

**Gulf Council
Standing Scientific and Statistical Committee
Meeting Summary
October 8, 2025
Council Office and Webinar
Tampa, Florida**

The meeting of the Gulf Council Standing Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC) was convened at 8:35 AM EDT on October 8, 2025. The agenda for this meeting was adopted, and the minutes from the May 2025 meeting was approved as written.

Election of Chair and Vice Chair

The SSC elected Mr. Trevor Moncrief as the Chair, and Dr. Tom Frazer as the Vice Chair.

Preliminary Results of Regional Fishery Management Council Regulatory Process Review

Dr. Willy Goldsmith (Pelagic Strategies) and Ms. Deirdre Boelke (Fisheries Insight Network) presented preliminary outcomes of work contracted by the Council to conduct a regulatory process review of the other regional fishery management councils. The Council funded this work as part of its ongoing climate readiness and regulatory streamlining efforts, with the aim of identifying approaches used by other regions to improve the timeliness and throughput of incorporating updated scientific information into the management process and otherwise increase efficiency. The contractors presented an overview of potential regulatory pathways for streamlining as well as best practice strategies for collaboration, coordination, and communication that other regions use to promote efficiency. The SSC discussed the regulatory process review and provided recommendations for topics of interest that the contractors could provide additional focus on in their final report.

An SSC member inquired whether other regions included human dimensions when considering ecosystem component species or setting multi-year harvest specifications, since social and economic issues (e.g., labor) can impact fishing effort and harvest projections. Ms. Boelke responded that human dimensions were not a focus of the regulatory process interviews and were not mentioned by respondents but recognized that social and economic components of the broader ecosystem are important and do not always receive enough consideration, an issue that may be exacerbated given the reductions in NMFS staffing. Another SSC member spoke in favor of exploring the use of ecosystem component species for species in Gulf stock complexes that are not frequently encountered. An SSC member expressed surprise that harvest control rules (HCRs) and management procedures (MPs) were not more frequently applied in other regions for efficiency gains, given that HCRs and MPs are often considered BSIA in international fisheries management.

Regarding legal considerations, an SSC member inquired how uncertainty around ongoing changes to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) would impact regulatory processes and future streamlining efforts. Council staff responded that the regional councils were working together at

the national level to comment on changes to NEPA and highlighted ongoing efforts by NMFS to provide guidance on how to operate under the requirements of both MSA and the new NEPA procedures. Another SSC member asked whether the contractors had explored potential legislative changes to alleviate some of the constraints that hinder efficiency. The contractors responded that they were focused on identifying efficiencies within the current legislative environment. An SSC member expressed interest in the use of Categorical Exclusions (CEs) and requested clarification on when they could be applied. Ms. Boelke responded that CEs may be used when it is known that there will be minimal environmental impact, and that CE implementation requires strong cooperation with NMFS and cannot be implemented by the Council alone.

Regarding incorporation of stakeholder observations in the SSC process to improve responsiveness, an SSC member supported the idea of AP member participation in SSC meetings to provide on the water context for scientific discussions. Other SSC members expressed interest in the use of Supplemental Information Reports (SIRs) and requested the contractors provide further information on whether SIRs were reviewed by both the SSCs and APs in other regions in their final report. SSC members requested that the final report include a list of what other regions consider allowable framework actions, since framework procedures are fairly limited in the Gulf, as well as an overview of streamlining considerations and best practices for stock assessment planning and coordination in other regions.

Review: Gulf SSC Projections Considerations

Council staff reviewed a summary of guidance to be considered by the SSC when it is reviewing projections from stock assessments. These considerations have a direct effect on the outcome of the stock assessment, and on the catch limits that will ultimately be recommended to the Council.

An SSC member thought general guidelines for parameterizing projections were helpful and suggested providing this guidance to analytical teams for setting up projections before presenting them to the SSC. Council staff added that clarifying how parameter values were derived would be very informative. Specifically talking about recruitment, which is highly influential on model outcomes, Council staff noted that it can be model estimated or inferred based on observations but is often used to balance out the model against decisions made in regard to steepness and MSY. Also, the time series used to inform recruitment in projections has the possibility of assuming an outcome relative to an overly optimistic estimate of stock productivity, or the opposite. Council staff thought careful documentation of these decisions was essential and suggested that the same decision be made for both the OFL and ABC to ensure they are truly comparable. The SSC member agreed and thought a small working group could be formed to explore the effects of those decisions about recruitment. Another SSC member noted the episodic nature of recruitment, and how it would reasonably vary depending on species and environmental variables. An SSC member recalled time-series forecasting tools which might be useful with regard to establishing a consistent approach to handling recruitment. SSC members agreed that thorough documented rationale about decisions made on projections settings was key. An SSC member thought these considerations also apply to interim analyses and otherwise data-poor assessments, and another SSC member added that the degree of influence these parameters have on the OFL should be characterized.

Review: Science Coordination Subcommittee Materials

Council staff briefly summarized the 8th Scientific Coordination Subcommittee meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, which was held in August 2024 (National SSC Meeting). An SSC member echoed the challenges with incorporating social sciences into management and thought the Gulf had made progress in this regard. Another SSC member asked about discussions around the issues with recreational landings data. Council staff replied that those issues were attenuated by region relative to the amount of recreational effort in a region, but that most regions were waiting on the results of the MRIP-FES pilot study. Council staff added that the Gulf was unique in that the state-sponsored fisheries surveys served as an alternative for some species for estimating landings.

Council staff also reviewed the proposed theme for the 9th Scientific Coordination Subcommittee meeting, which was accepted by the Council Coordinating Committee and will be hosted by the Gulf Council in 2027. SSC members were supportive of the proposed theme.

