

GULF OF MEXICO FISHERY
MANAGEMENT COUNCIL
STATEMENT OF ORGANIZATION
PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES

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GULF OF MEXICO FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

STATEMENT OF ORGANIZATION, PRACTICES, AND PROCEDURES

Pursuant to Section 302(f)(6) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (hereinafter referred to as the Act) (18 U.S.C. § 1801 *et seq.*, Public Law 94-265, as amended) each Regional Fishery Management Council is responsible for determining its organization and prescribing its practices and procedures for carrying out its functions under the Act in accordance with such uniform standards as are prescribed by the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary). Further, each Council must publish and make available to the public a statement of its organization, practices, and procedures. As required by the Act, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) has prepared and is hereby publishing its revised Statement of Organization, Practices, and Procedures, originally published September 13, 1977 (42 FR, No. 177). The revised document is available at the Council Headquarters: 4107 W Spruce St, Suite 200, Tampa, Florida, 33607 and on the Council's website at www.gulfcouncil.org.

1.0 Council Functions and Responsibilities

In accordance with the requirements of the Act, the Council shall:

- A. Prepare and submit to the Secretary or their delegate a fishery management plan with respect to each fishery requiring conservation and management within the Council's geographic area of authority and such plan amendments as are necessary.
- B. Review and comment on applications for foreign fishing transmitted to the Council under a governing international fishery agreement by the Secretary of State under the terms of the Act.
- C. Prepare comments on any fishery management plan or amendments prepared by the Secretary which are transmitted to the Council under Section 304(c)(4) of the Act.
- D. Conduct public hearings at appropriate times and locations in the Council's membership area, to allow interested persons an opportunity to be heard in the development of fishery management plans and amendments, and with respect to the administration and implementation of the provisions of the Act. When conducting a hearing outside Council's usual jurisdiction, the Council will first consult with the Council in that area.
- E. Submit to the Secretary such periodic reports as the Council deems appropriate, and any other relevant report which may be requested by the Secretary.
- F. Review on a continuing basis, and revise as appropriate, the assessments and specifications contained in each fishery management plan for each fishery within its geographical area with regard to:
 - (1) The present and probable future condition of the fishery;

- (2) The maximum sustainable yield from the fishery;
 - (3) The optimum yield from the fishery;
 - (4) The capacity and the extent to which fishing vessels of the United States will harvest the optimum yield on an annual basis;
 - (5) The portion of such optimum yield on an annual basis which will not be harvested by fishing vessels of the United States and can be made available for foreign fishing.
- G. Develop annual catch limits for each of its managed fisheries that may not exceed the fishing level recommendations established by mechanisms and processes under the Act.
- H. Develop multi-year research priorities for fisheries, fisheries interactions, habitats, and other areas of research that are necessary for management purposes, in the manner prescribed in the Act.
- I. Conduct any other activities which are required by or provided for in the Act or which are necessary and appropriate to the foregoing functions.

The Council expects to participate in international negotiations concerning any fishery matters under the cognizance of the Council. The Council also expects to be consulted during preliminary discussions leading to U.S. positions on international fishery matters, including the allocation of fishery resources to other nations within its area of authority.

2.0 Council Organization

2.1 Council Composition and Jurisdiction

The Council shall have a total of 17 voting members, and four nonvoting members, appointed pursuant to provisions of the Act.

The geographical area of authority of the Council includes the federal waters off of the states of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida; and the Council has authority over the fisheries in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Gulf of Mexico seaward of such states.

2.1.1 Voting Members

Eleven of the voting members (at least one of whom shall be appointed from each state) shall be appointed by the Secretary from a list of qualified individuals submitted by the governor of each applicable constituent state.

The remaining six voting Council members shall be the principal state official, who must be a full-time employee of the state agency, with marine fishery management responsibility and expertise in each of the five constituent states, as designated by the governors of the states or the

designee of such official; and the Regional Administrator, Southeast Region, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), or their designee.

2.1.2 Non-Voting Members

The non-voting members of the Council shall be:

- (a) The Regional Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for the Council's geographical area or their designee;
- (b) The Commander or designee of the Coast Guard Districts as designated by the Commandant of the Coast Guard;
- (c) The Executive Director of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) or their designee;
- (d) One representative of the Department of State designated for such purpose by the Secretary of State, or their designee.

Non-voting members of the Council may serve on committees of the Council and may serve as chairpersons of committees and, as members of the committee, may initiate and second motions, as well as vote on matters that pertain to the committee. At meetings of the Council, non-voting members may neither initiate or second motions, nor vote on matters that may be classified as business of the Council. They may, however, participate fully in discussions of such matters.

2.2 Oath of Office

As trustees of the nation's fishery resources, all voting members appointed to the Council must take the following oath of office: "I, [name of the person taking oath], as a duly appointed member of a Regional Fishery Management Council established under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, hereby promise to conserve and manage the living marine resources of the United States of America by carrying out the business of the Council for the greatest overall benefit of the Nation. I recognize my responsibility to serve as a knowledgeable and experienced trustee of the Nation's marine fisheries resources, being careful to balance competing private or regional interests, and always aware and protective of the public interest in those resources. I commit myself to uphold the provisions, standards, and requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and other applicable law, and shall conduct myself at all times according to the rules of conduct prescribed by the Secretary of Commerce. This oath is given freely and without mental reservation or purpose of evasion."

2.3 Terms of Council Members, Removal, and Council Officers

2.3.1 Term of Appointment -- Voting Members

Voting members shall be appointed for a term of three years. Vacancy appointments shall be for the remainder of the unexpired term of the vacancy. No member may serve more than three consecutive terms. Any term in which an individual was appointed to replace a member who left office during the term shall not be counted in determining the number of consecutive terms served by that Council member.

2.3.2 Removal

Council members appointed by the Secretary may be removed from office in accordance with Section 302(b)(6) of the Act (see 50 CFR § 600.230 for the details of this process).

2.3.3 Officers

The Council elects during the first meeting each year after the date upon which Council members are appointed from among the voting members, by majority vote of the voting members present and voting, a Council Chair who shall serve a term not to exceed one year unless sooner replaced, and a Council Vice Chair who shall serve for a one-year term ending when a successor has been duly elected, unless sooner replaced. Such election shall usually be the last order of business at said meeting. The Chair and the Vice Chair can serve no more than two consecutive terms.

The Chair, or in the Chair's absence the Vice Chair, of the Council has authority to convene and adjourn meetings and public hearings and designate members of the Council, to attend meetings and public hearings. The Chair will control meetings and hearings by recognizing speakers, establishing the order of business, and designating members of the Council and its advisory bodies as members of committees and working groups. The Chair or Vice Chair may, in order to create a quorum, serve as an ex-officio voting member of any of the Council's committees of which he/she is not already a member.

It shall be the policy that in the absence of any Committee's Chair and Vice Chair, the Council Chair shall either preside and exercise the duties of that office as herein provided or appoint a member of the Committee to serve as interim Chair. If the Council Chair is also absent, then the Council Vice-Chair will preside and exercise the duties of that office as herein provided. Individuals are elected or appointed to the offices of the Council Chair and Council Vice-Chair even though they may be state officials. Alternate representatives (designee or principal) do not assume the offices of Council Chair or Council Vice Chair, but may participate as members of the committees and act as Committee Chair or Committee Vice Chair.

2.4 Designees

The Act authorizes only the principal state officials, the Regional Administrator, and the nonvoting members to designate individuals to attend Council meetings in their absence. The Chair of the Council and NMFS Regional Administrator must be notified in writing who will serve as designee at least 48 hours before the individual may vote on any issue before the Council. The written appointment must include, the name, address, and position of the individual designated. A designee may not name another designee. However, such officials may

submit to the Chair, in advance, a list of several individuals who may act as designee, provided that the list designates who would serve if more than one designee is in attendance. Such designees must be a resident of the state, and be knowledgeable and experienced in the fishery resources of the geographic area of concern to the Council.

2.5 Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)

The Council has established a Standing SSC and Special SSCs for individual management plans or areas of expertise to provide expert scientific and technical advice to the Council. The SSC shall review and comment on the scientific adequacy of such statistical, biological, economic, social, and other scientific information as is relevant to the Council's development and amendment of any fishery management plan.

