Development of Regulatory Streamlining Procedures - Management Flexibility Measures

Gulf Council Meeting
October 29, 2026

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Outline

- Regulatory streamlining background
- Review of framework action types
- Proposed actions
  - Expand flexibility in abbreviated framework procedures
  - Develop automated processes for updating management advice
    - Proposed pilot species
    - Example of automated process
- Pathways
- Feedback
- Next steps

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.

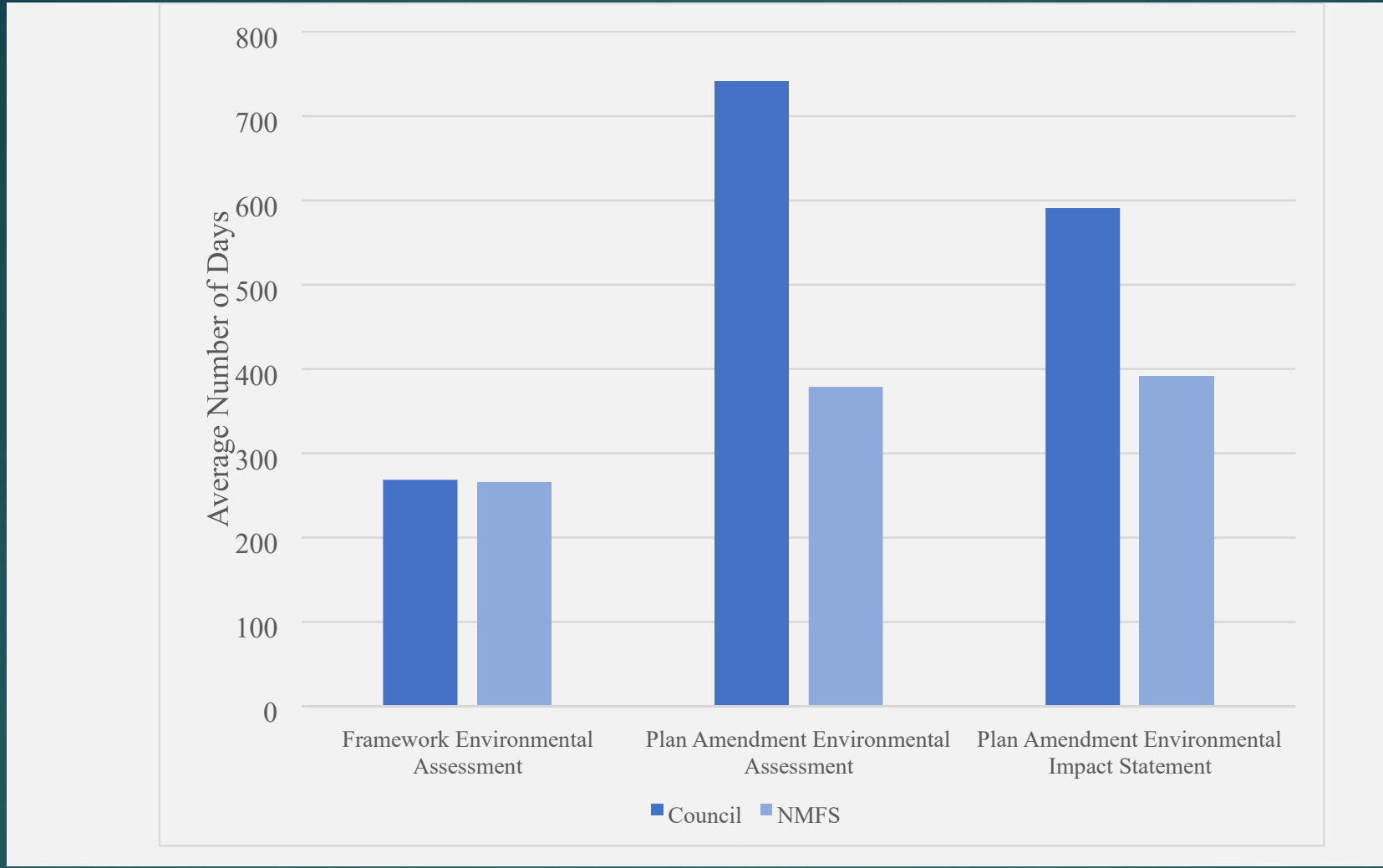


Figure 3. Average number of days for Council and NMFS to complete regulatory actions in the last five years (2017-2021) by Magnuson-Steven Act and NEPA category. Note: The Abbreviated Framework Actions (open frameworks) with a CE were not included due the sample of two actions. (From GMFMC April 2023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

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 Council in October 2025
  - Final recommendations highlighted the need to implement routine, non-controversial measures more quickly and identified potential mechanisms

January 2026 Council Discussion

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.

