

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 30th, 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 23rd of May, the same
12 day as Alabama, and we will stay open to the 6th 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 15th. 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 7th and reopening as a weekend-only season,
31 which is a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, the weekend-only, on July
32 12th, and then we closed again on August 18th after that, and we
33 resumed the daily season, beginning August 19th through the
34 remainder of the year up, until October 6th, 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 11th, 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 1st, 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_{∞} , 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_{∞} 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 date 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.

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 ΣR is the -- I didn't describe this on the other
27 two species, but ΣR 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.

48

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.
48

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**
48

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 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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33 - - -

34
35 April 9, 2025

36
37 WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON SESSION

38
39 - - -

40
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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