During the appointment process of the Standing SSC, the Council shall appoint no more than 21 individuals. The Standing SSC will include 8 stock assessment or quantitative biologists / ecologists. The remaining 13 appointees shall include up to 4 economists and up to 4 anthropologists / social scientists, and 5 other scientists. Each member will have demonstrable expertise in one of the above categories. Each Special SSC will be comprised of no more than 3 members, and none of those three shall be a member of the Standing SSC or another Special SSC. When a Special SSC meets with the Standing SSC, members of the combined committees will vote as a whole committee.

Council members or their designees may not simultaneously serve on the Council and an SSC.

2.5.1 Objectives and Duties

The SSC shall provide the Council with ongoing scientific advice for fishery management decisions, including recommendations for preventing overfishing and achieving rebuilding targets, and reviews of reports on stock status and health, by-catch, habitat status, social and economic impacts of management measures, and sustainability of fishing practices. The SSC may also recommend priorities for future research needs.

The Standing SSC and one or more Special SSCs may meet as a single body (SSC) to deliberate and advise on appropriate fishery management units. For each managed stock or assemblage of stocks, the SSC shall recommend an acceptable biological catch (ABC) and overfishing limit (OFL) that accounts for scientific uncertainty. The SSC may also comment on the scientific appropriateness and social and economic consequences of various alternatives for accountability measures (AMs) to be implemented if annual catch limits (ACLs) are exceeded.

Multi-Year Research Priorities

The SSC shall develop multi-year research priorities for fisheries, fisheries interactions, habitats, and other areas of research that are necessary for management purposes, that shall: (a) establish priorities for 5-year periods, and (b) be updated as necessary. The Council may revise the plan and will submit it to the Secretary and the regional science centers of NMFS for their consideration in developing research priorities and budgets for the region of the Council.

Review of FMPs, Amendments, and Framework Procedure Actions

The SSC will advise the Council, as requested on the adequacy of scientific information and supporting analyses for proposed management measures and alternatives in FMPs and amendments, including any environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA), regulatory impact review (RIR), and initial regulatory flexibility analysis (IRFA). The SSC will also provide a determination of whether these are consistent with the best scientific information available, and may provide advice as to the effectiveness of the measures in achieving the objectives of the FMP or amendment. The current document *Southeast Region Framework for Determining that Fishery Conservation and Management Measures are Based on the Best Scientific Information Available* is available on the NOAA website here:

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/2023-12/BSIA-framework-for-the-Southeast-Region-Final.pdf>

The emphasis of the SSC will be on evaluating scientific data and rationale on which the management measures are based, rather than selecting management measures. They will assess the appropriateness of the problem statements and adequacy of the objectives in solving the problems, and may suggest additional or revised problems, objectives, and management measures and may indicate which of the measures are most effective in achieving the objectives.

The SSC will also advise the Council on the adequacy of scientific information and supporting analyses in the stock assessment update, whether these are consistent with the best scientific information available, related scientific documents, and the content of stock assessment reports. The OFL and ABC advice from the SSC will be the basis for the Council to set ACLs and AMs. The Council may also set annual catch targets below ACL to further account for management uncertainty.

2.5.2 Members and Chair

Members appointed by the Councils to the SSCs shall be Federal employees, State employees, academicians, or independent experts and shall have strong scientific or technical credentials, and relevant professional experience.

Members and officers of the SSC shall be appointed for a period of three years without term limits and may be reappointed at the pleasure of the Council. Membership on an SSC is determined by the Council during a closed session of its Council meeting and is based on the application provided by the applicant as well as the Council members' knowledge of the applicant. Consideration for appointment may include the appropriate interest, experience, and past performance as well as other factors such as a record of fishery violations. SSC members serve at the pleasure of the Council and may be removed at any time. Appointment of new members may be made during any Council meeting.

Each member of the SSC shall be treated as an affected individual for purposes of financial interest disclosure and recusal provisions for SSC members as specified in the Act. Statements of Financial Interest (SOFI) disclosures for SSC members will be reviewed annually, by the Council prior to appointment, and when updated by an SSC member reporting any substantial

changes in financial interest. SOFI disclosures will be kept on file by the Regional Administrator.

A Chair and Vice Chair for the Standing SSC shall be elected by its members or may be designated by the Council at its discretion from the membership of the Standing SSC. The Chair or Vice Chair shall preside when the SSC is convened and will be responsible for summarizing its recommendations when advice is requested by the Council.

2.5.3 Administrative Provisions

The SSC Chair or their designee will, at the request of the Council Chair, attend Council meetings to report on SSC recommendations and rationale. (The SSC should attend and meet with the Council to the extent practicable.)

The procedural guidelines of Section 302(i)(2) of the Act (as amended) shall apply to the conduct of business at the meetings of the Council, advisory panels (APs), and SSCs. The Council's SSCs will meet with the approval of the Executive Director.

2.5.4 Subcommittees/Working Groups

The Council may form subcommittees of the SSC or working groups that include SSC participation, as needed, to provide recommendations for management consistent with the Act and other applicable federal laws and regulations. These panels may also be called upon to review other relevant information and provide recommendations to the SSC or Council, as requested.

2.6 Advisory Panels (APs)/Fishing Industry Advisory Committees (FIACs)

The Council has established APs, which serve as fishing industry advisory committees, and will form such panels as it deems necessary or appropriate to assist in carrying out assigned functions under the law. An AP shall normally be established for each fishery management unit identified by the Council.

2.6.1 Objectives and Duties

For each FMP or amendment under consideration, the APs provide advice concerning the recommended optimum yield (OY), the management measures and allocations under consideration, the supporting documentation to any regulatory action, management objectives, and any other advice the APs deem appropriate or as required by the Council.

2.6.2 Members and Chair

The APs shall generally be composed of members who are residents of the five-state geographical area. Each AP shall be selected so as to provide for geographical, commercial, recreational, marketing, or other interests in accordance with functions and purposes of the panel with such membership established in a manner that provides fair representation to commercial

and recreational fishing interests. Membership on an AP is determined by the Council during a closed session of its Council meetings and is based on the application provided by the applicant as well as the Council members' knowledge of the applicant. Consideration for appointment may include the appropriate interest, experience, and past performance as well as other factors such as a record of fishery violations. AP members serve at the pleasure of the Council and may be removed at any time without cause. Outgoing Council members may request to be placed on an AP of their choice at the discretion of the Chair and Vice Chair until the time of reappointment. When the AP term has expired, the outgoing Council member must apply for appointment through the regular appointment process.

No person may serve on more than two APs at any one time; however, service on any Ad Hoc or Special AP, as designated by the Council, will not be counted in the limitation to serving on more than two APs at the same time. Each AP shall be limited to a membership of 18 persons unless otherwise specified by the Council.

A Chair and Vice Chair for each AP shall be elected by members of the AP or may be designated by the Council at its discretion. The Chair or Vice Chair shall preside at each AP meeting. The Council may designate one or more members to meet with each AP.

Members and officers of the APs shall be appointed by the Council for a period of three years without term limits and may be removed or reappointed at the pleasure of the Council. Appointment of new members may be made during any Council session.

The presence of a fishing violation is an important aspect in consideration of an AP appointment. The Council has determined: 1) Applicable fishing violations include only violations of federally managed species in either State or Federal waters, regardless of the penalty (i.e., written warning, civil fine, criminal conviction); 2) Individuals are ineligible to serve on an AP within three years of the final finding of liability through adjudication, settlement, or default. A finding of liability is final after any applicable appeal period expires; and, 3) Vessel owners shall not automatically be held responsible for violations by a crew member when the owner is not present. If an individual who is currently serving on an AP is found to have a fishing violation that meets the preceding criteria, subsequent to their appointment, the decision to maintain or remove the individual from the AP is at the Council's discretion.

2.6.3 Administrative Provisions

The procedural guidelines of Section 302(I) (2) of the Act (as amended) shall apply to the conduct of business at the meetings of the Council, APs, technical committees, and SSCs. The Council's APs will meet with the approval of the Council Chair.

2.7 Technical Committees

Technical committees are special advisory panels made up of academics, agency, and industry personnel with expertise in relevant subject matter that can advise and assist the Council by reviewing relevant subject matter and providing recommendations.

2.7.1 Outreach and Education Technical Committee

The Outreach and Education Technical Committee consists of fifteen people. Membership includes six communication or education and outreach staff (i.e., one from each of the five Gulf States Marine Resource Departments and one from NOAA Fisheries) assigned by the Council representative of each agency. Other members include four Sea Grant agents (i.e., one from each Gulf region), four non-governmental organization representatives, and one media representative. Members are appointed jointly by the Executive Director and Council Chair.

