



Regulatory Streamlining Effort by the Gulf Council to Set Minor Changes in Annual Catch Limits

Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Meeting
September 29 – 30, 2026

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The Council recognized there are issues with timeliness and efficiency to management action implementation

August 2022

Motion: *In collaboration with SERO staff, explore mechanisms to improve timeliness and efficiency of updating routine changes in catch advice using either the existing framework process or suggest changes in framework procedures that could be used to reduce the time between the completion of science and implementation of management changes. Provide an update at a future Council meeting.*

January 2024

Motion: *To approve the proposed activities for Phase II of the Inflation Reduction Act.*

The Council's Inflation Reduction Act activities include a project focused on regulatory streamlining, which aims to improve the timeliness and efficiency of integrating updated scientific information into Gulf fisheries management.

Regulatory Streamlining Projects

- ▶ Regulatory Process Review (Boelke & Goldsmith 2025) evaluated efficient processes used in other regional fishery management councils to identify applicable opportunities for the Gulf.
 - ▶ Reviewed by the SSC in October 2025
 - ▶ Final recommendations highlighted the need to implement routine, non-controversial measures more quickly and identified potential mechanisms
- ▶ Development of Regulatory Streamlining Amendments (Hood)
 - ▶ Develop procedures to allow a more automated process for updating catch advice and other routine management measures for a suite of pilot species



Changing annual catch limits (ACLs) and annual catch targets (ACTs), even minor changes, in response to new information (e.g., stock assessments) takes time to implement.

- Fishery Management Councils added framework procedures to fishery management plans to address specific recurring actions such as ACLs and ACTs.
- Framework actions were designed to increase efficiency and timeliness.
- Framework actions must address procedural requirements. For example:
 - Magnuson-Stevens Act;
 - National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA);
 - Administrative Procedure Act (APA).
- Even minor changes often require extended timelines to implement new ACLs and ACTs to address these procedural requirements.

