mean it has to be done exactly this way, but it was a deliberative  
16 process, and so you would have to think about what those might be,  
17 and then so, for example, bag limits and size limits.  
18  
19 We pre-analyzed a range of those. I think it was fourteen to  
20 eighteen on the size, and I don't -- I think, on the bag limits,  
21 it was four on the high end, and I don't know if it was one, I'm  
22 presuming, on the low end, but, anyway, on amberjack, we would  
23 have to think about that.  
24  
25 If the bag limit is one, you know, I suspect that you would think  
26 perhaps two to some sort of vessel limit, or fractional bag limit,  
27 and I hate to say that term, but we've been all through these, and  
28 so those are things that we could continue to think about, if you  
29 wanted to, and you wouldn't have to -- I mean, you could have  
30 uniform regulations. That would all be part of your deliberative  
31 process.  
32  
33 Then, the accountability measures and things, we would have to  
34 develop, to prevent overharvest, and then one of the things that  
35 we've talked about here are some -- For red snapper is this  
36 potential interest in carryovers, or perhaps moving fish among  
37 states and years, or something like that, and so I don't know if  
38 there's options, or interest, in those kinds of things.  
39  
40 Accountability measures, and we still have to develop those such  
41 that states will be responsible, or regions, however that would  
42 work, for managing their harvests and then developing responses,  
43 in the case that they were exceeded, and it could be with ACTs, or  
44 ACLs, and paybacks, and all of those things, or it could be  
45 something different.  
46  
47 This is kind of just trying to bring this in, what I see just as  
48 the high-level things that you might want to think about, and, if

1 you want to move forward, we would certainly be asking you for  
2 guidance on what things you would like to consider as part of each  
3 one of those.

4  
5 In my view, those are kind of linear, but maybe not, and I think  
6 that's -- Is there another slide? I don't know if there is or  
7 not. No, and that's it. Okay, and you can go back to the other  
8 one, if people have questions, and I'm happy to try to answer them.

9  
10 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, John. We will just open the  
11 floor up for questions, to start. Mr. Schieble.

12  
13 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** I guess I'll kick this off, since I'm the one that  
14 asked for all this in the first place, and so, just to recap, back  
15 when I made the motion to request for this, the timescale of things  
16 was a little different than it is now, and so, first off, I asked  
17 for this as well as potentially an update on the great amberjack  
18 count to come at the same time.

19  
20 Really, what we're after, or at least I was after at that point,  
21 was not an update on data, or results, and it was mostly the  
22 timescale, like for completion, and what was the timing of that,  
23 and when would the assessment start, and, going back to the SEDAR  
24 Committee yesterday, or it was actually the day before, and we  
25 talked about the schedule and the changes that have happened in  
26 the past two years to that SEDAR schedule for amberjack as well.

27  
28 Now we're looking at Quarter 2 of 2028 for that assessment, and so  
29 I don't think, based on what we saw from the ACL landings update  
30 that we got from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center, we're  
31 going to really have much of an amberjack season, if at all, this  
32 coming year.

33  
34 We already lost the May season, which puts us down to about sixty-  
35 one days, technically, if we just had September and October season  
36 that we currently have, right, and, last year, we had about ninety-  
37 two days, I think, to fish.

38  
39 Last year, Louisiana landed about 1,200 amberjack, in LA Creel  
40 units, and so I would like to go back to slide 5, I think it was,  
41 that talked about the landings, and Captain Walker brought up a  
42 question there as well, because I'm not really sure exactly where  
43 these are coming from, and just to get some clarity in this.

44  
45 So, looking at I think it's 2021, and the 2021 was basically one  
46 of our biggest years in landings, and we had 2,535 amberjack  
47 landed, in LA Creel units, and it doesn't really show that on  
48 there. When you look at the bar graph on there, the gray color on

1 there, which would be Louisiana, isn't even showing up, really.

2  
3 Then, moving to this most recent year on there, which is 2023, we  
4 had 1,287 fish landed, in LA Creel units, but the gray bar is a  
5 huge percentage of the total, and so either the rest of the Gulf  
6 didn't land a lot of amberjack or the percent of the percentage of  
7 the total of 1,200 fish is what the difference is there, I guess,  
8 but back to the Captain Walker's question about what's going on in  
9 Mississippi.

10  
11 I think, you know, you look at that, and what happened there, and,  
12 to me, that's another one of those Wave 5 or Wave 6 blowups in  
13 MRIP, and likely the cause of whatever happened in the ACL landings  
14 update that we got yesterday as well from the Science Center, and  
15 so I guess, moving forward here, I would like to see a lot of the  
16 options that Dr. Froeschke outlined in here for a state management  
17 plan going forward, and include sector separation or not, a  
18 decision tool like that, as we go down that road for an amendment,  
19 but, also, I think we need to think about what we want to do in  
20 the interim, because we're really looking at a grim future for  
21 amberjack for this coming season.

22  
23 I think Dr. Froeschke had some good examples in there of do we  
24 want to have a consideration for an exempted fishing permit, like  
25 in the beginning of how we started things with state management  
26 for red snapper, and I feel like it's déjà vu all over again with  
27 amberjack.

28  
29 We're at the same place we are, and we're staring down the barrel  
30 of potentially a three-day amberjack season, you know, and I don't  
31 know what it really would be, but, if they stick with those  
32 landings that we saw, it's probably going to be pretty darn short  
33 next year. I think it would be less than the sixty-one days that  
34 we were projected to fish.

35  
36 I'll open the floor for some discussion around here on that, and  
37 is that something that we want to consider in committee here, is  
38 potentially an exempted fishing permit to test different state  
39 management, and also to test the current state data systems that  
40 are now really in place and giving us pretty good landings data,  
41 and I think that don't look like that.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, Chris, for kind of that  
44 history, you know, recent history. Mr. Strelcheck.

45  
46 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Thanks for that, Chris. Yes, and certainly what  
47 we're looking at this year is going to be difficult, based on at  
48 least the current landings, and we'll see, obviously, if those

1 change, or get revised, when they're finalized.

2  
3 I do see, I guess, some fundamental differences between amberjack  
4 and red snapper, and I just wanted to note a few things, and so,  
5 with red snapper, when we went to state management and did the  
6 EFPs, you know, as John pointed out, the federal seasons were  
7 getting shorter and shorter, but the state seasons were getting  
8 longer and longer, right, and so there was this push and pull and  
9 tug between state and federal management, and so the goal there  
10 was to, obviously, get everyone on the same page, kind of working  
11 together, and ultimately it led to the exempted fishing permits  
12 and the future implementation of state management.

13  
14 With amberjack, right, and red snapper was also a rebuilding  
15 population. With amberjack, for whatever reason, we have not been  
16 able to successfully rebuild this population. As John noted, it's  
17 been overfished now five or six times with stock assessments.

18  
19 With that said, you noted exempted fishing permits as a possible  
20 option. I think that could be an option, and I think we have to  
21 be careful, and thoughtful, because it can't just simply test  
22 what's already in place with state management, right, and so it  
23 would have to be something unique and different and limited,  
24 obviously, in terms of kind of timeframe with regard to what we're  
25 testing, and so I would be open to that, but I think we would want  
26 to really think through what we're going to learn from that that  
27 we haven't already learned from implementation of state management  
28 under red snapper already.

29  
30 Then the last thing I'll just comment on, and I've thought long  
31 and hard about, obviously, amberjack, and how we could do this,  
32 and the rec initiative group, obviously, was highly supportive of  
33 some sort of state or regional management, which I think is a bonus  
34 here.

35  
36 I think it comes down to allocation, and, as everyone is pointing  
37 out, a lot of uncertainty around the recreational landing  
38 statistics. We also have these state surveys that are coming  
39 online in the middle of the Gulf, right, and so timing I think is  
40 going to be really important, in terms of thinking through, if  
41 we're going to do any sort of allocation, how do we account for  
42 Mississippi and Alabama changing their surveys, in addition to,  
43 obviously, the other state surveys that have been up and running.

44  
45 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Andy. I see that Dr. Porch has his hand  
46 up. Clay.

47  
48 **DR. CLAY PORCH:** Yes, and thank you. A couple points, and one

1 just opining on the comment Andy made about not rebuilding  
2 amberjack. I mean, part of the reason we haven't rebuilt amberjack  
3 may be that the ACLs we calculated assumed the discards would be  
4 reduced in the same proportion to the landings and the ACL, but  
5 there's not really any evidence that this has happened, and so we  
6 may be fishing them harder than we think, just from the discard  
7 mortality.

8  
9 On the positive side, regarding calibrations, Alabama and  
10 Mississippi are moving towards that LA Creel approach, which means  
11 that we can be less worried about the cross-state calibrations  
12 that we've talked about so much with red snapper, and the plan now  
13 is to use the IRA funds that we managed to get over to Gulf States  
14 to run the revised MRIP FES and the Alabama and Mississippi Creel  
15 programs side-by-side, the point being is then we'll be able to  
16 calibrate the MRIP estimates back in time, both for stock  
17 assessment purposes and if there's a desire to calculate state  
18 allocations based on historical catches.

19  
20 I think that's going to put us in a very positive state, and we're  
21 also working with Texas, and hopefully we can work out something  
22 there that we can ultimately just calibrate MRIP back in time.

23  
24 I also wanted to mention, to the point John raised about setting  
25 size limits, or giving the states latitude to set size limits, bag  
26 limits, et cetera, some management measures, like size limits, are  
27 going to have pretty strong implications for the allowable  
28 biological catch, and so I think this is important, to not change  
29 size limits, at least in any substantive way, because the  
30 calculation -- It's just not appropriate to calculate catch limits  
31 based on one set of size limits and then change the size limits  
32 after the fact.

33  
34 Typically, although not always, the allowable biological catch  
35 goes down when selectivity shifts towards smaller fish. In some  
36 cases, it can go the other way, but the bottom line is the allowable  
37 biological catch does depend on the size limits that are already  
38 in place, and so I wouldn't give the states latitude to just adjust  
39 the size limits up and down with the same fixed catch allocation.  
40 Thank you.

41  
42 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Dr. Porch, for those comments. Any  
43 others? Dr. Sweetman.

44  
45 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and just a quick question, and so all states  
46 currently have a data collection program that would collect data  
47 on greater amberjack at the time? I'm looking around. Okay. Okay,  
48 and that's good to know.

1  
2 This is a little bit different than red snapper, obviously. I  
3 mean, we're dealing with 404,000 pounds of quota to be split up  
4 amongst the various states here, potentially. That's going to be  
5 a challenge. That will be a challenge, and we're not dealing with  
6 millions of pounds here. We're dealing with hundreds of thousands,  
7 and so it's just going to be -- I'm fine with seeing a document  
8 along these lines, and trying to explore the approach, because  
9 clearly the system doesn't seem to be working right now. We're at  
10 211 percent of the quota, preliminarily right now, which is just  
11 crazy to me, but, yes, this is going to be tough, Chris, but I'm  
12 open to looking at a document.

13  
14 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Schieble.

15  
16 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** Yes, and I agree with you, but I think you sort of  
17 nailed it on the head when you said that the state reporting  
18 systems are able to monitor amberjack. What I would like to see  
19 is basically a landings summary from the past season, or more than  
20 the past season, using the state systems, the state data, and not  
21 the MRIP-FES data that shot it over the top, at over seven-hundred-  
22 and-some-thousand pounds landed, or whatever it says.

23  
24 Obviously, there's something wrong, and, if we could look at the  
25 SRFS data, the LA Creel data from three states this past season,  
26 and look at what those landings look like, maybe perhaps at the  
27 next meeting, and then start making some decisions on potential  
28 exempted fishing permits, utilizing the state system to monitor  
29 the season coming up.

30  
31 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** C.J.

32  
33 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and fair point there, Chris. I would be fine  
34 with that. I'll just caution, you know, as I kind of have  
35 highlighted in the past, the State Reef Fish Survey is -- When we  
36 start getting down into these really short fishing seasons, similar  
37 to MRIP, in-season monitoring and management becomes really,  
38 really challenging at that point, just because of the way that our  
39 program is set up relative to the other Gulf states.

40  
41 I just kind of put a little pin in that there for as we start  
42 getting into lower quotas and figuring out how this goes here.  
43 When you start getting into really short fishing seasons, it  
44 becomes really challenging, and taxing, quite frankly, doing more  
45 than what SRFS was made to do.

46  
47 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Chris, to that point, and then I've got Mara in  
48 the wings here.

1  
2 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** Yes, and so, to that point, we already have a fixed  
3 season, and so, last year, we had May, which was the previous  
4 fishing year, and then we have the September and October season,  
5 right, and you would know by now what your landings were from those  
6 two months, correct, and the same with all the rest of us, and so  
7 a comparison of that, the two-month window, would be good, so we  
8 know what September and October looked like last year from every  
9 one of us, and then we can sort of forecast what we think this  
10 coming September and October would look like and what the  
11 difference between our last year's September and October landings  
12 were, versus what we saw from MRIP-FES on that on that table.

13  
14 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** C.J.

15  
16 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yes, and point well taken, and certainly that is  
17 definitely something that's doable for this past year, and  
18 everything all on those lines, and I was more thinking about  
19 projecting out into the future here, as we're looking at -- Okay.

20  
21 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Ms. Levy.

22  
23 **MS. LEVY:** So I'm just going to caution against -- I mean, it's  
24 fine to look at the state estimates, but I do not want us to go  
25 down the same path we did with red snapper, where we're comparing  
26 the state estimates to the catch limits, which are not using the  
27 state data, and so they're not comparable.

28  
29 We can't look at what Louisiana said and compare it to what MRIP-  
30 FES says, and that's not really a valid comparison, and, if we're  
31 going to go down the road of using the state data for state  
32 management, we should, on the front end, update the catch limits  
33 to reflect that and not get us into the same situation we did with  
34 red snapper, where we didn't have comparable catches, and we had  
35 to do this calibration, and we were over on the federal side, but  
36 not on the state estimates, and like I don't --

37  
38 I think there was a lesson learned there, right, and we don't want  
39 to get into the same pattern, and so, I mean, I'm not -- I'm all  
40 for looking at this, but we should use what we learned with red  
41 snapper and apply it at the front end here, and not after the fact.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** To that point, Chris, and then I'll come back to  
44 Andy.

45  
46 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** If Andy wants to make a point to that, you can go  
47 ahead, and I'll go follow him, if you want.

48

1 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Mara had largely made the points I was going to  
2 make. I guess, just going back to a red snapper, we were flying  
3 the plane while we were building it back then, right, and that was  
4 when the surveys were being developed for most of the states.

5  
6 I guess we're kind of repeating history a little bit, in that  
7 Mississippi and Alabama are now building their new surveys, but,  
8 yes, like Mara, I would caution against, you know, monitoring in  
9 state survey units against a catch level that's calculated in other  
10 terms, right, and so I think, if we're going to go down that path,  
11 we would want to figure out, on the front, how we would calibrate  
12 and prepare for, obviously, any sort of exempted fishing permit  
13 that puts everything in an apples-to-apples comparison for the  
14 state survey units.

15  
16 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Chris.

17  
18 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** Yes, and so I see the point of what Andy and Mara  
19 are saying, but I also look at that graph right there, and I know  
20 Mississippi didn't land the majority of the amberjack in the Gulf,  
21 and so we've got a reporting system, that is obviously flawed,  
22 that is giving us that data.

23  
24 I would advocate for some sort of exempted fishing permit to test  
25 the state data for the two-month window, and so we've got a fixed  
26 period we can fish. We don't need to worry about allocations,  
27 because it's already a fixed two-month window. We're not  
28 determining of season length based on keeping track of landings on  
29 a weekly basis, like we are at snapper.

30  
31 We already have a fixed season for amberjack for this coming  
32 season, and so, to me, it would seem that the next test would be  
33 for the state systems within that two-month window, and so any  
34 thoughts? I'm open to suggestions here by the states to what we  
35 need to do next.

36  
37 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Ms. Levy.

38  
39 **MS. LEVY:** Well, I mean, you're not -- I don't know that you need  
40 an exempted fishing permit, right? If people are fishing when  
41 it's open, and it's just a matter of then taking the data and  
42 looking at how it compares, you can do that. There's nothing to  
43 exempt you from. An exempted fishing permit would be if you're  
44 trying to do something that the regulations prohibit.

45  
46 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Chris.

47  
48 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** To that point, so are we expecting we're going to

1 get the two-month season, based on the landings data that we just  
2 saw from FES yesterday, because I think we're going to need an  
3 exempted fishing permit to test the state data within a two-month  
4 period.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Simmons.