The use of proxy attendees is allowed. The Executive Director should be informed at least two weeks prior to the scheduled meeting via a letter if a proxy is attending a meeting.

2.7.2 Law Enforcement Technical Committee (LETC)

The Law Enforcement Technical Committee (LETC) consists of nine people. Membership includes five representatives from each agency responsible for enforcement of marine fishery laws (i.e., one from each of the five Gulf states), one member of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service for each region (i.e., two regions in the Gulf jurisdiction), one member from the Office of Law Enforcement of any region charged with jurisdiction in the Federal waters of the Gulf, and one member of the Federal agency General Counsel Enforcement Section. The Executive Director should be informed in writing at least two weeks prior to a scheduled meeting of membership changes.

Federal and state members of the LETC may have designees represent them at meetings. The Executive Director should be informed at least two weeks prior to a scheduled meeting in writing, such as an email, of any change in designee membership, as well as if the designee will be attending the meeting.

2.7.3 Ecosystem Technical Committee

The Ecosystem Technical Committee consists of no more than twelve people. Membership includes three staff from NMFS, one of which is from the Atlantic HMS division, five members (with economic, social, or biological/ecological expertise) from the SSC, and up to four other stakeholder representatives. Members are appointed jointly by the Executive Director and Council Chair.

2.8 Council Committees

Members and officers of the committees are appointed by the Council from nominations by the Council Chair.

Committees will report to the Council and the convened Council will take action on the committee recommendations. No action of any committee is final without the approval of the Council, except as provided for under 2.7.4.(d).

While certain Council members are nonvoting members of the Council, they may vote when participating as members of a standing committee in making non-binding recommendations to the Council.

The Council Chair may designate one or more members to meet with the SSC as needed.

The Council Chair may appoint such ad hoc or special committees, with concurrence of the Council, as are needed to conduct the orderly business of the Council. Such ad hoc committees cease to exist after having completed the business assigned to them.

2.8.1 Council Appointments to Outside Committees

The Chair, with Council approval, shall appoint members as needed to the following committees:

- International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) Advisory Committee
- Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) Workshop Panelists (In conjunction with the Executive Director)
- National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Advisory Panel
- Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP)
- Coral Reef Task Force (Working Committees)
- Artificial Reef Subcommittee of the Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC)

The Chair, with Council approval, shall also appoint members to other committees or advisory groups as necessary and add the names to this list.

2.8.2 Standing Committees

The following listed committees, and other committees which the Council may appoint, are considered the standing committees of the Council:

Administrative Committees:

Administrative/Budget
Data Collection
Gulf SEDAR
Habitat Protection and Restoration
Law Enforcement
Outreach and Education
Personnel
Retirement Trustees

Fishery Management Committees:

Coastal Migratory Pelagics (Mackerel)

Coral
Ecosystem
Migratory Species (Billfish, Swordfish, Shark, Tuna)
Red Drum
Reef Fish
Shrimp
Spiny Lobster
Sustainable Fisheries
Other Management Committees Approved by the Council

Lists of committee members are available on the Council website and from the Council office.

2.8.3 Administrative Committee Functions

(a) Administrative/Budget:

The Administrative/Budget Committee, with assistance from the Executive Director and Administrative Officer, develops administrative and fiscal policy and provides oversight regarding the annual and 5-year budgets, the Statement of Organization, Practices and Procedures (SOPPs), the Administrative Handbook, amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act and other matters relevant to Council policies and operational procedures.

(b) Data Collection:

The Data Collection Committee reviews and advises the Council on the data requirements for managing each fishery, the statistical methodology needed, and on all issues related to data and data collection.

(c) Gulf SEDAR:

The Gulf SEDAR Committee is comprised of the Council Chair and the Coastal Migratory Pelagics, Red Drum, Sustainable Fisheries, and Reef Fish Management Committee Chairs. This committee reviews and advises on SEDAR stock assessment priorities.

(d) Habitat Protection and Restoration:

The Habitat Protection and Restoration Committee (HPRC) assures in each fishery management plan that habitat significant to the fishery is adequately defined and that recommendations are included in the plan for changes in habitat policies of responsible agencies. The Committee may make recommendations concerning any activity undertaken, or proposed to be undertaken, by any state or federal agency that may affect the habitat of a fishery resource under its jurisdiction, and shall make recommendations concerning any such activity that is likely to substantially affect the habitat of an anadromous fishery resource under its jurisdiction. The Committee also may review and comment on artificial reef programs and their effects on fishery resources.

If time or meeting constraints do not allow the Council to develop a letter of comments on a project, the HPC shall develop comments by meeting or conference call meeting. If time constraints would not allow such a meeting, the staff, in consultation with the HPC Chair, Council Chair, and Executive Director, will develop a draft letter of Council comments and provide copies to the HPC and all Council members for review. The final letter that states the committee is acting on behalf of the Council will be signed by the Council Chair and communicated to the appropriate agency, with copies concurrently provided to Council members, NMFS, and appropriate Habitat AP(s).

(e) Law Enforcement:

The Law Enforcement Committee reviews, monitors, and makes recommendations on law enforcement requirements of plans and regulations. It also reviews the policy recommendations of the Law Enforcement AP and other law enforcement issues.

(f) Outreach and Education:

To help further the Council communications goal by aiding in the long-term planning of communications projects, which includes outreach and education, and setting the strategic direction, priorities, and focus of the communication efforts undertaken by the Council.

(g) Personnel:

The Personnel Committee, with the assistance of the Executive Director, develops personnel policy and assists with other personnel matters.

(h) Retirement Plan Trustees:

The retirement plan trustees are charged with exercising discretionary authority over the management or disposition of the Council's employee 401K plan's assets and with providing the fiduciary responsibilities of administering the plan in a manner that is in the best interest of the plan's participants. The Trustees will be the Council Chair, Council Vice Chair, Chairperson of the Administrative/Budget Committee and the Executive Director.

2.8.4 Fishery Management Committee Functions

Each fishery management committee reviews recommendations and provides liaison between the appropriate APs, and SSC and the Council; assists panels in assigned tasks; monitors work of each panel; and monitors work of contractors and staff in the development and drafting of fishery management plans.

3.0 Council Meetings

The Council will meet at the call of the Council Chair or upon request of a majority of its voting members. Meetings will ordinarily be held in plenary sessions, but may be in subgroups or in individual sessions.

The presiding officer at any Council meeting will be the Council Chair, Council Vice Chair, or in their absences, a member of the Council elected by the voting members present to serve as temporary Chair.

The Council prefers in-person meetings with the ability to freely discuss and exchange information and interact with the public. However, health, budgetary, and/or time constraints may require virtual participation of a Council member when an in-person Council meeting is held. Therefore, Council members must be physically present at Council meetings in order to present a motion or vote, unless approved to do so remotely by a majority decision of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, and Executive Director.

All participants are to keep electronic devices on silent or vibrating mode during Council meetings.

The procedural guidelines of Section 302(i)(2) of the Act (as amended) shall apply to the conduct of business at the meetings of the Council, APs, and SSCs.

3.1 Notice – Regular and Emergency Meetings

Timely public notice of each regular and each emergency meeting of the Council, SSC and AP, including time, place, and agenda of the meeting, shall be published in the Federal Register, and appropriate news media notice given to local newspapers in the major fishing ports of the Council region (and in other major fishing ports having a direct interest in the affected fishery). Such notice may be given by other means which will result in wide publicity. Notice of each emergency meeting must be promptly announced through the appropriate news media. If notice of an emergency meeting is not published prior to the meeting, it should be published in the Federal Register as soon as possible after the meeting, including notification of NMFS (50 CFR § 600.135).

The Council shall ensure that all public meetings are accessible to persons with disabilities, and that the public can make timely requests for language interpreters or other auxiliary aids at public meetings. Anyone needing a special accommodation to attend and participate in a Council-hosted meeting must contact the Council office 10 days before the scheduled meeting. Guidance addressing disability-related accommodations is found at Department Administrative Order (DAO) 209-8, Access for People with Disabilities to Meetings and Other Group Events. (https://www.osec.doc.gov/opog/dmp/daos/dao209_8.html)

3.1.1 Agendas

A suggested agenda will be prepared for each Council meeting by the Executive Director with the approval of the Council Chair. Agenda items may be recommended to the Executive Director by other Council members and by staff members. The published agenda of the meeting may not be modified to include additional matters for Council action without public notice or within 14 days prior to the meeting date, unless such modification is to address an emergency action under Section 305(c), in which case public notice shall be given immediately.