This led to

- Development of Regulatory Streamlining Procedures – Management Flexibility Measures (Hood)
  - Develop procedures to expand flexibility in the framework procedures and allow a more automated process for updating catch advice and other routine management measures for a suite of pilot species

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 annual catch limit (ACL) is set equal to the ABC. (19% ACL change).

- January 2026 – SSC provides OFL and ABC recommendations, Council initiates framework to change the ACL.
- 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 action that would change the lane snapper size limit.
- Oct 2026 – Rulemaking still ongoing.

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 comparison; 34% change in ACL if FES to FES comparison)

- July 2023 - SSC provides OFL and ABC recommendations
- 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
- September 2026 – Final rule package under review

Mitigating Factors that Slow Down Implementation

- Shifting Council priorities
- New information
- Staff workload
  - Council staff
  - Southeast Reginal Office (SERO) staff
- Competing priorities among Councils (Gulf, South Atlantic, and Caribbean)
  - SERO staff works with 3 Councils
  - Affects staff who work on actions across all Councils
- Additional review from National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) headquarters
- Government shutdowns

Review: How does a Framework Action Differ from a Plan Amendment?

A Fishery Management Plan (FMP) amendment is a major, comprehensive change to an established long-term management plan, whereas a framework action is a streamlined, routine adjustment used to modify specific management measures within pre-established FMP guidelines.

Feature	Amendment	Framework
Scope	Major, structural plan changes	Minor, routine modifications
Timeline	Multi-year process	Fast 6 months – 1 year
Process	Full scoping and hearings	Streamlined review process
Examples	Major policy shifts, long-term conservation programs, rebuilding plans for overfished stocks, and allocation between commercial and recreational sectors	Routine, predictable adjustments such as changing ACLs, minimum size limits, bag limits, or short-term seasonal closures

Review: What are the Different Types of Framework Actions?

Feature	Open Framework		Closed Framework
	Abbreviated documentation	Standard documentation	
Scope	Routine or insignificant regulatory changes	Actions that do not qualify as routine or insignificant	Address specific factual circumstances
Process	Letter or memo from the Council to the RA	Framework document with supporting analyses transmitted to NMFS	RA is authorized to conduct specific actions through notification in the Federal Register
Examples	Size limit changes of not more than 10% of the prior size limit	Specification of ABC and ABC control rules	Season closure because an ACL is met or projected to be met

Purpose of this Project: To Increase Timeliness and Efficiency to Making Minor Changes to Management Measures

First Action – Increase the flexibility in the current framework procedures by expanding the range of actions allowed for an abbreviated open framework.

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

First Action: What are Allowable Changes under the Abbreviated Documentation Process?

- Regulatory changes that may be categorized as routine or insignificant.
- 17 actions are listed but are not exclusive to the abbreviated framework process (See Reef Fish Amendment 49). Some examples include:
  - Bag and possession limit changes of not more than 1 fish,
  - Size limit changes of not more than 10% of the prior size limit,
  - Vessel trip limit changes of not more than 10% of the prior trip limit, and
  - Closed seasons of not more than 10% of the overall open fishing season.
  - 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.
- For clarification, revising ACLs in response to new information (e.g., stock assessment or interim assessment) could be added to actions listed for the abbreviated framework as well as the re-specification of an OFL and ABC.
- The first action would add to the examples listed for the abbreviated framework:
  - Minor ACL revisions and evaluate the expansion of allowable ranges (e.g., plus or minus some percent of the current ACL) and
  - The re-specification of an OFL and ABC.

Second Action: To Allow more Automation for Updating Management Advice For Pilot Species

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 ACL/ACT control rule to determine the ACL and ACT.
- **If** the difference between the current and proposed ACL fits the defined criteria for the automated process, then the Council informs the Regional Administrator (RA) with appropriate documentation of the change and the RA implements the change through the appropriate rulemaking.
- **If** the difference between the current and proposed ACL does not fit the defined criteria for the automated process, then the Council will use the open framework process to implement the change in ACL.

Second Action: To Allow more Automation for Updating Management Advice For Pilot Species

How were the pilot species selected?