7  
8 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I guess,  
9 maybe just to be clear, the landings information that we saw, I  
10 think yesterday, is Texas Parks and Wildlife, their landings, LA  
11 Creel, their landings, right, but the eastern Gulf is the MRIP-  
12 FES, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. I don't believe the SRFS  
13 numbers are in those estimates right now, but the western Gulf --  
14 We're using those units as they stand, and the stock assessments  
15 too, and they have not been calibrated, it's my understanding.

16  
17 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Geeslin.

18  
19 **MR. GEESLIN:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. You know, to Chris's point,  
20 I think that is a reasonable approach. All the states are set up  
21 to monitor catches now. As I highlighted yesterday, we doubled-  
22 down our effort during the federal red snapper season, and that  
23 also extends into the fall, and so this would align well with the  
24 current amberjack season.

25  
26 I think, you know, looking at the state landings, and comparing to  
27 -- I do hear Andy and Mara's concern, and I think we should be  
28 proactive, and get out in front of that, so we demonstrate that we  
29 have learned from some of the lessons that we've experienced with  
30 the red snapper program, but I'll go back to Chris, and I think  
31 that is a reasonable path forward, to look at the state program  
32 landings.

33  
34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Banks.

35  
36 **DR. BANKS:** I think this also doubles-down on the rec initiative.  
37 We heard, very specifically out of that initiative, that they  
38 wanted to look at regional or state management for amberjack.  
39 We've got the perfect opportunity right now, and so, I mean, two  
40 birds and one stone.

41  
42 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Walker.

43  
44 **MR. WALKER:** I agree. I agree with the concept overall, but I  
45 remember, back when we had a for-hire AP on the concept of a sector  
46 separation for a bunch of species, and they were calling it a PFQ  
47 at the time, and I think I might have mentioned this before, but  
48 all the charterboat guys wanted this thing, and we worked on it

1 two years, and then Jessica came through with a decision tool that  
2 showed each of the charter boat guys how much they could expect to  
3 get, and it was -- Nobody wanted it at that point, because nobody  
4 got enough to even consider the concept.

5  
6 I don't know which -- I mean, really, this this landings chart  
7 here is a little -- We can't make any decisions on that. It's  
8 obviously just disastrously flawed, and on something as important  
9 as, you know, interstate allocation, I don't know where we go.

10  
11 John, I wondered, and is it is it easy to make that red snapper  
12 decision tool work for amberjack, so people could get a -- I mean,  
13 there's a lot of data in there, but it's not a plug-and-play, and  
14 it would be interesting just to see what we're talking about before  
15 we migrate in this direction, which, you know, I'm in favor of  
16 doing something, for sure, but I just want to make sure, if it's  
17 not going to work out good for anybody, and we knew that from the  
18 get-go, it might save us some time.

19  
20 **DR. FROESCHKE:** In response, I mean, the tool is -- I don't think  
21 it would be difficult to update, per se. The challenge, which  
22 kind of just was brought up, the data themselves, you know, that's  
23 -- It might highlight that, or it might -- You would have to take  
24 some liberties, perhaps, just how we would think about that.

25  
26 The other thing I'll just say is trying to present these by states  
27 and modes and all that, and so, when you drill down, you get a lot  
28 of confidential sets, and so I'm not sure, but, I mean, if you  
29 want, we can certainly try to update that and see where it goes.

30  
31 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Schieble.

32  
33 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** Yeah. Thank you. Mr. Chair, and so I think, you  
34 know, referring to the Nick Farmer spreadsheet that we got with  
35 red snapper for a decision tool, you know, we had percent biomass,  
36 and percent historical landings time series in there, and we had  
37 all these different percentages of that as options to go through.

38  
39 I think there is where we need to have the new assessment data,  
40 obviously, to look at, if you're going to include biomass and those  
41 decisions across the Gulf, and maybe 50 percent biomass and 50  
42 percent historical landings, those options like we had last time,  
43 that type of stuff, to come up with whatever that state-by-state  
44 allocation is going to be, like Dr. Sweetman talked about, or  
45 perhaps the zone management, right, or regional management options  
46 that we saw in the maps that were provided in this presentation.

47  
48 We would have to be able to get that within the spreadsheet to

1 come up with percent biomass, and percent historical landings as  
2 well, to decide those things, and so, going forward, I still think  
3 we're dependent upon the stock assessment schedule to get a final  
4 version of whatever decision tool is going to be for state or  
5 regional management and this whole thing.

6  
7 My goal with this was to get this process started at the council  
8 level, so that the timing of it would be that we have an amendment  
9 to work on when the results of the assessment come out, but now  
10 that whole timescale has changed, when you look at the SEDAR  
11 schedule that we got this this meeting.

12  
13 Going forward, I guess I would still consider potentially making  
14 a motion here at this meeting for a draft amendment for state  
15 management, but I think we need to decide what type of things we  
16 want to see in that amendment, and that's part of the discussion,  
17 and if we want to do that now, or hold off to the next meeting,  
18 and that's what I'm looking for answers for.

19  
20 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Dugas.

21  
22 **MR. DUGAS:** Thank you, Dr. Frazer. I am in agreement with Chris.  
23 I would like to see something move forward, and that's what we've  
24 heard from the rec initiative folks, in some form of fashion, but  
25 I actually have a question for Chris.

26  
27 Due to Louisiana's smaller landings in the last few years, to me,  
28 that would be due to the season structure late in the year. You  
29 know, we've been arguing, for quite some time, that the Louisiana  
30 folks are not going to put much effort in the amberjack fishing in  
31 the fall, and I just wanted to clarify that.

32  
33 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Schieble.

34  
35 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** Yes, and so, going back to Amendment 54, we changed  
36 the fishing year, the start, with August date, right, and that was  
37 basically driven by the fact that the eastern Gulf was maxing out  
38 all the landings in the time series before that point, and the  
39 western Gulf really didn't have access to it, and so we changed  
40 it, and we got the little May season in there, which is the bulk  
41 of the landings for at least Louisiana, are coming out of that  
42 short little May season, because it coincides with our snapper  
43 season at the same time, and it's a pretty good setup.

44  
45 We've heard a lot of public comment about making multiple seasons  
46 at the same time, and then now we're down to just the September  
47 and October season for this coming fishing year. We lost the May  
48 season, and so, yes, and, I mean, that's exactly your point.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Just real quick to that point, Chris, you know,  
3 I think there was a couple reasons for that split season. You  
4 know, it was to account for the spawning season in May as well,  
5 right, and so we were trying to minimize the impact there, but  
6 also the folks in the western Gulf didn't typically have access to  
7 those fish, and I get that part, but I just wanted to make sure  
8 that both of those were in there. Carrie.

9  
10 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I don't  
11 think you need to pass another motion to direct us to continue  
12 with this, because you passed the motion, back in August of 2022,  
13 asking us to look at this. I think probably, or perhaps, a better  
14 use of the time would be to try to think about, you know, what you  
15 would want to delegate, and is it going to be state-by-state, and  
16 try to have some discussion about that and some of the other  
17 decision points that John brought up about, you know, sector  
18 separation and those types of things, because those are going to  
19 be very contentious.

20  
21 To me, in the near-term though, I mean, it seems like we need to  
22 -- Andy you mentioned, I believe, that you had a group working on  
23 some of these MRIP-FES outliers, and some of the data issues, I  
24 guess with S&T in your office, and so I think, in the near-term,  
25 we really probably need to drill-down and get that group to look  
26 at some of this information, because we're monitoring the stock  
27 based on these landings, and, if people are not confident in that,  
28 we have major issues, especially if we don't have a season this  
29 year based on those numbers.

30  
31 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and something I've been thinking about,  
32 Chris, too is -- I mean, I appreciated the discussion the other  
33 day about, you know, the length of the time -- The length of time  
34 it will take to get the stock assessment, and I think that  
35 information is going to be critical.

36  
37 I really -- You know, when I'm thinking about the fact that  
38 Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama are, you know, collapsing on  
39 a similar data collection program, it's a really good thing, right,  
40 and I think that will help. Florida has SRFS, and Texas has its  
41 data collection program, and, in theory, that's all really good,  
42 right, I mean, because there's units that simplify the process.

43  
44 The issue I have, when I look at a figure like this, is that the  
45 fish -- You know, not only the catches variable right, in number,  
46 but they're variable among the states, and we don't really know,  
47 and that's why we're waiting for this other, you know, AJ kind of  
48 count, right, but it's a dynamic population, and it's one

1 population right now.

2  
3 We don't -- We're not managing as self, you know reproducing  
4 populations within those three regions, necessarily, and so I don't  
5 know how to capture that dynamic when fish move back and forth,  
6 and you say, for example, if state -- You know, Florida, for  
7 example, has some proportion of the allocation, but, you know, all  
8 the AJ's move to the western Gulf the next year, or something, and  
9 it doesn't -- I don't know how to capture that dynamic.

10  
11 I'm not saying I'm not for this. In fact, I am for this, right,  
12 and I think, the more that we can do in that regard, and I just  
13 think it's -- I don't think we fully wrapped our heads around that  
14 when we did red snapper, and I think it's going to be even a bigger  
15 issue when we get to AJs, but I just wanted to bring that point  
16 up, and that's it. In fact if we can go to I think it's slide 13.  
17 Andy, go ahead, while we're getting that slide 13 up.

18  
19 **MR. STRELCHECK:** I was wondering if that was the same slide I was  
20 going to ask to bring up, and so I was going to talk about slide  
21 17, but I guess my thoughts on this are we can continue to move  
22 forward, right, in terms of development of a document, as Carrie  
23 indicated.

24  
25 I think the key decision points really come down to apportionment  
26 and the methods, or data, which is used for that, right, and we  
27 have not only LA Creel being tested Mississippi and Alabama, and  
28 we've got the greater amberjack count, and we've got a pending  
29 stock assessment, but that shouldn't prevent us from at least  
30 developing a document, to kind of set us up for success, right,  
31 once that data and information is available to make some of those  
32 tough decisions.

33  
34 I would, I think, recommend just us talking through slide 17, at  
35 some point, and deciding what we want staff to bring back to us  
36 with regard to some of those, you know, key components of the  
37 document.

38  
39 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Andy, but, before we go to slide 17, I  
40 just wanted to look at this slide, and the reason is, you know,  
41 when we look at the way that the state data collection programs  
42 are going, right, none of these panels kind of capture those data  
43 bins, right, and so, if you look in the in the top panel for  
44 example, and so you've got an eastern zone and a western zone, and  
45 so Alabama is on one side, right, and Mississippi and Louisiana,  
46 which have the common data collection programs, are in two  
47 different parts.

48

1 Then, if you go to an Alternative 3 slide, which is the lower-  
2 right-hand panel, again you -- There's a bit of a mismatch, and  
3 I'm not saying you can't overcome that, and don't get me wrong.  
4 I'm just saying this is something that I felt like I learned, when  
5 we were doing red snapper, that kind of complicates things, and I  
6 just want to think creatively, right, how we can address that  
7 moving forward. Chris, and then Rick.

8  
9 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** So I think these are just hypothetical maps that  
10 were put in here, based on -- Ryan can correct me on this, but I  
11 think it's kingfish management zones, correct, or similar to those,  
12 right?

13  
14 **MR. RINDONE:** Yes, and kingfish management zones are just the  
15 western zone, northern zone, and southern zone for the handline  
16 fleets and the southern zone gillnet. The way that those zones  
17 were apportioned, from an allocation standpoint, was based partly  
18 on landings, but partly on the negotiated need, as stated by the  
19 representatives from those zones on the CMP AP at the time.

20  
21 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Chris.

22  
23 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** So, when we get to the point of really grinding  
24 through the nitty-gritty on this, I think we just draw the maps  
25 differently. We put a line at Cape San Blas, and the states that  
26 are on the same currency are within the same group.

27  
28 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and I totally get that, right, and, I mean,  
29 I'm just using this as an example, and, again, at some point  
30 though, my bigger concern is that those arbitrary lines on a map  
31 don't coincide with what we know about the biology of a fish.  
32 That's the bigger problem, right? Anyways, Andy, I think, wanted  
33 to go to slide 17. Andy.

34  
35 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Yes, and so I, you know, think it would be good  
36 for the council to weigh-in on components of what you would want  
37 to see in a document and how we would direct staff, obviously, in  
38 the development of this.

39  
40 These are all decision points that we made with red snapper, that  
41 seemed to align well with any consideration for greater amberjack,  
42 but is there anything missing from this, or is there anything that  
43 we would want to subtract from this list?

44  
45 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** A quick question, maybe because a lot of people  
46 weren't here when we did the red snapper kind of EFP, and then  
47 went into Amendment 50, but -- Maybe Mara is probably the one that  
48 can talk a little bit about the difference between delegation and

1 the conservation equivalency, right, because there's some subtle  
2 differences there.

3

4 **MS. LEVY:** Do you want me to talk about that now?

5

6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and I think it would be good.

7

8 **MS. LEVY:** I think -- I mean, I think we had these options in the  
9 Amendment 50 document, and so the conservation equivalency  
10 requires NMFS to, for lack of a better word, approve what you're  
11 doing. You submit your conservation equivalency regulations to  
12 the agency, and there's a process, which we would flesh out, about  
13 the agency reviewing that, and then agreeing that whatever you're  
14 proposing is the conservation equivalent of whatever it should be.

15

16 The delegation allows the states to set the management measures  
17 specified in the FMP. The agency is not reviewing those before  
18 you do them, and sort of giving you an approval. The agency is  
19 monitoring on the back end, and, as long as you are acting  
20 consistent with the delegation and what's in the FMP, your  
21 delegation remains.

22

23 If there's some inconsistency, or some issue with the delegation  
24 that isn't consistent with the plan, or you continually go over,  
25 the agency has the ability to suspend that delegation, right, and  
26 then those federal regulations go in place during that suspension,  
27 and so it's more of when the agency acts.

28

29 Conservation equivalency requires upfront approval by the agency.  
30 Delegation is just, if you don't act in accordance with the  
31 delegation, there's the possibility of getting that delegation  
32 suspended.

33

34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Great. Thanks for that. All right. The floor  
35 is still open. Chris.

36

37 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** I guess, timeline-wise, Dr. Simmons, when would we  
38 be seeing a potential draft amendment back, or when would you like  
39 to have us look at that back, because I think, if that's a longer  
40 time series before we would get this back at the council, then we  
41 probably need to make some decisions today of what should be  
42 included in that, correct?

43

44 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Simmons.

45

46 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Yes, and I  
47 think it would be helpful for you guys to give us some guidance on  
48 what you would like us to focus on for the August or November

1 meeting. Do we need to go into, you know, the conservation  
2 equivalency as an option, or is that something we know we're not  
3 interested in, and maybe you need more information on that. That  
4 kind of thing, and if we could focus on, you know, do you want us  
5 to -- Give us some guidance. This is a big, tall order, that took  
6 us many years, and what's your priority here?

7  
8 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Walker, and then Chris.

9  
10 **MR. WALKER:** Maybe, in the interest of biting off smaller pieces  
11 here, to move forward, I mean, can we discuss, or make a decision,  
12 on state versus regional management, or are we still just juggling  
13 both of those?

14  
15 I mean, that's a -- It seems like a one side or the other decision  
16 that maybe we could make, and I know there's a million strings  
17 attached, and data questions and all that, but I'm just looking at  
18 trying to -- I'm looking at this list and seeing if there's a  
19 couple we could cross off, or check the box. Realistically, I  
20 don't see sector separation passing a vote at this council, just  
21 speaking out loud here, and do we need to keep that in?

22  
23 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** We'll come back to that. Chris, you had your  
24 hand up?

25  
26 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** Yes, and I agree with the process here of where  
27 we're going, and so, with Captain Walker, what he's trying to do,  
28 I think we should just go through these and start deciding yes or  
29 no, and what we want to add in, so we have something that comes  
30 back, but I don't want to be prescriptive here and say, okay, we're  
31 just going to make this regional management only, and then we look  
32 at the actual document in November, or whenever we get it back,  
33 and we're like, well, I wish we would have left a state option in  
34 here.

35  
36 Also, I think we could say we would like to see alternatives that  
37 include state and regional management within the document, and  
38 check the box, and move to the next step here, but, also, back to  
39 the original question for Dr. Simmons about conservation  
40 equivalency and delegation, I think the way it's written in  
41 Amendment 50 should be the way it's written in this.

