

## Excerpt from July 21-23 Gulf SSC Report

### *Update on Operational Assessment Process*

Dr. Julie Neer (SEDAR) detailed modifications from the SEFSC on the process for conducting operational assessments (OAs). The efficacy intended for the OA process is at the expense of some transparency. If a more transparent and thorough assessment is needed, the research track process is designed to deliver that type of assessment, which is always followed by an OA to generate management advice. To the extent practical, and to ensure timeliness, the OA should be limited to updating new years of data already used in the previous assessment. Additional changes from the previously accepted model will result in a more time-consuming process. Further, the SEFSC did not intend for every OA to have a workshop panel, which the SEFSC sees as detrimental to the goal of increasing throughput by delivering more stock assessments every year. As such, the SEFSC recommends eliminating assessment panels for all future OAs. Instead, the SEFSC will use “topical working groups” (TWGs) to address very specific facets of an assessment (e.g., selectivity, discard mortality). These TWGs would work only on their specific topic and would not review the assessment in total. TWGs would be appointed by the SEDAR cooperators (Councils, Commissions); be comprised of SSC members, academia, and stakeholders; and would operate using prescribed statements of work through a team-style approach with webinars and/or conference calls. These TWGs would produce documentation detailing their discussions and recommendations for inclusion in the assessment materials, which would then be reviewed during plenary sessions during the assessment. SEDAR would be responsible for organizing scheduling and participation for TWGs. SSC members should expect to provide guidance on which issues require a TWG, TWG statements of work, participate in TWGs for assessments, and review TWG findings during formal OA reviews. These modifications to the OA process, specifically the TWG approach, would begin in 2022. Many details remain outstanding and will be resolved as the process evolves.

The SSC was told that the number of TWGs for an assessment will vary. If a topic is not covered by a TWG, and needs further review, the SSC will have to request such work as part of the formal assessment review. Statements of work (SOWs) for TWGs will need to be developed two years in advance of the OA; no guidance was presented on how to resolve discovering a need for a TWG during the assessment process.

The SSC noted that SEDAR has been encouraged by cooperators for 20 years to increase transparency and participation, while also trying to increase throughput. Modifications to the SEDAR assessment process seem to occur every 3-5 years through rebranding, with only minor or incremental changes actually being made to stated shortcomings. An SSC member suggested looking to the former stock assessment panel approach that was used for coastal migratory pelagics and reef fish species prior to SEDAR, which boasted ample expertise and efficiency, but at the expense of transparency. Unless a radical change is made in how SEDAR functions, great

strides in timeliness and throughput may prove elusive. Data-processing automation at the SEFSC is in progress, but is not yet fully operational.

The SEFSC added that they are trying to find efficiencies wherever possible. The SOWs will be important to planning workflow as that is when the various TWGs should be identified. Further, including new items once a stock assessment begins is detrimental to the timeliness of any assessment. Strict adherence to the SOWs for TWGs will be critical to achieving better throughput and timeliness. However, it was recognized a TWG may be needed after a stock assessment has been started and that could in fact slow the process down.