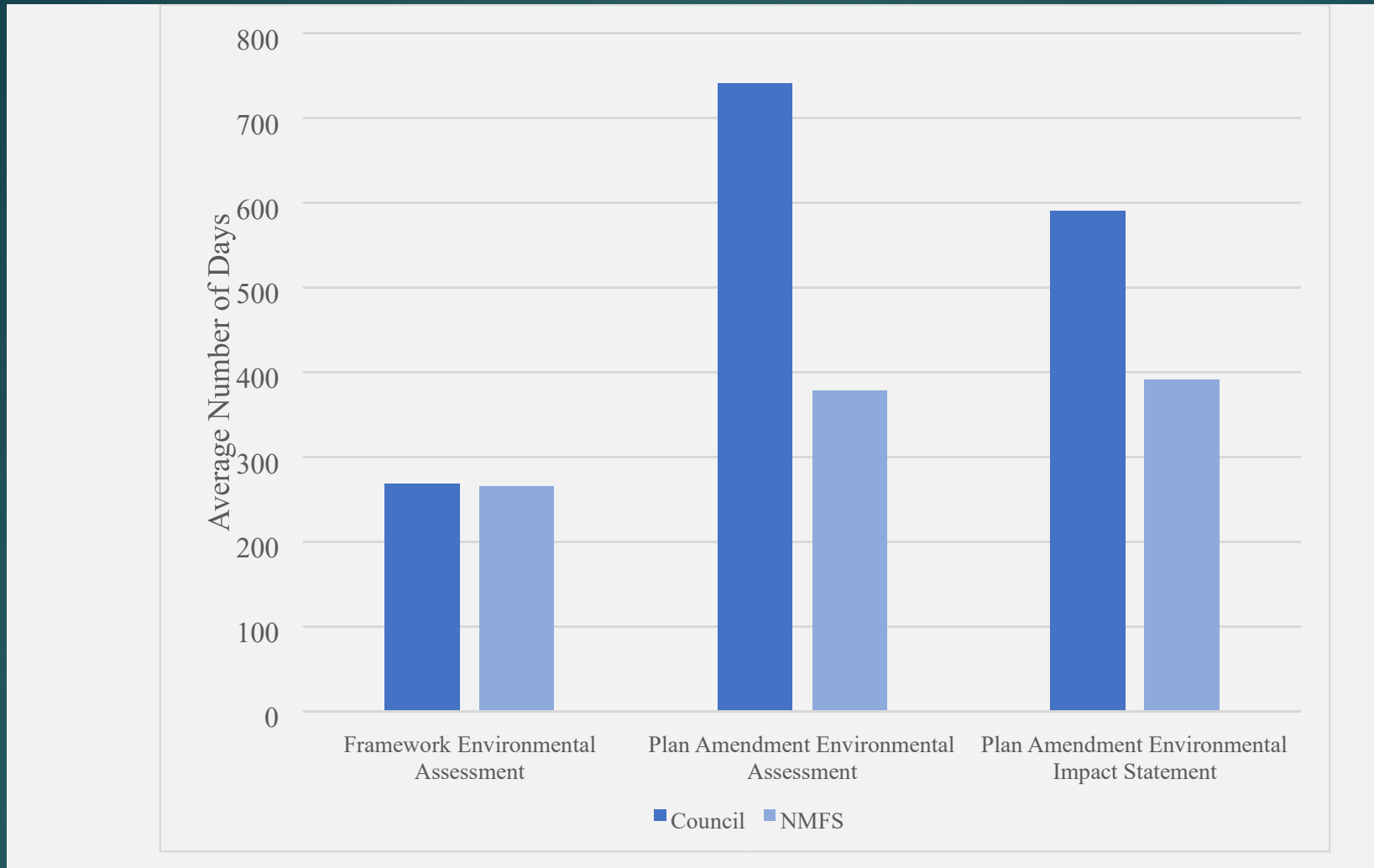


Figure 3. Average number of days for Council and NMFS to complete regulatory actions in the last five years (2017-2021) by Magnuson-Steven Act and NEPA category. Note: The Abbreviated Framework Actions (open frameworks) with a CE were not included due to the sample of two actions. (From GMFMC 2023 'Overview of Potential Options for Regulatory Streamlining – White Paper')

Recent example of a simple, non-controversial framework action

Lane snapper ACL change

Modify the overfishing limit (OFL) for the Gulf lane snapper stock to be 1,336,445 lb ww, and the acceptable biological catch (ABC) to be 1,304,917 lb ww, for 2026 – 2028 and subsequent years. The stock ACL is set equal to the ABC. (19% ACL change).

- January 2026 – SSC provides OFL and ABC recommendations, Council initiates framework
- April 2026 – Council takes final action on framework.
- June 2026 – Framework is transmitted to NMFS
- July 2026 – Rulemaking complicated by trying to combine the ACL change with another 2025 framework that would change the lane snapper size limit.

Recent example of a simple, non-controversial framework action

Spanish mackerel ACL change

Modify the OFL and ABC as recommended by the Gulf Council's SSC, for 2025/2026 – 2027/2028 and subsequent fishing years. The stock ACL is set equal to the ABC. OFL, ABC, and Stock ACL for 2025/2026 – 2027/2028+ are 12.074, 9.630, and 9.630 mp, respectively. (7% change in ACL if CHTS to FES; 34% change in ACL if FES to FES)

- July 2023 - SSC provides OFL and ABC recommendation
- August 2023 – Council initiates framework
- June 2025 – Council takes final action
- March 2026 – Framework action is transmitted to NMFS
- July 2026 – Proposed rule published in Federal Register (91 FR 46042) on July 21 with a 30-day comment period.



