

## **Sustainable Fisheries Committee Report January 26, 2026 Kesley Banks – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda as modified (**Tab E, No. 1**) and the minutes (**Tab E, No. 2**) from the November 2025 meeting were approved as written.

### ***Regulatory Streamlining Report (Tab E, No. 4)***

Council staff reviewed the recommendations from the regulatory streamlining report, work that was contracted by the Council to identify efficient processes used in other regions that could potentially be applied in the Gulf. Staff highlighted recommendations that were previously prioritized by the Council or by staff and proposed a draft work plan with next steps to operationalize those recommendations. The Committee discussed the prioritized recommendations and provided suggestions for the draft work plan. A Committee member requested that Recommendation 2.4, to explore ways the Council can play a more active role in the Exempted Fishing Permit process, be added to the list of priority recommendations.

Committee members discussed the recommendation to designate low priority species as ecosystem component species. A Committee member suggested that the Council could follow procedures used in similar efforts by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, where a questionnaire is used to streamline discussions of ecosystem component species criteria. Council staff highlighted that the work plan for the Seafood Competitiveness Executive Order (E.O.) 14276 includes the consideration to remove low priority species from fishery management plans altogether, without the need to designate them as ecosystem component species. Regarding the recommendation to develop automatic management measures, a Committee member suggested focusing on species that rely on data-limited stock assessments with interim updates for adjusting catch levels (e.g., lane snapper). Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff recommended building capacity for direct implementation via the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Regional Administrator as part of the development of automatic measures.

NOAA General Counsel encouraged streamlining efforts to be developed with consideration for the processes that have been embedded in the Gulf (i.e., using Categorical Exclusions instead of Supplemental Information Reports). General Counsel also clarified that Categorical Exclusions can only be used if there are ‘no extraordinary circumstances’, noting a typo in the criteria on page 66 of the report. SERO staff contributed that there are ongoing efforts to identify document sections that can be simplified or removed if not required. Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) staff stressed the importance of pursuing pathways to reduce the time lags between the terminal year of data used to produce catch advice and the implementation of fishery specifications. Both SERO and SEFSC staff expressed support for a working group to focus on efforts to operationalize the streamlining of routine/minor management measures.

*Other Business*

Atlantic Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Proposed Rule

Council staff reviewed the Atlantic HMS proposed rule on commercial and recreational shark management measures, which includes revising the recreational bag limit for Atlantic sharpnose sharks and bonnethead sharks from one per person per trip to one per vessel per trip. The comment period for the proposed rule ends on March 6, 2026 before the April Council meeting. Committee members expressed concern about the proposed bag limit reduction for Atlantic sharpnose, given that the species is abundant. The Committee stated that this bag limit does not appear to be related to any recent stock assessment that would warrant a decrease in harvest (last assessed in 2013). Committee members discussed the need to have additional time to understand the rationale for the proposed changes so that the Council could comment on the proposed rule appropriately.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to request an extension of the comment period on the implementation of the proposed HMS rule of commercial and recreational shark management measures to give the Gulf Council ample time to comment. Additionally, the Gulf Council requests a presentation from HMS at the April 2026 Council meeting.**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

Council Review of Seafood Competitiveness E.O. Public Comments

The NOAA Office of Sustainable Fisheries recently requested that the Council review the public comments received during their public comment period for E.O. 14276 Seafood Competitiveness and decide if the Council's work plan that was submitted in September 2025 should be amended or updated. Any updates to regional council work plans are due on April 30, 2026. Council staff suggested working with Council leadership staff and SERO staff to review the comments and determine if there is a need to bring the public comments and the work plan back to the Council during its April 2026 meeting.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.