3.2 Conduct of Meetings

3.2.1 Written Statement and Oral Testimony

Meetings will be conducted in a manner to permit the greatest possible participation by all Council members and the public. As per MSA Section 302(i)(2)(D), “Interested persons shall be permitted to present oral or written statements regarding matters on the agenda at meetings. All written information submitted to a Council by an interested person shall include a statement of the source and date of such information. Any oral or written statement shall include a brief description of the background and interests of the person in the subject of the oral or written statement.” The Council follows this policy at all of its publicly noticed meetings, including those of its advisory committees.

Oral or written communications provided to the Council, its members, or its staff that relate to matters within the Council’s purview are public in nature. All written comments will be posted on the Council’s website for viewing by Council members and the public. Knowingly and willfully submitting false information to the Council is a violation of Federal Law (MSA § 307(1)(I)).

Materials submitted to Council members or staff for distribution prior to or during a Council meeting will be treated as all other written comments and will be posted to the website and will be maintained by the Council as part of the permanent record.

3.2.2 Quorum and Roll Call Voting

A majority of voting members constitutes a quorum (MSA § 302(e)(1)).

Decisions of the Council are by majority vote of the voting members present and voting (except for proposed removal of Council members which requires an affirmative vote by two-thirds of the members). An abstention does not affect the unanimity of a vote.

A roll call vote will be held on any motion before the Council at the request of any voting member. Votes for the approval of management plans or plan amendments and other roll call votes are recorded by name of Council member and how they voted. A vote may not be taken until the motion before the Council is recorded in written form visible to each Council member and the public present.

Decisions by consensus are permitted except where the issue is Council approval of a/an:

- (a) FMP;
- (b) Amendment to a FMP;
- (c) Proposed regulation;
- (d) Secretarial FMP or amendment; and
- (e) Council finding that an emergency exists involving any fishery.

3.2.3 Approval or Amendment of Fishery Management Plan and Finding of Fishery Emergency

A vote is required for Council approval or amendment of a fishery management plan (including any proposed regulations), a Council finding that an emergency exists involving any fishery, or Council comments to the Secretary on fishery management plans developed by the Secretary. A final vote may not be taken until the motion before the Council is recorded in written form, visible to each Council member present and the public. The written motion, as voted on, must be preserved as part of the record or minutes of the meeting. For a vote on a Council finding that an emergency exists in a fishery, the exact number of votes (for, against, and abstaining) must be preserved as part of the record of the meeting.

3.2.4 Procedure for Proposed Regulations

The Council shall prepare any proposed regulations which it deems necessary to carry out any FMP or any amendment to an FMP, which is prepared by it. Such proposed regulations shall be submitted to the Secretary together with such plan or amendment, for action by the Secretary pursuant to Sections 304 and 305 of the Act. The Council delegates the authority to the Chair of the Council to review any editorial changes to the regulations between now and the time they are submitted to the Secretary and deem those changes as necessary and appropriate.

3.2.5 Parliamentary Procedure; Consensus

Meetings will generally be conducted in accordance with Roberts Rules of Order, Newly Revised unless otherwise specified in the SOPPs.

3.2.6 Dissenting Votes; Minority Written Statement

Voting members of the Council who disagree with the majority on any issue to be submitted to the Secretary, including principal state officials raising federalism issues, may submit a written statement (minority report) of their reasons for dissent. If any Council member elects to file a minority report, it should be submitted to NMFS at the same time as that of the majority.

3.2.7 Consideration of Information from Interested Parties

Interested persons shall be permitted to present oral or written statements regarding matters on the agenda at all publicly noticed meetings of the Council or any of its advisory bodies. All written information submitted to a Council by an interested person shall include a statement of the source and date of such information. Any oral, written, or email statement shall include a brief description of the background and interests of the person in the subject of the oral or written statement.

It is the policy of the Council to afford interested parties an opportunity to review and respond to new data or other information which may be used by the Council as a basis for its management decisions. For purposes of this policy, this new information includes the technical data and analyses developed and compiled in printed, unpublished form by NMFS, state agencies or

universities, Council staff, or other entities associated with the Council, which has not previously been distributed to the public, and which is used in the decision-making process. The Council will, through its news releases, notify the public of the availability of new information. Examples of such new information include, but are not to be limited to, stock assessments, scientific assessment group reports, and staff analyses of alternative management strategies. Copies of such documents will be distributed, as soon as available, to Sea Grant extension agents and affected fishery associations for distribution to the public. Members of the public may, by contacting the Council Public Information Officer, be included on a mailing list to receive such documents for a specific fishery.

Under circumstances beyond the Council's control, new information developed by NMFS, state agencies or universities, Council staff, or other entities associated with the Council may not be available in time for distribution before the Council meeting, and may be presented to the appropriate management committee at the meeting where final action is to be taken. In this situation, the public shall be advised at the earliest possible time to attend the committee session to receive this information. In addition, the relevant committee session shall be scheduled at the earliest available time during the committee meetings. The Council's consideration and final action on that item shall be scheduled as late as possible on the Council agenda in order to allow the maximum time for review and response by all interested parties.

It is also the policy of the Council to consider, and to allow other interested members of the public to consider, new information prepared and offered by interested members of the public before it takes final action, if this new information is provided to the Council as specified herein. For purposes of this policy, this new information consists of data and analyses developed by or for that person which has not been submitted previously to the Council.

Responses to the new information by interested members of the public may be through testimony at public hearings or at the Council session where final action will be taken, or by submitting written statements at the public hearings or to the Council office. Summaries of oral testimony from hearings and the written statements, if received in the Council office at least seven days before the first day of the Council meeting, will be posted on the Council's website.

New information prepared by the public may be provided to the Council in the same manner as responses to any other new information. However, members of the public are encouraged to provide their new information either by submitting documents at a public hearing or by mail to the Council office at least fourteen days in advance of the Council meeting so that it can be included in the briefing book. New information submitted by NMFS, state agencies or universities, Council staff, or other entities associated with the Council at least fourteen days in advance of the Council meeting will also be included in the briefing book. This assures that the appropriate committee and Council members will have an opportunity to read the new information. New information received in the Council office between five and fourteen days before the meeting will be posted on the Council website.

Members of the public should bring at least 40 copies of any new information, not previously submitted, to the meeting to be passed out to Council members and members of the public at or before the time testimony before the Council is scheduled on the agenda item to which the new

information relates. However, such persons should be aware that under the Council's policy on public testimony the Council Chair may limit the time allowed for each presentation consistent with the total time available and the number of persons registered to testify.

If a resource problem warrants consideration of emergency action or the most expedient action possible, then the Council's distribution of new information under the policy shall be consistent with the urgency of the action. New information will not, however, be accepted after the close of public testimony.

3.3 Council and Committee Meeting Records

Detailed minutes, except for any closed session, will be kept of each meeting. The minutes, records and other documents which were made available to or prepared for or by the Council, a committee, or panel incident to the meeting shall be available on the Council's website or for public inspection and copying at the office of the Council, except for minutes and records of closed sessions. Such available minutes and records will be on the Council website (50 CFR § 600.150(b)) and, upon request, distributed to the public.

Minutes include a record of persons present and their organizational affiliations when available; a complete and accurate description of matters discussed and conclusions reached; and certification of accuracy by the Chairperson of the Council, SSC, or AP as appropriate.

3.4 Closed Meetings

The Council shall close its meeting, or portion thereof, and the meetings, or portion thereof, of the SSCs or APs which concern matters or information that bears a national security classification and may close such meetings, or portion thereof, that concerns matters, or information pertaining to national security, employment (personnel) matters including appointment of members of scientific or fishery advisory groups, briefings on litigation, the public decorum, or medical condition of members of the Council or members of the advisory groups, taking into consideration the privacy interests of individuals that will be discussed. Actions that affect the public, although based on discussions in closed meetings, must be taken in public. Notice of such closed meeting, or portion thereof, shall be provided for as per MSA Section 302(i)(3)(A) & (B) and 50 CFR § 600.135, except that any brief closure of a portion of a meeting may be held, not to exceed 2 hours, with the concurrence of the NOAA General Counsel, without such notice to discuss employment (personnel) matters or other internal administrative matters.

3.5 Frequency and Duration

The Council will meet in plenary session at least four times per calendar year. The duration of each meeting will vary according to need.