42  
43 If a state blows over its ACL consistently, they end up reverting  
44 to conservation equivalency, and their delegated authority is  
45 removed, and we need to have some guardrails on this, as we go  
46 forward, because we just don't know how it's going to go. I mean,  
47 we saw that, with state management, the states are able to handle  
48 this pretty well. We haven't really had problems with that, but

1 I don't want to remove that, just because of how red snapper went.  
2 I think we need to put that in place, but Mara probably better  
3 speak to that than I can.

4

5 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mara.

6

7 **MS. LEVY:** So, real quick, I'm going to -- I'm going to correct  
8 one thing, and so, when we first started looking at state  
9 management, it was a regional management, and we had Amendment 39,  
10 and that's where we had the options for conservation equivalency  
11 or delegation, and by region and things like that, and we  
12 jettisoned that at some point.

13

14 The council decided it was a delegation, and it was going to be  
15 state-by-state, and that's what we put in Amendment 50. Amendment  
16 50 did have the decision point of whether it was going to -- The  
17 states we're going to manage both private and federal charter or  
18 not, but there was no decision point in Amendment 50 about  
19 conservation equivalency and regional or not regional, and we kind  
20 of got rid of that in from the old one.

21

22 Then, in terms of the delegation, the act basically says that, if  
23 the Secretary determines that a state law or regulation is not  
24 consistent with the FMP that gave the delegation, then the agency  
25 can give notice and suspend that. We didn't need to write that  
26 into the amendment, and it's part of the delegation provisions in  
27 in the Magnuson Act.

28

29 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** So let me ask -- I mean, again, right, what I'm  
30 hearing, obviously, is an interest across the table, right, to try  
31 to move something forward, pretty strongly, and, you know, I really  
32 appreciated the presentation that John laid out, right, and we  
33 have some templates to follow, and perhaps that may be the best  
34 way forward, at least as a draft, right, to take that template  
35 that was developed for red snapper, either to draft the EFP, or  
36 the Amendment 50 itself, right, the overarching amendment, and  
37 essentially --

38

39 So there's some decision points in there that are already made for  
40 us, right, and so the conservation equivalency discussion goes  
41 away, right, because we've already kind of dealt with that and  
42 said, okay, we're going to delegate that authority to the state,  
43 and so that simplifies some things there.

44

45 You know, I would like to hear -- I mean, what I heard is that  
46 it's probably premature to say whether you want it state or  
47 regional, right, and so we need some options in there for that,  
48 and so those two decision points are probably already made.

1  
2 I think there's always going to be this -- You're going to have to  
3 have the accountability measures, right, and so that stays. The  
4 apportionment method is going to be more difficult, right, but  
5 that's probably something that we're going to have to spend some  
6 time on, moving forward, and I would like to hear a little bit  
7 more on how we might approach that, at least in the template part  
8 of it. John.

9  
10 **DR. FROESCHKE:** So I guess what I'm thinking, in my mind, is, if  
11 I were to take something like that decision tool, and it seems  
12 like, at this time, you're not interested in exploring sector  
13 separation, and so I would just think about that in the context of  
14 both sectors combined.

15  
16 I don't -- We would have to go back and look and figure out what  
17 that meant, but so we could develop this tool, or whatever, and I  
18 haven't seen the easiest way, and then we could develop some  
19 concepts of states and regions on a map, and you could kind of  
20 click through, and then, the apportionments, we would do something  
21 analogous to the ideas that we explored in red snapper, and  
22 different years, but those kinds of things, and try to put that in  
23 something like that.

24  
25 As part of that, it's going to have to require us circling back  
26 and try to deal with these landings, in some form or fashion, and  
27 it might just result in the landings that we're squirrely about,  
28 and I don't know where that would go, but so we would do that.

29  
30 I mean, the conservation equivalency, it doesn't sound like -- I  
31 mean, we could just kind of look beyond that right now, and then  
32 the accountability measures would sort of be a backend, and I think  
33 those would be doable, once we got through the first three, and  
34 that would be, I guess, how I -- As a staffer, how I would probably  
35 want to approach it, and I don't know where it would go, but at  
36 least to kind of visualize what you might want to think about.

37  
38 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** John has his hand up, but I just want to make  
39 sure I'm here hearing you right. Again, so I think one, two, and  
40 three are going to be pretty difficult, right, and, I mean, I just  
41 heard, around the table, that sector separation is probably  
42 something that we don't want to consider, but that's not what I've  
43 heard in public comment in the past, and so you're very likely to  
44 hear a very different kind of something come out in there, but let  
45 me go to Captain Walker.

46  
47 **MR. WALKER:** Just to that, that was just my personal guess on the  
48 likelihood of it passing. I mean, I'm not even saying I'm opposed

1 to it. I'm just saying, if nobody is going to vote in favor of  
2 it, how long do we need to talk about it, but we might, and maybe  
3 I'm wrong. I'm just I'm just making some assumptions here, and so  
4 maybe I shouldn't.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and I think it's a little too early in this  
7 process to make an assumption like that. John.

8  
9 **MR. SANCHEZ:** To that point, when I see, you know, some of the  
10 uncertainty in the landings, like some of the graphs we saw, where  
11 2022, that big yellow area, you know, jumps out of you like what's  
12 going on, and I think sector separation needs to be included in  
13 this, whether we proceed with it or not, or we start off with state  
14 management, or regional management, first, but we need to preserve  
15 the ability to do that, because I think, when I see the uncertainty  
16 in some of the landings stuff, I think that gives us a beautiful  
17 finite universe of people, that we can probably get some good  
18 landings data out of.

19  
20 There's also a desire, as you'll hear from them, for them to have  
21 that as we look at things that are -- You know, we're managing a  
22 tiny amount of fish, and then we're going to get in the allocation,  
23 you know, state aspect of it, and then I think that gives them too  
24 a little certainty of how they can plan their business model too,  
25 and so I think we need to hold on to sector separation as this  
26 evolves.

27  
28 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, John. I've got Mara, and then Chris.

29  
30 **MS. LEVY:** Okay, and this just happened too long ago, that I keep  
31 on having to correct myself. Okay. Amendment 50, right, and we  
32 had Amendment 50A, which set up the overall program, and that dealt  
33 with sector separation, and, basically, we had an optional -- There  
34 was an optional, potentially for states to manage the for-hire  
35 vessels, and we had the apportionment, and we had a procedure for  
36 the state to request a closure of an area of federal waters, and  
37 then we had all those individual amendments.

38  
39 So what I got wrong is, in those individual amendments, we did  
40 decide whether each state was getting a delegation, and what that  
41 delegation was, or a conservation equivalency, and so when we  
42 originally -- Everything was mixed up, and so each state amendment  
43 had what authority it was going to get to manage, delegation or  
44 conservation equivalency, and the accountability measure, and so  
45 those things were all in there. They were just separated out.  
46 Sorry about the confusion.

47  
48 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Simmons.

1  
2 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and, just to  
3 add to that, you know, delegation requires, in Magnuson, the three-  
4 quarters majority vote by all council members, and I think maybe  
5 what's causing a bit of confusion there too on this slide is I  
6 think Number 4 -- I think we meant to say delegate or consider  
7 conservation equivalency plans, and so I think that's maybe causing  
8 some issues, and I apologize for that.

9  
10 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and I think that's part of the issue, but,  
11 you know, I was just trying to through this discussion, thinking  
12 about how much time we spent on red snapper, and ultimately where  
13 we landed with regard to delegation, and I think it was unanimous,  
14 right, that we opted to go that route, and I was just trying to  
15 get the conservation equivalency, based on the history, and kind  
16 of just remove that from the process, but maybe, again, it may be  
17 too early, but it was a pretty strong opinion to delegate. Chris.

18  
19 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I agree with Mr.  
20 Sanchez with regards to keeping sector separation as an action in  
21 the document, but, with that said, I think the states, at least  
22 three of the states right now, are using a system that can monitor  
23 the federal for-hire boats' landings, as shown with the snapper  
24 landings that we presented yesterday, and so it's not necessarily  
25 a requirement.

26  
27 I don't think you have to have sector separation to do this. The  
28 states can monitor the landings that are allocated to the federal  
29 for-hire sector on their own, with their with their systems that  
30 they currently have, and so I guess, also, with that said, what I  
31 think we're looking at here is a list of the actions already.

32  
33 We could say, you know, Action 1, discuss sector separation or  
34 not, and Action 2 is state or regional management, and we make a  
35 decision on that, and we move through, so John can simply create  
36 the actions based on the bulleted list here that we would see in  
37 the next iteration of this.

38  
39 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Froeschke.

40  
41 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Yes, and that was sort of my thinking when I put  
42 those together. What I would say though is, if we want to include  
43 sector separation in the document, that would actually be like a  
44 1b, because, the way that I kind of laid it out here, there was -  
45 - Assuming that you did sector separation so it was just a private  
46 anglers, and there would be the apportionment, Number 3, among the  
47 states, but, if you want to have that action for sector separation,  
48 there would really be an apportionment among the private angling

1 and the for-hire components.

2  
3 What I would suggest, at least as a first pass if we go down that,  
4 is look at an action for that, the apportionment between those two  
5 sectors, and then kind of the map lines for state and/or regional  
6 management, because, if we try to do apportionment among the states  
7 among -- Like the factorialness of that, and there will be an  
8 ungodly number of things to -- It will kind of make our heads spin,  
9 I think, and so, if you want to have the sector separation, my  
10 plan would be to bring, whether it's an app or a paper, whatever  
11 it is, but something with the first one, sector separation, and 1b  
12 is some potential options for apportionment between the states,  
13 with the private angler and for-hire, and then three would be the  
14 lines, regions, zones, whatever you want to think about, and then  
15 stop there, and make some decisions, and then move to the other  
16 actions.

17  
18 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Schieble.

19  
20 **MR SCHIEBLE:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I agree with that, but  
21 I also think that the order we see here should not be the order of  
22 the actions of document, because we could start with sector  
23 separation and just get stuck, and not move to the next action in  
24 the document, and so I think that should come a little bit later,  
25 after we start to decide whether state or regional.

26  
27 Then, if we're going to pick state, we need to talk about are  
28 states going to be delegated size and bag limits, right, because  
29 we have a stock that is overfished, or overfishing, according to  
30 the last assessment, and so how much are we going to allow the  
31 states leeway in the management of that within the fishery, and so  
32 that sort of stuff I think needs to be addressed in there, because  
33 we have a limited season, right, and it's still going to be a two-  
34 month season that we're talking about here. We're not talking  
35 about 151 days, like a snapper season, but, yes, I would change  
36 the order.

37  
38 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Sanchez.

39  
40 **MR. SANCHEZ:** You know, as far as the order in which we approach  
41 this, I guess, you know, there's probably some commonsensical way,  
42 and so I would defer to staff and what gives you a logical, easy  
43 way to put this together, again trying to avoid getting hung up on  
44 one issue, because these are big issues, and we know we get into  
45 these discussions, and we can get log-jammed.

46  
47 I would let, you know, let us figure out what order we want, but  
48 I definitely do feel strongly about keeping sector separation in,

1 because, as I was -- I refreshed my memory a little bit with  
2 Mara's, you know, stroll down memory lane on how we got there, and  
3 that seemed to be very valuable, and, as the season in snapper was  
4 winding down to zero days, and then the impact was very great, you  
5 know, to the charter for-hire sector, and I see something similar  
6 maybe taking place here, and I don't want them to get lost in this,  
7 and and I think we need to have that considered, and allowed for,  
8 because it has worked.

9  
10 I think it has worked out rather well, sector separation, and so  
11 I don't see why we would want to discount it from having a useful  
12 role here as well.

13  
14 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Williamson.

15  
16 **MR. TROY WILLIAMSON:** A historical bullet point, to your point,  
17 John, and I was on the sector separation AP, and we voted against  
18 sector separation, and did not recommend it to the council, but  
19 the council disregarded the advice, and I think they did so wisely,  
20 and so I don't disagree with where you are, and just bringing up  
21 a historical bullet point.

22  
23 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Troy. Mr. Anson.

24  
25 **MR. ANSON:** Yes, and I may be thinking incorrectly, but, when we  
26 have a discussion about sector separation, particularly in the  
27 document, you know, I see it as going one of two ways. One is  
28 that it's you're separating out a sector for inclusion in a state  
29 or regional management process, or you could include them in the  
30 state or regional management process, but then they would have  
31 potentially their own allocation that would be defined in a  
32 proportion, based on historical or some other method.

33  
34 So, I mean, I just want -- In my mind, that's how I see it, is  
35 that, at least early on, so that we have that available for us to  
36 decide, or discuss, is that iteration should have it so whereby  
37 it's explicit that they would be removed, or one would be removed,  
38 and the other that would be retained would be going forward with  
39 the regional management plan, or that there is an option whereby  
40 whatever partition is decided, whether it's regionally or at the  
41 state level, that there would be set-asides, based on historical  
42 for for-hire and for private rec, is how I see it.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Walker.

45  
46 **MR. WALKER:** I kind of had a similar question for John on what  
47 Kevin was just saying. In my mind, at least with red snapper,  
48 sector separation was done, for the federal guys, outside of any

1 state. It was just federal, and it avoided all of these regions  
2 and/or states, but were you saying that -- Was Kevin saying that  
3 you could do it like for-hire guys in that state have an  
4 allocation, or -- To me, a sector separation would essentially  
5 eliminate the charter guys from state to state, or regional or  
6 whatever, like it does with red snapper.

7  
8 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Froeschke.

9  
10 **DR. FROESCHKE:** I guess I hadn't thought about the idea that say  
11 in one state the split could be 60-40, and another state could be  
12 50-50, and I hadn't really thought about that. Initially, in my  
13 mind, this was the logical order of how you would decide it, but  
14 maybe it isn't, and so, I mean, I have to think about how to do  
15 that. I was just trying not to make it -- In my mind, if you said  
16 clearly for-hire are not part of this, that you're going to do it  
17 -- That would be easier to work down the list, but maybe that's  
18 not the -- You know, I'm happy to try to approach it a different  
19 way.

20  
21 **MR. WALKER:** No, and I think that would -- To me anyways, that  
22 would be the way to go, just like red snapper was, and it was just  
23 separated from any regional discussions.

24  
25 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Chris.

26  
27 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** So I know we don't have all day for this, and so  
28 I'm going to try to wrap it up a little bit. Do you think, John,  
29 that you have what you need to get started for a document for  
30 November, or are there are certain points that we haven't talked  
31 about here that we need to get ironed out today, or should we wait  
32 until Full Council, or where are we at?

33  
34 **DR. FROESCHKE:** I mean, I guess I have enough to start to think  
35 about. I suspect, if we start talking to other staff, and  
36 colleagues and things, there will be other things that come up,  
37 and so I guess my workplan would be I will start on the first two  
38 and/or three, and see how far I get. If there are major roadblocks,  
39 then we'll come back with that.

40  
41 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** How about this, John, and I'm going to make a  
42 suggestion to lighten your workload a little bit. Rather than  
43 putting it in the format of a document, why don't you consider  
44 taking the information that was provided today and maybe just  
45 provide an extended outline of what that document might look like,  
46 and, that way, you can probably get something back to the council  
47 for feedback a little bit earlier, and is that okay with you,  
48 Chris?

1  
2 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** Yes, and I think, you know, we've gone that route  
3 before, and I want to say it was maybe cobia. I can't remember,  
4 but we had presentations where we literally made motions on items  
5 in a presentation, to include or not include, and then we  
6 collectively agreed, you know, to make decisions at that point,  
7 and so we may not necessarily need an actual document for November,  
8 if that's simplified to go through a presentation of actions and  
9 decision points, and we can make motions that have gravity at that  
10 point. I would be fine with that. Before we wrap up with this,  
11 I would like to discuss this season, before we leave.

12  
13 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Simmons.

14  
15 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so one more  
16 question on the delegation. I guess, the items that you want us  
17 to work toward, those are the ones on the screen, which I guess  
18 we're at a one-fish bag, but maybe a vessel limit, and then the  
19 season. I mean, that's what we hear the most about, and that came  
20 up many times at the recreational initiative. That seems to be a  
21 driver for many of these things, but, based on what Dr. Porch said  
22 right now, we are not going to include minimum size limits in the  
23 delegation piece that you see again?

24  
25 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Anson.

26  
27 **MR. ANSON:** Well, I was going to suggest not including a change to  
28 size limits, but there ought to be probably a reference, as a  
29 baseline, to a minimum size limit, and that's probably what was -  
30 - It's been recently implemented in management, is that that would  
31 be what would be carried forward, but there would be not an option  
32 for changing that.

33  
34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Frady.

