

GULF COUNCIL

HABITAT PROTECTION AND RESTORATION COMMITTEE

Hilton Tampa Airport Westshore Tampa, Florida & Virtual

June 1, 2026

VOTING MEMBERS

Johnny Marquez.....Mississippi
Michael Allen.....Florida
Brenda Ballard.....Texas
Gregg Bray.....GSMFC
Anthony Overton.....Alabama
John Sanchez.....Florida
Joe Spraggins.....Mississippi
Ed Walker.....Florida

NON-VOTING MEMBERS

Kevin Anson.....Alabama
Kesley Banks.....Texas
Billy Broussard.....Louisiana
J.D. Dugas.....Louisiana
Troy Frady.....Alabama
Dakus Geeslin (designee for Robin Riechers).....Texas
Lt. Jackson Morton.....USCG
Jason Osborne.....Mississippi
Chris Schieble (designee for Ryan Montegut).....Louisiana
Andy Strelcheck.....NMFS
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STAFF

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Leonardo "Leo" Egula.....Fishery Outreach Specialist
Matt Freeman.....Economic Analyst
John Froeschke.....Deputy Director
Sarah Gardiner.....Fishery Biologist
Lisa Hollensead.....Fishery Biologist
Mara Levy.....NOAA General Counsel
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Emily Muehlstein.....Public Information Officer
Ryan Rindone.....Lead Fishery Biologist & SEDAR Liaison
Bernadine Roy.....Office Manager
Kathy Pereira.....Meeting Planner & Travel Coordinator
Carrie Simmons.....Executive Director
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1	<u>OTHER PARTICIPANTS</u>	
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3	John Walter.....	SEFSC
4		
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1 The Habitat Protection and Restoration Committee of the Gulf
2 Council convened at The Hilton Tampa Airport Westshore in Tampa,
3 Florida on Monday morning, June 1, 2026, and was called to order
4 by Chairman John Marquez.

5
6 **ADOPTION OF AGENDA**
7 **APPROVAL OF NOVEMBER 2025 MINUTES**
8 **ACTION GUIDE AND NEXT STEPS**
9

10 **CHAIRMAN JOHN MARQUEZ:** For the Habitat Committee, I would like to
11 read off the members of the committee. It's Ms. Ballard, Dr.
12 Allen, Mr. Donaldson, Mr. Overton, Mr. Sanchez, General Spraggins,
13 and Captain Walker.
14

15 First, I have the Adoption of the Agenda. Do I have a motion to
16 adopt the agenda? Captain Walker. Second by Ms. Ballard. Any
17 opposition? The motion carries. Next up is the approval of
18 minutes. The committee last met in November 2025, and do I have
19 a motion to approve the minutes? Captain Walker. Second by Ms.
20 Ballard. Any discussion? Any opposition? Minutes are approved.
21 I'm going to turn the floor over to Ms. Gardiner. She's going to
22 walk us through the action guide and next steps.
23

24 **ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT GENERIC AMENDMENT PUBLIC HEARING DRAFT**
25

26 **MS. SARAH GARDINER:** Thank you, Mr. Marquez, and good morning, and
27 so, while Bernie pulls up the action guide, we only have one item
28 on our agenda today, and that is reviewing the public hearing draft
29 for the Essential Fish Habitat Generic Amendment to the Shrimp,
30 Reef Fish, Coastal Migratory Pelagics, Spiny Lobster, and Red Drum
31 Fishery Management Plans in the Gulf.
32

33 This amendment is part of the EFH five-year review process, as
34 required under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation Act, and
35 it specifically looks to update the essential fish habitat
36 descriptions and identifications for the addressed FMPs. I will
37 walk through the document, summarizing the methods and results
38 that are produced for the EFH text and map descriptions.
39

40 This is a typo. The committee actually selected their preferred
41 alternative at the November council meeting, and so that's
42 indicated in the document, and, if the committee approves the
43 amendment for public hearings, we'll move forward with a series of
44 virtual public hearings. This may not take place in July, as
45 indicated here, as we had some additional information come in late
46 last week, and so, with that, I'll move through the document.
47

48 Just some background information for this document. As I said,

1 Magnuson-Stevens requires that each fishery management plan
2 describe and identify EFH and minimize, to the extent practicable,
3 adverse effects on habitat caused by fishing. This is something
4 that should be done around every five years.

5
6 The last time this council did their five-year review was back in
7 2016, and so we're a little bit late on that, and so we're trying
8 to move through that process right now and update the EFH text
9 descriptions and identifications.

10
11 The reason why this is an amendment, and some of the other review
12 processes have not been amendments, is that we need to update those
13 text descriptions and identifications in the respective FMPs, and
14 an amendment is required to do that.