3.6 Location

The Council meetings will ordinarily be held within the five-state geographical area. However, if the Council determines that the best interests of the work of the Council, its committees, advisory groups or panels, in joint management actions with other Councils, will be better served, meetings may be held outside of the five-state area, particularly in any of the constituent states affected by a joint management plan. Public access will be given primary consideration in meeting plans. The Council Chair with input from staff will select the meeting sites for the Council with the understanding that members are given adequate advance notice.

The Council prefers holding in-person meetings; however, national emergencies, health pandemics, natural catastrophes, budgetary, and time sensitive issues may require the use of remote meeting technologies. In these rare cases, the Council is prepared to hold virtual meetings using alternative technologies for committee and Council meetings. Members of the public will be given the opportunity to provide written and/or verbal comments during virtual meetings of the full Council.

3.7 Public Hearings/Scoping Meetings

3.7.1 Public Participation/Location

The Council shall conduct public hearings at appropriate times and in appropriate geographic locations as determined by the Council so as to allow all interested persons an opportunity to be heard in the development of FMPs and amendments thereto, and to receive input with regard to other matters of concern to the Council with respect to its mission and the administration and implementation of the provisions of the Act. Interested parties may appear in person and/or submit comments in electronic or written form to the Council.

3.7.2 Hearing Notices

Hearing notices will be prepared and issued in the same manner as meeting notices. In addition, local media will be used to publicize meetings so as to maximize public awareness.

3.7.3 Council Hearing Representatives

When it is determined by the Council that a hearing is appropriate, the Council Chair will designate at least one member of the Council to officiate. The designated official in charge will provide for maximum participation and expression of viewpoints by all those present. All meetings will be conducted in an orderly and professional manner.

3.7.4 Records of Participants/Views

Records of the participants and their views, whether orally or written, will be made available to the Council and retained as official Council records.

3.8 Council Member Compensation

Council members whose eligibility for compensation has been established in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Act) and NOAA guidelines will be paid on a contract basis without deductions being made for Social Security or federal and state income taxes. The level of compensation for authorized Council members shall be as established in accordance with Section 302(d) of the Act and the Federal rule (50 CFR § 600.245).

Compensation will be paid to eligible Council members for time spent in the performance of official duties for the Council and as authorized by the Council or the Council Chair. Payment will be made for a full day's pay whether the duties performed are in excess of or less than eight hours a day for physical attendance at authorized meetings. Payment for authorized participation in conference calls, webinars, or any other electronic meeting that does not require the member to be physically present to participate will be paid at the half-day rate if the electronic meeting is less than four hours. Payment for participation in an electronic meeting that has a duration of four hours or more will be paid at the full day's pay rate. The time is compensable where the individual member is required to expend a significant private effort which substantially disrupts the daily routine to the extent that a work day is lost to the member. "Homework" time in preparation for formal Council meetings is not compensable. Non-government Council members receive compensation for:

- A. Days spent in actual attendance at a meeting of the Council or jointly with another Council.
- B. Travel on the day preceding or following a scheduled meeting that precluded the member from conducting their normal business on the day in question.
- C. Meetings of standing committees of the Council if approved in advance by the Chair.
- D. Individual member meeting with scientific and technical advisors when approved in advance by the Chair and a substantial portion of any day is needed.
- E. Conducting or attending hearings when authorized in advance by the Chair.
- F. Other meetings involving Council business when approved in advance by the Chair.

3.9 Stipends

Subject to the availability of appropriations, the Secretary of Commerce will pay a stipend per meeting day attended to members of the SSC who are not state marine fisheries employees or federal employees. Payment will be made for a full day's pay whether the duties performed are in excess of or less than eight hours a day for physical attendance at authorized meetings. Payment for authorized participation in conference calls, webinars, or any other electronic meeting that does not require the member to be physically present to participate will be paid at the half-day rate if the electronic meeting is less than four hours. Payment for participation in an electronic meeting that has a duration of four hours or more will be paid at the full day's pay rate. Stipends will be paid to eligible members for attendance at meetings of the SSC, SEDAR,

and other meetings to represent the Council SSC, and to give presentations to the Council on behalf of the SSC.

4.0 Employment Practices

4.1 Staffing

Subject to the Council's practices and procedures and according to personnel authority provided by the Secretary, the Council may establish positions, recruit, hire, compensate, and dismiss staff deemed necessary to carrying out the decisions and desires of the Council. Each position must be justified during the budget process described in 2 CFR Part 215, or prior to filling a new position established during the course of the cooperative agreement year. The Council Executive Director has the responsibility to prepare lists of eligible candidates, as appropriate, for each position. The Council has authorized the Executive Director, in consultation with the Council Chair, to recruit, hire, compensate, and dismiss all permanent, probationary, and temporary personnel. In the absence of the Executive Director, routine daily activities will be handled by the Deputy Executive Director, and in the absence of both the Executive Director and the Deputy Executive Director, routine daily activities will be handled by the Administrative Officer. The Council, when it deems appropriate and after notification to NOAA Office of General Counsel, may employ on a temporary basis a legal counsel to advise it on matters of importance to the Council consistent with 50 CFR § 600.120.

A file for each employee containing appointment information, security information, biographical data and other official documentation will be maintained by the Executive Director under security and safeguard conditions required of files subject to the Privacy Act. Except as otherwise provided for by law, each employee may have access to their individual file; but files are otherwise available to others only pursuant to the Privacy Act and Freedom of Information Act in consultation with NOAA legal counsel.

4.1.1 Staff Functions

Staff positions and functions are listed in Appendix A of the Council's Administrative Handbook. Other positions may be authorized as deemed necessary by the Council. Experts, consultants, and temporary personnel may be employed to provide additional Council staff support as required. Position descriptions for the Executive Director and for each staff member are available at the Council Headquarters in Tampa, Florida.

4.2 Experts and Consultants

Experts, consultants, and temporary personnel may be employed to provide additional Council staff support as required.

4.3 Detail of Government Employees

Authority is provided for the temporary transfer of state, local, and federal government employees to the Council staff. The Council may authorize requests for such personnel.

4.4 Personnel Actions

Dismissal for permanent employees will be made for misconduct, unsatisfactory performance, and/or lack of funds. Dismissal for probationary employees may be for any cause. In the event of dismissal for lack of funds, a reasonable notice will be given to the permanent employee. New employees shall be subject to a probationary period of a minimum of six months, which may be extended up to 12 (twelve) months, during which the individual's fitness for continued employment shall be evaluated. Annual pay rates for staff positions shall be based on 5 U.S.C. § 5332.

4.5 Salary and Wages

In setting rates of pay for Council staff, the principle of equal pay for equal work shall be followed. Variations in basic rates of pay shall be in proportion to substantial differences in the difficulty and responsibilities of the work performed.

4.6 Council Member and Staff Legal Protections

In conducting official Council business, Council members and staff generally have the same protection from individual tort liability as Federal employees on official actions, and are protected by the Federal workmen's compensation statute, by the minimum wage/maximum hour provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act, 29 U.S.C. § 201 *et seq.* (FLSA), and by the rights of access and confidentiality provisions of the Privacy Act. Council staff are also eligible for unemployment compensation in the same manner as Federal employees. Overtime payments shall be made in accordance with the provisions of the FLSA.

4.7 Recruitment and Anti-Discrimination Policy

All activities supported in whole or in part by federal funds shall be operated under a policy of equal employment opportunity. Council staff positions shall be filled solely on the basis of merit, fitness for duty, competence, and qualifications. The Council is an Equal Employment Opportunity Employer. All employment actions will be free from discrimination based on race, religion, color, national origin, sex (including pregnancy and gender identity), age, disability, sexual orientation, genetic information, status as a parent, and reprisal. See 50 CFR § 600.120.

Complaints by employees alleging discrimination on any basis listed above will be processed in accordance with 29 CFR Part 1614 (<https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/fs-fed.cfm>) and applicable Department of Commerce Department Administrative Orders (DAOs). Employees must contact an EEO Counselor at NOAA's Office of Civil Rights, 301-713-0500 or 800-452-6728 (voice), 301-713-0982 TDD, within 45 days of the date of the alleged discrimination, or in the case of a personnel action, within 45 days of the effective date of the action.

4.8 Anti-Harassment Policy

The Council process should operate in an atmosphere of respect, collaboration, openness, safety, and equality. Every individual who participates in the Council process should be treated with dignity and respect and should be free from abusive conduct and harassment.