Mitigating Factors that Slow Down Implementation

- Shifting Council priorities
- Staff workload
 - Council staff
 - Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff
- Competing priorities among Councils
 - SERO works with 3 Councils
 - Affects staff who work actions across all Councils
- Additional review from National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) headquarters
- Government shutdowns

January 2026 Council Action

The Council's Sustainable Fisheries Committee identified two initial opportunities to increase efficiency in implementing routine management measures based on recommendations from the Regulatory Process Review:

- (1) Expanding flexibility in the framework procedures that are used to make modifications to existing management measures, and
- (2) Developing new framework procedures to allow a more automated process for updating catch advice and other routine management measures for a suite of pilot species.

Types of Framework Actions

Open frameworks

- Address issues where there is more policy discretion in selecting among various management options developed to address an identified management issue, such as changing a size limit to reduce harvest.
 - **Abbreviated documentation process** - routine or insignificant regulatory changes that may be proposed in the form of a letter or memo from the Council to the RA containing the proposed action (e.g, bag and possession limit changes of not more than 1 fish, size limit changes of not more than 10% of the prior size limit, and quota changes of not more than 10%, or retention of a portion of an annual quota in anticipation of future regulatory changes during the same fishing year.
 - **Standard documentation process** - regulatory changes that do not qualify as routine or insignificant may be proposed in the form of a framework document with supporting analyses (e.g., specification of ACTs or sector ACTs, and modifications to ACL/ACT control rule, specification of ABC and ABC control rules, and inseason accountability actions.

Types of Framework Actions

Closed Framework

- Address much more specific factual circumstances, where the FMP and implementing regulations identify specific actions to be taken in the event of specific facts occurring.
- Consistent with existing requirements in the FMP and implementing regulations, the RA is authorized to conduct the following framework actions through appropriate notification in the Federal Register.
- Covered actions:
 - Close or adjust harvest of any sector of the fishery for a species, sub-species, or species group that has a quota or sub-quota at such time as projected to be necessary to prevent the sector from exceeding its sector-quota for the remainder of the fishing year or sub-quota season,
 - Reopen any sector of the fishery that had been prematurely closed,
 - Implement accountability measures, either in-season or post-season.

Purpose of this Project: To increase timeliness and efficiency to making minor changes to ACLs, two amendments are proposed

First Amendment – Increase the flexibility in the current framework procedures by adding minor ACL revisions to the list of actions allowed for an abbreviated open framework.

Second Amendment – Develop new framework procedures to allow more automation for updating management advice for a limited number of species by adding minor ACL revisions to the list of actions allowed for a closed framework.