35  
36 **MR. FRADY:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. You know all of this has warrant  
37 to me. I mean, the sector separation for the group here, for the  
38 charter-for-hire and the states, and, you know, I do like state  
39 and regional management, but I'm seeing something here that alarms  
40 me, to the point to where, if I don't say something, I'm afraid  
41 that it will be not heard.

42  
43 You know, right now, we've got greater amberjack that is -- It's  
44 been highly controversial, and, a few years ago, probably seven  
45 years ago I guess, we changed the annual allocation of amberjack,  
46 to try to end the problem with greater amberjack, and we set the  
47 annual allocations to begin in August, and, when we opened in  
48 August, I believe we ended up -- It attributed to overfishing.

1  
2 We couldn't get overharvesting under control, and so we changed it  
3 to a September 1. Then, if we had an overage, we ended up opening  
4 up in May, and, every time we opened up in May, we would blow  
5 through the quota, and we would bust our ACL, and so, as a concerned  
6 fishing guide, federally-permitted, you know, when we start  
7 talking about bag limits, and giving the delegation to set limits  
8 and seasons, my concern is --

9  
10 You know, if we look back, red snapper was already, in my mind,  
11 rebuilt when we did sector separation on red snapper. Everybody  
12 was complaining about we're walking on red snapper, and they  
13 marketed that we've got red snappers rebuilt, and let us go kill  
14 them, and we can manage them better than the federal government  
15 can.

16  
17 Now we're in a situation to where each state, as great as they are  
18 in their in their systems of measuring this right here, we've still  
19 all failed to constrain the overharvesting of greater amberjack,  
20 and so, when we start talking about delegation again, and give the  
21 delegates the opportunity to set their bag limits and seasons, I'm  
22 afraid we're going to negate any gains we make by cutting seasons  
23 or restricting harvest on greater amberjack.

24  
25 What's going to end up happening is we're going to see -- I foresee,  
26 if we -- Unless we get overharvesting a greater amberjack under  
27 control, and rebuild that fishery, we're going to convolute the  
28 whole process if someone comes in there says, okay, we're going to  
29 raise it to two fish per person, and we're going to lower the size  
30 limit, and we're going to see a delay in actually the rebuilding.

31  
32 Now, again, I support sector separation. I just think the timing  
33 of this should be done with a little caution, or, when we get down  
34 to the delegation of the conservation equivalencies, there needs  
35 to be some teeth in that, to where we have some consistency,  
36 because we've all seen what happens with the greater amberjack  
37 when you open in May.

38  
39 They're easy to catch. They're spawning, you know, and, when  
40 they're spawning, they do dumb stuff, and they get caught, and,  
41 you know, I want to make sure we have a healthy, robust fishery to  
42 pass on to our children and grandchildren, and, like I said, I  
43 support this, but I'm just cautious about the details of it. Thank  
44 you, sir.

45  
46 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Captain Frady, for those comments.  
47 Chris.

48

1 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** To Captain Frady's point, I think you're correct,  
2 but I also believe that, under the states managing it, it would be  
3 better, because the states would be constraining it to either an  
4 allocation of the individual to the state, and, right now, we're  
5 fishing to a Gulf-wide allocation with a time series.

6  
7 We have a two-month window to just fish, and we don't have any ACL  
8 that we manage to at the state level, and so we tell our anglers  
9 to go fish for two months, and, go ahead, you know, and that's  
10 when we're going to have this season, but we don't know what  
11 portion that we're landing equals in the full Gulf-wide ACL, but,  
12 if we have that delegated, individual states can then manage that  
13 better, so this doesn't happen, what you're talking about.

14  
15 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. I'm going to take two more questions,  
16 because we're up against a break. Dr. Banks.

17  
18 **DR. BANKS:** Just a follow-up on what Chris said. The states also  
19 have a system that allows for in-season monitoring, for the most  
20 part, versus the MRIP waves, and so I think some of your concerns  
21 would be mitigated once we start really looking into that amberjack  
22 and into those LA Creel models. In Texas, we can look at them  
23 pretty frequently compared to the MRIP waves.

24  
25 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Captain Frady.

26  
27 **MR. FRADY:** To that point, there's no doubt that the LA Creel is  
28 good for what it's doing, and, I mean, I'm glad that Alabama and  
29 Mississippi are doing what they're doing to emulate the same thing.

30  
31 My biggest concern is what if it doesn't work? What if you don't  
32 capture it accurately, or what if we see a negative trend, because  
33 we're already seeing the average weight of the Gulf red snapper  
34 being managed to the point to where the average weight continues  
35 to drop, and, as a result, because our agencies that manage the  
36 fisheries depend on the revenue from license sales and access to  
37 the fish, which was a big thing for the past ten years, having  
38 access --

39  
40 You know, what's the -- My thought is what should we put in place  
41 to keep the average weight from going down, like we did in red --  
42 Like what we're seeing in red snapper? Right now, the snapper  
43 weight keeps going down, and what we're doing is we're going from  
44 a two-fish bag limit to a four-fish bag limit, and from a four-  
45 fish bag limit to wherever, because, when you can't catch your  
46 quota, the first natural instinct is, well, we've got to increase  
47 access.

1 In other words, let's open it to seven days a week, or let's open  
2 it to thirty days in a row, or let's go to a four fish, and I'm  
3 not fussing about this.

4  
5 I'm just simply observing how the relaxed management coming through  
6 the delegation is -- We're focusing on ACL, and, if we can't hit  
7 our ACL, we open up access, and I'm afraid if -- Until we get  
8 greater amberjack under control, there's a temptation to let the  
9 states manage each one of them to their fullest, and I see some  
10 people down in Florida, south Florida, and especially in the  
11 Panhandle, wanting to open up in May, but, historically speaking,  
12 I've just -- I've seen that being a disaster, because of the fish  
13 spawning, and so please forgive me for just trying to throw  
14 something out there.

15  
16 I just see something a little bit different here, because I see -  
17 - I'm on the water, and not 300 days a year, and I'm not the best  
18 charter fishing captain, but I'm out there enough, and I'm probably  
19 the worst fisherman in the Gulf of Mexico, but I'm a heck of an  
20 entertainer. I teach you how to catch fish, but I am noticing  
21 these trends, and I'm not disrespecting anyone at this table, or  
22 your state, or your organization, or anything like that, but I see  
23 it every day, and I feel it every day, and I just want to do what's  
24 right by these fish. Thank you.

25  
26 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Troy, thank you again for those comments, and I  
27 think that they're all important considerations, certainly, moving  
28 forward. I think the argument being made around the table is that,  
29 you know, we're moving towards a state capability, right, to  
30 actually manage the fish, and I think there's a lot of desire to  
31 exploit and do that, and so that's where we're at, and so what I'm  
32 going to ask John is -- I'm not going to impose the timeline, and  
33 that's between, obviously, you and Carrie and the staff, but I  
34 feel like -- You know, do you have enough direction here to come  
35 back with some type of an extended outline to say, hey, this is -  
36 - Or a presentation like Chris suggested, to say this is where  
37 we're going to head, perhaps?

38  
39 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Yes.

40  
41 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay. Excellent. Chris.

42  
43 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** To wrap this up, I will circle back to this season,  
44 and this may be more directed to Andy, and so, if we were to start  
45 taking action on exempted fishing permits, we would not have those  
46 in place for this season, and what's the timeline on those, if we  
47 were to try to do that, in order to be able to have an amberjack  
48 season based on that landings graphic that we got yesterday?

1  
2 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Well, so, first, we haven't made a decision on  
3 this year's season, because the landings are still being reviewed,  
4 right, and so I want to make sure that we emphasize that. If the  
5 landings hold, we have to pay back the overage, which, obviously,  
6 would result in either no season or a very short season, right?

7  
8 I don't want to discuss it too much here on the fly, but I think  
9 the challenge with exempting you from the regulations at that point  
10 is we have an overfished stock that has exceeded its catch limit.  
11 We potentially are over the overfishing limit at that point, and  
12 so I don't think we could exempt you from the restrictions for not  
13 having a season, or having a short season, by issuing an exempted  
14 fishing permit.

15  
16 Even if there is a path to issue an exempted fishing permit, we  
17 would want to know what's being proposed, you know, work with those  
18 that are, obviously, requesting the EFP, and there's a process  
19 that we have to go through in order to issue an exempted fishing  
20 permit, which typically takes -- I'm spit-balling, but four or  
21 five or six months.

22  
23 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Chris.

24  
25 **MR. SCHIEBLE:** As a follow-up to that, so I guess, hypothetically,  
26 as you review those landings, do you think that an announcement of  
27 that would be possible before we get to our June meeting, where  
28 then we could make decisions on a potential exempted fishing permit  
29 from the states, and what they would entail at that point, or is  
30 that not a reasonable timeline?

31  
32 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Andy.

33  
34 **MR. STRELCHECK:** I think that's a reasonable timeframe, and so the  
35 landings are undergoing kind of final review from last year right  
36 now, and so we'll be looking at those carefully. We've  
37 prioritized, obviously, decisions about red grouper and the for-  
38 hire red snapper season in the near-term, but we'll shift to gag  
39 and greater amberjack for the next month or two.

40  
41 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Mr. Chairman, I think we are  
42 scheduled for a break.

43  
44 **MR. DUGAS:** Yes, and thank you, Dr. Frazer, for taking us through  
45 that. We will take a break for fifteen minutes. At 10:35 we'll  
46 start back up.

47  
48 (Whereupon, a brief recess was taken.)

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** We will go to Agenda Item XIII, and that's a  
3 Review of the Return 'Em Right Science, and Ms. Muehlstein will  
4 take us through the action guide and the subsequent presentations.  
5

6 **REVIEW OF RETURN 'EM RIGHT SCIENCE**  
7

8 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** All right. Thank you. So, during today's  
9 session, Mr. Charlie Robertson, the Return 'Em Right coordinator  
10 for the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, is going to start  
11 by giving us a bit of a programmatic overview and an overview of  
12 the science and monitoring that has been funded by the Return 'Em  
13 Right program.  
14

15 Following him, Dr. Allen, from the Scientific and Statistical  
16 Committee, will offer recommendations from the SSC from its review  
17 of the research that was conducted. They spent an entire day  
18 reviewing all of the research that has been funded through the  
19 Return 'Em Right program and have some recommendations to offer.  
20

21 Then Mr. Nick Haddad, who is with Florida Sea Grant, will provide  
22 an education and outreach update to brief the committee about  
23 continuing awareness efforts for Return 'Em Right and teaching  
24 best fishing practices and proper descending and venting  
25 techniques.  
26

27 Then, finally, I will give you guys a brief presentation on the  
28 expiration of the DESCEND Act and ask you all what we should do,  
29 if anything, because it is going to expire January of next year.  
30

31 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, Emily, and so I guess first  
32 up on the list is the programmatic overview, and that's Tab B,  
33 Number 13(a) in your briefing materials. Mr. Robertson.  
34

35 **MR. CHARLIE ROBERTSON:** All right. Thanks, Emily. I was going to  
36 say a lot of that, and so I don't need to do that anymore, but I'm  
37 Charlie Robertson, and I'm with the Gulf States Marine Fisheries  
38 Commission. As Emily said, I'm the program coordinator for the  
39 Return 'Em Right project for the commission.  
40

41 I'm going to go through an update on our program for Return 'Em  
42 Right, and it's been about two years since we brought this to you  
43 guys, and so we've got a lot of new things to kind of talk about.  
44

45 This is just to kind of set the stage for what I'm going to cover.  
46 As Emily mentioned, we've got a series of presentations. I'm going  
47 to go through the program overview, and gloss over some of the  
48 education and outreach stuff, which is being led by Florida Sea

1 Grant, and Nick is going follow-up with a lot more detail on that,  
2 and so I'm going to focus more on some of the efforts from the  
3 commission side of things, and so we'll talk about the state and  
4 federal fishery-dependent data collection initiatives that we've  
5 got going, some collaborative studies that we funded through Return  
6 'Em Right, as well as a human dimensions study that we just  
7 completed the second of a two-series survey on, and then talk about  
8 some of the next steps.

9  
10 Return 'Em Right, for those of you that haven't heard of it yet,  
11 it's a program that was funded through the Deepwater Horizon oil  
12 spill legal settlement. It's an eight-year program, and we're in  
13 about year-five right now.

14  
15 We were given \$30 million, roughly, in funds to spend towards  
16 helping restore some of the resources, in this case reef fish,  
17 that were damaged, or identified as being damaged, by the oil  
18 spill. One thing I want to emphasize here is that a lot of the  
19 stuff that I'm going to talk about here, while it is beneficial  
20 and useful for stock assessments and management, the primary focus  
21 is us evaluating and monitoring the success of the program, and so  
22 that's kind of the primary goal of this.

23  
24 We were recognizing all along that it can also be useful for  
25 management, and so we've tried to keep that in mind throughout the  
26 planning and development of the program.

27  
28 The core partners of Return 'Em Right are NOAA, the Restoration  
29 Center specifically, and they help with administration and  
30 coordination of the program, and Florida Sea Grant, leading the  
31 outreach and education initiatives, and the Gulf States Marine  
32 Fisheries Commission. We're leading the monitoring and  
33 evaluation.

34  
35 The mission of Return 'Em Right is to improve reef fish survival  
36 by equipping anglers with knowledge and gear to confidently and  
37 successfully release reef fish, and so we're doing this by trying  
38 to focus on improving discard survival.

39  
40 Return 'Em Right is a very big program, and there's lots of moving  
41 parts to it, but, very simply put, there are three main components,  
42 the outreach education, which includes things like our online  
43 training module about best practices, and that is connected to the  
44 fish descending device distribution, and also part of education  
45 and outreach is our social and digital media, our website, a lot  
46 of the public events that we attend, and the things that we do to  
47 stay engaged with the angling community.

1 These are all things that Nick is going to talk about, and so I'm  
2 not going to go into detail too much yet on those, but I am going  
3 to talk a little bit, moving forward, about the evaluation and  
4 monitoring, and so we're evaluating the effectiveness of different  
5 release methods, through some of the studies that we're funding,  
6 and we're working with the states to collect data, through  
7 different survey programs, to help us monitor the success and  
8 benefits to restoring the resources affected by the oil spill.

9  
10 The goals of Return 'Em Right are to reduce mortality in reef fish,  
11 obviously, with a focus on barotrauma, and also other release  
12 factors, such as depredation and best handling practices. We're  
13 hoping to improve angler awareness and experience with release  
14 gear, and so, by giving anglers knowledge, we're hoping to empower  
15 them to be able to use best practices in the situations that they  
16 find themselves in, and then, ultimately, this would likely lead  
17 to improvement of the health of the reef fish fisheries in the  
18 Gulf.

19  
20 So what are we collecting? I wanted to just kind of give a  
21 breakdown of the different data collection and surveys that we're  
22 collecting through Return 'Em Right, and so I've put here each of  
23 the core partners and the surveys that each one are conducting, or  
24 implementing, and so the commission -- We've been working with the  
25 states for the first two.

26  
27 They've been very helpful with allowing us to collect data through  
28 the state reef fish validation surveys, and these are the surveys  
29 that they conduct alongside their state reef fish reporting  
30 surveys, where they're intercepting anglers at the dock to collect  
31 information after a trip, and so we've been able to add some  
32 questions to help us understand different release practices, like  
33 descending and venting, through these surveys.

34  
35 The Gulf at-sea observer program is another state-led initiative,  
36 and we've been collecting information through observers on for-  
37 hire trips, several collaborative studies that we funded, as well  
38 as a human dimensions survey to help us understand anglers  
39 knowledge and awareness around best practices.

40  
41 Then NOAA, as you all are aware, has the Southeast Region Headboat  
42 Survey that's been going on for a number of years, and we've added  
43 some questions to that to help us learn some more about the  
44 frequency of use of different devices, like descending devices and  
45 venting, with discarded fish, and then Florida Sea Grant, as part  
46 of the education module, has a follow-up survey, where we're  
47 collecting feedback from anglers. This is one of the many feedback  
48 loops we have with angling community, and then also a gear use

1 survey.

2  
3 I'll start by going through a little overview of each of these  
4 different surveys. The state reef fish validation surveys, as I  
5 mentioned, this is the surveys where the states are intercepting  
6 anglers at the dock, after they've completed a trip. Right now,  
7 we're collecting information through the surveys that FWC are  
8 implementing, Alabama, and MDMR.

9  
10 These are voluntary surveys, and so we're collecting just some  
11 high-level information. You can see, on the right, and I know  
12 that's a little bit small, but this is an example of the form from  
13 Alabama, the reef fish validation form, and so they're collecting  
14 information about date, location, the number of anglers on trips,  
15 whether it was a private or charter trip, and they're collecting  
16 information about effort, related to distance from shore, and then  
17 also information about fish that were retained and discarded.

