

**Standing, Reef Fish, Coral, and
Socioeconomic SSC Meeting Summary
January 9, 2020**

The meeting of the Standing, Reef Fish, Coral, and Socioeconomic Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC) was convened at 9:00 a.m. on January 9, 2020. The agenda for this meeting was approved after adding two items under Other Business. The meeting summaries and verbatim minutes from the September 2019 meeting and the October 2019 webinar were approved with the following correction to the September 2019 meeting minutes:

To make the following edit to the motion on page 14 in *Terms of Reference and Participants*: SEDAR 72: Gulf of Mexico Gag:

Motion: To approve the terms of reference for SEDAR 70: Gulf Greater Amberjack as modified.

Is edited to read:

Motion: To approve the terms of reference for SEDAR 72: Gulf of Mexico Gag as modified.

Mr. Doug Gregory agreed to serve as the SSC representative at the January 2020 Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Expansion

Ms. Beth Dieveney from the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) presented an overview of the proposed changes included in the Restoration Blueprint Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The presentation focused on changes in Gulf Council's jurisdiction.

Dr. Paul Sammarco, Coral SSC member, requested the rationale for the FKNMS preferring Alternative 3 over Alternative 4, specifically referring to the incorporation of Pulley Ridge as part of the Sanctuary. Ms. Dieveney responded that the FKNMS looked into areas that already had protections and ways to strengthen those protections. The Pulley Ridge Unit (Pulley Ridge South and proposed expansion South A) currently have regulations that limit the use of bottom tending gear and anchoring by fishing vessels. Alternative 4 in the DEIS proposes to restrict anchoring for all vessels, in addition to additional protection included in sanctuary-wide regulations.

When asked about the way in which the Sanctuary would move forward with the recommendations, the FKNMS does not foresee having to select a single alternative to move forward. Depending on public comments, the final proposal may include options from the other alternatives. Members of the Standing SSC requested more information regarding the types of public comments in favor or against the proposed changes and the Sanctuary's approach to incorporate such comments and recommendations in the final EIS. Ms. Dieveney responded that the comments are diverse, some stakeholders are in favor of closures to protect habitat, but there are also comments against any changes to the current Sanctuary regulations. Public comments will

be categorized by issue. Currently, there is no ranking protocol, but the Sanctuary will evaluate the range of comments by category, not necessarily by the number of comments received. The Sanctuary would also consult with partnering agencies to address issues specific to those agencies' purview and jurisdiction.

The Committees debated on the best approach to provide recommendations to the Council, echoing the general comments of the Council's APs and other stakeholders about the complexity of the DEIS—should the focus be on policy recommendations, on a sole evaluation of the scientific data, or both. The Coral SSC supports additional protections to Pulley Ridge given the connectivity of this mesophotic reefs to the shallow-water reefs. The Coral SSC explained the amount of data that supports the protection of benthic habitat in Pulley Ridge and its association with fish productivity. Also, recent studies look at the connectivity between Pulley Ridge and coral reefs in the Florida Keys, which indicate that Pulley Ridge could be a source of coral larvae to other regions. This point was highlighted given the current decline of stony coral cover in the Florida Keys.

The proposed changes in Alternative 4 for Pulley Ridge would protect the hard-bottom from repeated anchoring perturbations by non-fishing vessels, as no anchoring is a current fishing regulation for Pulley Ridge. As stated in the DEIS, the proposal to include Pulley Ridge currently would not affect fishing regulations in the existing Pulley Ridge South HAPC or Pulley Ridge South Portion A proposed in Coral Amendment 9. Other members of the SSC would like to see additional data and analyses regarding the socio-economic effects of implementing no-anchor for all vessels in Alternative 4 for Pulley Ridge.

Motion: The SSC recommends that the Gulf Council support a Sanctuary boundary expansion that includes Pulley Ridge with the associated regulations, including no anchoring, because it would afford increased protection to mesophotic corals and associated communities.

