Gulf Council
Standing Scientific and Statistical Committee
Meeting Summary
January 22, 2026
Webinar

The meeting of the Gulf Council Standing Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC) was convened at 1:00 PM EDT on January 22, 2026. The agenda for this meeting was adopted, and the minutes from the October 2025 meeting were approved as written.

Gulf Lane Snapper Interim Analysis and Catch Advice

Dr. Francesca Forrestal (Southeast Fisheries Science Center [SEFSC]) presented an updated interim analysis (IA) for Gulf of America (Gulf) lane snapper. This IA is based off the ITarget model used initially in SEDAR 49 (2016)[1] and has been updated to use the Gulf Fishery-Independent Survey of Habitat and Ecosystem Resources (G-FISHER) composite video index as the representative index of relative abundance. The last IA conducted for lane snapper used the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS) catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) index but is no longer being considered due to concerns about the representativeness of that index for the fishery. Dr. Forrestal discussed the requirements for conducting an IA, which uses a 10-year reference period during which the fishery is thought to be in a stable condition. She added that G-FISHER is currently a Gulf-wide survey that samples both natural and artificial reef sites. For this analysis, only natural reef sites were considered.

An SSC member noted the large increase in the index beginning in 2016 and asked about the sample sizes reported from the G-FISHER survey. A G-FISHER analyst replied that the increase in sampling since 2016 has been accounted for in the standardization of the index. Council staff reported a correlation analysis conducted comparing the increase in the sample size from G-FISHER against the standardized index and found strong correlation (rho=0.87). Council staff inquired whether sample size and index performance might be conflated. Several SSC members were similarly concerned. An SSC member thought G-FISHER was appropriate for lane snapper with respect to survey coverage. They further asked if biological data (i.e., ages and lengths) were available to provide context for the patterns observed in the ITarget analysis. Dr. Forrestal replied that ages and lengths are not used to directly inform IAs. Council staff confirmed that fishermen are reporting catching lane snapper in greater numbers and at larger sizes than in years past.

Dr. Forrestal reviewed the merits of using different reference periods (2006-2015, 2019-2023, and 2009-2018) of CPUE data from G-FISHER and described how each informed the various overfishing limits (OFL) for lane snapper. Ultimately, the SEFSC recommended the use of G-FISHER for lane snapper, and the reference period of 2009-2018, which corresponds to an OFL of 1,336,445 lb whole weight. This reference period captures more interannual variability without management bias and is likely to be more representative of the fishery. An SSC member thought it

[1] https://sedarweb.org/documents/sedar-49-final-stock-assessment-report-gulf-of-mexico-data-limited-species/

may be best to consider a reference period from 2016-2023 which would be completely inclusive of the expanded sampling regime. However, the SSC determined that the 2009-2018 reference period incorporated long-term uncertainty in the index, accounted for the likely increase in abundance since 2016, but did not include recent years where in-season closures occurred in December. In conclusion, the SSC advocated moving away from using the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS) since dockside sampling has been recently interrupted due to funding issues and advised that SEFSC analysts closely examine whether G-FISHER survey expansion in 2016 does affect CPUE estimates for lane snapper.

Motion: The SSC considers the 2026 lane snapper interim analysis using the G-FISHER index with the reference period of 2009-2018 as consistent with the best scientific information available.

Motion carried with one in opposition and one abstention.

Motion: The SSC recommends an OFL of 1,336,445 lb whole weight, and an Acceptable Biological Catch of 1,304,917 lb whole weight for Gulf lane snapper for 2026-2028, based on the 2026 lane snapper interim analysis.

Motion carried without opposition.

Gulf Red Grouper Interim Analysis Health Check

Dr. Forrestal presented an IA for Gulf red grouper which also uses the G-FISHER composite video index as the representative index of relative abundance. The last stock assessment conducted for red grouper also used the G-FISHER index (SEDAR 88 2025)[2]. Because the Council is currently considering an amendment to the Fishery Management Plan for Reef Fish Resources in the Gulf (Reef Fish Amendment 62)[3] to incorporate the SSC's catch advice from SEDAR 88, this IA was presented as a health check and new catch advice was not considered. To date, the G-FISHER index is showing an increasing trend for red grouper in the last several years. By comparison, the NMFS bottom longline index, which was used in the past as the representative index of abundance for red grouper, plateaued, with a modestly increasing trend observed in recent years.

Gulf Gag Grouper Interim Analysis Health Check

Dr. Lisa Ailloud (SEFSC) presented an IA for Gulf gag grouper. This IA also uses the G-FISHER composite video index as the representative index of relative abundance. The last stock assessment conducted for gag grouper separately considered the three video surveys which make up the G-FISHER index (SEDAR 72 2022)[4], using two of those surveys to inform the SEDAR 72 model. Because the rebuilding plan for gag started recently (Reef Fish Amendment 56;

[2] https://sedarweb.org/documents/sedar-88-gulf-of-mexico-red-grouper-final-stock-assessment-report/

[3] https://gulfcouncil.org/amendments/modifications-to-gulf-red-grouper-management-measures/

[4] https://sedarweb.org/documents/sedar-72-gulf-of-mexico-gag-grouper-operational-assessment-report-amendment-state-reef-fish-survey-srfs-run/

implemented in June 2024)[5], and because catch limits for gag are projected to increase annually, this IA was provided as a health check only. Another stock assessment for gag (SEDAR 105) is currently underway and is expected to be reviewed by the SSC in late 2026. Dr. Ailloud added that an IA is not designed to modify stock status determination criteria since, among other limitations, it analyzes only a single index. The G-FISHER index since the last gag grouper stock assessment (2019) decreases in 2020, increases in 2021 and is relatively stable through 2024.

Dr. Mike Allen (Council liaison) thought it was likely that the G-FISHER index would not do as good a job of capturing the signal from the younger and smaller fish closer to shore (e.g., inside of 20 meters or 66 feet depth). Dr. Ailloud thought that any recruitment signal for gag grouper from sampling nearshore waters would be a delayed response; thus, the inclusion of ages and lengths in the upcoming SEDAR 105 stock assessment would be more informative of stock structure.

An SSC member noted that all three IAs used G-FISHER as an index and expressed interest in having a future presentation reviewing the methodologies and sampling design of the survey. A G-FISHER analyst stated that internal review of the survey had been conducted and that a SEDAR "Best Practices" assessment had been completed, with the final report pending finalization. A presentation to the SSC will be provided at a future meeting.

Public Comment

None received.

Other Business

No other business was discussed.

The meeting adjourned at 3:00 pm eastern time on January 22, 2026.

Meeting Participants

Standing SSC
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
Will Patterson
Dan Petrolia
Sean Powers
Andrew Ropicki
Ralph Townsend

Council Representative
Mike Allen

[5] https://gulfcouncil.org/amendments/reef-fish-amendment-56/