18  
19 I've highlighted in yellow two of the questions that we added to  
20 help us gather information for Return 'Em Right, and those are  
21 fields that collect information about whether fish were descended  
22 and whether or not a descending device was onboard.

23  
24 One thing to note is that these state reef fish validation surveys  
25 are one of the few, if not the only, method that we have to collect  
26 information from the private recreational sector, while some of  
27 the surveys do also collect it from the for-hire survey sector as  
28 well, and so that's just one important thing to note there.

29  
30 This is self-reported, and so we're relying on anglers' recall  
31 after each trip, and, because a lot of these surveys were developed  
32 before Return 'Em Right came along, we've had to work within the  
33 framework of the existing state surveys, which presented some  
34 challenges with how we ask questions to fit into the existing  
35 surveys.

36  
37 Because of that, there's a little bit of variability in how the  
38 data and the variables are collected within that, and so I've  
39 listed a few examples there. One is that Florida doesn't collect  
40 from the for-hire sector, where other surveys do, and then Alabama  
41 isn't collecting any venting information, and so there's just a  
42 couple small examples. This is still very useful data, and so I  
43 do want to point that out.

44  
45 Next is the Gulf at-sea observer program. This program has been  
46 going on for about fifteen years in Florida. It's been  
47 sporadically implemented, kind of on an intermittent basis, in  
48 Alabama and Mississippi, just depending on when funding has been

1 available, but, since 2022, Return 'Em Right has been able to  
2 support a consistent data collection program through Florida,  
3 Alabama, and Mississippi, and it's more of a supplemental to  
4 Florida's existing program.

5  
6 This is also a voluntary participation program, where they're  
7 getting for-hire vessels that agree to participate to allow  
8 observers to come onboard their trip. These observers are trained  
9 to collect and record specific data, that has been standardized to  
10 the greatest extent possible.

11  
12 I know that's one of the biggest challenges. Even though that a  
13 lot of the states are collecting similar data, and we're neighbors,  
14 oftentimes we find it difficult to agree on the methodology, and  
15 the variables, but this is something that I think we put a really  
16 big, concerted effort into standardizing, and so we've got a really  
17 good, consistent program so far.

18  
19 Up to this point, we've got three years, and we're now about to  
20 enter our fourth year of data collection through the at-sea  
21 observer program across these three states. We also have a  
22 centralized at-sea observer data warehouse that that manages and  
23 stores all of this data.

24  
25 I wanted to just give a couple examples of some of the data that  
26 are coming out of the at-sea observer program. It's a very  
27 valuable data stream.

28  
29 On the left, this is a screenshot of a map produced by Alabama  
30 showing their spatial representation of effort, and so you can see  
31 where the highest concentrations of effort were in Alabama, with  
32 respect to the artificial reef zones, from 2002 and 2004, and so  
33 that's a three-year time period that we're looking at every year.  
34 Then kind of the same time period for Florida, and so you can see  
35 where the highest concentrations of effort have been over those  
36 three years.

37  
38 This is also from Florida, and this is just a summary of the number  
39 of trips that they've sampled on a yearly basis. You can see they  
40 started their program in 2009, and number of trips was just over  
41 a hundred, and it grew to over 500, and almost 600, around 2016 to  
42 2018, and then there was a dip around COVID, and then they've kind  
43 of picked back up.

44  
45 They've been doing this program for a really long time, and have  
46 done an amazing job at it, and so, when Return 'Em Right came along  
47 in 2022, we were able to provide some supplemental funding, and  
48 you can see, there in the chart, where the number of trips that

1 were sampled on a yearly basis increased, and it has kind of  
2 remained pretty steady.

3  
4 Coverage is a question that we often get asked, and, you know,  
5 what's the percent coverage of the at-sea observer program, and,  
6 while we'll probably never hit the ideal target for that number,  
7 we're hoping -- Or we're at least hopeful to see that we can  
8 improve, and increase, the number of trips that we're able to  
9 sample on a yearly basis, and we're hoping that's a good thing for  
10 the data.

11  
12 This is another example of just some of the species-specific data  
13 that we can gather from the at-sea observer program, and this is  
14 a new field. I say a new field, and it's a field that we improved  
15 when we began working with the states to collect the at-sea  
16 observer data. They were collecting barotrauma before, but it was  
17 a little bit difficult to analyze.

18  
19 They were just collecting like a descriptive name, and so we moved  
20 towards a code-based system, that the levels of barotrauma can be  
21 described based on some definitions. That way, we can use those  
22 codes to better analyze the data, and you can see here, on the map  
23 on the right, for red grouper, as the depth contours increase off  
24 the coast of Florida, you can see where the level of severity of  
25 barotrauma increases for red grouper, and so just some interesting  
26 things you can do with the data.

27  
28 We're also collecting information through the Southeast Region  
29 Headboat Survey. This is managed by NOAA, and it's a Gulf-wide  
30 survey of headboats. This is different from the other volunteer  
31 reporting surveys, in that it's required, and so, each trip, the  
32 captain is required to report their information through an  
33 electronic logbook, and they're reporting on the number of fish  
34 they catch, and discarded by species, and so we worked with NOAA  
35 in 2023.

36  
37 We went through the OMB process, the Paperwork Reduction Act, to  
38 get questions added for each discard, to collect whether or not it  
39 was descended or vented, and this is similar to the other ones, in  
40 that it's self-reported data, and so, just like when anglers come  
41 back from the dock and are intercepted, they're relying on recall,  
42 and so is this survey.

43  
44 One interesting thing about this is the headboats are included in  
45 our observer program, and so, any instance of a headboat trip that  
46 is observed by an at-sea observer, we can take the data that was  
47 recorded from the observer and use it to validate against a trip  
48 that was also reported from the captain.

1  
2 So this is just a summary of the collaborative studies, and I'll  
3 go into each one here in a little bit more detail after this slide,  
4 but I wanted to just give you an overview of them, and just to  
5 show that, you know, we've got a coverage across the Gulf from the  
6 different studies, and a variety of different topics, looking at  
7 release mortality and survival with different release methods and  
8 different depth zones and different species, and also including  
9 things like trying to characterize and understand different rates  
10 of depredation across the Gulf.

11  
12 The two surveys on the top, that have the dark background, are  
13 completed, and the other two are ongoing, so we'll kind of go  
14 through those next.

15  
16 The first one I wanted to touch on is a study by Steve Szedlmayer  
17 out of Auburn University. His study looked at red snapper release,  
18 and he was hoping to compare survival of red snapper released via  
19 three different treatments of surface, descender, and cage  
20 methods.

21  
22 Some of the results from that were that predation, obviously, had  
23 an effect on survival. We were able to determine that through the  
24 cage release method as a control, and then descending devices are  
25 effective at reducing mortality. Now, this wasn't really supported  
26 through the mark-recapture portion of the study, but, looking at  
27 the acoustic telemetry, there was a significant difference in the  
28 survival between the different methods, with surface release  
29 having the lowest survival.

30  
31 This wasn't a surprise, but, at greater depth, we're going to find  
32 that we have reduced survival. I think most of us knew that  
33 already, but fast handling and retrieval greatly improved  
34 survival, and so part of the conclusion to this is that descending  
35 devices are and can be effective. However, reduced handling and  
36 fast release are likely the most important. I think that's one  
37 thing that we've tried to maintain and be consistent with in our  
38 messaging with Return `Em Right.

39  
40 This next study is Marcus Drymon's lab out of Mississippi State.  
41 They looked at depredation on descending devices across the Gulf.  
42 This was kind of an add-on to a previous study that he had done as  
43 kind of a pilot off the coast of Alabama, and they were attempting  
44 to assess depredation rates on descending fishes and identify the  
45 depredating species.

46  
47 Ultimately, after about a thousand descents, they only recorded  
48 three shark depredations, and, when we say shark depredation, we're

1 talking about observed being taken from the device. There were  
2 oftentimes predators present, and we believe that fish were eaten  
3 after they were released from the device on some occasions, but,  
4 as far as being taken from the device, it was less than 1 percent.

5  
6 There were no dolphin depredations recorded during descent. They  
7 would often follow, but they didn't take them off of the devices,  
8 and depredation during ascent, when the fish was being reeled up,  
9 was a much more common issue, and so Marcus Drymon and their team  
10 concluded that the depredation is essentially a non-issue for reef  
11 fishes on descending devices and the anglers should embrace their  
12 use as an effective tool for mitigating barotrauma.

13  
14 I want to just say that we're not saying that depredation doesn't  
15 occur, and it's not something we should be talking about, but it  
16 may not be happening at the frequency that that we hear about.

17  
18 This is a study, and it's ongoing, and so I'm just going to talk  
19 a little bit about the objectives and kind of where they're at in  
20 the process. Will Patterson, out of the University of Florida,  
21 was studying gag release mortality mitigation, and his project was  
22 using 3D telemetry to estimate gag fate and assess the  
23 effectiveness of descending devices and venting.

24  
25 Some of the data they have, they've got over 800,000 detections,  
26 which, if you ask Will, that's about half of what he was hoping to  
27 have, and they were -- They're going to use this information to  
28 measure the movements, and that includes depth and speed changes,  
29 and we'll have a high degree of confidence in estimating fate, or  
30 assigning fate, to the different fish that are tagged through this  
31 program.

32  
33 He's had a lot of challenges. His site is right off of  
34 Steinhatchee, and so two hurricanes, year-after-year, have crossed  
35 directly over his study site and toppled, and displaced, all of  
36 the acoustic arrays that he had set out, one year after the next,  
37 and so he was able to get some data from the winter of 2023, and  
38 he may have gotten a couple days of data.

39  
40 They rushed to try and get things out before the last hurricane,  
41 but I have yet to get a status on where he is with the recovery  
42 process on that, but I'm hopeful we'll be able to get something  
43 good out of that study.

44  
45 The last study was out of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and  
46 Fisheries. This is Zachary Zuckermann evaluating the fish  
47 descending devices for reef fish. The objective of their study  
48 was to assess the biological and logistical effectiveness of

1 descending devices for different reef fish species, and so what we  
2 were prioritizing here were gray triggerfish, greater amberjack,  
3 and red snapper.

4  
5 Again, this is just preliminary data, but they've seen predators  
6 present in about 34 percent of their releases. I will note, in  
7 Drymon's study, I think the depredation events that he saw were  
8 all off the coast of Louisiana, all three of them. Then, also,  
9 the SeaYaLater, which is an inverted hook device, worked well, as  
10 well as the SeaQualizer. The SeaQualizer had the most predator  
11 interactions. I will note, even though it had the most, it was  
12 still a very low frequency of occurrence.

13  
14 Then the Fish Elevator was another device that they were testing,  
15 and you can see it's in the picture there with a gray triggerfish,  
16 and it's essentially an upside-down crab trap, and they found that  
17 difficult for anglers, or themselves even, to try to hold the fish  
18 in and then toss over the side upside down and maintaining the  
19 fish inside, and so it resulted in a lot of failed descents.

20  
21 This study is the last I'm going to cover, and it is the human  
22 dimensions survey, and so I wanted to talk a little bit about the  
23 sampling frame before I get into this, and so what we did for this  
24 survey was we used the licensing data in the state reef fish  
25 reporting apps to develop our sampling frame.

26  
27 We sent this out to anglers that that had licenses within the  
28 reporting apps, and we asked them whether or not they fished for  
29 reef fish, snapper, or grouper in the Gulf. Those that responded  
30 yes took the survey, and so this is essentially a survey of Gulf  
31 reef fish anglers only, and so we've gotten a pretty high response  
32 rate.

33  
34 We got almost 4,000 during the first survey, and we've got about  
35 3,500 in the second survey, and so what this is is it's a sequential  
36 -- It's a series of surveys. The first one we sent out in 2022,  
37 prior to any of the outreach and education program starting for  
38 Return 'Em Right, so that we can get a baseline of what knowledge  
39 and awareness anglers had about different best release practices  
40 for reef fish in the Gulf.

41  
42 We've sent out the second survey, and so in 2024, and we actually  
43 just completed it. They're going through the analysis right now.  
44 The second survey, we got about 3,500 responses, and what we're  
45 hoping to do is to measure the difference from the 2022, over those  
46 two years to 2024, of what anglers knowledge and awareness of these  
47 different best practices are.

48

1 Some of the results from that are the barotrauma knowledge has  
2 improved. The use of best handling practices has also increased,  
3 especially with respect to fish descending devices. One of the  
4 things that our program noted right off the bat was that there's  
5 a large gap in the knowledge about descending devices and options  
6 for releasing fish, and so we wanted to try to put an emphasis on  
7 that, to close that gap.

8  
9 Now, we talk about lots of other best release practices, venting  
10 included, best handling, getting them out and back to the water  
11 quickly, but we did try to emphasize fish descending devices as an  
12 option. Awareness of Return 'Em Right has increased as well, and  
13 anglers fishing in greater than fifty feet of water were more  
14 likely to use fish descending devices after learning about Return  
15 'Em Right and the best handling practices that we were trying to  
16 educate them on.

17  
18 The chart to the right, I wanted to just kind of look at it for a  
19 minute here, and so this was part of the results from the two  
20 surveys. If respondents indicated that they knew about Return 'Em  
21 Right, they're the graph in green, the bar in green, and, if they  
22 didn't know about Return 'Em Right, they're indicated in blue.

23  
24 What you'll see here is that their knowledge of best handling  
25 practices was 10 top 40 percent greater, depending on the different  
26 practices that we're looking at here, if they knew about Return  
27 'Em Right, and so what that tells us is that the messaging through  
28 our program seems to be working, and so the conclusion that we can  
29 draw from this is that Return 'Em Right is positively influencing  
30 angler behavior and awareness of best release practices, and that  
31 continued outreach, especially targeting new anglers, or anglers  
32 that don't know about Return 'Em Right already, is recommended.

33  
34 Some of the next steps are we're going to continue our efforts  
35 working with the states through the different surveys and data  
36 collection programs, and we're always looking for ways to improve.  
37 One thing that we're kind of excited about is that we're expanding  
38 our at-sea observer coverage. We'll be back here next week to  
39 train the Louisiana and Texas observers that are going to be ready  
40 to start implementing the at-sea observer program as soon as  
41 possible in Texas and Louisiana.

42  
43 I want to give a shout-out to Marie and the Alabama Department of  
44 Conservation and Natural Resources. They're going to help us with  
45 the training. Captain Dale Woodruff is going to take us out, with  
46 all the observers, so we can get them some hands-on experience  
47 before we send them back to Texas and Louisiana, and, again, all  
48 of this is coordinated and standardized, so that we're going to,

1 for the first time, hopefully have a Gulf-wide at-sea observer  
2 coverage, and so we're pretty excited about that.

3  
4 The at-sea data warehouse, we're getting it improved, and making  
5 some modifications to it, to include Louisiana and Texas in the  
6 data management and storage, and then we'll plan to continue  
7 coordinating with the SSC and the Gulf Council on ways that Return  
8 'Em Right can help the council, and provide any kind of information  
9 that would be useful for them, and so I will end on that note.

10  
11 I know Dr. Allen is going to present some recommendations. All of  
12 this information that I've talked about here today, we spent an  
13 entire day covering with the SSC last month, and we had some really  
14 great discussions, and had some really good deep dives into some  
15 of the data and information that is available through these data  
16 collection programs, and so thank you.

17  
18 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Charlie. That was a great presentation.  
19 Before Mike comes up, maybe I'll allow folks a few minutes to ask  
20 questions now. Questions? Okay, and I've got one, right, and so,  
21 you know, I appreciate all of the collaboration, and the  
22 coordination, that you're doing with, you know, various groups,  
23 and one that kind of stuck out to me was the Southeast Regional  
24 Headboat Survey.

25  
26 We've talked a lot about that over the last couple of days, and,  
27 given your budget, and your priorities, and you had \$8 million or  
28 something to spend over -- Or \$30 million over eight years, right,  
29 and is there an opportunity, or are you contributing any funds, to  
30 that survey?

31  
32 **MR. ROBERTSON:** Yes, we are. When we had initially reached out to  
33 NOAA and made the modifications to the survey, we paid a pretty  
34 big portion of the cost of that survey, just for the development,  
35 the adding of the questions, and any kind of like technical support  
36 that may have been required for, you know, problems that resulted  
37 from the modifications that we made, and so we paid a pretty big  
38 portion of the implementation of that survey for the initial year.  
39 Since then, we've just kind of picked up a smaller portion, based  
40 on the number of questions that we have added to the survey, but  
41 we are contributing to it.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Yes, and then, I guess, moving forward, is there  
44 an opportunity to, you know, think about how you might contribute  
45 perhaps a little bit more, if it's needed?

