

Sustainable Fisheries Committee Report November 3, 2025 Kesley Banks – Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab E, No. 1**) and the minutes (**Tab E, No. 2**) from the August 2024 meeting were approved as written.

Regulatory Streamlining Report (Tab E, Nos. 4a – c)

Ms. Deirdre Boelke (Fisheries Insight Network) and Dr. Willy Goldsmith (Pelagic Strategies) presented a draft report for 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 efficient processes used in other regions that could potentially be applied in the Gulf. The contractors provided an overview of the draft recommendations from the report, including procedural mechanisms, innovative regulatory approaches, and best practices for collaboration, coordination, and communication.

The Committee discussed the potential use of Categorical Exclusions (CE) as a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) vehicle to quickly implement routine, non-controversial measures. The Committee discussed the challenges of navigating CEs in the Gulf where routine changes like catch limits are often accompanied by more complex issues such as allocation and data unit conversion. Committee members asked whether there was guidance on the types of actions considered to have minimal impact and requested that staff keep the Council informed of actions in development that could qualify for a CE as a means for efficiency. The contractors responded that NOAA was in the process of updating its procedures for NEPA implementation, which includes expanding the use of CEs. Council staff contributed that the Council Coordination Committee has a working group focused on these NEPA updates, and the working group was awaiting guidance on how to apply the new NEPA procedures within the bounds of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

The Committee expressed interest in automating routine management activities through a closed framework process, but noted that challenges with recreational data availability and calibration in the Gulf may hinder automation. A Committee member suggested that automation could be possible for simple actions with fewer data issues, and highlighted efficiencies that could be gained by limiting the need for Council discussion and SSC review. Council staff responded that such automation could be feasible but would require comprehensive pre-analysis to inform framework development. The contractors added that the process can be flexible, and some management measures can be automated while other, more complex management measures follow a traditional path through the Council process.

A Committee member supported Ecosystem Component Species (ECS) designation for species that are not encountered in quantities that warrant federal conservation and management. The Committee member mentioned that other regions streamline their decisions on conservation and management need by using polls rather than Council discussion. Council staff added that ECS

designation for some reef fish species aligns with the Council's response to the Executive Order 'Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness', which includes a recommendation to remove low priority species from fishery management plans.

The Committee discussed the draft recommendations for improving the uptake of scientific information and stakeholder knowledge in the Council process. A Committee member asked for clarification on the use of Exempted Fishing Permits (EFP) in other regions since the Council already participates in the EFP approval process but currently views EFPs as a largely NOAA-driven effort. The contractors responded that other regions use EFPs in a proactive manner, linking EFPs with their Council's research and monitoring priorities. A Committee member contributed that EFPs have been developed in the South Atlantic to test management strategies for reducing red snapper discards.

A Committee member expressed interest in the use of Fishery Performance Reports to inform decision making and inquired whether an advisory panel (AP) developed product would be representative of the various fishery sectors. The contractors clarified that in other regions, staff typically prepare the report with standardized information acquired from the APs and highlighted that the Fishery Performance Reports can reveal information about fisheries trends that are not captured by traditional data sources (e.g., weather, fuel prices). A Committee member inquired whether the contractors researched the timing of scientific advice in other regions and offered that many regions coordinate the flow of scientific data with the timing of the Council process. The contractors responded that other regions align the timing of their stock assessment review process with Council timelines.

A Committee member discussed an ongoing effort to internally review and streamline Interdisciplinary Plan Team processes in the Gulf, including improving the flow of data to Council staff. The contractors added that in some regions, Council staff have highlighted direct access to federal databases as a key efficiency. The Committee member also suggested that development of streamlining tools and approaches should be coordinated between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils because the regions are similar and coordinated efforts could reduce the burden on the Southeast Regional Office, which oversees both regions.

Other Business

No other business came before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.