Motion carried 13 – 8 with three abstentions.

The SSC also asked about the reason for the Sanctuary boundary expansion and if it was related to ease of enforcement. The goal of the DEIS is to provide additional protection to available habitat and connectivity, in addition to streamline boundaries for easier identification by the public, in addition to potentially enhancing enforcement. Another approach to streamline enforcement was to apply the same regulations to all Sanctuary Preservation Areas (SPAs). There is concern from the general public, Council's APs, and SSC regarding this issue. Enforcing idle speed / no wake in large SPAs, such as the proposed Tortugas Corridor, could pose a navigational hazard. Members of the SSC expressed frustration that rationale for the idle speed navigational regulation proposed for the Tortugas Corridor was not clearly described in the DEIS. More specifically to the Tortugas Region, the SSC is also concerned about the implications to commercial fisheries as navigating at idle speed through the Tortugas Corridor could limit fishermen to accessing other areas in the Tortugas Region that do not have fishing restrictions; for example, the area east of the Tortugas Ecological Reserve South, as just getting there alone could take numerous hours to transit at idle speed.

The SSC also debated if the changes proposed in Alternative 3 for the Tortugas Corridor were more protective than Alternative 4. Mr. Schmahl suggested that “no transit” (Alternative 4) would restrict anchoring, fishing, as well as diving. The proposed regulations for SPAs (Alternative 3) are no anchor, idle speed/ no wake, no fishing, but it does allow diving and snorkeling. It is unclear if the mooring buoys would be installed in the Tortugas Corridor.

The SSC asked about the number of marine zones and how this could be confusing to the general public. The FKNMS preferred alternative is designating 98 marine zones. These zones are categorized into four different types, with associated regulations and resource protection goal. A member of the SSC also noted inconsistencies in the reclassification and regulatory changes to Ecological Reserves (ER) and SPAs. The question was specific to the proposed changes in Western Sambo ER, which alternative 3 includes as a SPA. NOAA is including Western Sambo ER as a SPA as the regulations are similar to other SPAs. The proposed regulations for SPAs include idle speed, no anchor, and no fishing. Tortugas ERs North and South are both transit only.

The SSC commends the FKNMS involvement with the community. However, several members of the SSC were not satisfied with the studies and rationale laid out in the FKNMS DEIS. Specifically, a member of the socio-economic SSC commented that the DEIS only captures analyses on the potential impacts to the fishing fleet with data through 2013 which is considered old and outdated information. Thus, potential losses to the commercial sector may not be well represented given that the analyses do not include more recent data. Another SSC member noted that the Condition Report for the Tortugas Region is cited throughout the DEIS; however, the report doesn’t cite information on Southeast Data Assessment and Review (SEDAR) stock assessments on black grouper and mutton snapper. Further, the DEIS should discuss the actions that partner agencies (i.e., Gulf and South Atlantic Councils and Florida FWC) have taken to protect these coral habitats and associated fishes to date. If data exists, FKNMS should demonstrate successes of these restrictions as a whole.

Steve Atran, retired Council staff, recommended clarifications on the definition of traditional fishing. The definition seems ambiguous and he recommended the FKNMS to refer to the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils allowable gear definitions to make it more precise. Ms. Dieveney stated that more detail was provided in the original environmental impact statement of 1997.

September 2019 Coral SSC Recommendations

Staff provided the SSC with the meeting summary from the joint Shrimp AP, Coral AP, and Coral SSC meeting on September 2019. The recommendations from this meeting had already been presented to the Council in October 2019. There were no additional recommendations from the SSC to the actions related to: Council funding for a research project for Kemp’s Ridley sea turtles to work towards completing an assessment on the species, and Council’s direction to staff to begin work on potential areas to be included in Coral Amendment 10.

