

1 GULF OF MEXICO FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

2  
3 291<sup>ST</sup> MEETING

4  
5 NMFS' AGENCY PRIORITIES AND DRAFT EQUITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL  
6 JUSTICE STRATEGY REMARKS

7  
8 Omni Hotel

Corpus Christi, Texas

9  
10 AUGUST 23, 2022

11  
12 **CHAIRMAN DALE DIAZ:** All right. Good morning, everybody. We're  
13 going to go ahead and get started here this morning. Dr.  
14 Frazer, through two days of hard travel, has blessed us with his  
15 presence this morning. We're glad to see that you finally made  
16 it, Dr. Frazer. We are going to start with Reef Fish, and Dr.  
17 Frazer is going to handle some introductions for our first  
18 speaker, who is going to talk right before the Reef Fish  
19 Committee. Dr. Frazer.

20  
21 **DR. TOM FRAZER:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I never thought I  
22 would say that I'm really excited to be here for the Reef Fish  
23 Committee, but, nevertheless, I am. Thanks for you guys'  
24 patience yesterday, and thanks to Chris for going ahead and  
25 running the committee meeting. I really appreciate that.

26  
27 Before we get started on the Reef Fish Committee, we are going  
28 to hear from Mr. Sam Rauch, from the agency, to provide us an  
29 update on NMFS agency priorities as well as the Draft Equity and  
30 Environmental Justice Strategy, and so, with that said, we have  
31 the pleasure of having Mr. Rauch here. Sam, if you want to say  
32 a few words.

33  
34 **MR. SAMUEL RAUCH:** Thank you. I am Sam Rauch, and I'm the  
35 Deputy Director of the National Marine Fisheries Service. I  
36 oversee the regulatory programs, which means the work of all the  
37 regions, and some of our headquarters offices. I wanted to be  
38 there in person, and it sounds like I was not the only one that  
39 had travel issues. I had several United flights cancelled on me  
40 yesterday, and it turns out the earliest I could get there is  
41 late tonight, if I were to get there at all, and so that  
42 obviously wouldn't work for this, and so I apologize for not  
43 making it. I did try, and apparently I'm not the only one that  
44 had problems.

45  
46 I wanted to provide a few brief overviews. I was asked to  
47 provide some remarks about the agency's priorities and about our  
48 equity policy, which is out for review, and so, in terms of our  
49 priorities, we, and you, oversee our nation's fisheries, which

1 are crucial to local global food security, health and resilience  
2 of the ecosystem, a key part of many of our coastal economies,  
3 and an important recreational pastime for many of our citizens.  
4 We pride ourselves on having the best management system in the  
5 world, and we could not do that without the council process.

6  
7 Some of the economic data is that the commercial and  
8 recreational fisheries currently support about 1.7 million jobs,  
9 \$238 billion in sales, both in fishing and across the broader  
10 economy. The commercial fisheries landed 9.3 billion pounds of  
11 seafood, providing a valuable source of local and sustainable  
12 healthy food, and the recreational fisheries continue to be  
13 incredibly important, not just as a pastime, but an important  
14 economic driver for many of our coastal communities.

15  
16 In terms of sustainability, we held steady in 2021, with more  
17 than 90 percent of the stocks not subject to overfishing and 80  
18 percent not overfished, and we could not do that without the  
19 councils, and not just the council members, but the AP members,  
20 the SSC members, all the stakeholders that participate in the  
21 council meetings.

22  
23 I know we have some new council members for this meeting, and  
24 many of you are all grizzled veterans, and it is a difficult job  
25 to be a council member. There is a lot to take in, and there is  
26 a lot to balance. I know many of you came from viewing  
27 yourselves as coming from a particular state, or a particular  
28 sector, or community, and we ask that you set a lot of that  
29 aside.