46  
47 **MR. ROBERTSON:** Yes, potentially. Potentially, and we would have  
48 to kind of figure out some details about that, I mean, within the

1 scope of the project. I mean, we've got to be able to justify our  
2 portion, and pay our fair part of the survey, but we recognize it  
3 is a very important survey. It provides some really, really  
4 important data.

5  
6 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I'm not trying to twist your arm, but looking  
7 for creative options moving forward. Any other questions for  
8 Charlie? Andy.

9  
10 **MR. STRELCHECK:** I was intrigued by the Marcus Drymon study, and  
11 so we constantly hear about depredation from sharks and dolphins,  
12 and so you mentioned, obviously, with the descending of fish, not  
13 much depredation, but you also alluded to depredation happening as  
14 they're being reeled to the surface, and what are the estimates of  
15 that? Did Marcus provide that information?

16  
17 **MR. ROBERTSON:** The estimates on fish depredated on ascent?

18  
19 **MR. STRELCHECK:** Right. Yes, on ascent.

20  
21 **MR. ROBERTSON:** I'll have to look back at the numbers. I'm not  
22 sure if he provided the specific numbers on the ascent. They may  
23 have that in their metadata, you know, and what we were looking at  
24 specifically was depredation on the descending devices, and so I  
25 imagine they probably captured that information.

26  
27 It's a little tricky sometimes too though, because, I mean, we've  
28 talked about trying to add this, a field like this, to the at-sea  
29 observer programs, and we do actually in fact have a field, but  
30 it's only when it's observed. You know, oftentimes, it happens  
31 fifty feet below, and you don't know. All you know is that you  
32 had a fish, and it disappeared.

33  
34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Dr. Banks.

35  
36 **DR. BANKS:** So, to answer part of that question, we actually have  
37 an ongoing project at Harte right now where there's a camera  
38 looking at during the reeling-in of fish, and who is causing the  
39 issue there, and we're getting ready start year-two of that study.  
40 It's actually, ironically, been barracuda more than sharks on the  
41 video, and also amberjack.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks, Dr. Banks. Very interesting.  
44 Mr. Strelcheck.

45  
46 **MR. STRELCHECK:** I'm raising my hand on behalf of Dr. Porch.

47  
48 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Clay.

1  
2 **DR. PORCH:** Thank you, and thank you for this presentation. It's  
3 really exciting to see some positive results coming out of the  
4 Deepwater Horizon disaster, and this is fantastic work. I had a  
5 couple of questions.

6  
7 One, we put a considerable amount of IRA funding, red snapper IRA  
8 funding, towards expanding the for-hire observer program too, and  
9 so I'm curious how that is going, because I know we've been working  
10 hand-in-hand in that regard, and if that's part of the Texas and  
11 Louisiana expansion that you're referring to.

12  
13 Also, clearly more work needs to be done to better characterize  
14 discard mortality rates, for a bunch of species, and I'm curious  
15 how many more studies this program intends to fund on that, and  
16 then, finally, just a comment. You know, based on Marcus Drymon's  
17 work, it looks like descender devices are really useful to reduce  
18 depredation even in shallow water, where barotrauma is not  
19 necessarily an issue.

20  
21 **MR. ROBERTSON:** Thanks, Clay, and I'll try and touch on each one  
22 of those. The first one, the IRA funding, you caught me there,  
23 and I didn't really get into the funding sources there, because I  
24 didn't want to confuse it within the group here, but the expansion  
25 of the at-sea observer program in Texas and Louisiana is being  
26 funded through the IRA funding, just because we had two different  
27 pots of money, and we had to keep that separate.

28  
29 However, Return 'Em Right, I'm spending a lot of my time -- Our  
30 existing at-sea observer program staff are spending a lot of their  
31 time to help us stand up the infrastructure to get this going, and  
32 so I wanted to put it in here as just a really big portion of what  
33 Return 'Em Right is doing right now, is coordinating that  
34 standardization of the expansion of that program into Texas and  
35 Louisiana. What was your second question, Clay?

36  
37 **DR. PORCH:** If you have think that there will be an opportunity to  
38 fund more discard mortality rate studies, because that's sorely  
39 needed in the region.

40  
41 **MR. ROBERTSON:** Right, and, yes, I think we're open to discussing  
42 gaps, and identify areas that need more research, and we're  
43 entering the fifth year. We're going to start looking at a new  
44 cooperative agreement, and so there's the potential that we could  
45 consider that under the scope of our new, or next, three-year  
46 agreement, and so, yes, we are, and we have a we have a session  
47 coming up at AFS this year where we're hoping to get some feedback  
48 from stakeholders on what some of the research gaps and things are

1 that we might be able to help with.

2

3 You know, I think maybe Dr. Allen is going to talk a little bit  
4 about some of the recommendations from the SSC, and for us to kind  
5 of think through that a little bit as well, and then the last point  
6 that you made I think was about the depredation study for Marcus  
7 Drymon, and the potential for descending devices to possibly help  
8 fish return to the bottom past predators.

9

10 This is completely anecdotal, and there's no science to back this  
11 up, but we've done a lot of camera drops, and we've seen,  
12 oftentimes, the descending device, when it pulls a fish down, that  
13 fish is just limp going down on the device, and they go relatively  
14 quick to the bottom. We see, oftentimes, they go right past  
15 sharks, and dolphins, and they're not really paying any attention,  
16 just because it's not an easy meal.

17

18 When we're releasing fish at the surface, that don't have a device  
19 weighting them down to the bottom, you know, they're struggling  
20 sometimes to get down, and they might look like they go quickly at  
21 the start, at the surface, and they go ten or fifteen feet down,  
22 but then they then they start to slow down. They use that burst  
23 of energy to break the first ten to fifteen feet, and they  
24 struggle, and that's when the predators cue on to them.

25

26 You know, there's those predatory instincts we talked about, and  
27 we all know current nature, and I think it triggers something in  
28 them, when they when they see these fish struggling to get back  
29 down, and there may be something there. I think that's something  
30 we might like to look at, or potentially explore, in the future.

31

32 **DR. PORCH:** Yes, and it goes against the conventional wisdom of  
33 not having to use those descending devices when the fish don't  
34 look like they need to be descended, but, anyway, great work. I  
35 really appreciate it. Thank you.

36

37 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Clay, and thanks, Charlie, for that  
38 exchange. Dr. Banks.

39

40 **DR. BANKS:** I will point you to a thesis that's come out of Harte,  
41 back in 2017 or 2018, and Alex Tompkins, for us, actually looked  
42 at that using, ironically, something called a crossbow, which is  
43 set up with four cameras, and so he got like a 360 view of the  
44 descender device, and looked at predation as well as where you  
45 actually would need to release the fish to get them through  
46 predation, and so I would highly encourage you start there, with  
47 a literature search.

48

1 **MR. ROBERTSON:** I may have seen that one, and I need to look back  
2 and refresh my memory on it.  
3  
4 **DR. BANKS:** He some really cool videos of dolphin head-butting  
5 snapper and things like that. There's some interesting  
6 interactions between these animals.  
7  
8 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Any other questions for Charlie?  
9 All right. Not seeing any, thanks, Charlie. We appreciate it.  
10  
11 **MR. ROBERTSON:** Thank you, all.  
12  
13 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Next up is Dr. Allen for the SSC  
14 review and the recommendations.  
15  
16 **DR. ALLEN:** Thank you, and thank you, Charlie. We at the SSC, as  
17 they mentioned, spent a full day on this, and got detailed  
18 presentations on a lot of the studies that Charlie highlighted in  
19 his talk, and we certainly recognize the great educational benefit  
20 of just improving angler behavior about released fish and the  
21 chance to reduce discard mortality through angler education  
22 programs like this.  
23  
24 The recommendations of the SSC really focused more on how programs  
25 like this could be used to improve data streams, and data sources  
26 that we can use in stock assessments, and so we had several  
27 recommendations there. You know, one is that there is a critical  
28 need to just synthesize data across the Gulf from different tagging  
29 studies and having a database where folks can go in and understand  
30 kind of the big picture of what has happened across a bunch of the  
31 individual studies.  
32  
33 It sounds like the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission has  
34 those databases in process, with future improvements, and so we  
35 definitely think that's a good step, to be able to synthesize  
36 things that could be used in stock assessments.  
37  
38 There's other data sources that could be done as part of these  
39 studies, but one is that we recognized a need for analysis of  
40 critical sample sizes that are required for discarded catch  
41 information, and could also be used to inform tagging studies about  
42 what's feasible to do as far as tagging studies using charter  
43 boats, and recreational anglers as well.  
44  
45 We had a lot of discussion about the potential, along with these  
46 programs, of doing genetic samples, fin clips off fish, which some  
47 of the newest methods are allowing a lot of really robust  
48 information that could be directly used in stock assessments, like

1 population size estimation, age composition through genetic  
2 sampling, and ultimately exploitation rates and harvest rate  
3 estimation, and so those kind of studies could be dovetailed in  
4 with this type of program, to really ultimately improve  
5 assessments.

6  
7 Another topic that we discussed was the need for seasonal and  
8 spatial resolution on discarded catch data from both recreational  
9 and charter boats, including depredation.

10  
11 As you know barotrauma is, obviously, depth-related, and, also,  
12 catch-and-release mortality in general has a temperature component  
13 that affects the impact on individual fish, and so understanding  
14 how discarded catch and depredation is happening spatially and  
15 temporally might allow for improved use in stock assessments.

16  
17 For example, instead of just one pooled total discarded catch, if  
18 a lot of the catch is happening in shallow water, and only a  
19 portion of the year in deeper water, they could allow us to refine  
20 those estimates and improve stock assessments that way, by having  
21 a better sense of how many dead discards ultimately happen in the  
22 fishery, and this Return 'Em Right initiative offers the  
23 opportunities to do that.

24  
25 Another topic that we discussed was the potential to use high-  
26 reward tagging studies to estimate fishing mortality more  
27 directly, and those kind of tagging studies could be implemented  
28 along with the kind of studies that Charlie highlighted, and so we  
29 enjoyed the day about working through this, and talking about how  
30 these things could be used in stock assessments, and I  
31 think where the SSC fell is really looking at how we can improve  
32 data sources that would ultimately improve stock assessments and  
33 reduce some of these critical uncertainties that we're always  
34 dealing with, and so that was it, Dr. Frazer, and I'll be happy to  
35 take any questions.

36  
37 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Mike, for that overview. Any questions  
38 for Dr. Allen? You're off the hook.

39  
40 **DR. ALLEN:** Okay. Thank you.

41  
42 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Next up on the list is Mr. Haddad,  
43 to give us the communications update.

44  
45 **MR. NICK HADDAD:** All right, and thank you to the council for  
46 having me here this morning. Thank you, Emily, for the  
47 introduction earlier as well. My name is Nick Haddad. I'm the  
48 Sustainable Fisheries Communications Manager for Florida Sea Grant

1 and Return 'Em Right, and we'll hop right into it.

2  
3 So not much to talk about here, and Charlie covered most of this  
4 already, but, just as a reminder, I'll be covering the education  
5 and outreach and the fish descending device distribution  
6 components of this project that are being run by Florida Sea Grant  
7 and the University of Florida.

8  
9 Charlie mentioned we brought this -- We last presented to the  
10 council around two years ago, and so I kind of want to set the  
11 stage for the new council members, and also any new folks in the  
12 audience, and so a lot of work initially went into building the  
13 foundation of this project.

14  
15 We knew we wanted to create an independent brand from the partner's  
16 name, and one that was guided by anglers and grounded in science,  
17 and that's where Return 'Em Right came to be, and so we started  
18 with a branding process, "Return" focusing on returning fish to  
19 depth, not exclusively with descending devices, and so proper  
20 venting techniques, proper surface releasing, really doing what we  
21 can to make sure fish aren't just floating off and dying anymore.  
22 If you notice "Right" is slightly larger, emphasizing that there's  
23 a right and wrong way to release fish.

24  
25 Then, from there, we set up all new digital media, and so a website,  
26 returnemright.org, social at ReturnEmRight on all platforms, and  
27 we had to build an education module to be the centerpiece of our  
28 education and outreach. We didn't want to just give gear away to  
29 the anglers. We wanted to make sure that they knew how to use it,  
30 and when to use it to best support the resource, and so we wanted  
31 that education module to be easily accessible to anglers and short  
32 and concise.

33  
34 Then we had to procure release gear, and so we had an open  
35 invitation to bid process with the University of Florida, where we  
36 awarded contracts to three descending device manufacturers, and  
37 you can kind of see that picture of the box of gear there. It's  
38 a pretty cool kit that we came up with. You can't buy this kit on  
39 its own, but it's a pre-rigged kit, where the SeaQualizer comes  
40 pre-rigged to a three-way swivel and a three-pound weight.

41  
42 That way, the anglers can take it out of the box, attach it to a  
43 spare line, and it's ready to use immediately, and so trying to  
44 overcome some of those barriers to use upfront. It also includes  
45 a backup inverted hook descending device as well.

46  
47 Then, after that, it was really launching the program. We launched  
48 publicly on May 3 of 2022. We did have a very small private launch

1 to the federal for-hire fleet in October of the prior year, but  
2 the education module, and pretty much everything, had changed in  
3 between that short few months, and so really, at this point, we're  
4 looking at just under three years of operating the program  
5 publicly.

6  
7 I wanted to give a quick screenshot of what this education module  
8 looks like and kind of talk about some of the justification for  
9 why we use it. The software we use is Articulate Rise, and we use  
10 that software because it translates really well between devices,  
11 and so whether you're using a phone, an iPad, or a laptop, those  
12 interactive elements really translate well between platforms, and  
13 we thought it was a good application for this program, knowing a  
14 lot of anglers would be doing this on their phones.

15  
16 There's three main components to the education module. It starts  
17 with eligibility forms, and so we wanted to set the stage upfront  
18 whether anglers would be eligible for gear, or whether they  
19 wouldn't, and, from there, they have the choice to continue to the  
20 module or not, whether they're eligible or not.

21  
22 Those forms are self-verification. I think we all know that  
23 there's no single permit that can verify who is a reef fish angler  
24 across all states in the Gulf, and so it's basically a self-  
25 verification that you fish offshore for reef fish, and, if you do  
26 fish offshore for reef fish in the Gulf, you are eligible for gear.

27  
28 You do not have to live in the Gulf. We know a lot of anglers  
29 travel to the Gulf to fish, and we didn't want to exclude those  
30 anglers from the program. An example is the Atlanta Saltwater  
31 Sportsman's Club has several tournaments a year in the Gulf,  
32 despite being in Georgia.

33  
34 From there, the content, and it's really short and concise. We  
35 focus on barotrauma and venting, but we do have a brief section on  
36 general best release practices, and you can kind of see the slides  
37 on the left. There's a trip preparation component, a general best  
38 release practices, barotrauma venting, and then descending. The  
39 whole course, from start to finish, averages around fifteen minutes  
40 to complete.

41  
42 Then, lastly, if you are eligible from here, you'll receive a  
43 question asking you to confirm you want the gear. It's basically  
44 like a last-step trust thing, like saying, hey, this gear is only  
45 really relevant if we're fishing in forty or fifty feet, and are  
46 you sure you want it, and, if you say yes, you get the shipping  
47 form, and then the packages are shipped weekly to participants.

1 I wanted to touch on kind of how we got the program out there, and  
2 so, once the program launched, it was really all about marketing  
3 and outreach, to bring awareness to the fishing community. We  
4 wanted to start with developing effective messaging and  
5 terminology that was relatable to the angling community, like give  
6 reef fish a fighting chance.

7  
8 Our slogan is "Earn Another Fight", which speaks to a successful  
9 release being currency for the future, whether that's a fish that  
10 you get to catch again, or it's a fish that gets to spawn and  
11 provide for the future of fishing.

12  
13 Investing in social media, and social media is pretty much what  
14 you put into it you get out of it, and so, given a small team, we  
15 try to keep up with the times and keep up-to-date on social media.  
16 Sometimes we struggle, not being allowed to use TikTok, but Dylan  
17 is back there to help us out with that.

18  
19 Utilizing ambassadors and influencers, and, again, I don't love  
20 the term "influencers", but they can come in many shapes and sizes.  
21 A single charter captain can be an influencer, or it could be  
22 someone like a content creator with a million followers on YouTube.