15
16 There are there ten parts of an EFH five-year review. Describing
17 and identifying EFH is only one component of the five-year review,
18 but that's the only one that the council needs to take action on,
19 and so that's what I presented here in the public hearing draft.

20
21 We'll go down to Section 1.2, and I'll walk through the purpose
22 and need. The purpose is to consider new available spatial habitat
23 information to revise the text and map descriptions in the
24 mentioned FMPs here. Updates to these descriptions would allow
25 the best scientific information available to be utilized and
26 provide enhanced conservation benefits to the Gulf resources and
27 establish a better understanding of species habitat requirements
28 by life stage. Again, this is a requirement under Magnuson.

29
30 I presented something very similar in the draft options document
31 back in November, where I walked through very specifically what
32 the text identifications and descriptions are. I won't do that
33 today. Those are in Chapter 3, in Appendix C, if you guys are
34 interested in looking at those a little bit more in-depth.

35
36 We'll move to Chapter 2.1, and we'll walk through the alternatives.
37 Alternative 1 would be the no action alternative, retaining the
38 current description and identifications. These were specified in
39 the Generic Amendment 3 way back in 2005, and so over twenty years
40 ago.

41
42 The Preferred Alternative 2 is to update these descriptions and
43 identifications and integrate them into our respective FMPs. This
44 would be utilized for every life stage for all managed species as
45 the data are available, and so what's different in this draft that
46 I wanted to go through, versus the draft options document that you
47 all saw in November, is Chapter 4.

Chapter four, this is not -- It's a little bit different than what our typical amendment document would look like. Chapter 4 actually combines what our traditional Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 would look like, and that's because we aren't looking at changing any regulations to fishing activity, fishing behavior, or fishing location for this amendment draft.

The economic section, the social and economic sections, descriptions of the fisheries are largely just a broad overview, and we don't need very detailed analysis in the effects of those sections, and so I kind of structured this a little bit differently, where I combine these Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 into one chapter in which we are looking at just the effects of the alternative on all of the physical environment, the biological environment, and the social and econ environment.

If you take a look at those very broadly, we can see that the effects are largely minimal, but improvement of the definitions that we have within our FMPs which may better help us manage our Gulf resources, and so that's the gist of Chapter 4.

This is what I'm hoping to go to public hearings with to present, including the descriptions and the maps that you'll find in Chapter 3 and Appendix C. I did want to note that we did have some new information that came in from the Science Center last week that we were not able to incorporate for this draft, and that's the definition of the EFH inland boundary, and so that's essentially how far inland does essential fish habitat go.

That's not necessarily something that we utilize in the council realm very much, but something that's utilized in the EFH consultation process on the NMFS side of things, and so that's not included for this draft, but I do think that it is pertinent to include in updating these EFH descriptions and identifications, and so it should be included in the public hearing draft.

The feedback I'm looking from the committee on this is really to just look at the public hearing draft as it stands, recognizing that staff is hoping to incorporate this EFH inland boundary prior to going to public hearings, but, should we be able to include that, we get the okay to go through to public hearings.

Additionally, I wanted to note that there may be some discussion, either today or at Full Council or offline, where we can come to consensus on whether we need to bring this document to the South Atlantic Council, so the South Atlantic Council has the opportunity to review the CMP and Spiny Lobster updates. We aren't looking to update any changes in the Atlantic designation of essential fish

1 habitat, but, as those are jointly-managed FMPs it may be something
2 that needs to go to the South Atlantic Council, and so I'll kind
3 of pause there.

4
5 This document is broadly very similar to what you saw in November,
6 with the inclusion of Chapter 4, which looks at the effects
7 sections, and I'll see if anybody has any questions, and go from
8 there.

9
10 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** Any questions for Ms. Gardiner? Any comments?

11
12 **MS. MARA LEVY:** Just for -- So, since we're amending two FMPs that
13 are joint FMPs with the South Atlantic, they are going to have to
14 approve those amendments, regardless of whether it's changing
15 what's within the Atlantic jurisdiction. Thanks.

16
17 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** John.

18
19 **DR. JOHN FROESCHKE:** Just a little bit of information on the inland
20 boundary too, and so we did five-year reviews, and don't do the
21 math, but in 2010, 2016 and this one will include that. This
22 improving the inland boundary has been a recommendation in each of
23 those, and so this is a long-standing issue, and so we do have
24 information for the first time I think that would allow us to make
25 a meaningful advance on that.

