

Gulf Council
Standing and Special Shrimp Scientific and Statistical Committee
Meeting Summary
July 21 – 22, 2026
Tampa, Florida

The meeting of the Gulf Council Standing Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC) was convened at 9:00 AM EDT on July 21, 2026. The agenda for this meeting was adopted, and the minutes from the May 2026 meeting were approved as written.

Estimation of Shrimp Trawl Bycatch Methodology

Dr. Steven Smith a Southeast Fishery Science Center (SEFSC) contractor presented the shrimp bycatch estimation methodology and its application to red snapper, which will be integrated into the current red snapper stock assessment (SEDAR 98). In May 2025, the SSC discussed a review of this shrimp bycatch estimation methodology by the Center for Independent Experts (CIE). During that meeting, the SSC requested additional time to review the CIE's findings and continue discussion at a future meeting.

Dr. Smith explained improvements to the bycatch methodology that were conducted prior to the technical CIE suggestions and the additional changes that were made after the CIE review that mainly focused on improving effort estimation and reducing potential bias issues. Another notable change was the use of observer data for red snapper from the Shrimp Observer Program, where each red snapper is counted from sampled shrimp trawl nets to obtain catch per net, whereas other characterized species are counted from a basket subsample of nets and then multiplied by a weight ratio of basket to net in order to obtain catch per net. In addition to shrimping effort being grouped into four zones, each of which contains multiple statistical zones, it is also differentiated by 2-net and 4-net vessel configuration to more accurately scale up red snapper bycatch estimates for the entire Gulf. Prior to this work, SEAMAP data was used to estimate red snapper bycatch.

Dr. Smith explained that, after the CIE technical reviews, there were additional changes made to the methodology such as utilization of the full observer time series 2007-2023, and applied to pre-observer, pre-ELB tracklog time period 1984-2006. Much of his work focused on estimating more accurate commercial fleet shrimp landings and effort, extending landings and effort back in time with respect to other space-time (area-depth-season) and gear (Day 2-net, Day 4- Night 2-net, Night 4-net) strata.

An SSC member inquired why nets 1 and 4 (the outside nets for vessels with a 4-net configuration) are selected for on-deck sampling with the Shrimp Observer Program. Another SSC member responded that, based on testing in the 1980s and 1990s, it was determined that substantial prop wash occurred with inside nets, so sampling of the outside nets provide a better sample of bycatch. An SSC member stated that, if a difference in bycatch does exist between inside and outside nets, then the Shrimp Observer Program should determine if there are any unintended consequences from only sampling the outside nets for 4-net vessels.

An SSC member commented that there is worldwide evidence that fishermen may modify their fishing behavior and location when observers are onboard, creating an observer bias. Dr. Steve Smith (SEFSC contractor) responded that tows are often conducted twice a day for 5.5 hours and that trips are conducted for multiple weeks. He considered that modifying fishing behavior in a manner that reduces efficiency in the presence of observers was unlikely in this fishery given the length of the trips and the number of tows on each trip. Another SSC member added that, since the profit margin is so low in the Gulf shrimp industry, it is unlikely that shrimpers would modify their behaviors due to observer presence. He also added that state law enforcement observes high compliance with TEDs and that it is not an efficient use of time to remove TEDs when observers are not on-board.

The SSC generally agreed that the recommendations from the CIE review had been addressed. However, a couple of SSC members suggested a different approach than hindcasting for years prior to 2007, when the observer program was implemented, due to the assumptions about catch of shrimp and bycatch of finfish such as red snapper.

Gray Triggerfish Bycatch Estimation

Dr. Cheston Peterson (SEFSC contractor) presented the method for estimating bycatch of gray triggerfish by shrimp trawls that is being used in the ongoing gray triggerfish stock assessment (SEDAR 100). Dr. Peterson reviewed the method and its assumptions. Notably, the analysis uses lane snapper as the primary proxy species for gray triggerfish, with red snapper being used in one region, for estimating bycatch based on species co-occurrence in SEAMAP data. In 2025, the Observer Program for Gulf shrimp trawls began characterizing other finfish species including gray triggerfish. Dr. Peterson presented the one year of data which showed gray triggerfish in the bycatch primary in the western Gulf. Due to data limitations, the SEFSC has recommended the use of the proxy data as opposed to the observer data to characterize bycatch of gray triggerfish.