23  
24 Partnering with industry leaders is kind of a no-brainer. We want  
25 to operate in the same space as the fishing industry. We're  
26 constantly seeking those mutually-beneficial relationships, to  
27 spread word on best release practices, and we've had really  
28 successful partnerships with the media, the fishing media, and so  
29 that Healthy Returns image on the right is the cover of a feature  
30 story in *Saltwater Sportsman*.

31  
32 They turned our best release practices magazine into a feature  
33 editorial, and you can't really see it, but the very bottom line  
34 says that the health of the fishery is every angler's  
35 responsibility, and here's how you can do your part, and producing  
36 high-quality visuals. I know everyone is aware of Adrian Gray's  
37 picture of a red snapper with a SeaQualizer in the mouth.

38  
39 That's been floating around, and I think I saw it once this council  
40 meeting, but it's been used for most of the last decade to refer  
41 to descending, and we now have a Flickr account with over 1,200  
42 pictures that are available for download with credit to Return 'Em  
43 Right. All the pictures in this presentation are in those, and  
44 you can download them yourself and use them.

45  
46 Lastly, we want to focus on building a community. We don't want  
47 this to be one-stop-shop program, where you get your gear and we  
48 never hear from you again. We're constantly following-up with the

1 angling community and trying to find opportunities to engage with  
2 them, and, really, they're the ones that lead this program. We  
3 focus on it being an angler-driven program, and we create  
4 modifications, based on their input, on a yearly basis.

5  
6 Here's a couple examples, and "Return 'Em Right: A Collective Drive  
7 to Tackle Barotrauma", and this was a story in *Texas Saltwater*  
8 *Fishing Magazine* and another example of how, you know, you can  
9 create these mutually-beneficial partnerships.

10  
11 These magazines need content, and so, if you write the story, and  
12 it's a good story, and provide it to them for free, they're willing  
13 to publish it in their magazines, and so we've written several  
14 stories for *Florida Sportsman*, *Saltwater Sportsman*, and *Texas*  
15 *Saltwater Fishing Magazine*. We're always looking for new avenues  
16 to write for.

17  
18 A pretty cool story on the top-right, and Bill Dance Saltwater has  
19 a saltwater television program, and they reached out to us.  
20 Actually, they were looking for the manufacturer of SeaQualizer,  
21 and we were able to find out that we actually sent the gear to the  
22 boat here in Orange Beach, the Annie Girl, that they were filming  
23 on, and that they received the gear from us, and then, in the next  
24 two episodes, they highlighted Return 'Em Right, which was pretty  
25 cool. Then Chasing the Sun in Panama City, and then Return 'Em  
26 Right on Saltwater Experience on Discovery Channel.

27  
28 This is one more example of how outreach can kind of translate to  
29 education, and so this was a collaboration we did with Light by  
30 the Bow on YouTube last year, and you can see the full-form video,  
31 and this is a thirty-minute video, has 1.7 million views, and then  
32 they added a link to our program in the description, and so, in  
33 the two months following the launch of that video, 1,800 people  
34 clicked on that link and visited our website.

35  
36 Looking deeper into that, if we look at our education module  
37 completions in the following two months, we had 3,145 education  
38 module completions, and over 2,000 of them came from YouTube, and  
39 so just one partnership led to over 2,000 education module  
40 completions in two months, and we're still seeing those education  
41 module completions pour in from this video.

42  
43 All of that has led to over 45,000 education module completions  
44 across the Southeast, with over 42,000 packages of release gear  
45 distributed. You can see it's pretty well spread across the Gulf.  
46 We still have more work to do in Texas, and a lot of coverage in  
47 the southeast Atlantic as well, which I would have to assume is  
48 partially due to their one to two-day red snapper season and our

1 red snapper seeing season being a hundred-plus days, and so a lot  
2 of anglers traveling across the State of Florida to fish the Gulf.

3  
4 We also have a voluntary follow-up survey in our education module  
5 after completion, and what's really cool is we've had 23,000  
6 responses, and so over 50 percent of our angling community  
7 completes that follow-up survey, and that's how we improve our  
8 education.

9  
10 Lastly, from the sources, it's not too surprising, as word travels  
11 fast in the fishing community, but the number-one source of traffic  
12 comes from another angler, and so that's our top source of traffic,  
13 followed by YouTube, then other, which we're kind of diving into,  
14 and we've actually split that into now you can type in here what  
15 the other response is, and we're getting a lot from FWC, and so a  
16 big shoutout to FWC, and then also the Fish Rules app and some  
17 other platforms.

18  
19 A lot going on on this slide, and we have an informational  
20 dashboard. We can track anglers by day, by source, by state, and  
21 by sector pretty easily, but, for this council, you most likely  
22 are interested in the middle-left. 41,800 are private recreational  
23 anglers, 589 federal for-hire, and 749 state for-hire. Then, in  
24 the bottom-left, Florida has 33,250 completions, Texas at just  
25 under 4,000, Alabama just over 3,000, Louisiana just over 2,000,  
26 and Mississippi just under a thousand, and so that's the state  
27 breakdown of completions.

28  
29 After anglers have had their gear for six months, we send them a  
30 follow-up survey. We want to know are they using the gear. If  
31 not, why, and what's their experience with the gear, and so 93  
32 percent of anglers are extremely satisfied with the package, and  
33 so, if you look at somewhat satisfied, it goes up to close to 98  
34 percent satisfaction, and I think it was like less than 1 percent  
35 are dissatisfied with the package.

36  
37 What's pretty interesting is that 84 percent of the Return 'Em  
38 Right community now prefers descending, and so that -- If you --  
39 I put "descending" there because we send two descending devices,  
40 and so 73 percent prefer the SeaQualizer, and 11 percent the  
41 SeeYaLater inverted hook, and 12 percent still prefer venting, and  
42 so, considering venting has been the norm for so long, I kind of  
43 envisioned this being like a 50-50, like they'll use each practice  
44 for when it's necessary, but it's almost been a complete flip-flop  
45 in the preference to descending and away from venting.

46  
47 94 percent reported having no issues with the devices, and the top  
48 two issues are too much weight and then not enough weight, and so

1 it's pretty hard to make everyone happy, but those are the top two  
2 issues, and the third issue is setting the depth on the  
3 SeaQualizer, and so we're constantly trying to address those.

4  
5 In the box, we've just created a new print material, double-sided,  
6 and the one side is a weight guide, kind of showing you how to  
7 swap out your weight for a lighter one, and giving some suggestions  
8 for how much weight you need to descend, and the flip side is  
9 setting the depth on the SeaQualizer, and so we're trying to trying  
10 to help alleviate some of those issues.

11  
12 Then what was pretty interesting as well is we ask -- Considering  
13 we provide the devices for free, we ask about willingness to buy  
14 the devices, and 68 percent were likely to buy descending devices  
15 on their own, but it was interesting that 22 percent already had,  
16 and so some of that might have been in the past, and some of that  
17 might have been after using them that they've bought more. We've  
18 had people reach out and say they bought a second one, to hook two  
19 on the line, or they just had to buy extra ones, and so over --  
20 Around 90 percent of people are likely to buy them on their own.

21  
22 I know we talk a lot about depredation, and so I figured I would  
23 throw some of this stuff in here. Later on in this follow-up  
24 survey, we added questions about depredation, and so have you lost  
25 your catch to predators, and close to 80 percent report losing  
26 them on the way up, and around 10 percent report after venting,  
27 and 7 percent after surface release.

28  
29 Again, you're only going to see those fish for so long under the  
30 boat, and so, depending on the clarity, you might only see those  
31 fish for ten feet. You might not see them get eaten, especially  
32 in deep water, if we're talking 150 to 200 to 300 feet. I mean,  
33 you might only see them for 5 percent of the water column, and so  
34 it's kind of hard to judge what gets eaten after that.

35  
36 What's interesting is 11 percent report losing fish while  
37 descending, but I put this little communication from someone that  
38 reached out and said that they were losing fish every time they  
39 released it on the descending device, and it wasn't making sense  
40 to me, and so I asked were you losing them on the way up, because,  
41 you know, you're far more likely to lose fish reeling them in than  
42 descending them, in my experience, and are you sure they were  
43 sharks, and they said, in each instance, it was on the way down,  
44 and the conventional reel started spinning three-times the drop  
45 rate while they were descending a twenty-four-inch red grouper.

46  
47 I explained to them that, with the SeaQualizer, which is a  
48 pressure-release device, you're pulling a fish down, and so it's

1 going down slowly, especially -- The bigger the fish, the slower  
2 it's going to descend, based on the same weight you're using, and,  
3 as soon as that fish is released from the descending device, you  
4 now basically have a three-pound weight in free spool, and so it  
5 starts speeding up really quick on your conventional setup, or  
6 whatever setup you're using.

7  
8 They were actually misinterpreting the device doing exactly what  
9 it's supposed to do as being depredated by a shark. I explained  
10 that, and they said I think you nailed it. We were in 105 feet,  
11 and I had the device set to fifty feet, and so, the last fifty  
12 feet, that three-pound weight was basically in free spool, with  
13 nothing attached, and so it speeds up quickly.

14  
15 Then we further asked, for those that said they lost fish while  
16 descending -- 68 percent said they didn't lose the gear, and so,  
17 again, like I'm -- It's hard to interpret kind of when a fish was  
18 actually lost to a predator or not, if you didn't lose your gear,  
19 and people are also misinterpreting what's supposed to happen as  
20 depredation, but I think it's still a good sign.

21  
22 That's roughly 3 percent of respondents report losing gear, and  
23 the good thing is, if you're descending fish, you don't have to  
24 worry about a fish being leader shy and not biting. You can just  
25 use a steel leader, or a steel rig, and you can descend it, and  
26 you won't lose your gear that way.

27  
28 Kind of moving forward, as we normally do, to keep this an angler-  
29 driven program, we're getting ready to launch Version 3 of the  
30 education module. We take those surveys, and we make corrections  
31 and improvements every year to the education module. We're also  
32 trying to expand access.

33  
34 I personally would like more of our education accessible on our  
35 website without having to complete any of those forms. It just  
36 gets a little -- It gets a little confusing, and it's like which  
37 one, and, if I complete the one without the forms, do I still get  
38 my gear, and so we have to carefully manage that situation.

39  
40 We've also translated our education module fully into Spanish, all  
41 the videos, all the forms, the entire course, which is fully  
42 operational now, and then, for marketing and outreach, we're trying  
43 to incorporate -- We're trying to incorporate Return 'Em Right  
44 into more tournaments. Tournaments are the space where you have  
45 the most avid anglers, and you also have the most people fishing  
46 for the largest fish, and so you have the most releases.

47  
48 It's not realistic to expect people not to release big keeper fish

1 in tournaments, when they're trying to catch the biggest one, and  
2 so we see a great opportunity to incentivize best release practices  
3 in tournaments.

4  
5 Increase community engagement opportunities, and so continuing to  
6 find opportunities to connect with the Return 'Em Right community,  
7 trying to build this more as a brand community instead of just  
8 delivering education to them, and then, lastly, building more  
9 industry partners. It's kind of a no-brainer. If we can continue  
10 to find those mutually beneficial partnerships, we're going to  
11 continue to seek them.

12  
13 Again, this is a thank you just to everyone that's been involved  
14 in this project. We couldn't have provided education to 45,000  
15 anglers in less than two years without the support of the states,  
16 the industry, the media, and Hubbard's Marina logo is not on here,  
17 but Dylan has done a lot to help promote us, and so a big thank  
18 you to the council and everyone for helping with this project, and  
19 I'll say thank you and take any questions

20  
21 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Thanks Nick. It was really nice  
22 presentation. Any questions? Anthony.

23  
24 **DR. OVERTON:** Thanks, Nick, for your presentation. What is the  
25 cost for kit if someone purchased one?

26  
27 **MR. HADDAD:** If someone were to purchase one, for them it would -  
28 - Again, this isn't a commercially-available kit, but all the  
29 pieces combined would probably be around \$100.

30  
31 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Any other questions for Nick? All right. Not  
32 seeing any, thanks, Nick. Appreciate it. All right. Emily,  
33 you're up.

34  
35 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** All right. Bernie, can you pull up Tab B, Number  
36 13(d), please? So we thought that this might be a reasonable time  
37 for us to talk about the DESCEND Act, which is the Direct  
38 Enhancement of Snapper Conservation and the Economy through Novel  
39 Devices. I'm going to start by just giving you an overview of  
40 sort of the provisions in the act, and what it does, and then we'll  
41 talk about why we care and what we can do about it.

42  
43 All right, and so the primary regulatory action that's contained  
44 within the DESCEND Act is the requirement that a descending device  
45 or venting tool be rigged and ready onboard commercial and  
46 recreational fishing vessels while fishing for reef fish in federal  
47 waters, and so it seems pretty simple, but I just want to call  
48 out, really importantly, that this allows for both descending or

1 venting tools to be onboard.

2  
3 It also applies to both commercial and recreational sectors, and  
4 it applies only for reef fish in federal waters, and so, as we  
5 sort of move through this, it's important to sort of start to pull  
6 those things apart. The act also defines a descending device, and  
7 I don't think we need to go into that in-depth, and then it uses  
8 the council's definition for a venting tool.

9  
10 There are a couple of key provisions in the act that are not  
11 necessarily related to that specific regulatory requirement that's  
12 put on fishermen. One of the things that I want to highlight is  
13 it does say that the act should not affect various programs,  
14 including approved NRDA restoration plans.

15  
16 A little bit of information about why this was here, and the NRDA  
17 plans that fund Return 'Em Right generally don't support projects  
18 that are otherwise mandated by law, because they don't enhance  
19 restoration benefits, and so, while the DESCEND Act was being put  
20 in place, we had a number of different conversations with the  
21 staffers of the folks that were writing the act, and this provision  
22 was added to ensure that funding for Return 'Em Right was not  
23 interrupted.

24  
25 The rationale that they used was that NRDA continues to support  
26 Return 'Em Right because the education portion, and the gear  
27 distribution components, of that Return 'Em Right program are a  
28 key to restoration success, and so, essentially, what this is  
29 saying is the regulation itself is not everything that is needed  
30 here, right, and that's just a piece of the puzzle into making  
31 sure that we are restoring reef fish resources.

32  
33 There were a couple of provisions in the act also that talk about  
34 sort of some of the science that should be conducted, and I'll go  
35 to into those right now, and so the DESCEND Act did provide for  
36 the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a study and produce a  
37 report no later than two years after enactment, and so that would  
38 have been 2003, because the DESCEND Act was enacted in 2001.

39  
40 On the discard mortality of Gulf reef fish fisheries, there was a  
41 number of things that it wanted to include, gaps in biases in  
42 reporting discards, assessments of uncertainty, assessments of the  
43 effectiveness and usage rate of barotrauma mitigation devices, and  
44 so on, and you'll see it all on this slide, and so I do want to  
45 make it clear that that study, as far as I can tell, was not  
46 conducted.

47  
48 I spent the last two months trying to contact folks at the agency

1 and at the Science Center, at the Office of Science and Technology,  
2 at the National Academy of Sciences, and I have gotten no clear  
3 explanation on what happened with this, whether it just went  
4 unfunded or unfinished.

5  
6 This is important to know, because the next three slides focus on  
7 things that the council was supposed to do in response to these  
8 studies. First, the act says that, not later than one year after  
9 that study was received, that the Secretary of Commerce and the  
10 Gulf Council should be developing guidance on minimum standards  
11 for quantifying and reporting discards, and also the associated  
12 mortality in the Reef Fish Fishery Management plan, and also make  
13 a plan to assess and monitor the effectiveness of the usage of  
14 these devices and their impact on discard mortality rates in Gulf  
15 reef fish fisheries. Since that National Academy study was not  
16 conducted, the council has done nothing to act on this either.

17  
18 Another provision in the act was that the Secretary of Commerce,  
19 in coordination with the Gulf Council, should develop and  
20 disseminate to fishermen education and outreach materials that are  
21 related to the proper use of venting tools and descending devices,  
22 and, also, you know, just to encourage this behavior, and so I  
23 just want to note here that the council staff is very deeply  
24 involved in Return 'Em Right.

25  
26 I sit on that plan team. In fact the council's 2019 Discard  
27 Mortality Symposium, the Outreach and Education Technical  
28 Committee met and made a number of recommendations that ended up  
29 in sort of the development of Return 'Em Right as you see it,  
30 right, this sort of non-branded entity that's external from the  
31 agency, or from the council, that really speaks to the fishing  
32 industry without having sort of the stink of the agency on them.  
33 I don't know how to better articulate that.