- Eight prospective species
- All have stock ACLs
- All have had stock assessments
- All have the potential to be updated using index-based methods

Species	Assessed?	Overfished?	Overfishing?	Next Stock Assessment (Quarter, Year)	Next Interim Analysis (Quarter, Year)
Yellowtail Snapper	Yes	No	No	-	-
Mutton Snapper	Yes	No	No	-	-
Gray Snapper	Yes	No	No	3, 2027	-
Vermilion Snapper	Yes	No	No	2, 2028	1, 2030
Lane Snapper	Yes	No	Yes	4, 2028	4, 2027
Hogfish	Yes	No	No	-	-
Spanish Mackerel	Yes	No	No	4, 2028	4, 2027
Cobia	Yes	No	Yes	4, 2028	4, 2027

Stock status as of September 30, 2026, based on most recent NOAA Fisheries Quarterly Fishery Stock Status Update

Lane snapper example of how an automated process might work

SSC reviews interim assessment

SSC recommends OFL and ABC of 1,336,445 lb ww and 1,304,917 lb ww, respectively

Based on ACL/ACT control rule, Council staff proposes the ACL=ABC

The difference between the current ACL and proposed is 216,044 lb ww, or a 19.8% of the current ACL of 1,088,873 lb ww

The change in ACL meets the defined criteria for using the automated process

Council sends appropriate documentation to RA to change the ACL

NMFS undertakes rulemaking

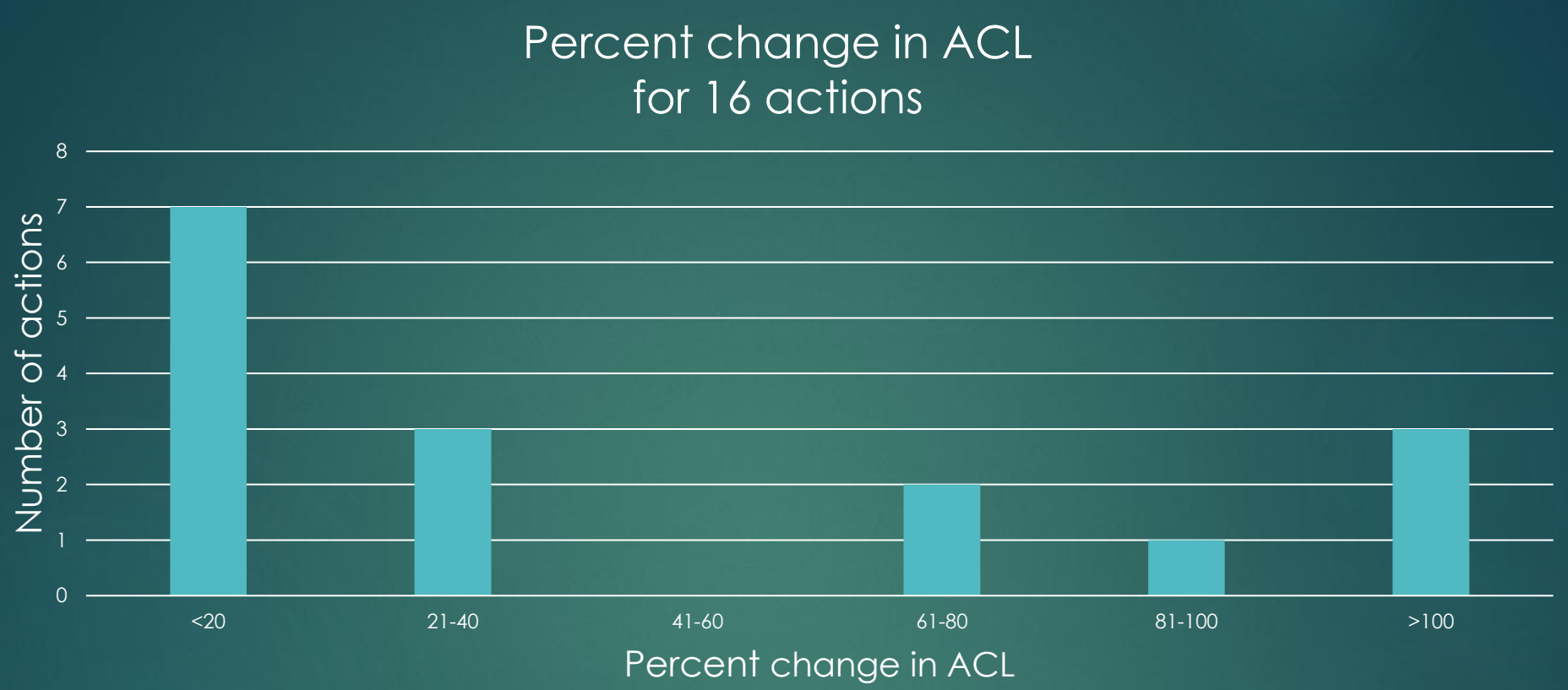
The change in ACL does not meet the defined criteria for using the automated process