The Council has a zero-tolerance policy for harassment and will not tolerate retaliation against those who report harassment. Harassment includes unwelcomed conduct that is based on the basis of race, religion, color, national origin, sex (including pregnancy and gender identity), age, disability, sexual orientation, status as a parent, or genetic information. Any Council employee who believes he or she has been harassed or believes he or she has witnessed harassment is encouraged to report the harassment to a supervisor or manager. The supervisor or manager should then immediately contact the Employee and Labor Relations Division of NOAA's Office of Workforce Management, 301-713-6331. The Council's Anti-Harassment Policy for Employees is detailed in the Administrative Handbook¹ and is intended to ensure that staff members work in an environment free of harassment in all their interactions.

For the purposes of this policy, harassment is unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex (including sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy), national origin, age (beginning at age 40), disability, or genetic information (including family medical history). Preventing harassment is everyone's responsibility and individuals who experience or observe harassment are strongly encouraged to come forward to ensure a safe working environment for everyone involved in the Council process. Council members, including Council Chair and Vice chair, hold positions of trust and responsibility and it is incumbent upon them, together with the Executive Director, to make every reasonable effort to establish an environment free of harassment. This policy provides a framework for procedures to encourage Council process participants to come forward with harassment allegations without fear of retaliation and outlines a process for reporting and reviewing allegations of harassment.

4.8.1 Training

Anti-Harassment Training should be completed at the time of appointment or reappointment of Council Members, SSC members, and AP members. State Directors and their designees should complete anti-harassment training every three years and at the time of appointment.

4.8.2 Council Process Participants

A Council Process Participant includes all persons who participate in the Council process in any setting, with the exception of individuals employed by the Council, who are covered under a separate policy. Council Process Participants include all individuals present under the context of Council business regardless of location, whether in a Council office, at a Council meeting, or at offsite meetings, hearings, workshops, and outreach events sponsored by a Council.

4.8.3 Reporting Process

Council Process Participants who observe, experience, or receive a report of harassment, including but not limited to sexual harassment or assault are encouraged to report the matter as

¹ <https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Administrative-Handbook-April-2022.pdf>

soon as possible to an appropriate official. Swift reporting allows appropriate law enforcement authorities, the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), or the Council, as appropriate, to take measures to ensure that offensive behavior stops, the harassee's needs are addressed, and action is taken against the offender.

Council Process Participants who observe or are subject to harassment by any Council member, Council employee, or other Council Process Participants may report incidents in a variety of ways, including but not limited to: appropriate law enforcement authorities, as applicable; Executive Director or Deputy Executive Director; and the Council Chair and Vice-chair.

4.8.4 Council Response to Reports

Unless particular circumstances require otherwise, any Council Member, Council employee, or NMFS employee who receives a report of harassment of a Council process participant is encouraged to communicate the details of that report, in writing, to the Executive Director for appropriate action under this policy, unless they are the alleged harasser. In the event of a reported incident, a response team should be convened, as appropriate depending upon the context, the Council Chair, Executive Director, and other designated Council and staff points of contact. The response team will determine appropriate follow-up, including whether to engage the NMFS Regional Administrator in the response to the incident, based on the allegations raised and the parties involved. The Council shall maintain a record of each allegation received under this policy, which shall be made available to NMFS upon request.

4.8.5 NMFS Role

The Councils are primarily responsible for addressing issues that arise within the Council environment. NMFS will, in consultation with NOAA and the Department of Commerce, provide such support and advice to the Councils as may be appropriate under the circumstances. Any Council that receives a report of harassment against or by a Council member must inform the NMFS Regional Administrator of the nature of the incident and any steps taken to address the incident.

4.8.6 Related Processes

Individuals who are federal employees (including but not limited to NOAA employees) or employed by state agencies, academic institutions or other organizations is encouraged to report any concerns and seek assistance or action through their supervisor and/or within their own organization, as appropriate, but are encouraged to also report incidents to a Council official described above so that prompt action can be taken by the Council, as needed.

Individuals who are employed by the Councils or the federal government, including but not limited to NOAA, also have the right to file an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaint with their employing federal agency's EEO office within 45 days of the matter alleged to be discriminatory.

4.9 Whistleblower Protection

It is the intent of the Council to adhere to all applicable laws and regulations. The underlying purpose of this Employee Protection Policy is to encourage the organization's goal of full legal compliance. The support of all employees is necessary to achieving this result. To this end, any employee who reasonably believes that a policy, practice, or activity of the Council is in violation of law has a right to file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Commerce's Office of Inspector General. This right notwithstanding, any employee with such concerns is encouraged to report those concerns to the Council for review and any necessary correction.

The Council will not retaliate against employees who disclose or threaten to disclose to the Department, any activity, policy, or practice of the Council that the employee reasonably believes is in violation of a law, or a rule, or regulation mandated pursuant to law or is in violation of a clear mandate of public policy concerning the health, safety, welfare, or protection of the environment.

4.10 Leave

Employment practices follows 50 CFR § 600.120. Details of all of the Council's leave policies are located in the Administrative Handbook. A copy can be obtained by calling the Council office or accessed on the web at:

<https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Administrative-Handbook-April-2022.pdf>

4.10.1 Leave Accounting

One account shall be maintained to pay for unused sick or annual leave as authorized, and will be funded from the Council's annual operating allowances. Funds may be deposited into this account at the end of the budget period if unobligated balances remain. Interest earned on this account will be maintained in the account, along with the principal, for the purpose of payment of unused annual and sick leave only. This account, including interest, may be carried over from year to year. Budgeting for accrued leave will be identified in the "Other" object class categories section of the SF-424A.

4.10.2 Annual Leave

Full-time staff members earn annual leave of 13 to 26 days per year, prorated per biweekly pay periods, based upon the collective number of years of creditable service with the Council. Annual leave is accrued incrementally based on a corresponding number of hours per pay period and is granted as follows:

<u>Years of Service</u>	<u>Working Days of Leave per Year</u>	<u>(Hours per Pay-Period)</u>
Under 3	13 days	(4 hours)
3 to 15	20 days	(6 hours)
15 and over	26 days	(8 hours)

4.10.3 Sick Leave

Council full-time employees are granted 13 days of paid sick leave annually, prorated per biweekly pay period. Sick leave accrues and is available immediately upon hiring. Sick leave accrual is cumulative throughout an employee's tenure with the Council.

4.10.4 Advanced Leave

An advance of sick leave of no more than six weeks may be granted to an employee upon approval by the Executive Director only after the employee has exhausted all sick, annual, and compensatory leave, and the employee has not received sufficient leave donations to cover a medical need. Advanced sick leave shall be repaid using sick, annual, and/or compensatory leave as it is accrued. If the employee is still unable to return to work after this extended leave period, the employee may be granted extended leave without pay or terminated, except in the event of a qualified Family and Medical Leave Act situation. A signed promise of repayment must be executed prior to receiving advanced sick leave.

4.10.5 Family Medical Leave Act of 1993

The FMLA requires employers to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave during a 12-month period to eligible employees for certain family and medical reasons. Care for a covered service member may be up to 26 weeks under FMLA. The FMLA also permits employees to take leave on an intermittent basis or to work a reduced schedule under certain circumstances. The Council maintains a notice that summarizes FMLA provisions on its information bulletin board in a public work area. Employees should review the FMLA notice or consult with the Administrative Officer for further details. More information on the Council's FMLA policy can be found in the Council's Administrative Handbook and specific details are available from the United States Department of Labor (www.dol.gov).

4.10.6 Holidays

The Council generally recognizes holidays as observed for federal employees and employees are granted the day off with pay as shown in the following:

New Year's Day, January 1
Martin Luther King's Birthday, Third Monday in January
President's Day, Third Monday in February
Memorial Day, Last Monday in May
Juneteenth, June 19
Independence Day, July 4
Labor Day, First Monday in September
Columbus Day, Second Monday in October
Veterans' Day, November 11
Thanksgiving, Fourth Thursday and Friday in November
Christmas Day, December 25
Other national holidays and related leave granted to federal employees

4.11 Employee Benefits

The Council provides health and dental insurance for full-time permanent employees and their qualifying family members. The Council also provides life and, disability insurance, and a retirement program for all full-time permanent employees. The Council may, at any time, require employees to pay for a portion of benefits or eliminate benefits.

4.12 Travel Reimbursement for Non-Federal Travelers

All travel must be authorized and approved in advance by the Executive Director, the Council Chair, Vice Chair, or by Council vote.

