

TAB E

Sustainable Fisheries Committee Report October 2, 2017 Greg Stunz – Acting Chair

The agenda and the minutes of the August 7, 2017 Committee meeting were approved as written.

Options Paper – Draft Modifications to the Sea Turtle Release Protocol and Gear for the Reef Fish Fishery (Tab E, No. 4)

Staff reviewed the draft options paper that considers modifications to the sea turtle release protocol and gear for the reef fish fishery. Staff reviewed the purpose and need and no changes were made by the Committee. The document currently has two draft actions. The first action considers including the three new approved sea turtle release gears for commercial and charter vessels/headboat Gulf reef fish permit holders. The second action would modify the framework procedure to allow new gears to be approved for use without a full amendment to the fishery management plan. The Committee was satisfied with the range of actions and alternatives. Staff will develop a public hearing draft for the January meeting. Due to the education and outreach activities conducted by the SEFSC staff, the Committee agreed that an online video and webinar public hearing would be sufficient.

Options Paper – Framework Action to Require either Descending Devices or Venting Tools on Board Vessels Possessing Reef Fish (Tab E, No. 5)

Staff reviewed the options paper which included a revised purpose and need section from the version previously reviewed in June. One Committee member felt that the purpose and need needed an additional statement to indicate how the proposed action would benefit the anglers by reducing bycatch mortality.

Committee members noted that, in Action 1, only Alternative 3 resulted in regulatory action and therefore was the only alternative that, if adopted, would require further development of the framework action. Under this alternative, RESTORE Act funds could not be used to distribute descender devices. However, staff noted that it would take about 2 years for the RESTORE funds to become available, and for testing and analysis to be completed. Committee members further noted that Alternative 3 only mandated the possession of devices, not their use. There would be no way of determining how many fishermen actually used the devices. A motion to make Alternative 3, Option c (require that vessels where reef fish are on board possess: Option c. Either venting tools or descending devices) and Alternative 4 (Develop an outreach program in conjunction with Sea Grant programs, to educate fishermen on the availability and correct use of venting tools and descending devices, including best handling techniques to minimize stress to the fish.) the preferred alternatives failed by a vote of 3 to 3.

After clarification that the alternatives applied to all fishing vessels (recreational, for-hire, and private angler), the Committee passed the following motion:

By a vote of 4 to 3, the Committee recommends, and I so move, to recommend staff stop working on Framework Action to Require either Descending Devices or Venting Tools on Board Vessels Possessing Reef Fish and instead develop a policy statement and include the development of an outreach program.

Discussion on Dead Zone Regarding RESTORE Act Activities

Leann Bosarge noted that Glen Constant was scheduled to give a presentation on how RESTORE funds could be used to address the dead zone issue. However, due to obligations related to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, Mr. Constant was unable to attend the Council meeting. His presentation will be rescheduled for the January 2018 Council meeting.

Presentation – Proposed Lionfish Gear and Modification to the List of Allowable Gears (Tab E, No. 7a, b, c)

Mr. Bruce McCormack gave a presentation on a proposal to use a new gear to target lionfish and to develop a commercial fishery. The gear consisted of a 40 foot harvesting vessel and a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) to which cameras and a slurper were attached. The development version of the device would hold up to 75 pounds of lionfish up to 2 pounds in size, but the production model could hold up to 400 pounds. The corral into which the lionfish would be deposited was constructed of 1 ½ inch mesh net, which would allow small fish to escape and minimize bycatch. Lionfish would be targeted, and larger fish of unwanted species avoided, through the use of an HD camera and acoustics. Mr. McCormack's company had been conducting proof-of-concept tests since September 18, 2017. Mr. McCormack envisioned having 10 harvesting vessels in the Gulf within 5 years. He also discussed possible future modifications to allow capture of larger lionfish from deeper depths.

Staff noted that the Council needed to take action only if it wanted to prohibit the gear. If no Council action was taken, the gear would become an allowable gear for lionfish harvest. NMFS staff added that while the Council would not need to take action, NMFS would need to publish a proposed rule and take public comment. The Committee took no action regarding the proposed gear.

Madam Chair, this concludes my report.