An SSC member noted stark differences in trawl time between SEAMAP trawls and shrimp trawls, with the latter being much longer. Another SSC member asked whether there was any effort to use the larger observer dataset to validate the performance of proxy species, as opposed to relying on SEAMAP data. Dr. Peterson agreed that such an investigation would be worthwhile but had not yet been performed. An SSC member suggested a sensitivity analysis testing the effects of changes in shrimp trawl bycatch estimates. Dr. Katie Siegfried (SEFSC) replied that such work is included as part of SEDAR 100, and that the model does not appear to be sensitive to shrimp trawl bycatch. Another SSC member noted considerable variability in the regional abundance of lane snapper and gray triggerfish and questioned the validity of lane snapper as a proxy. Dr. Peterson added that looking into the proxy data from the observer data was likely useful as a validation measure, but he did not expect it to be considerably different from the current approach. An SSC member suggested evaluating the ratio of shrimp to gray triggerfish in the SEAMAP trawl data as an additional validation technique. Another SSC member noted the difference in SEAMAP and shrimp trawl practices, combined with early life history differences for gray triggerfish (e.g., using *Sargassum* in the pelagic environment for a long period of time before dropping down to benthic habitat), further increases the risk of conflating the effect of fish in SEAMAP trawls versus those observed as bycatch in the shrimp fleet.

Council staff provided a review of recommendations from the Working Group on Shrimp Trawl Bycatch for Finfish, which covered general bycatch estimation methodology with the new shrimp effort estimates, as well as its application to red snapper estimation methodology and gray triggerfish bycatch estimation methods. Generally, the working group thought the estimation methods were robust and reasonable. The working group thought the methodology using observer data that has been proposed and is being used to estimate red snapper bycatch in the Gulf is acceptable and requested that it be reviewed for the other characterized species in the observer data. For gray triggerfish, the working group thought the methodology reviewed for gray triggerfish bycatch was mathematically and statistically valid but using proxy species to develop ratios was questioned. Regarding using a proxy species for gray triggerfish, the working group recommended a consistent methodology be developed for bycatch estimation of other uncharacterized species in the observer data for use in Gulf finfish stock assessments. They also thought the methodology being used to estimate red snapper bycatch in the Gulf needs to be reviewed for the other characterized species in the observer data. The working group thought king mackerel would be the next logical species to consider for this effort as it is characterized but rarely encountered and documented by the Gulf shrimp fleet observer program.

An SSC member said that the red snapper methodology was appropriate, and may even be applicable for other finfish species, with validation. Other SSC members agreed with additional validation techniques by species, investigating hindcasting scenarios as appropriate.

Motion: The SSC found the methodology using observer data that has been developed by the SEFSC and being used to estimate red snapper bycatch in the Gulf is acceptable for data input into the current red snapper assessment model.

Motion carried without opposition.

The SSC discussed the application of the methodology for future assessments, with Council staff commenting that these processes and their validation techniques are most commonly evaluated for their appropriateness as a function of SEDAR assessments. An SSC member commented on differences in trawl net types, and the need to evaluate possible effects between species. Dr. Smith discussed alternative approaches to consider in the future. Dr. Siegfried added that technical reviews could be done through SEDAR topical working groups.

Motion: The SSC supports expanding the bycatch methodology to include additional finfish species that are presently in the observer database. The SSC also recommends that the results of these additional efforts be presented to the Shrimp Bycatch Working Group and/or the appropriate SEDAR workshop or topical working group.

Motion carried without opposition.

The SSC discussed sensitivity analyses related to the estimation of gray triggerfish bycatch in shrimp trawls that are being considered in the SEDAR 100 stock assessment of gray triggerfish. The SSC discussed their continued hesitation with the use of proxy species for estimating gray triggerfish bycatch but agreed that the alternative of a gray triggerfish bycatch value of zero was

not viable. The SSC stated that the use of proxy species was acceptable, if necessary, but that direct estimation is preferred when the data are available.