34  
35 We have been, and continue to be, very involved in the outreach  
36 and education component of Return 'Em Right, and that is by design,  
37 right, and that is to make sure that these best fishing practices  
38 aren't coming from the agency, and they are coming from a trusted  
39 angler source, and so I think we've probably fulfilled this  
40 provision of the act through our involvement with Return 'Em Right.

41  
42 Then why are we here? Well, the DESCEND Act was enacted in January  
43 of 2021, and it had a five-year sunset provision, and so the  
44 DESCEND Act will be expiring in January of 2026, and so the clock  
45 is ticking here, and we need to decide if it is appropriate for  
46 the council to develop an amendment to the Reef Fish Fishery  
47 Management Plan to replace any or all of the provisions in the  
48 DESCEND Act.

1  
2 Some things I think that we should be considering through this  
3 discussion are that the current effectiveness of the DESCEND Act  
4 likely results from a combination of both the regulatory  
5 requirements and the education and outreach component of Return  
6 'Em Right, and so, you know, those two things, and the success of  
7 these things, seem to be coupled.

8  
9 Another consideration is that there are many efforts in progress  
10 right now to evaluate the effectiveness of descending and venting,  
11 but conclusions are not yet, you know, super definitive. You guys  
12 just got a brief overview of the science that has been funded  
13 through Return 'Em Right, but, you know, there's not -- The body  
14 of information may not be, you know, sort of wholly accepted and  
15 ready for use yet.

16  
17 Also, the council could develop an amendment to the fishery  
18 management plan, which would require a reasonable range of  
19 alternatives and an evaluation of effects, and so we would need  
20 some good data, in order to base our analysis, but we would also  
21 have to use a range of alternatives, and I think some of the things  
22 that we could be considering are do we want to include, you know,  
23 just reef fish, or do we want to include commercial fishing and  
24 recreational fishing, and do we want to have separate provisions  
25 for for-hire fishing, and so, you know, we would have to sort of  
26 start thinking about if we would mirror the act as it is or if we  
27 would sort of choose our own path here.

28  
29 We would also want to consider whether or not we would like to  
30 take management action, if we would like to request completion of  
31 that National Academy study, and improve monitoring and discards  
32 of reef fish mortality, right, and so we could decouple the  
33 regulatory requirements that would be put on the anglers and  
34 instead, you know, find a way to support the completion of these  
35 studies, or not, and one sort of final thing, that's not on this  
36 slide, but I think is an also an important consideration, is that,  
37 you know, we reviewed the recreational initiative yesterday, and  
38 the recommendations that came out of the working group, and  
39 Recommendation 6.1 of the recreational initiative working group  
40 directly recommends that the council implement a requirement for  
41 the DESCEND Act replacement, right, and so requiring that  
42 descending devices specifically be rigged and ready for use by  
43 anglers, and so I think that's sort of an important thing for you  
44 all to consider in this conversation as well. With that, I'm happy  
45 to take any questions or entertain any discussion.

46  
47 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right. Mr. McDermott.

48

1 **MR. MCDERMOTT:** So I would like to advance that recommendation of  
2 the recreational initiative, and it appears to me that we need an  
3 amendment to do that, and so I can wait until Full Council, but I  
4 would like to make a motion for an amendment to enhance or replace  
5 the DESCEND Act.  
6  
7 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** Okay, and do you want to do that now? I mean, we  
8 can always do that and have it in committee report.  
9  
10 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** It's up to you, Mike.  
11  
12 **MR. MCDERMOTT:** Yes, and I'll do it now.  
13  
14 **MR. WALKER:** Can you -- C.J. should draft it though.  
15  
16 **MR. MCDERMOTT:** Yes, and probably him better than me. I'm going  
17 to make a motion --  
18  
19 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Just for that, Jason, you've got to draft it.  
20  
21 **MR. MCDERMOTT:** I guess to create the direct staff to create  
22 amendment to replace or enhance the DESCEND Act, or develop an  
23 amendment. Bernie, I think it might need to be replace or enhance  
24 the DESCEND Act.  
25  
26 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** All right, and so we've got a motion on the board  
27 seconded by C.J. Ms. Levy.  
28  
29 **MS. LEVY:** I guess I would just suggest develop a document. I  
30 don't know that it needs to be a plan amendment. There might be  
31 a way to streamline and simplify what needs to happen, and so we  
32 can go back and talk about that at the staff level.  
33  
34 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Michael and C.J., are you doing that change?  
35 All right, and so we'll make the change to direct staff to develop  
36 a document that replaces or enhances the DESCEND Act. All right.  
37 A couple questions. C.J. and then Captain Walker.  
38  
39 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Just something that maybe we can consider as an  
40 option, and so I think Florida, and I believe Texas, has a  
41 requirement to use a descending device if the fish is experiencing  
42 barotrauma, and so that could be something that would be additive  
43 on top of what is the DESCEND Act, and so maybe something that we  
44 could consider. I'm not advocating for it one way or the other,  
45 but just throwing it out there.  
46  
47 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, C.J. Captain Walker.  
48

1 **MR. WALKER:** Thank you. My view on this is I think, currently,  
2 this DESCEND Act -- The requirement to have the descending device  
3 on the boat is -- It's not a law, and it's a recommendation. Am  
4 I right? Like you having a rigged --  
5  
6 **DR. SWEETMAN:** It's rigged and ready.  
7  
8 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** It is a requirement to have them rigged and ready  
9 onboard. However, the DESCEND Act does not require the use  
10 thereof. I think they determined that that was a hard thing to  
11 enforce, which is why they wrote it as they did.  
12  
13 **MR. WALKER:** So it is required, mandatory, and like you can get a  
14 ticket if you don't have a rigged -- I thought -- I didn't know if  
15 it was that far along or if it was just a highly recommended, and  
16 so I have one. I'm not saying I'm -- I just wasn't sure about the  
17 --  
18  
19 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I am looking at you quite suspiciously, Captain  
20 Walker. We'll go to our Coast Guard liaison.  
21  
22 **LT. JACKSON MORTON:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Just to reiterate, if  
23 you were to write that they had to be used while the fish was  
24 experiencing some sort of barotrauma, to enforce that, you would  
25 need to have a boarding officer or enforcement agent onboard the  
26 vessel at the time, and so that's probably in line with not writing  
27 that requirement to use it, and instead have it rigged and ready,  
28 and then just focus more on the education portion.  
29  
30 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Mr. Osborne.  
31  
32 **MR. OSBORNE:** I have a suggestion after you pass the motion, and  
33 so I don't know if you want to do the motion first, and then I can  
34 get my comment after.  
35  
36 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay, and so, I mean, there's still -- Is there  
37 more discussion related to the motion, I guess? J.D.  
38  
39 **MR. DUGAS:** Thank you, Dr. Frazer. Michael, would it be the right  
40 thing to do to replace "or" with "and"?  
41  
42 **MR. MCDERMOTT:** Carrie brought that to my attention, and the  
43 DESCEND Act is going away, and so, if C.J. would be agreeable to  
44 that, I would amend it to read "a document that replaces and  
45 enhances the DESCEND Act".  
46  
47 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** There you go, and so you've got a change to the  
48 motion, and it's agreed to by the seconder. Okay. Mr. Strelcheck.

1  
2 **MR. STRELCHECK:** A couple things, and so, going back to the comment  
3 about the National Academy of Sciences study, and so that was an  
4 unfunded mandate. If you look through that list of requirements,  
5 many, and maybe not all of them, are being at least partly, or  
6 fully, addressed through the Return 'Em Right program, through  
7 some of our IRA work with the states, in terms of improving  
8 enhancing data reporting and consistency with regard to reporting  
9 methodology and requirements, and so there is a lot of information  
10 I think that can inform us with regard to, obviously, those studies  
11 and all the presentations that were just given.

12  
13 I'm going to caveat my next statement with I support this motion,  
14 but we've been talking internally, in terms of the complexities of  
15 the new executive order once again, right, and so the new executive  
16 order focuses on deregulation and focuses on states, you know,  
17 implementing regulations that have statutory mandates.

18  
19 Well, the statutory mandate to require descending devices and  
20 venting tools is going away, because the DESCEND Act is expiring,  
21 and the Magnuson Act has discretionary provisions that allow for  
22 us to impose gear restrictions to help reduce bycatch, but not  
23 necessarily a statutory mandate, right, and so I think that will  
24 be one of the things we'll need to talk through as we develop this  
25 amendment and focus with regard to the deregulatory or regulatory  
26 aspect of this, and what are the additional cost and burden on  
27 fishermen, and there's absolutely benefits that we know are going  
28 to result from the requirements of these descending devices, as  
29 evidenced by some of the presentations, but I just wanted to flag  
30 that, that this is an ongoing conversation and something that we're  
31 trying to figure out as we move forward with this action.

32  
33 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thanks, Andy. Mr. Anson.

34  
35 **MR. ANSON:** Just a clarification on the motion and the change that  
36 was made by replacing "or" with "and", and, just, you know, to  
37 Michael and C.J. and staff, and I guess we'll be getting back a  
38 document that would have, for instance, an action item in there  
39 that would have alternatives that say to have rigged and ready for  
40 use, and then an alternative it says rigged and ready to be used,  
41 correct, and not just an action item just to use it. Okay. All  
42 right. Thank you.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** I'll take one more question, perhaps. Captain  
45 Walker.

46  
47 **MR. WALKER:** Yes, and that was going to be my next comment as well.  
48 I support the motion, and we can talk about the particulars of it

1 at that time, but I -- You know, as some statements have been made  
2 here, it would kind of seem, to me, that it means we're not going  
3 to use venting tools anymore, if this is the required means of  
4 dealing with barotrauma, and this can be ironed out later, but  
5 that's kind of what it sounded like to me, like it mandates using  
6 this device.

7

8 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Ms. Muehlstein.

9

10 **MS. MUEHLSTEIN:** Well, if we replace the DECEND Act, currently,  
11 that allows you to choose, either or. I think, in this language  
12 about enhancing, one of the things that we would want to include  
13 in a reasonable range of alternatives was allowing for both, or  
14 just allowing maybe for the descending device, and so I think that,  
15 again, will be something that will end up in our consideration.

16

17 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Okay, and so we are right up at our lunchbreak.  
18 I think this is the last agenda item, and we'll cover the -- We're  
19 going to vote on this in sec, but I just would let people know  
20 that we'll probably cover our other business items in Full Council.  
21 Sorry, Chris. Okay. All right, and so we've got a motion on the  
22 board. **Is there any opposition to the motion? Seeing none, the**  
23 **motion carries.** Mr. Chairman, if it's all right with you, we'll  
24 cover those Other Business items in Full Council.

25

26 **MR. DUGAS:** Yes, sir. Thank you, Dr. Frazer. We'll go ahead and  
27 break for lunch, and we'll reconvene at 1:30, and we'll move the  
28 agenda item to Full Council, in Other Business. We'll return at  
29 1:30.

30

31 (Whereupon, the meeting recessed for lunch on April 9, 2025.)

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April 9, 2025

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WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON SESSION

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41 The Reef Fish Management Committee of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery  
42 Management Council reconvened at The Lodge in Gulf Shores, Alabama  
43 on Wednesday afternoon, April 9, 2025, and was called to order by  
44 Chairman Tom Frazer.

45

46 **MR. DUGAS:** Welcome back from lunch. Before we move into Full  
47 Council, I'm going to pass the mic back over to Dr. Frazer. We  
48 had one other item in Reef Fish to cover. Dr. Frazer.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for considering the  
3 request, and so, as folks recall, we had two Other Business items  
4 on the agenda, and I thought that, by giving C.J. an opportunity  
5 to quickly introduce and provide some context for the gag Other  
6 Business item that the public, and the audience, would benefit  
7 from that prior to our discussion at Full Council, and so, C.J.,  
8 if you want to enter to introduce the subject.  
9

10 **OTHER BUSINESS**  
11 **GAG GROUPEL DISCUSSION**  
12

13 **DR. SWEETMAN:** Yeah. Thank you, Dr. Frazer, and thank you, Mr.  
14 Chair, for allowing the extra time. I really wanted to get some  
15 public feedback on this, and so gag grouper, and I'm just going to  
16 be blunt here. I am super concerned about what we've got going on  
17 with that fishery right now.  
18

19 We've drastically cut quota from the rebuilding plan, right, and  
20 we were at like 1.9 million pounds, and then that got reduced to  
21 about 211,000 pounds in 2023, and we had about a month-and-a-half  
22 season, a 170,000-pound overage. In 2024, we had to pay that back,  
23 all that overage, and we were at 163,000 pounds.  
24

25 Preliminary, it was only a fifteen-day season. Preliminary numbers  
26 indicate that we still have an overage, and I get those numbers  
27 are still being looked at, but it's still around 90,000 pounds, on  
28 a 163,000-pound quota, which is pretty darn significant, and so  
29 now we're in 2025, and we're, quite frankly, looking at another  
30 reduced season.  
31

32 We are kind of starting to see a little bit of derby fishing going  
33 on here with this fishery, and this constrained season, and it's  
34 very clear that this effort compression is really hard to estimate,  
35 and it create some big uncertainties in projecting what the season  
36 will actually look like, and so my concern here is that we're kind  
37 of in this downward spiral here, that's about to get out of our  
38 control to be able to deal with keeping the quota under control,  
39 and I fear that we're kind of entering into an Atlantic red snapper  
40 situation, where we might have to -- There might be some strong  
41 considerations for how we deal with this fishery in an extremely  
42 short season, where discards just only become higher and a bigger  
43 problem here.  
44

45 What I really want to bring to the table today, and I realize this  
46 might not be the most popular thing, but I think we're kind of in  
47 a situation where we really do start to need to consider this here,  
48 and what I'm thinking about is a temporary, temporary one-year

1 reduction in the gag bag limit from two fish to one fish.  
2  
3 I've heard people say just close it down. That's a hard no for  
4 me, but the fact that anglers are actually saying that -- I'm  
5 trying to do what's best here for the fishery, while keeping it  
6 open to some capacity.  
7  
8 I've worked with our scientists at FWRI, and I've worked with NOAA  
9 Fisheries to kind of update a bag limit analysis that we had  
10 previously seen during the rebuilding plan, and what it's basically  
11 telling us is that it would give us roughly a 19 percent savings,  
12 and, honestly, when you have low quotas like this, that's going to  
13 be very significant.  
14  
15 What I'm basically looking for here is -- This would be basically  
16 a buffer that would be applied to this fishery, so we can get out  
17 of this downward trajectory Of paybacks and overages non-stop, so  
18 that we can actually get into the rebuilding plan, where it's a  
19 stepwise increase in the quota, and we're going to have longer  
20 fishing seasons overall.  
21  
22 It's certainly not happening right now, and I just -- I'm getting  
23 super concerned about this, because we are not even coming close  
24 to that rebuilding plan, and it's actually impacting our ability  
25 to rebuild that fishery here, and so quite frankly, I think the  
26 discussion at the table, and not necessarily today, and maybe at  
27 Full Council, and after hearing public comment, but I want the  
28 council to consider what really is our risk tolerance for this  
29 fishery here, and so I think that this is a potential Avenue.  
30  
31 I think it qualifies -- Well, I know it could qualify as an  
32 emergency action, and I'm happy to present a presentation at Full  
33 Council, so this can be better visualized and whatnot, and I  
34 realize I'm short on time here, and so I'm trying to rush through  
35 it, but I certainly would be interested in thoughts from the  
36 council, at a later time, and I would like to hear from the public  
37 on this topic, too.  
38  
39 We have already heard from our Reef Fish AP, and there was a motion  
40 in there that was unanimously passed that supported potentially  
41 considering something like this, and I've talked to industry, and  
42 I have not heard one person that has told me don't do this. I  
43 think we all recognize that we're in a really bad situation with  
44 gag grouper here, and that's something needs to be done.  
45  
46 I realize that this could be considered a drastic action, but I  
47 think we're -- It's just a one-fish bag limit reduction, and it  
48 would just be temporary for one year, until we can get back into

1 the rebuilding plan cycle and extend the season. Thank you.  
2 That's all I wanted to say.

3  
4 **CHAIRMAN FRAZER:** So I think we're going to hold comment, C.J. I  
5 just wanted to thank the chair again for providing us the  
6 opportunity to provide context for everybody, but we'll certainly  
7 have a fuller discussion in Full Council, and so I think, with  
8 that said, we're done with the Reef Fish Committee.

9  
10 (Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on April 9, 2025.)

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