Update of SEDAR 49: Lane Snapper with MRIP-FES Data including OFL and ABC Recommendations

Dr. Nancie Cummings presented the update of the headboat index used to assess lane snapper in SEDAR 49, using the iTarget model from the NOAA Data Limited Toolkit. The recreational data now incorporate landings and effort using the Fishing Effort Survey-calibrated Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP-FES) data from 1986 through 2018. The index indicates a peak in catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) in 1993, followed by a decline into the late-1990s. Thereafter, the index increased to 2017, with a decline in 2018. Trends of annual headboat effort and total recreational effort on lane snapper are similar. The recreational landings using MRIP-FES data are higher than those not calibrated for the FES, and those differences vary by year. Recreational harvest accounts for the majority of lane snapper removals in the Gulf. Based on the newly included MRIP-FES data, the projections provide an overfishing limit (OFL) recommendation of 1,094,324 pounds (lbs) whole weight (ww) at a 50% probability of overfishing. The acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations from the projections are 1,068,508 lbs ww at a 30% probability of overfishing, or 1,081,903 lbs ww at a 40% probability of overfishing.

The SSC asked about the reference period used for lane snapper, and the criteria used to select that reference period. Dr. Cummings noted that the time period used for the recreational data was 1999 through 2008, was selected during SEDAR 49, and which matched well with the CPUE data from the headboat index. The SSC asked about the possibility of the stability of the reference period changing as a result of the inclusion of the new MRIP-FES data. Dr. Cummings noted that changing the reference period was outside the requested scope of work, but could be examined, along with other data, in a future assessment of lane snapper.

Staff noted that the current annual catch limit (ACL) for lane snapper of 301,000 lbs ww is not adjusted for FES; however, quota monitoring for the stock is currently performed using the same method used to establish that ACL. The SSC expressed some concern about the magnitude of differences between the pre- and post-FES calibrated MRIP data, in that those differences can vary widely from year to year. Dr. Cummings added that the method of assessment has not changed- the only change to the model has been the use of the MRIP-FES data in the place of the previous dataset.

The SSC asked whether it was plausible that the stock could sustain the level of harvest that the data suggest is occurring. Staff referenced conversations with headboat operators, who have indicated that they have been landing consistently more lane snapper over the last few years; however, staff cautioned that landing more fish than in the past only infers that the fish are there to be caught, and does not infer anything about stock status. The iTarget model is not designed to generate estimates of stock status or spawning stock biomass.

Motion: The SSC finds that the updated Gulf of Mexico Lane Snapper assessment using the iTarget model with FES-calibrated MRIP data is the best scientific information available.

Motion carried 17 – 2 with three abstentions.

The SSC heard from the Southeast Regional Office that if the quota for 2018 were monitored using the FES-calibrated MRIP data, that the 2018 estimated landings would be approximately 800,000 lbs ww. This is compared to the estimated 300,000 lbs ww as measured under the present monitoring system (Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey).

Motion: The SSC finds that the updated Gulf of Mexico Lane Snapper assessment using the iTarget model with FES-calibrated MRIP data is useful for management advice. The OFL using the 50th percentile of the PDF is 1.09 mp ww, and the ABC using the 30th percentile of the PDF is 1.07 mp ww.

Motion carried 17 – 2 with two abstentions.

Staff noted that the Council retains the option to set the ACL at some value below the ABC, and may also use an annual catch target as an additional catch limit to further accommodate management uncertainty. The SSC discussed the merits of receiving a presentation of the methods used in the FES at its next meeting, and requested that such a presentation and available time for discussion be had. The Council previously concurred with the SSC and requested at its October 2019 meeting that the SSC and MRIP staff convene via a workshop to discuss the incorporation of state-collected recreational data for inclusion in stock assessments.

SEDAR 61: Gulf Red Grouper Projections with MRIP-FES Revised Allocations and Projections

Dr. Skyler Sagarese presented the results of the projections from the SEDAR 61 stock assessment for Gulf red grouper. These projections account for various allocation scenarios which affect the subsequent catch advice. At the SSC's September meeting, the SEFSC presented the projections assuming the current sector allocations (76% commercial and 24% recreational, based on data from 1986 through 2005 in SEDAR 12) and that the 2018 red tide event was equivalent to the 2005 event. The resultant OFL and ABC determined by the SSC was 5.35 mp gutted weight (gw) and 4.9 mp gw with the current sector allocations, respectively.