Council uses the open framework process to change the ACL

NMFS undertakes rulemaking

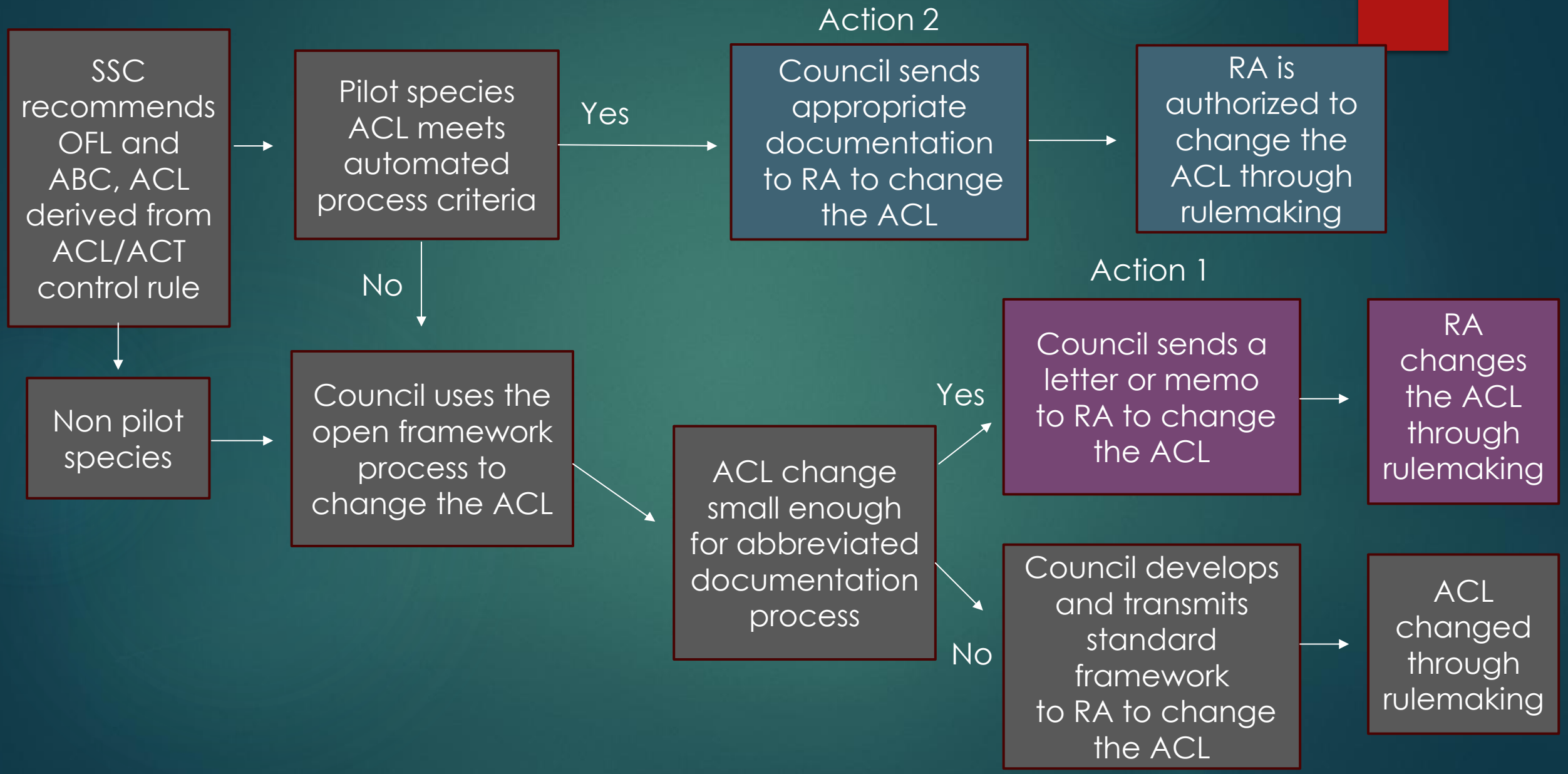
What considerations are needed for the automated process to change an ACL?

- Use a Checklist
  - Stock status
  - Does the difference between the proposed and current ACL fall within some range (e.g., plus or minus some percent of the current ACL)?
  - How close are recent catches to the ACL?
  - Is stock projected to increase or decrease?
  - How long since last assessment or IA?
  - How fresh is the supporting data for the change?
- If the automated process can be used, what sort of documentation is needed to support the decision?
- What are the data streams that can be used?
- Do we need to develop a mechanism for the Council to opt out of the automated ACL adjustments and direct staff to develop a standard documentation process framework or plan amendment (e.g., if there are perceived issues with the stock)?



The frequency distribution for the percent change in ACLs resulting from 16 FMP actions from 2012 to present. Actions considered addressed changes in ACLs for lane snapper, gray snapper, vermilion snapper, mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, hogfish, 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).

Pathways for ACL changes with the two proposed actions



Council 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 criteria that could be used to trigger the use of more efficient framework types.

Next Steps

- Establish an Interdisciplinary Plan Team (IPT) to work on the actions
- 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