Substitute Motion: The SSC found the proxy methodology using SEAMAP and observer data that has been developed by the SEFSC to estimate gray triggerfish bycatch in the Gulf, as acceptable for consideration as a data input for SEDAR 100. The SSC also recommends future investigations into improving the estimation of shrimp trawl bycatch for species not characterized in the observer program.

Substitute Motion carried 9 – 7, with 1 abstention and 5 absent.

Review of the Minimum Threshold Number of Federal Gulf Shrimp Permits

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) staff briefed the SSC on the trend of valid or renewable federal Gulf shrimp permits as it relates to the minimum threshold number of valid or renewable federal Gulf shrimp permits established in Shrimp Amendment 17B. The Council requested that NMFS provide an updated approach to setting the minimum threshold. NMFS staff gave a status update, and a review of the types of data for potential inclusion in an updated approach.

Council staff informed the SSC that NMFS staff wanted to obtain additional ideas from the SSC in terms of how to approach an analysis for updating the minimum threshold number of permits. An SSC member added that this is an economic issue, so the SSC should have ideas regarding the analysis of an optimum number of permits for the shrimp fishery. The SSC member disagreed with the 2007 workgroup's findings on not identifying a way to balance economics with protected resources interactions and bycatch of other species. The SSC also member recommended examining the economic costs of finfish bycatch and protected resources interactions, as overall optimum yield should include various economic aspects. Another SSC member stated that an additional source of effort exists from state permitted vessels, which have many of the same constraints of federally permitted vessels but without the \$5,000 initial cost for a federal permit.

Public Comment, July 21

Bob Zales – Executive Director of SFA. He appreciates and respects the economic discussion. He thinks the \$5,000 permit is not the problem, but rather the current cost of fuel. Shrimpers are not letting their permits go away because of lack of interest, but because they are forced to. Everyone knows about the seafood labeling issues. He ate at a seafood restaurant near Panama City Beach, Florida, and asked where the seafood was from. The waitress said it was from Bayou La Batre, Louisiana, which does not exist. Restaurants and markets are trying to sell seafood as local, despite being imported, by using imagery to imply that it is locally sourced. This is a problem that runs much deeper than just shrimp permits. These issues need to be considered, as shrimpers are suffering economically.

Tricia Kimball – VP of Port Arthur Area Shrimpers Association. The reasons shrimpers are not renewing permits are because of the low price of shrimp and high fuel prices. There are American people holding down the price of shrimp at the docks, evident by the price of imports being higher than domestic. Shrimpers have a lot of money invested in their business, and it would

not be right for the government to give them a small amount of money to make their boats nothing more than paperweights. That was their retirement money, and they are losing their retirement funds because of what's going on. There is currently not a single shrimper on the Gulf Council, and the shrimp fleet has no representation. Council members have no idea how their rulings truly affect the shrimpers. The crushing mandates on the shrimp fleet have no effect on Council members, so they do not care. The Gulf Council has chosen destructive management rather than to help this fleet. Everyone in the meeting today is so focused on the data, but there needs to be more focus on people. Sea turtles and bycatch are more important to the Gulf Council than people's livelihoods. The Shrimp Advisory Panel helps, but they are always shut down at the Council level. We need to work together and save this industry rather than rush its demise. We can't be thinking of solutions for 5-10 years down the road because the fleet will be gone before then. Mismanagement has destroyed this fishery. The work done by the Council regarding the Competitive Seafood Executive Order (E.O.) only focused on two things, and neither is for shrimpers. The Gulf Council only focused on those because they had already begun work on them before the E.O. Shrimping is the highest value fishery in the Gulf, yet nothing is being done to help them when they need it. We need to focus on the now. The fishery needs help, not mandates, not amendments, just help. The graying of the fleet is not because they want to but because they have to. The price of 10,000 gallons of fuel on the vessel is much more expensive than what they will make catching shrimp, and then they cannot pay their deckhands. Amendment 17B says the minimum threshold number of permits should be met by 2031 and 2032, but the termination rate of permits is going a lot faster than it should. The discussion infuriated her when all they talk about is the data and not about the people suffering. The government, which is supposed to work for people, did not take care of the people in this situation and would now rather just shut down the fishery than help. Her husband and her are doing everything they can to keep the fishery alive including going to Austin, Texas, and have gotten bills passed, but they need help.