Travel performed by Council members, staff or others for the Council is classified into special travel requiring Council Chair or Vice Chair approval or routine travel requiring approval by the Executive Director. Special travel includes travel of Council members to attend any meeting that is not a meeting of the Council, or other Council committee meeting. Routine travel in support of Council business includes the travel of staff, SSC members, AP members, and consultants.

Meeting authorizations will be issued prior to the performance of travel. These will be numbered sequentially and maintained in a file pending payment of the travel vouchers. Travel authorization documents are approved by the Executive Director.

Completed travel reimbursement claims will be audited for conformance to current policies and compliance with existing travel guidelines. Claims will be certified for payment by the Executive Director, Deputy Executive Director, or Administrative Officer. Travel policies are specified in the Council's Administrative Handbook.

The Council generally observes the General Service Administration (GSA) reimbursement rates for mileage and commercial transportation, and per diem rates for lodging and meals, and incidental expenses (M&IE) as the per se accounting of actual expenses; additional information may be found in 41 CFR Part 301 and will be provided by the Council office upon request. M&IE and lodging will be reimbursed in accordance with GSA's current M&IE and lodging rates unless prior approval is granted by the Council Chair or Vice Chair for reimbursement amounts that exceed GSA limits.

4.13 Foreign Travel

Foreign travel includes travel outside Canada, Mexico, the United States, and any United States territories and possessions. All foreign travel must be approved in advance by the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration. The Council shall comply with the Fly America Act (<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/103191>).

4.14 Training

Council members appointed after January 12, 2007, shall complete a NMFS training course that will cover a variety of topics relevant to matters before the Council. Such training shall be available as well to existing Council members, staff from regional offices, and regional science centers of NMFS, and may be made available to committee or advisory panel members as resources allow.

4.15 Invitational Travel

The Executive Director of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council may accept in-kind and/or actual invitational funds for Council staff travel, only after (1) notifying the NMFS Regional Administrator of the origin and purpose of such funding, and (2) directing such gifts to the Administrator. 50 CFR § 600.125(c).

5.0 Standards of Conduct

5.1 Federal Criminal Statutes

Applicable Statutes:

Council members, as Federal officeholders, and Council employees are subject to most Federal criminal statutes covering bribery, conflict-of-interest, disclosure of confidential information, and lobbying with appropriated funds. Among other statutes, the following provisions apply:

- A. 18 U.S.C. § 201 - prohibits offer or acceptance of anything of value to influence any official act;
- B. 18 U.S.C. §§ 203, 205 - prohibits officials from contacting any Federal agency or Federal court on behalf of others concerning a particular matter involving specific parties with the intent to influence Government action if they participated personally and substantially in the matter as a Council member. Furthermore, officials may not receive compensation for the representational activities of others regarding such matters.
- C. 18 U.S.C. § 207 - prohibits a former official permanently from representing others before a Federal agency or Federal court concerning a particular matter involving specific parties in which the official participated personally and substantially as a Federal official or for two years concerning a matter which was under the person's official responsibility during their last year of Government service.
- D. 18 U.S.C. § 208 - prohibits official acts in a matter in which the official has a personal financial interest. This prohibition does not apply to a financial interest of a Council voting member or Executive Director if the official obtains a waiver under 18 U.S.C. § 208(b), or if the disclosure of financial interest in a report has been filed under Section 302(j) of the Act and that individual is in compliance with regulations promulgated under that section.

- E. 18 U.S.C. § 209 - prohibits an official from receiving compensation for performing Federal duties from a source other than the United States Government. This restriction does not apply to an official who has served for 130 days or less in a 365-day period.
- F. 18 U.S.C. §§ 210, 211 - prohibits offer or acceptance of value to procure appointment to public office.
- G. 18 U.S.C. § 1905 - prohibits disclosure of trade secrets or confidential commercial information except as provided by law.
- H. 18 U.S.C. § 1913 - prohibits use of appropriated funds to influence a member of Congress to favor or oppose any legislation or appropriation. However, this prohibition does not apply when responding to a request from a member of Congress or a Congressional Committee. Personal communications of a Council member or employee at their own expense that are identified as such are not prohibited.

5.2 General Standards of Conduct

The Council is responsible for maintaining high standards of ethical conduct. In addition to abiding by the applicable Federal conflict of interest statutes, both members and employees of the Councils must comply with the following standards of conduct:

- A. No employee of the Council shall use their official authority or influence derived from their position with the Council for the purpose of interfering with or affecting the result of an election to or a nomination for any national, state, county or municipal election.
- B. No employee of the Council shall be deprived of employment, position, work, compensation, or benefit provided for or made possible by the Act on account of any political activity or lack of such activity in support of or in opposition to any candidate or any political party in any national, state, county, or municipal election or on account of their political affiliation.
- C. No Council member or employee shall pay, or offer, or promise, or solicit, or receive from any person, firm, or corporation, either as a political contribution or a personal emolument any money, or anything of value in consideration of either support, or the use of influence, or the promise of support, or influence in obtaining for any person, any appointive office, place or employment under the Council.
- D. No employee of the Council shall have a direct or indirect financial interest that conflicts with the fair and impartial conduct of their Council duties.
- E. No Council member or employee of the Council shall use or allow the use, for other than official purposes, of information obtained through or in connection with their Council employment which has not been made available to the general public.

- F. No Council member or employee of the Council shall engage in criminal, infamous, dishonest, notoriously immoral or disgraceful conduct prejudicial to the Council.
 - G. No Council member or employee of the Council shall use Council property for other than official business. Such property shall be protected and preserved from improper or deleterious operation or use.
 - H. Except as provided in 18 U.S.C. § 208, no Council member may participate:
 - (1) Personally and substantially as a member through decision, approval, disapproval, recommendation, the rendering of advice, investigation, or otherwise in a particular matter primarily of individual concern, such as a contract, in which he or she has a financial interest; or
 - (2) In any particular matter that is likely to have a direct and predictable effect on a member's financial interest unless that interest is in harvesting, processing, lobbying, advocacy, or marketing activities and has been disclosed in a report filed pursuant to Section 302(j)(5) of the Act.
- For purposes of this subsection, the member's financial interest includes that of the member's spouse, minor child, partner, organization in which the member is serving as officer, director, trustee, partner or employee, or any person or organization with whom the member is negotiating or has any arrangement concerning prospective employment.
- I. Employment of relatives is discouraged and will be approved only on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the Executive Director provided that such employment does not fall under the line of supervision of an incumbent employee.

5.3 Financial Disclosures

5.3.1 General

The Act and 50 CFR § 600.235 require the disclosure by Council members and members of a Scientific and Statistical Committee of any financial interest of the reporting individual in any harvesting, processing, lobbying, advocacy, or marketing activity that is being, or will be, undertaken within any fishery under the jurisdiction of the individual's Council, or of any such financial interest of the reporting individual's spouse, minor child, partner, or any organization (other than the Council) in which that individual is serving as an officer, director, trustee, partner, or employee. Individuals must update the form at any time a reportable financial interest is acquired or the financial interests are otherwise substantially changed. The information will be kept on file and made available for public inspection at reasonable hours at the Council office, at Council meetings, and on the Council's website.

5.3.2 Recusal

As provided for in the regulations promulgated under Section 302(j) of the Act, i.e., 50 CFR §§ 600.225 and 600.235, as amended, an affected individual who is required to disclose a financial

interest shall not vote on a Council decision which would have a significant and predictable effect on such financial interest. A Council decision shall be considered to have a significant and predictable effect on a financial interest if there is a close causal link between the Council decision and an expected and substantially disproportionate benefit to the financial interest of the affected individual relative to the financial interests of other participants in the same gear type or sector of the fishery. An affected individual who may not vote may participate in Council deliberations relating to the decision after notifying the Council of the voting recusal and identifying the financial interest that would be affected.

At the request of an affected individual, or upon the initiative of the appropriate designated official, the designated official shall make a determination for the record whether a Council decision would have a significant and predictable effect on a financial interest.

Any Council member may submit a written request to the Secretary to review any determination by the designated official under subparagraph 2 within 10 days of such determination. Such review shall be completed within 30 days of receipt of the request.

Any affected individual who does not vote in a Council decision in accordance with this subsection may state for the record how he or she would have voted on such decision if he or she had voted.

If the Council makes a decision before the Secretary has reviewed a determination under subparagraph 3, the eventual ruling may not be treated as cause for the invalidation of reconsideration by the Secretary of such decision.