30  
31 You're obviously here to share your expertise, but you're also  
32 here to represent the Gulf of Mexico and the people of the Gulf,  
33 the people of the United States, to look at a broader interest,  
34 and so good council members are able to appropriately balance  
35 the reason that they're here with their broader task of looking  
36 at this broadly and truly acting as a representative for the  
37 entire Gulf.

38  
39 Some of the top priorities that this administration has are,  
40 obviously, confronting climate change, and it is important.  
41 We're all affected by climate change. People's lives and  
42 livelihoods are being affected, and nowhere more so than many of  
43 our fisheries. Fish stocks are moving around, and some of them  
44 are just simply moving, and many of them are being adversely  
45 affected by climate change issues, and some of them are  
46 benefitting from climate change issues.

47  
48 Understanding these climate-driven shifts, changes, and

1 expansions -- This is just going to continue and get more  
2 pronounced, and, as we do our jobs, which is to try to plan for  
3 the importance of sustainable fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, we  
4 need to understand both what is happening and understand how to  
5 manage in the face of that uncertainty and that change.

6  
7 These are immense challenges that matter a lot to both the  
8 fisheries out of the water and the people that rely on them, and  
9 we need to work together with both the Science Center and the  
10 regulators and the stakeholders to chart a path forward, such  
11 that we can continue to enjoy the great benefits of the Gulf of  
12 Mexico for years to come.

13  
14 Another priority is the seafood strategy, and many of you have  
15 heard about this, and we are working on a broader public draft  
16 for comment later this fall, but, in the meantime, we've had a  
17 number of roundtables with industry, and others, to receive  
18 input on elements of that strategy, and it's been invaluable to  
19 hear what partners and stakeholders feel is important.

20  
21 We do want to use our resources wisely, and we do want to focus  
22 on this, but providing safe, healthy seafood and making sure  
23 that Americans have an American choice of seafood is an  
24 important goal for this administration, and so, when that comes  
25 out for comment, or now, to the extent that you have access to  
26 the document, we do encourage you to share your thoughts.

27  
28 Conservation is also an important goal for this administration,  
29 and I think, on the first day of this administration, they  
30 issued the challenge to conserve 30 percent of our land and  
31 waters by 2030, and that has been translated into the America  
32 the Beautiful initiative, which is designed to do just that.

33  
34 We have talked with the councils, both individually and through  
35 the CCC, about that and about how council-managed areas can be  
36 an important part of that conservation objective. I know that  
37 the councils, through the Council Coordinating Committee, the  
38 CCC, has had an extensive workgroup that has done a lot of good  
39 work in trying to provide input into that process.

40  
41 We heard a presentation, back earlier this year in Annapolis,  
42 for all the councils together about that work, and we are trying  
43 to make sure that all of that gets incorporated into the various  
44 goals and the future work of the administration as we go forward  
45 with that, and so we want to continue to work with the councils  
46 on that, and we look forward to more results. The next big  
47 step, I think, is the release of the Atlas, later this year,  
48 which will provide at least an initial look at how the

1 administration is really accounting for that 30 percent goal.

2  
3 We are also working through the various funding packages that  
4 we've got, and, for us, not just the upcoming 2023  
5 appropriations, and I will get to that in a minute, for the  
6 environmental justice, but also through the Infrastructure Act,  
7 which passed late last year that we've been implementing, and  
8 the last Inflation Reduction Act.

9  
10 All of those provide a significant increase in funding over --  
11 In the short-term, it's like five-year funding, through the  
12 Fisheries Service, and through NOAA, to do some transformative  
13 things. The Infrastructure Act primarily was focused on  
14 building infrastructure, but also on broad-based conservation  
15 measures, and there's a number of other things, dealing with  
16 climate and some equity and environmental justice issues, in the  
17 Inflation Reduction Act, which we're still working with Congress  
18 through exactly how that's going to get allocated.