Review of Fisheries Integrated Modeling System (FIMS) Peer-review

Dr. Jie Cao (SSC) presented an overview of the CIE review of the NMFS Fisheries Integrated Modeling System (FIMS). The peer-review was held virtually from April 21 – 23, 2026. The new FIMS approach is intended to be implemented agencywide by NMFS for conducting stock assessments in the future. FIMS aims to shift the NMFS stock assessment enterprise away from many isolated analytical platforms toward a nationally coordinated framework of models and tools that is consistent, extensible, and transparent. Broadly, the peer-review found the new methods to be sound and of strategic value, but also noted that FIMS was not yet ready for full implementation. The peer-review panel prioritized FIMS model robustness and long-term success over its rapid deployment to replace legacy regional assessment tools.

An SSC member thought FIMS was designed to be a statistical catch-at-age platform that can address seasonality, and asked whether FIMS would be capable of handling data-limited cases. Dr. Cao replied that it was his impression that FIMS was able to examine data-limited situations. Dr. Siegfried echoed this and said that FIMS is expected to replace all existing toolkits for future modeling efforts. Another SSC member asked about benchmarking with region-specific case studies. Dr. Cao replied that FIMS was being parameterized against existing analyses to test performance and diagnostics. An SSC member highlighted the importance of side-by-side comparisons with FIMS approaches and legacy models, particularly for data-limited species that

FIMS approaches may not have been designed to handle. Dr. Siegfried said that parallel model work with legacy models and FIMS are being conducted to test those differences and evaluate FIMS performance. Dr. Siegfried also contributed that one of the main reasons for moving toward a FIMS approach is because AD Model Builder, the program underlying Stock Synthesis, would no longer be supported and therefore Stock Synthesis cannot be updated. She stated that Stock Synthesis, in its current form, will remain available for use in FIMS comparisons. Another SSC member thought conducting these parallel analyses off-cycle from current assessment efforts would allow for better evaluation without the immediate concern of provisioning management advice to a Council. An SSC member asked about the expectations of FIMS implementation from the SEFSC perspective. Dr. Siegfried noted that FIMS implementation will become a necessity and the agency is proactively preparing for a transition to FIMS prior to the phasing-out of legacy models. Another SSC member asked whether the State of Florida will also adopt FIMS. Dr. Siegfried could not speak to Florida's intentions but expected that they would also be trained on FIMS.

Discussion: Gulf King Mackerel Landings and Length Composition Data from Mexico

Dr. Francesca Forrestal (SEFSC) reviewed recent findings regarding landings of king mackerel off Mexico. Quantifying removals from Mexico has been a long-standing Terms of Reference request for previous king mackerel assessments, and recent work by stock analysts in Mexico has been made available to SEFSC staff. These data include annual commercial and recreational landings by fleet and commercial length composition data since the 1970s. Given the substantial magnitude of Mexican commercial landings, especially of juveniles in the gillnet fishery, these data will be considered in the stock assessment of king mackerel (SEDAR 99), which will be extended by a few months to allow the analysts to work with Mexican scientists. Tentatively, two in-person workshops (September 2026 in Merida, Yucatan; and November 2026 in Miami, FL) are being proposed so that analysts from SEFSC and Mexico can share data and discuss modeling approaches.

SEFSC staff are currently working with fisheries analysts from Mexico. The Mexican commercial fishery is largely artisanal and there is no known recreational fishery. While work has been conducted on the Mexican model, there are currently no management measures for king mackerel in Mexico and no stock status determination for king mackerel has been reported. The SEFSC indicated that, in past assessments, the start of the model was set in the 1920s; however, that decision has been debated. Given there are no records of harvest in Mexico prior to 1970, it is possible analysts may consider using a more contemporary starting year for SEDAR 99 relative to prior assessments.

An SSC member asked if previous work conducted by Mote Marine Lab to sample king mackerel landings in Mexico had been analyzed. SEFSC staff replied that work had not been incorporated yet and they would investigate that project further¹. Council staff asked for further clarification on what would be discussed at the upcoming in-person meetings and who might be the appropriate to

¹ Council staff queried this tagging database. Only seven king mackerel were tagged as part of the project and no recaptures were reported.

send as an observer. SEFSC staff indicated they would share agendas for the meeting as soon as they were provided. They stated that even if an interested stakeholder or staff could not attend the in-person meetings, the results of these efforts would be fully reported out through the conventional SEDAR process. Council staff recommended that the limited tagging data should be considered carefully given the paucity of tagging studies and uncertainty of these study findings. The SSC acknowledged that future management for king mackerel could be very complicated given the magnitude of Mexican landings. They decided to wait until completion of the assessment before making many management recommendations to the Council.