Recreational landings are collected in number, and weight is estimated by the model. Prior to this January 2020 SSC meeting, the weight estimation procedures for MRIP were updated, which result in different recreational landings estimates from those used in SEDAR 61. These updated data from the NMFS ACL Monitoring dataset have been determined by the SEFSC to represent the best scientific information available. The decision before the Council in Reef Fish Amendment 53 will be which time series to use to determine the new sector allocations for Gulf red grouper, based on these data. Though this exercise of revisiting sector allocations due to the use of MRIP-FES data will likely be conducted for other species besides just red grouper, the SEFSC cautioned that each species would represent its own unique case. Using the MRIP-FES data from the NMFS ACL Monitoring dataset, and assuming the 2018 red tide event affected red grouper similar to the 2005 red tide event, the following catch advice was generated for the three time series options currently being considered by the Council in Reef Fish Amendment 53:

Landings Time Series	Comm %	Rec %	Million pounds gutted weight			
			OFL (P*=0.5)	P*=0.427	P*=0.4	P*= 0.3
1986-2005	59.3	40.7	4.66	4.52	4.47	4.26
1986-2009	60.5	39.5	4.70	4.56	4.51	4.30
1986-2018	59.7	40.3	4.67	4.53	4.48	4.28

Dr. Sagarese presented an updated interim analysis for Gulf red grouper, which shows lower levels of relative abundance in 2018 and 2019. These lower levels of abundance suggest that the 2018 red tide event did in fact have a substantial negative effect on the biomass of Gulf red grouper, and that the decisions made by the SSC in September 2019 with respect to the red grouper catch limits were supported by the data. Development of harvest control rules as part of management strategy evaluation tools is ongoing. The SEFSC will perform an interim analysis for Gulf red grouper annually, which will be reviewed by the SSC.

The beta scalar used to generate a recommended ABC from the interim analysis characterizes the responsiveness of the harvest control rule to the standard error of the index used, which in the case of Gulf red grouper is the fishery-independent NMFS Bottom Longline Survey. A lower scalar value tracks the index more closely, while a higher value tracks the ABC more closely. The SSC discussed the setting of the beta scalar for red grouper specifically, acknowledging that this scalar may be different for different species. Given the variability in the NMFS Bottom Longline Survey, further evaluation of the beta scalar for red grouper may be necessary.

The SSC discussed the need to differentiate any recommendation of an OFL or ABC (based on the resultant allocation from each of the presented time series options) from the decision of determining allocations itself. Setting sector allocations is the prerogative of the Council, while setting the OFL and ABC is that of the SSC. The SSC requested clear descriptions of the data being used to inform catch advice for similar requests in the future.

Motion: Given the SEDAR 61 red grouper stock assessment, which was accepted by the SSC as the best scientific information available and utilized the FES recreational landings estimates, the time series of 1986-2005, 1986-2009, 1986-2018 yield scientifically valid estimates of OFL and ABC as found in the following table:

Landings Time Series	Comm %	Rec %	Million pounds gutted weight	
			OFL (P*=0.5)	ABC (P*=0.3)
1986-2005	59.3	40.7	4.66	4.26
1986-2009	60.5	39.5	4.70	4.30
1986-2018	59.7	40.3	4.67	4.28

A P*=0.3 (30% probability of overfishing) was selected by the SSC following SEDAR 61.

Motion carried 20 – 0 with one abstention.