19  
20 Then I wanted to talk a little bit about equity and  
21 environmental justice. This is another priority for the  
22 administration, and this has been something that, on day one,  
23 the administration came out with a number of executive orders  
24 dealing with equity and environmental justice, and we've put out  
25 a strategy that I know the council has seen, and I think you  
26 talked about it at your last meeting, but we are committed to  
27 advancing equity and environmental justice, including equal  
28 treatment and opportunities and environmental benefits for all  
29 people.

30  
31 There are a number of ways to look at equity. You could look at  
32 it looking backwards and trying to determine whether, in the  
33 past, we have equitably allocated both the benefits and the  
34 burdens of the federal government, in terms of regulation or  
35 where we do our surveys, or things like that, or where we do our  
36 habitat restoration programs, but it's also looking forward, to  
37 ensure that, in the future at least, we try to do a better job  
38 accounting for these things, when we know about them, and that  
39 is one of the principle issues, is, many times, we don't know  
40 who the underserved communities are.

41  
42 I have looked at the draft letter that was attached to the  
43 agenda, and the draft letter notes that this is one of the first  
44 challenges, is trying to determine exactly who the underserved  
45 communities are. We are, in general, both we and the council,  
46 NOAA and the council's, science-based organizations, and, quite  
47 rightly, trying to understand the implications and what does the  
48 science tell us. It's often hard to know about where these

1 underserved communities are, in part because of the history of  
2 overlooking them.

3  
4 We do have a social indicators working group, which provides a  
5 lot of parameters, and that's been in existence for about ten  
6 years, that could help us do that. We are currently working to  
7 develop a new Community and Environmental Justice explorer tool,  
8 built on the work of that working group, that will help us get  
9 some more answers about where are the underserved communities,  
10 and what makes them an underserved community. No community --  
11 Whenever you deal with communities and economics, it's never  
12 quite so simple. People aren't quite so easily categorized, but  
13 we need to understand the impacts of fishing and what we do here  
14 on those communities and on our regulatory structure.

15  
16 In terms of the budget, and this was the other issue that the  
17 council, at least in draft, has also raised, which we also  
18 recognize as well, and that strategy is extensive, and we  
19 currently do not have the resources to implement everything in  
20 the strategy. We have the resources to implement some, and some  
21 of it is just a different way of looking at it, which doesn't  
22 really cost anything, but, in order to fully realize the  
23 benefits of that strategy, we would need resources, and the  
24 President has asked for resources.

25  
26 The 2023 budget, President's budget, does reflect a commitment  
27 to these priorities and has requested dedicated equity and  
28 environmental justice funds, and there are some funds that would  
29 seem to be available in the Infrastructure Act, and so we are  
30 hopeful that, as we continue to work with Congress and the  
31 administration on funding, that there will be an ability to do  
32 some of the things in that strategy, should we finalize them,  
33 that are more expensive and that require a larger commitment.

34  
35 The one thing about the strategy, and I think it is out for  
36 comment through the end of this month, through August 31, and we  
37 do appreciate any comments that we get, not just from the  
38 councils, but from any of the stakeholders participating in this  
39 meeting, and we have translated much of it into -- I think the  
40 entire strategy has been translated into Spanish, and the  
41 summary has been translated into a number of other languages,  
42 and we are continuing to work on broader translations. We  
43 understand that that, in and of itself, is a barrier and creates  
44 equity and environmental justice issues, if we can't translate  
45 it into the other languages.

46  
47 Finally, I wanted to note that the Southeast Center is working  
48 on a multiyear survey designed to assess and track, over time,

1 the social and economic conditions of commercial fishing crews  
2 and hired captains in the Gulf and South Atlantic related to  
3 regulatory changes.

4  
5 This is also going to provide much needed data on crew  
6 demographics, fishing history, vessel information, fishing  
7 practices, payment methods, et cetera, and it's going to help us  
8 collectively design regulatory programs with equity and  
9 environmental justice in mind, and both the Region and the  
10 Center continue to try to develop a contact list for these  
11 underserved communities, to try to identify who they are, how to  
12 reach out to them. The participation is important, not just as  
13 decision makers, but in the process, and the first step into  
14 increasing participation is understanding exactly who these  
15 communities are, and that is difficult.