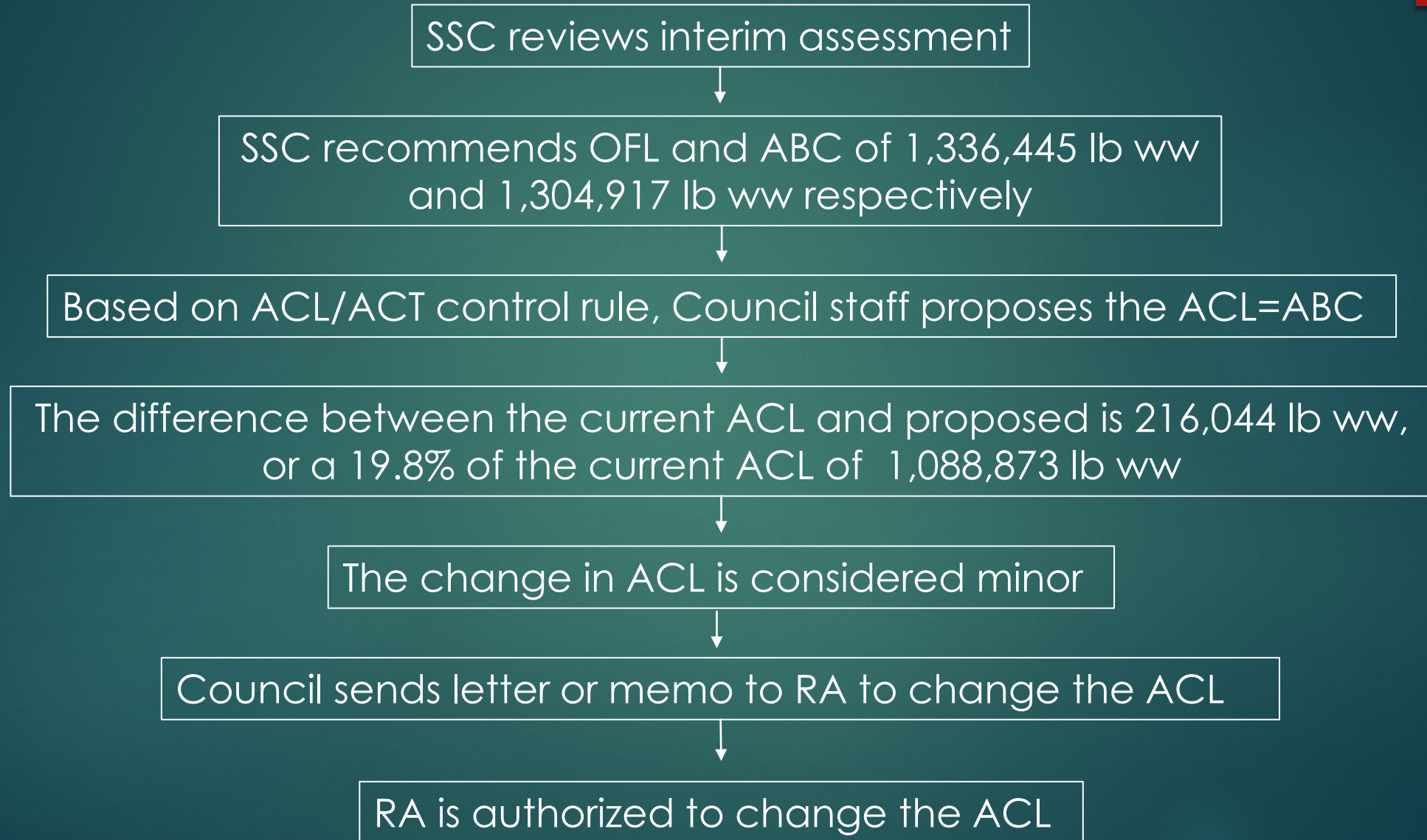
- Proposed pilot species that do not have sector allocations
 - Lane snapper
 - Gray snapper
 - Vermilion snapper
 - Mutton snapper
 - Yellowtail snapper
 - Spanish mackerel
 - Cobia



How an automated process might work

- SSC reviews new information and provides an OFL and ABC.
- Council reviews the SSC's recommendations and applies the spreadsheet-based ACL/ACT control rule to determine the ACL and ACT.
- **If** the difference between the current and proposed ACL is considered minor, then an automated process where the Council informs the Regional Administrator (RA) of the change and the RA implements the change through the appropriate notification in the Federal Register.
- **If** the difference between the current and proposed ACL is considered not minor, then the Council will use the proper open framework process to implement the change in ACL.