An affected individual is prohibited from voting in accordance with 50 CFR § 600.235, which provides for the making of determinations.

Section 208 of Title 18, United States Code, does not apply to an affected individual during any time in which that individual is in compliance with the regulations prescribed under Section 302(j) of the Act.

5.3.3 Security Investigations

Security assurances are issued by the Office of Security of the Department of Commerce. (<http://osec.doc.gov/osy/>) Security assurances are required for all Council members and are valid for five years. Other staff and advisory group members may be required to obtain clearances at the Council's discretion. Those who have not been cleared may not participate in meetings, closed for reasons of national security, or have access to any classified information. Council staff should maintain adequate records to determine when to initiate renewal requests as clearances expire and to request initial and renewal security clearances.

6.0 Financial Management

The budget and financial management system of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council provides procedures for and controls over the elements of: budget formulation and execution, fiscal management, procurement, and property management. The management of this

system is the responsibility of the Administrative Officer. The following describe the existing Budget and Financial Management System.

6.1 Governing Statutes

The Council's cooperative agreement activities are governed by 2 CFR Part 200 (Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards), 48 CFR Part 31 (Contract Cost Principles and Procedures), and OMB Circular A-133 (Audit Requirements for Institutions of Higher Education and Other Nonprofit Organizations), as applicable, and the terms and conditions of the cooperative agreement. (See 5 CFR § 1310.3 for availability of OMB Circulars.)

6.2 Cooperative Agreements and Contracts

The Council may enter into cooperative agreements with federal agencies, state, and private institutions on matters of mutual interest which further the objectives of the Act. Approval from the Secretary must be obtained prior to entering into such arrangements, and each agreement must specify the nature and extent of Council participation.

6.3 Procurement

The cost and financial management principles outlined in 2 CFR Part 200 and 48 CFR Part 31, as applicable, apply to all Council procurement actions.

6.4 Check Signatures

All checks issued will bear two authorizing signatures, these signatures being two of either: the Administrative Officer, the Executive Director, or the Deputy Executive Director. All checks processed through accounts payable for amounts greater than \$5,000 must be manually signed.

6.5 Property Management

All durable or capitalized equipment will be accounted for by an inventory system. A physical inventory of all property and equipment will be made at least once every two years.

A property number will be assigned to all capitalized equipment and property inventory records maintained on all such equipment.

The Council shall comply with the property management standards as stipulated in the applicable uniform administrative requirements.

6.6 Real Property

The leasing, renting, and acquisition of real property and space will be performed in a manner consistent with 2 CFR Part 200.

6.7 Accounting System

Adherence will be made, as a minimum, to the principles in the accounting system accepted by the Council (a Cash Receipts and Disbursement Journal with a monthly Summary of Accounts).

Fiscal controls will be accomplished through a source document supported cash accounting system capable of providing modified accrued expenditures as needed.

6.8 Audits

An independent audit will be conducted at least biennially by DOC Office of Inspector General auditors or an independent public accountant (IPA). The scope of the audit may include: conduct of financial operations; compliance with applicable laws and regulations; economy and efficiency of administrative procedures; and achievement of results. The audit will be conducted in accordance with OMB Circular A-133 or 2 CFR Part 200, as applicable. The following NOAA personnel will be invited to participate in the audit exit conference: the Grants Officer and a representative of the NMFS, Southeast Regional Office (SERO).

6.9 Financial Reporting

The Federal Cash Flow Financial Report will be submitted to the Grants Officer through the Grants Online website and in accordance with the reporting procedures contained in the terms and conditions of the award and 2 CFR Part 200, as applicable. A final report will be submitted within 90 days after expiration of the grant.

Semi-annual financial reports are provided to NOAA, as a condition of the grant process and quarterly budget reports are provided to the Council.

7.0 Recordkeeping

Councils, NMFS Headquarters, Regions, and Science Centers collectively are responsible for maintaining records pertaining to the development of FMPs and amendments within their geographic area of authority. The disposition of such records must be handled in accordance with NAO 205-1, NOAA Records Management Program and DAO 205-1, Department of Commerce Program for Records Management. In the event of litigation, compilation of an administrative record for a court case will be under the direction of NOAA General Counsel.

7.1 Definitions

Records: Documentary items that are made or received by an agency of the United States in connection with the transaction of public business. Agencies are legally required to keep these records as evidence of their actions, and they must be maintained in accordance with your agency's records retention schedule or one of the government's general records retention schedules. They can be in any format (i.e. text documents, photos, computer codes, electronic files, CD-ROMS, disks, USB keys, magnetic tapes).

Non-records: Items made or acquired solely for reference, extra copies of documents kept for reference/personal convenience (even if it's a copy of something that is a record – only the original is the record), notes taken during a meeting which aren't shared with others, drafts.

Personal papers: Materials pertaining solely to your private affairs, for example the telephone bill that you brought in to pay during your lunch break or your personal appointment calendar.

7.2 Availability of Records

In accordance with 50 CFR § 600.150(b), the Council will maintain documents generally available to the public on its Internet site. Documents for posting must include: fishery management plans and their amendments for the fisheries for which the Council is responsible; drafts of fishery management plan amendments under consideration; analysis of actions the Council has under review; minutes or official records of past meetings of the Council and its committees; materials provided to Council members in preparation for meetings; and other Council documents of interest to the public. For documents too large to maintain on the website, not available electronically, or seldom requested, the Council will provide copies of the documents for viewing at the Council office during regular business hours or may provide the documents through the mail.

7.3 Administrative Records for Fishery Management Plans

The Council and NMFS Headquarters, Regions and Centers collectively are responsible for maintaining records pertaining to the development of FMPs and amendments. In the event of litigation, compilation of an administrative record for a court case will be under the direction of NOAA General Counsel.

7.4 Disposition of Records

Council records must be handled in accordance with Department of Commerce and NOAA records management office procedures. The Council will abide by the terms of the NOAA Records Management Guide; the NOAA Records Disposition Handbook; and the following records management authorities: NAO 205-1 NOAA Records Management Program; DAO 205-1 Program for Records Management; Federal Records Act of 1950; 44 U.S.C. Chapter 31 Records Management by Agency Heads; 44 U.S.C. Chapter 33 Disposal of Records; and 44 U.S.C. § 101 Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services

All records and documents created or received by Council employees, while in active duty status, belong to the Federal government. When employees leave the Council, they may not take the original or file copies of records with them. Before any records are disposed of, Council members and employees will coordinate with the NOAA records management office.

7.5 Permanent Records

The designation of a file as “permanent” means that the records are appropriate for offer to the National Archives once the records are 20 years old, unless otherwise specified. Destruction of permanent records is not authorized. Examples of permanent records are Environmental Impact

Statements (EIS), Environmental Assessments (EA), annual reports, meeting files that include agendas, minutes, reports, studies, and related correspondence.

7.6 Privacy Act Records

The Council will maintain in its office, under appropriate safeguards in accordance with the Privacy Act (PA), personnel files on employees, experts and consultants under contract, and advisory group members. Maintenance, protection, handling of request for information, and disclosure and disposition of PA records will be provided for in the Secretarial guidelines and regulations.

7.7 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

FOIA requests received by the Council are coordinated promptly with the NMFS Southeast Regional Office. The Region will forward the request to the NMFS FOIA official to secure a FOIA number and log into the FOIA system. The NMFS Regional Office will obtain clearance from the NOAA General Counsel's Office concerning the initial determination for denial of requested information. FOIA requests will be controlled and documented in the Region.

7.8 Confidentiality of Statistics

In accordance with Section 302(i)(4) of the Act and in compliance with 50 CFR §§ 600.130, 600.405, 600.425, and NAO 216-100, the Council may establish policies and procedures applicable to it, its committees, and advisory groups to ensure confidentiality of statistics submitted to the Council by federal or state authorities, and information that may be voluntarily submitted to the Council by private persons, including but not limited to procedures that restrict Council employee access and prevent conflicts of interest. In the case of statistics submitted by a state or federal entity, policies and procedures must be consistent with the laws and regulations of the federal or state entity submitting the statistics.

7.9 Information Quality

The Council agrees to abide by the NOAA Information Quality Guidelines for ensuring and maximizing the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of information which it disseminates. The NOAA guidelines also establish an administrative mechanism allowing affected persons to seek and obtain correction of information that does not comply with Office of Management and Budget or NOAA applicable guidelines.