

**Gulf Council
Ecosystem Technical Committee
Meeting Summary
March 3, 2026
Virtual**

The meeting of the Gulf Fishery Management Council's (Council) Ecosystem Technical Committee (ETC) was convened at 1:00 PM EST on March 3, 2026. The ETC approved the meeting agenda and the summary from the May 2025 meeting as written.

Ecosystem and Climate Readiness Project Updates

Council staff presented an update about progress to date on the Council's Inflation Reduction Act projects, including an overview of the final regulatory streamlining report and upcoming social-science driven stakeholder engagements for the Fishery Ecosystem Plan, which includes in-person workshops to identify Fishery Ecosystem Issues (FEI), large language model analysis identify additional FEIs using publicly available information, and the development of FEI data documentation web pages. ETC members expressed support for the stakeholder engagement efforts, and inquired whether virtual workshop participation would be made available. Council staff clarified that the workshops would be held in-person to foster collaborative discussion.

Dr. Mandy Karnauskas (Southeast Fisheries Science Center [SEFSC]) presented an update on development of the Gulf Ecosystem Status Report (ESR) and outlined a new objective-focused approach which aims to match ecosystem indicators to management objectives from Gulf Fishery Management Plans. Management objectives were categorized into themes (support food production, maintain socioeconomic health, avoid waste and bycatch, promote good governance, protect habitat and ecosystem function), and potential indicators were presented for each. ETC members were supportive of the new objective-focused ESR format, and thought that it was a practical and intuitive approach. ETC members discussed the potential for the ESR to support FEIs in the Fishery Ecosystem Plan, and stressed the importance of a simplified ESR that could be produced with regularity to improve Council utility. An ETC member suggested that regional indicators may be necessary due to the size and diversity of the Gulf ecosystem.

ETC members discussed the potential indicators that were presented and provided suggestions for additional indicators to consider. For indicators in the 'support food production' category, ETC members recommended tracking total system removals, fishery diversification, and market-based metrics from catch share programs. In the 'maintain socioeconomic health' category, ETC members suggested that indicators based on the number of permits or processors could provide information about fleet consolidation. For the 'avoid waste and bycatch' category, Council staff recommended exercising caution in developing indicators based on observer and early-adopter program data because the funding for these programs is uncertain and data may be unavailable for future ESR iterations.

In the ‘promote good governance’ category, ETC members suggested several potential metrics to quantify regulatory delays, including the lag between stock assessments and implementation of regulations and the number of actions that have been approved by the Council but have yet to be implemented. An ETC member cautioned that simply counting Council actions may not be informative, because some complex amendments require more time to develop but can be more impactful. Additionally, an ETC member thought that the number of lawsuits were an indicator of governance rather than socioeconomic health and user group conflict, as currently categorized.

For indicators in the ‘protect habitat and ecosystem function’ category, ETC members suggested tracking permits for new artificial reefs, number of Essential Fish Habitat consultations, measures of biodiversity, and developing G-FISHER (Gulf Fishery Independent Survey of Habitat and Ecosystem Resources) video survey-based indicators of habitat availability. An ETC member recommended including nearshore and estuarine based indicators of water quality, which are important for early life history stages of many species. Mr. Kevin Anson (Council representative) cautioned that indicator interpretation may differ between fisheries, for example artificial structures may be an impediment to shrimp trawling but serve as valuable habitat for reef fish. Council staff encouraged the SEFSC to work closely with Council staff to ensure that indicators align with Council objectives.

Review Draft Gulf Fishery Ecosystem Plan

Council staff provided an overview of the updated draft Gulf Fishery Ecosystem Plan, including a summary of feedback received during the November 2025 Council meeting where the draft was previously reviewed. The updated draft Fishery Ecosystem Plan incorporates recommendations from previous ETC discussions and is the first update to the Fishery Ecosystem Plan since the version developed by LGL Ecological Research Associates in 2022. The ETC discussed the mission statement for the Fishery Ecosystem Plan, which was proposed by the ETC in 2020 prior to Fishery Ecosystem Plan development. The current mission statement highlights the objective to provide a structured process for integrating ecosystem science into the Council’s decision making, and the ETC agreed that the mission statement should be updated to reflect the outcome-oriented goal of addressing fisheries ecosystem issues rather than focusing on processes. The ETC revised mission statement as follows:

‘To identify and address key fisheries ecosystem issues and inform the Gulf Fishery Management Council’s decision-making for long-term ecological, social, and economic sustainability of Gulf of America fishery resources.’

ETC members discussed the scope of prospective Fishery Ecosystem Issues (FEI), including whether FEIs must rise beyond impacting a single species, whether social issues could be considered, and the importance of prioritization and focusing on FEIs that the Council has the tools to address. Council staff contributed that the ETC will play an important role in evaluating and prioritizing FEIs for Council consideration. ETC members discussed the potential for Ecosystem Status Reports to help inform and prioritize FEIs and considered whether the role of

Ecosystem Status Reports should be directly incorporated into the Fishery Ecosystem Plan. Council staff suggested that Ecosystem Status Report updates could be provided concurrently with the annual Council review of FEIs, which is described in the Fishery Ecosystem Plan, to facilitate informed FEI selection.

An ETC member inquired whether the Council's Fishery Monitoring and Research Priorities, an avenue for recommending research in the FEI Loop, could be updated regularly to align with the annual Council review of FEIs rather than every four years as described. Council staff clarified that the timing of updates to the Fishery Monitoring and Research Priorities is tied to the Council's four-year award cycle, but that research recommendations identified in the interim could be retained for future updates. ETC members provided suggestions for additional edits to improve the Fishery Ecosystem Plan document. Council staff stated that after Council and ETC recommendations are incorporated into the document, the Fishery Ecosystem Plan will be posted to the Council website and stakeholder engagement efforts for the Fishery Ecosystem Plan will begin.

Public Comment

None received.

Other Business

No other business came before the ETC.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:10 PM EST on March 3, 2025.

Meeting Participants

ETC Members Present

Mandy Karnauskas, Chair
Eric Brazer, Jr.
David Chagaris
Jennifer Cudney
Michael Drexler
Nick Farmer
Matt McPherson
Jim Nance
Dan Petrolia
Steven Saul
Steven Scyphers

Council Representative

Kevin Anson

O&E Technical Committee Members

Eric Weather