Lane snapper example of how an automated process might work



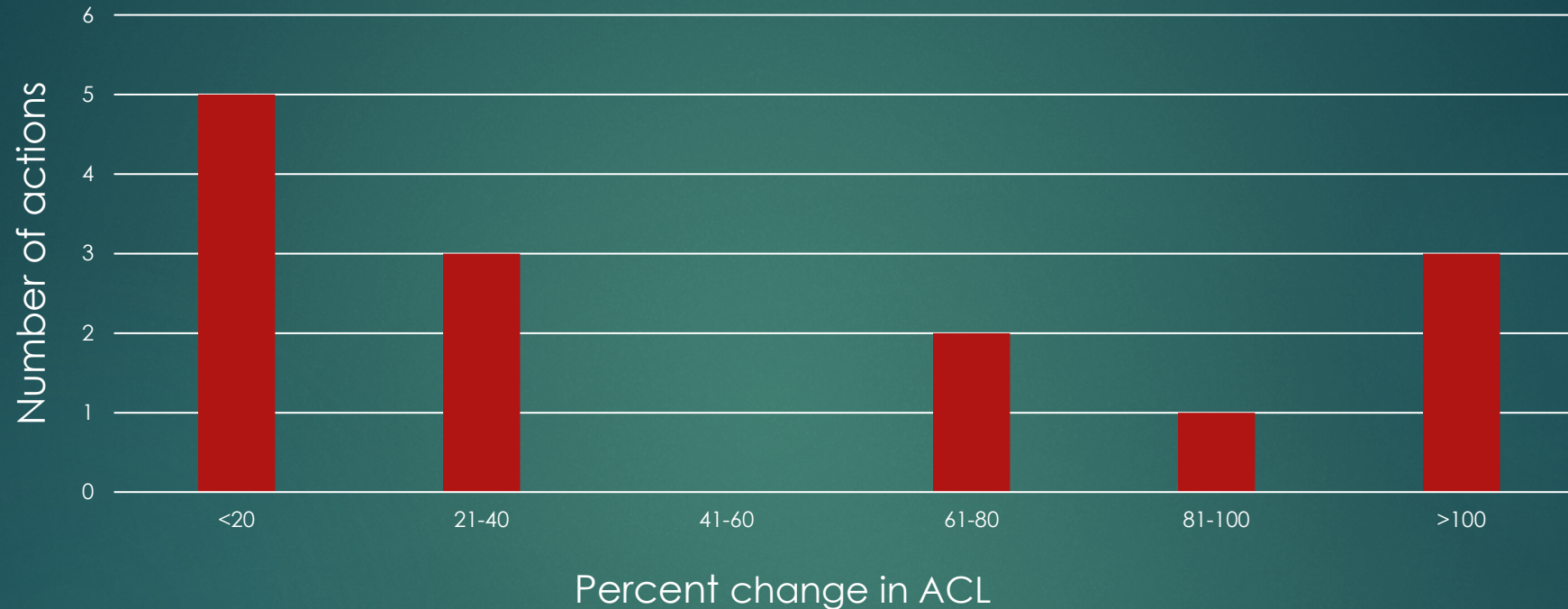


What measure should be used to determine if the automated process can be used to change an ACL?

Example: ACL changes of not more than certain percentage of the prior ACL (e.g., 5%, 10%, 20%).

Example: ACL changes of not more than some level of error associated with the prior OFL?. Error would be dependent on the type of assessment used to generate an estimate of OFL.

Percent change in ACL for 14 actions



The frequency distribution for the percent change in ACLs resulting from 14 FMP actions from 2013 to present. Actions considered addressed changes in ACLs for lane snapper, gray snapper, vermilion snapper, mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, Spanish mackerel, and cobia. This analysis is of the raw change in ACLs and did not consider changes in how landings data were estimated (e.g., MRIP CHTS vs MRIP FES).

SSC Feedback

- ▶ General insights and recommendations to the approaches to improve timeliness and efficiency in implementing minor ACL, bag limit, and size limit changes.
- ▶ Recommendations on pilot species.
- ▶ Recommendations on how to define 'minor' changes in ACLs and the data or indices available that could trigger the use of more efficient framework types:
 - ▶ Use of percent change vs the use of some type of error estimate.
 - ▶ If percent change is used, how should the percent be calculated if currencies differ between the current and proposed ACLs (e.g., CHTS to FES)?
 - ▶ Is there some other way to define 'minor' changes in ACLs.

Next Steps

- ▶ Discuss species and automation processes with the Council
- ▶ Discuss timing and availability of indices and analyses to inform automation processes with SEFSC
- ▶ Analyze effects of the range of management actions considered
- ▶ Project runs through December 2027