GULF COUNCIL · STANDING SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE

September 2026 Meeting Summary

September 29–30, 2026 · Tampa, Florida

01 SEDAR 94 West Florida Hogfish Stock Assessment

- **Findings:** The stock has grown since the last assessment and is not overfished or undergoing overfishing
- More small fish are present, potentially tied to the 2017 size limit increase from 12 to 14 inches
  - Spawning potential is 55% of unfished levels, above both the 30% and 40% MSY proxy benchmarks
  - All three independent surveys reflected the 2014 red tide die-off
  - SSC requested a steepness profile comparison prior to reviewing projections
- **SSC Discussion:** Centered on data gaps that could affect the results
  - Larger fish rarely appear in dockside sampling but do show up in video surveys
  - Commercial length data are sparse, and released fish may have low survival
  - Increases in hook and line catch vs. spear harvest
  - Recommended research on older hogfish moving offshore
- **Management Relevance:** The SSC accepted the assessment as consistent with the best scientific information available, clearing it to inform catch advice (motion carried without opposition).

02 SEDAR 94 West Florida Hogfish Yield Projections

- **Findings:** OFL set at 208,103 lb and ABC at 177,581 lb (whole weight), with a reassessment recommended in 2029 (motion carried with one opposed, one abstention, one absent).
  - OFL is the average projected yield for 2028–2030; ABC (averaged) is the yield at 75% of the fishing rate target
  - Current catch limit is 150,400 lb (older federal survey units); 2020–2024 landings ran ~70,000–170,000 lb recreational and 7,400–10,400 lb commercial
- **SSC Discussion:** Recommended 40%SPR target over the current 30%SPR.
  - Hogfish start life as females and change to males when older, making them sensitive to heavy fishing
    - This recommendation is in line with past advice (see red grouper, gag grouper, yellowedge grouper)
  - The stock has never been fished down to 30%, so its response at those levels is unknown
  - Long-term average recruitment reflects occasional strong year classes

03 Mississippi and Alabama Creel Surveys

- **Findings:** NOAA Fisheries certified both programs in April 2026; results for 2025 and 2026 to date were presented.
  - Surveys contact licensed anglers, run weekly, and match dockside sampling to actual fishing pressure
  - Data are available about one month after collection, with faster in-season tracking expected
- **SSC Discussion:** Members supported the effort but asked for more before a formal recommendation.
  - No double-counting across state lines: catch is credited where it is landed
  - Estimates are closer in proximity to older CHTS units, in which some catch limits are still monitored (e.g., red snapper)
  - Debated endorsing NOAA-certified surveys; allocation and calibration are largely outside the SSC's role
- **Management Relevance:** MDMR and ALMRD will return with additional information on MRIP comparison, efficiency gains, estimates for Council species and their uncertainty
- That these surveys likely produce more precise and timelier data than MRIP was generally acknowledged.

04 MRIP 2024 Pilot Study and Data Recalibration

- **Findings:** Anglers reported trips from outside the survey window ("telescoping"), overestimating shore and private-boat effort and thus landings.
  - Reordered questions and a full-year reporting window correct the bias
  - The largest effect was in low-effort winter months (waves 1, 2 and 6)
- **SSC Discussion:** Some revised estimates still don't match what fishermen see on the water.
  - Plausibility of some estimates (e.g., vermilion snapper and king mackerel discards) was questioned
  - NOAA: values can't change without quantitative justification; SSC questioned data review process
  - The for-hire survey was not also updated, so how it combines with the revised FES must be revisited
  - NOAA will explore splitting Monroe County, Florida, for-hire estimates between the two Councils
- **Management Relevance:** Revised, lower recreational estimates represent an updated data unit for consideration in future assessments and catch monitoring; state partners are continuing to flag outliers.

05 SHELF Egg Project

- **Purpose:** A University of South Florida program uses DNA from fish eggs to record where and when fish spawn on the West Florida Shelf (since 2017, with records back to 2013).
- **Findings:** More than 100 species identified; king mackerel spawning declined from 2013 to 2025 and shifted north into the Big Bend.
  - Uses archived SEAMAP Fall Plankton Survey samples plus its own underway egg sampler
  - King mackerel estimates carry high variability
- **SSC Discussion:** Members saw value in the program but noted its limits.
  - Proposals: expand to the western Gulf, test more eggs between SEAMAP stations, add summer reef fish sampling
  - Egg data are hard to link to adult abundance, and grouper eggs are hard to catch at the surface
  - Recommended reviewing how larval data fit recent assessments to identify gaps

06 Social Science Questionnaire for Gulf Species

- **Purpose:** NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Science Center piloted an expert survey rating the social value of Gulf fisheries, separate from economic and biological value.
- **Findings:** Survey methods and preliminary rankings were presented to gather SSC feedback before a larger rollout.
  - The approach has already been applied in the South Atlantic and Caribbean
- **SSC Discussion:** Members saw potential but flagged bias and methodological issues.
  - Dimensions like recreational well-being and teaching favor recreational fisheries; add commercial counterparts such as community jobs and food security
  - Guard against ranking on recent trends rather than long-standing practice
  - Include more experts with on-the-water experience
  - Compare state-managed species and consider the varying motivations between state/federal fleets
  - Maintain limited survey length while maximizing signal from the responses gathered

07 Regulatory Streamlining

- **Purpose:** Council-funded work to move new science into regulations faster, starting with more automatic catch limit updates for pilot species.
- **Findings:** Two options were presented to use framework procedures for routine catch limit changes on species with one stock-wide limit and no sector allocation.
  - Currently, framework actions handle recurring changes (catch and retention limits); plan amendments handle complex actions
  - Some delays traced to NOAA regional staff workloads, bureaucratic lag, and other sources
- **SSC Discussion:** Members supported starting small but urged care in defining a “minor” change.
  - Pilot species rarely come before the SSC; staff said the aim is to test on non-controversial species first
  - Catch limit reductions may be more contentious than increases, and small changes ≠ small impacts
  - Thresholds may need to be set species by species, screened with a checklist or decision tree
- **Management Relevance:** Frees staff and Council time for complex issues and tests a process that could later expand to more species.

09 Other Business: Gulf Greater Amberjack Count

- **SSC Discussion:** Member questioned the return on large absolute abundance studies.
  - Over $40 million has funded such studies, including the Great Red Snapper Count, with high opportunity cost little that has translated into the stock assessment process
  - Others expect some useful data despite poor reviews, citing cobia and tripletail projects
  - Presenting scientific findings to the Council before the SSC breaks the usual order and confuses the public
  - Future studies should plan up front how results will feed stock assessments and management, with a clear order of scientific review