National Marine Fisheries Service Standardized Economic Reports for Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish and Mackerel Fisheries

Dr. Christopher Liese from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center presented an overview of the NMFS standardized economic reports. He noted that the reports could be considered reference manuals, in terms of data for fishery management. Dr. Liese explained that while cash flow and income statements cover a period of time, balance sheets are for a specific point in time. He further noted that while logbooks are assumed to be a census, about 20% of vessels are part of a stratified sample that report economic data for all of their logbook trips. Additionally, once the year is over, those same sampled vessels are sent a cost survey to collect fixed cost information. A systematic approach to reporting the cost data is utilized by NMFS, and Dr. Liese next provided an overview of two such Technical Memorandums.

In the NOAA Technical Memorandum Economics of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Fishery – 2016, 16 Statistics of Income (SOI) are included; 15 of the SOIs are subsets of the primary SOI, which is for all gears. Standardized results for each SOI include trip-level and annual, vessel-level economics. In the NOAA Technical Memorandum Economics of the US South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico CMP Fisheries – 2016, 6 SOIs are included for King Mackerel fisheries, and 2 SOIs are included for Spanish Mackerel fisheries. SSC members inquired about calculating the return on investment for quota share purchases. Dr. Liese explained that it would not be possible given the data that is currently collected.

Discussion of Joint Gulf and South Atlantic SSC Meeting in May 2020

The Gulf and South Atlantic Council SSCs will convene for a joint meeting on May 5-7, 2020 in Tampa, Florida to evaluate the SEDAR 64 stock assessment of southeastern US yellowtail snapper. The Committees will determine at the meeting how to proceed with voting as it relates to the review of the assessment.

Other Business

National SSC Meeting in Sitka, Alaska – August 2020

The National SSC Meeting is scheduled for August 4-6, 2020 in Sitka, Alaska. The planning committee for the meeting has requested that the regional SSCs gauge interest from their memberships in attending the meeting, which carries themes of 1) How to incorporate ecosystem indicators into the stock assessment process; 2) Developing information to support management of interacting species in consideration of ecosystem-based fishery management (EBFM); and 3) How to assess and develop fishing level recommendations for species exhibiting distributional changes. The SSC volunteered the following members for participation in the meeting: Will Patterson, Dave Chagaris, Kai Lorenzen, Andrew Ropicki, Jim Tolan, and Paul Sammarco.

ABC Control Rule Working Group

A small working group of volunteers will convene via two webinars to initiate development of a proposed revision to the Council's ABC Control Rule. The group will include Joe Powers (who will chair), Jeff Isely, and Jim Tolan.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:30 pm on January 9, 2020.

Participants (*via webinar*)

Standing SSC

Joe Powers, Chair
Kai Lorenzen, Vice Chair
Lee Anderson
Luiz Barbieri
David Chagaris
Benny Gallaway
Bob Gill
Doug Gregory
Jeff Isely
Walter Keithly
Camp Matens
Jim Nance
Will Patterson
Sean Powers
Ken Roberts
Steven Scyphers
James Tolan

Reef Fish SSC

Judson Curtis
John Mareska

Coral SSC

Sandra Brooke
Paul Sammarco
George Schmahl

Socioeconomic SSC

Kari Maclauchlin Buck
Jack Isaacs
Andrew Ropicki

Council Staff

Ryan Rindone
Natasha Mendez-Ferrer
John Froeschke
Carrie Simmons
Matt Freeman
Jessica Matos
Lisa Hollensead
Ava Lasseter
Assane Diagne

Presenters

Nancie Cummings, NMFS
Beth Dieveney, FKNMS

Skyler Sagarese, NMFS

Council Member

Tom Frazer

Others

Sue Gerhart, NMFS
Rich Malinowski, NMFS
Peter Hood, NMFS
Dan Luers, NMFS
Roy Crabtree, NMFS
Mike Travis, NMFS
Christopher Liese, NMFS
Katie Siegfried, NMFS
Bob Zales II, SOFA
Robert Spaeth, SOFA
Jason Delacruz
Erin Grebener
Eric Brazer, RFSA
Ashford Rosenberg, RFSA
Michael Drexler, OC
Catie Bruger, OC
Steven Atran