Review: Gag Grouper Operational Assessment Terms of Reference

Council staff reviewed the terms of reference for the upcoming stock assessment of Gulf gag grouper. The last stock assessment (SEDAR 72) estimated gag grouper to be overfished and undergoing overfishing as of 2019, and a rebuilding plan for the stock was implemented in June 2024. Overfishing is not estimated to have occurred since 2022. A topical working group will be needed to review updated life history information, particularly on natural mortality, and on episodic mortality from red tide. An SSC member noted a minor red tide in 2025 and said that those data would be evaluated for consideration by the topical working group. Council staff suggested, and the SSC agreed, to add a bullet for describing the process for estimating recent and long-term recruitment (i.e., model-derived versus measured). Another SSC member recalled some new information about discard mortality and thought the topical working group should discuss those new findings also, if available.

SSC members Drs. Dave Chagaris, Luiz Barbieri, and Tom Frazer volunteered to participate in the topical working group, which will meet via webinars in 2026.

Discussion: Joint Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs Working Group

During their February 2025 meeting, the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs made a motion stating a clear need to collectively address the required precision to estimate 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 SSCs requested a follow up meeting to address these topics, and both Councils agreed and have directed staff to work with the SSCs to form a workgroup to this end. Council staff reviewed direction for this working group.

SSC members Will Patterson, Luiz Barbieri, Paul Mickle, and Steve Saul volunteered to be a part of the working group and agreed to participate in the three webinar meetings. Additionally, the Committee nominated Elizabeth Brooks (Northeast Fisheries Science Center) as a member outside of the Gulf to the working group. Recommendations will be presented to both SSCs and Councils.

Review: Essential Fish Habitat Mapping for Gulf Shrimp, Reef Fish, Coastal Migratory Pelagics, Spiny Lobster, and Red Drum FMPs

The Council is developing a generic amendment to update the identification and description of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) for all managed finfish, shrimp species, and spiny lobster. Additionally, the document will satisfy requirements for the recurring 5-year review, as required under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery and Conservation Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). The amendment will update the EFH text, habitat association tables, and mapped descriptions using more contemporary data. Council staff requested SSC feedback on identified challenges in the description of EFH for several species and life stages. The SSC discussed that additional gray literature or Local Ecological Knowledge (LEK) could be considered for use in the absence of formal publications used to inform habitat associations. An SSC member inquired about the approach to geographically define EFH by eco-region. Staff replied that it is not explicitly defined in the Magnuson-Stevens Act to define by eco-region, but EFH can be categorized based on four levels of information (level four the highest):

- Level 1: Distribution data are available for some or all portions of the geographic range of the species
- Level 2: Habitat-related densities of the species are available
- Level 3: Growth, reproduction, or survival rates within habitats are available
- Level 4: Production rates by habitat are available

EFH in the Gulf is currently defined based on Level 1 information for nearly all federally managed species, and defining species-specific EFH by geographical range allows for improved EFH text and map descriptions detailed in the Fishery Management Plans. An SSC member suggested utilizing spawning adult associations to be indicative of habitat associations for early life stages, such as egg and larvae, even if no literature has yet been published explicitly describing this occurrence.

An SSC member inquired about the number of life stages present for each species and suggested removing some life stages other than egg, larvae, juvenile, and adult. Staff noted that these life stages were defined during the Final Environmental Impact Statement, and it may not be subject to immediate modification, but it would be beneficial to reduce the number of life stages for the following 5-year review process. Staff emphasized that the EFH maps provided are not visual depictions of distributions for species by life stage, but rather display known habitat linkages for each species and life stage. This level of detail is indicative of Level 1 EFH maps, and this can be included in the map legend when finalized. Inclusion of distribution information or environmental covariate associations would be indicative of Level 2 or 3 maps, and current data availability does not allow for that level for most species.

Overall, the SSC recommended staff make the suggested modifications to the qualitative descriptors for distribution for wenchman, Spanish mackerel, scamp. The SSC recommended removing water column associations for all species adult and spawning adult lifestages. Additionally, the SSC suggested to combine reef and hardbottom habitat types a single habitat layer. Staff noted that SSC members may email additional literature sources or LEK recommendations to staff to incorporate into the EFH 5-year Review. The SSC noted that staff has

the discretion to make improvements needed, and the SSC does not need to review the document again before finalized by the Council.

Public Comment

Jim Tolan – He had high hopes going into the recent shrimp stock assessment and the analysts went through a completely different modeling framework to incorporate environmental information into the assessment. Unfortunately, it was a complete bust. None of the environmental information gathered was incorporated into the assessment despite new data streams being provided by the states. This plays into the sub-topic of SCS9 that focuses on environmental drivers. The Gulf Council has been pushing for environmental drivers to be incorporated to the assessments better and he would like to see environmental drivers integrated into stock assessments as well.

Other Business

Solicitation for Greater Amberjack Count SSC Reviewers

Council staff asked SSC members to volunteer to participate in the peer-review of the Greater Amberjack Count study, which estimates greater amberjack abundance in the Gulf and Atlantic regions. The review will be held at the Council office in Tampa from March 24-27, 2025. SSC members Drs. David Chagaris and Luiz Barbieri, and Mr. Trevor Moncrief, volunteered to participate in the peer-review. Dr. Barbieri will chair the review.

The meeting adjourned at 2:00 pm eastern time on October 8, 2025.

Meeting Participants

Standing SSC

Jason Adriance
Luiz Barbieri
Harry Blanchet
Dave Chagaris
Tom Frazer, *Vice Chair*
David Griffith
Tiffany Hopper
Jack Isaacs
John Mareska
Paul Mickle
Trevor Moncrief, *Chair*

James Nance
William Patterson
Dan Petrolia
Sean Powers
Andrew Ropicki
Ralph Townsend
Steve Saul

Council Representative

Mike Allen