16  
17 Those are just a few high-level comments, Mr. Chairman, and I'm  
18 happy to take any questions, and I do apologize, again, for not  
19 being there in-person. It makes it more awkward, but I think we  
20 can try to make the best of it.

21  
22 **DR. FRAZER:** Thanks, Sam, for providing the overview. I am  
23 looking around, real quick, to see if we have any questions from  
24 the council. We've got one from Mr. Gill.

25  
26 **MR. BOB GILL:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Sam, for  
27 your comments, and I'm sorry that you couldn't be here, and  
28 certainly the quest to achieve fairness and equity is a noble  
29 one, and so it's hard to be negative, and nothing but  
30 supportive, of things like the EEJ initiative, albeit it's a  
31 difficult task, and one man's fairness is another man's  
32 unfairness, but how do you respond to the criticism, in this  
33 vein, that the agency, and the department, are hypocritical,  
34 given the Secretary's appointments to this council in the last  
35 two years and the resulting unbalance by sector and the obvious  
36 reaction of those that look at it that way, in terms of support  
37 for the EEJ initiative, and how would you react to that label of  
38 hypocrisy?

39  
40 **DR. FRAZER:** Go ahead, Sam.

41  
42 **MR. RAUCH:** Thank you for the question. You know, I think this  
43 gets back to what I said at the beginning. When you all, as  
44 council members, take your seat, you are representing not just  
45 where you came from, but we ask you to represent the broader  
46 Gulf.

47  
48 We understand that there is an issue, in terms of diversity, and

1 we have talked before about, equity aside, there is an issue of  
2 diversity and representation among council members, and we would  
3 like to see a broader suite of diversity, and that would help  
4 get to some of these issues.

5  
6 Diversity is not necessarily the same as equity and  
7 environmental justice, but, nevertheless, when we look at  
8 council members, you know, you are asked to a higher calling, to  
9 set aside sort of the sectoral politics that got you here and to  
10 try to do a broader effort.

11  
12 The issues that we are dealing with, in terms of this, expand  
13 beyond the different sectors, and, you know, I think, when the  
14 Magnuson Act is looking at balance between the sectors, the  
15 Magnuson Act is looking at broader issues than just equity. You  
16 can have completely inequitable situations with a perfectly  
17 balanced council, when you're still looking at the types of  
18 communities that are being affected by council action, and so we  
19 need to look at those things.

20  
21 I know that there are some issues in certain groups, in terms of  
22 the council appointments. The only thing I can say about that  
23 is the Secretary makes these decisions, and the Secretary has  
24 issues as to why and how they make those decisions, and I've  
25 dealt with a lot of Secretaries over time, and the one thing I  
26 can tell you is they have never told me why they choose to do  
27 what they do, and I don't expect them to start now, but I do  
28 look at these as two different things.

29  
30 When we're trying to figure out the effects, either the past or  
31 future effects, of our actions, we need to sit back and realize,  
32 and it doesn't matter whether we're recreational fishermen or  
33 commercial fishermen or fishermen from Florida or Mississippi or  
34 Alabama or Louisiana or Texas. We all need to sit back and look  
35 at what it is that we're trying to achieve, Gulf-wide, and how  
36 is it that what we've done has affected them in the past, and  
37 how is it that what we're about to do will affect them, and we  
38 can do that no matter where we came from, and that's what we're  
39 asking you to do.

40  
41 **DR. FRAZER:** Thanks, Sam, for the response. I am going to wait  
42 a second, to see if there are any other questions from the  
43 council. All right, Sam. I am not seeing any more questions.  
44 Again, I know your time is valuable, and thank you for taking a  
45 couple of minutes to share with us the priorities of the agency  
46 moving forward, and I look forward to seeing you in-person one  
47 time soon.

48

1 **MR. RAUCH:** All right. Thank you so much.  
2  
3 - - -