26
27 It seems like a trivial thing, but it does -- We want to avoid
28 something, for example, in south Texas requiring an EFH review
29 consultation on a cattle ranch, and so sometimes those boundaries
30 just -- They extend far enough in, and we want to make sure we're
31 not doing that, and we also want to make sure we're not excluding
32 areas that should be included, and so the Science Center has done
33 some work to try to work on that, and so that's -- You know, we're
34 just getting this, and we met with them just recently, and we're
35 probably going to work with Mr. Bray in the Gulf States, to get
36 some additional review from the states, although I haven't told
37 them, or talked to him about that yet.

38
39 He's going to add me to his blocked caller list, but I think that
40 it might delay, or slow down, the finalization of this just a
41 little bit, but I do think it would be worth it to get this in
42 there, given that we don't do this all that often.

43
44 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** Ms. Gardiner.

45
46 **MS. GARDINER:** Thank you. I think, you know, for the committee at
47 this time, it would be helpful to just get some feedback on whether
48 the draft as-is, recognizing we need to include the inland boundary

1 definition, would be ready to go to public hearings once we include
2 that information.

3
4 I guess also to note about the plan for public hearings. Because
5 a lot of the stakeholders that are interested in this are other
6 agency partners, we're planning to do two virtual public hearings.
7 One will be during regular business hours, so those agency partners
8 can put it on the calendar, and one will be in our typical evening
9 timeframe as well.

10
11 **MR. ANDY STRELCHECK:** I'm not on the committee, and so can you
12 remind me in terms of the timing of the amendment, and final
13 action? When would we approve it?

14
15 **MS. GARDINER:** So, with the inclusion of the inland boundary
16 pending review from Gulf States, Mr. Bray's team, I think our
17 public hearings may get pushed out until after, around November-
18 ish, and then we would be able to take final action early in 2027.

19
20 **MR. STRELCHECK:** So, with that said, I mean, we're going to have
21 another council meeting between now and November. I'm not sure
22 how urgent it is for us to say we need to move this out to public
23 hearings, but, with that stated as well, I think, once we work
24 through this inland boundary issue, and you start coordinating
25 with the Gulf States, as well as other action agencies, that will
26 be the critical timing to lay out when public hearing should be
27 held.

28
29 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** John.

30
31 **DR. FROESCHKE:** Well, just following up on Ms. Levy's feedback,
32 we'll also need to coordinate with the South Atlantic Council's
33 meeting schedule, and we would take it to them for public hearing
34 approval as well, I'm assuming, before we would go out, and so
35 we'll have to think about that.

36
37 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** Do we have any other discussion? Go ahead.

38
39 **MR. KEVIN ANSON:** Just a question regarding -- There's a
40 description specifically for cubera snapper at the introduction,
41 and it just says they're distributed mainly in the eastern and
42 southeastern Gulf, in both shallow and deep reefs and wrecks and
43 mangroves. I'm just wondering, and there's several other species
44 where there's references to wrecks, i.e., you know, vessels that
45 had sank through a disaster, or I would assume artificial reefs
46 could be lumped in with that, but that's not listed as an essential
47 fish habitat, one of the eleven that are identified, and so I'm
48 just curious if that is just provided us extra information, or why

1 that was included.
2

3 **MS. GARDINER:** Thank you for the question, and so we don't
4 currently define artificial reefs as one of the habitat types. I
5 think that was looked at back in 2013, if I recall off the top of
6 my head, and the council ultimately decided not to, and so part of
7 the reason of including that in just the definition is more
8 informative, but noting that they do like the hardbottom habitat,
9 and so just broadly keeping it in there, recognizing that we don't
10 currently define artificial reef structure as essential fish
11 habitat.
12

13 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** Go ahead, Carrie.
14

15 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CARRIE SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so
16 the committee can think about this, I guess, but we would need
17 some clear direction, you know, by Wednesday as to whether you
18 really need to see this again or if -- Staff know it, obviously,
19 has to go to the South Atlantic Council, and and we need to get on
20 their schedule, but you need to see the document again, or would
21 you guys be comfortable with saying it's ready to go out to virtual
22 hearings, and we can wait for the Full Council to do that, but we
23 do need a motion to direct staff to do that, ideally before we
24 leave.
25

26 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** Captain Walker.
27

28 **MR. ED WALKER:** I would agree with Dr. Simmons. We can have the
29 whole council approve it, but, as a committee member, I support
30 moving it forward.
31

32 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** Any further discussion?
33

34 **MR. WALKER:** I think so, yes, and there doesn't seem to be a lot
35 of discussion on it in the committee, and so I think council would
36 be better.
37

38 **CHAIRMAN MARQUEZ:** Okay. Thank you, Gardiner. Mr. Chair, that
39 concludes our meeting.
40

41 (Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on June 1, 2026.)
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