

## **Tab D, No. 5**

Rev. 05/29/2026

### **DRAFT Work Plan and Membership: Working Group to Address Protected Resources Interactions with Gulf Federal Shrimp Trawls**

#### **Objectives of Workgroup**

This working group will consider as part of its deliberations (1) the status, behavior, and biology of giant manta ray and smalltooth sawfish; (2) observer data and bycatch estimation, and (3) the management, operation, and behavior of the Gulf federal shrimp fleet. The primary objective is to consider and identify workable solutions that aim to reduce interactions with smalltooth sawfish and giant manta ray in the Gulf federal shrimp trawl fishery.

The Working Group will:

- Be presented with an overview of the Section 7 Consultation process and requirements as they specifically pertain to the Gulf shrimp fleet.
- Review relevant data on the life history and ecology of giant manta ray and smalltooth sawfish.
- Evaluate the seasonal and spatial overlap between federal shrimp trawl effort and any hot spots for smalltooth sawfish and giant manta rays using the most recent terminal year for effort information (e.g., NMFS observer data, electronic logbooks (ELB), and species research).
- Evaluate gear, operational tactics, and other management measures used globally or regionally to mitigate large elasmobranch interactions and bycatch.
- Evaluate the technical feasibility, safety, and economic impact of potential modifications to shrimp fishery operations, including gear alterations or updated safe handling and release protocols for protected resources.
- Review and consider any improvements to safe handling and release management practices for minimizing bycatch and bycatch mortality.
- Discuss the South Atlantic Council's working group recommendations on management measures proposed in that region and any potential applications.
- Provide recommendations to the Gulf Council for discussion and consideration for the Magnuson-Stevens Conservation and Management Act management actions and Endangered Species Act Section consultation processes.

#### **Background**

In November 2022, the Shrimp AP received a presentation from Mr. Brame (SERO Protected Resources Division (PRD) staff) on smalltooth sawfish bycatch in the shrimp industry, noting that SERO had received a letter from the Smalltooth Sawfish Recovery Implementation Team voicing concern with the issue of bycatch. In June 2023, SERO notified the Council that SERO Sustainable Fisheries Division had requested PRD reinstate Section 7 consultation on U.S. shrimp fisheries and giant manta rays and smalltooth sawfish because of unanticipated, observed lethal incidental take of giant manta rays and new information revealing effects of southeast shrimp fisheries on smalltooth sawfish and giant manta rays not considered in the 2021 Shrimp

Opinion. At its October 2023 meeting, the Shrimp AP then received a presentation from Ms. Lee (SERO Protected Resources staff) on the reinitiation of Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 7 Consultation, giant manta ray interactions with shrimp trawls, and new information on smalltooth sawfish. At that time, she noted that key data need included revised giant manta ray bycatch estimates based on recent observer data, smalltooth sawfish population viability analysis (PVA), and a giant manta ray PVA. Population viability analysis is used to estimate the likelihood that a species will persist over a specific period of time and is a common method to evaluate the status of endangered species. During the March 2024 Shrimp AP meeting, Dr. Carlson (SEFSC staff) presented the updated smalltooth sawfish PVA and recognized challenges, which included that estimates of fishing mortality from the southeast shrimp trawl fishery are subject to high levels of variability and uncertainty. At the March 2025 Shrimp AP meeting, Dr. Carlson gave a status update on new bycatch estimates for smalltooth sawfish and giant manta rays, stating that bycatch estimates through 2023 were under review by the SEFSC and that a new PVA for giant manta ray and a revised PVA (to include recent “spinning” mortality event) for smalltooth sawfish were completed. Ms. Lee also presented at this meeting with updates from SERO’s Protected Resources Division, including updated “Status of Species” sections for giant manta rays and smalltooth sawfish. She stated that updates are underway for a Smalltooth Sawfish Recovery Plan and that a Giant Manta Ray Recovery Plan is under development.

At the May 2025 SSC meeting, Dr. Peterson (SEFSC contractor) presented estimates of shrimp trawl bycatch of smalltooth sawfish and giant manta ray. Dr. Carlson then presented an updated PVA for smalltooth sawfish. Following Dr. Carlson’s presentation, the SSC concluded that the PVA represents a useful analysis for understanding impacts of bycatch and other mortality sources on population viability, while adding that continued development of this approach could be used to inform bycatch mitigation measures for Gulf fisheries. The SSC encouraged increased observer coverage in areas of high bycatch, evaluation of uncertainty around bycatch source estimates, evaluation of potential impacts of range expansion of smalltooth sawfish, and continued refinement of effective population size estimates.

In August 2025 the Gulf Council received a presentation from Ms. Lee on the ESA Section 7 Consultation information about interactions, effects, and projected jeopardy analyses of the Gulf penaeid shrimp fishery on listed protected species like smalltooth sawfish and giant manta ray. She added that SERO Protected Resources staff are working to incorporate SSC feedback on the PVA for smalltooth sawfish. A Committee member recalled the SSC discussions from its May 2025 meeting (noted above), highlighting a need to focus on collecting more data, more cooperative research, and better characterization of range expansion of sawfish northward in west Florida. Another Committee member suggested convening a Working Group of shrimp industry representatives, protected resources staff, and gear experts to develop recommendations regarding these consultations. The Council passed the following motion without opposition and one Council member absent.

**Motion:** Populate and convene a new working group comprised of shrimp harvesting sector representatives, NMFS staff, Council staff, SSC members, researchers, and others to identify workable solutions that aim to reduce interactions with smalltooth sawfish and giant manta ray in the Gulf federal shrimp trawl fishery. This new working group should

be formed by the Council chair, Shrimp committee chair, Regional Administrator, and Executive Director with no more than 15 members.

Recommendations from the Working Group will be presented to the Standing and Special SSCs and Shrimp AP for final guidance that will potentially impact management measures of the federal shrimp industry’s interactions with smalltooth sawfish and giant manta rays in the Gulf moving forward. Meetings of this Working Group will be noticed in the Federal Register, open to the public, and provide an opportunity for public input during the meetings.

**Potential Timeline**

- Virtual meetings in July, September, and October 2026
- In-person meeting November 2026
- Report out to Standing and Special Shrimp SSCs and synthesize feedback. Report out to Shrimp AP and synthesize feedback. Provide recommendations to the Gulf Council for review and considerations.
- Forward proposed management measures to the Gulf Council and South Atlantic Council for consideration by Councils and Protection Resources Division.

<b>Working Group Participant</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
John Froeschke	Gulf Council Staff
Lisa Hollensead	Gulf Council Staff
Jim Nance	SSC Representative
Steve Saul	SSC Representative
Jason Saucier	Special Shrimp SSC
Gary DeCossas	NMFS – SEFSC: Shrimp Observer Program
Kyle Detloff	NMFS – SEFSC: Shrimp Effort
Jeff Gearhart	NMFS– SEFSC: Gear Research
Jenny Lee	NMFS - SERO
Nathan Putman	Researcher
Leann Bosarge	Industry Representative
Ernie Aparicio	Industry Representative
Cheri Blanchard	Industry Representative
<b>Support Staff Participant</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Katie Siegfried	NMFS – SEFSC: Gulf Branch Stock Assessments
Matt Freeman	Gulf Council Staff
Nick Farmer	NMFS - SERO
Adam Brame	NMFS – SERO
Taylor Beyea	Researcher