Review: Gulf Tilefish Data Triage and Stock Evaluation Options

Dr. Katie Siegfried (SEFSC) presented progress to date on the SEFSC's data triage and options for stock assessment for Gulf tilefishes. The last stock assessment of these species (golden tilefish, goldface tilefish, and blueline tilefish) was SEDAR 22, which used data through 2009. This modified approach to evaluating these data is being considered due to the limited data available to assess the complex and includes consideration of index-based approaches. Generally, the current catch limits for tilefishes have not been exceeded since last modified in 2012, and the majority of landings are from the commercial longline fleet. Dr. Siegfried reviewed landings and discards by fleet, where data were available. While the recreational data remain highly uncertain, the commercial data have been collected under the Gulf Grouper-Tilefish Individual Fishing Quota program since 2010 and are presumed known with high precision. Age composition data are only reliable from the commercial longline fleet, and only from 2003 forward. Broadly, the SEFSC does not think there are enough data to assess any of the tilefish species individually. Further, there is no indication that immediate action is necessary, based on available data, to prevent overfishing. The age composition data continually show the presence of older individuals in the population, which suggests a management complex with a healthy age structure. The SEFSC recommends maintaining current catch limits and annually reviewing the NMFS Bottom Longline and G-FISHER indices to keep track of the stock.

An SSC member asked whether the Gulf distribution of landings was indicative more of biomass or of where fishing effort was originating. Council staff noted that commercial effort was substantial out of the Florida Panhandle, which corresponded to where the majority of the commercial landings for golden and blueline tilefish are reported. Another SSC member noted historical ages of tilefishes from the commercial longline fleet that might be available from Louisiana. The SEFSC was interested in these data but reiterated current reduced staff. The SSC appreciated the analysis presented, acknowledged current tilefish data gaps, supported the continued age processing of tilefishes, and did not disagree with the SEFSC's recommendation of annually reviewing the NMFS Bottom Longline and G-FISHER indices for these species.

Public Comment, July 22

Bob Zales – Representing SFA. He came here to talk about kingfish. His family business was involved in king mackerel fishing and that is what got him involved in all of this and somehow, he still is here. Back in the day, they used to have mackerel stock assessment panels that convened in a small house behind the SEFSC. He first participated in 1989 and was pretty much the only one in the audience because MRFSS was not great data. The identification of king mackerel moving

up from Mexico was the start of data flow between US and Mexico. However, after Dr. Karen Burns passed away, no more Mexican data was provided. Those records have to be somewhere, and we should include those data if we can find them. He recommends John Sanchez be sent on behalf of the Gulf Council to Mexico for the workshop because he is involved in king mackerel commercial fishing, speaks Spanish, and would be best fit. Mackerel regulations in Mexico need to be equivalent to what we're doing here so that we don't take the short end of the stick after the assessment. Doug Gregory has all the history of king mackerel as well. Dr. Joe Powers is also a great source of information about history of king mackerel. He doesn't think there's a problem with the stock, they're just migrating. Last year was good in Panama City, Florida, and this year non-existent, so he doesn't really know what's going on. We need to look at the commercial effort data for tilefish. People don't want to work as hard as they do currently to catch golden tilefish.

Other Business

No other business was brought before the SSC.

The meeting adjourned at 11:30 am eastern time on July 22, 2026.

Meeting Participants

Standing SSC

Jason Adriance
Harry Blanchet
Thomas Frazer
David Griffith
Tiffany Hopper
Jack Isaacs
John Mareska
Paul Mickle
Trevor Moncrief, *Chair*
James Nance
Dan Petrolia
Ralph Townsend

Steven Scyphers
Steve Saul

Shrimp SSC

Don Behringer
Konner Lockfield
Jason Saucier

CMP SSC

Jie Cao

Council Representative

Mike Allen