

**Mackerel Committee Report  
August 16, 2023  
Mr. Kevin Anson – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab C, No. 1**) and approved the minutes of the April 2023 (**Tab C, No. 2**) as written.

***SSC Recommendations on Gulf King Mackerel Interim Analysis (Tab E, No. 5)***

Dr. Jim Nance (Chair, Scientific and Statistical Committee [SSC]) presented the SSC's discussions of the Gulf of Mexico migratory group king mackerel (Gulf king mackerel) interim analysis (IA), produced by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC). Indices of relative abundance included the Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP) fall groundfish survey and the SEAMAP fall plankton survey. The last king mackerel assessment (SEDAR 38 Update 2020) found the spawning stock biomass (SSB) to be between the minimum stock size threshold (MSST) and SSB at maximum sustainable yield (MSY), indicating that while not overfished, the stock was not fully healthy. The SSC recognized the shortcomings of both indices, their declining trends, and the sparse data in recent years, and did not think there was enough data to recommend revising the current catch limits at this time.

***SSC Recommendations on SEDAR 81 Gulf Spanish Mackerel Operational Assessment (Tab E, No. 5a-c)***

Dr. Nance presented the SSC's review of SEDAR 81 Operational Assessment for the Gulf migratory group of Spanish mackerel (Gulf Spanish mackerel). SEDAR 81 resolves several concerns from the previous model (SEDAR 28 2014), and incorporates updated recreational landings data calibrated to the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES). The model included data from 1986 through 2021, corresponding to the data-rich period of landings data, with the recreational fleet split into its separate components (i.e., private, shore, for-hire). The SSC noted that there were substantial data limitations for SEDAR 81, and that recommendations should be made with that in mind. The SSC accepted SEDAR 81 as consistent with the best scientific information available (BSIA). Under the current MSY proxy of  $F_{30\%SPR}$ , SEDAR 81 indicates the stock is not overfished and not undergoing overfishing as of 2021. For projections, SSC members discussed using either a three-year average of 2017 – 2019 for the interim years, or a six-year average using 2017 – 2022. The SSC ultimately recommended using the mean of the landings from 2017 – 2019 as the proxy for the interim projection years of 2023 and 2024, with the actual landings used for 2022. The new overfishing limit (OFL) projections trend down towards the  $SSB_{MSY}$  target, and the acceptable biological catch (ABC) trends up towards the  $F_{MSY}$  target. The SSC set the OFL for Gulf Spanish mackerel based on SEDAR 81 using a constant catch of 12.074 million pounds (mp) whole weight (ww) for 2025 – 2027, and subsequent years. The SSC then set the ABC using the yield at 75% of  $F_{30\%SPR}$ . The constant catch ABC for 2025 – 2027 is 9.630 mp ww.

A Committee member asked why the SSC only recommended a constant catch for the OFL and ABC. Dr. Nance replied that using a constant catch approach was to better accommodate the opposing trends between the OFL and ABC projections, thereby maintaining a buffer for scientific uncertainty.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move: to direct staff to begin a document to modify the catch limits for Gulf Spanish mackerel in accordance with SEDAR 81 results and SSC recommendations.**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

Council staff reviewed the *Fisherman Feedback* tool for Gulf Spanish mackerel. Generally, half of the responses indicated negative sentiment overall and in relation to stock condition. More overall negative sentiment was expressed in the eastern Gulf compared to the western Gulf (west of Venice, Louisiana). Private anglers held more negative views about the stock condition than other directed fleets, and a standout word contributing to negative sentiment was “shark”.

The SEFSC noted the issue raised with the MRIP-FES survey discussed on Monday, and recommended using sensitivity analyses to evaluate the effect of the first pilot study on MRIP-FES on the results of the SEDAR 81 stock assessment. Spanish mackerel may be appropriate to test this evaluation method, especially since it is perceived to be healthy and does not have sector allocations. A Committee member agreed, and thought the SEFSC could work with Council staff to schedule a review of these sensitivity runs to SEDAR 81 with the SSC.

#### ***Proposed Engagement in Mackerel Port Meetings (Tab C, No. 6)***

Council staff gave an overview of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s plan to conduct a series of port meetings from Florida to Massachusetts with a focus on mackerel to gather input from fishermen to guide the SA Council on updating the Coastal Migratory Pelagic (CMP) Fishery Management Plan and modifying management measures for king and Spanish mackerel. Given that CMP species are jointly managed, the Gulf Council has an opportunity to participate in a complementary effort. Council staff compared participation between public hearings and virtual tools (i.e., *Fishermen Feedback*, video views, and webinars) and noted the historic low participation to in-person CMP-focused meetings. Given that virtual tools seem to have a wider-reach and capture responses from our constituents more efficiently, the Committee recommended moving forward with a virtual approach, but also asked staff to consider ways to enhance feedback from CMP anglers during scheduled Council meetings.

#### ***Amendment to the 2015 Biological Opinion for Coastal Migratory Pelagic Resources on the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Region (Tab C, No. 7)***

Ms. Jennifer Lee (NOAA Protected Resources Division) gave an overview of what is entailed in an Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 7 consultation. Federal agencies must ensure that the actions they authorize are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of ESA-listed species or adversely modify critical habitat. A Biological Opinion summarizes the effects of a Federal action on ESA-listed species and designated critical habitat. The 2023 amendment addresses three new listed species: endangered Rice’s whales; and, threatened oceanic whitetip shark and giant manta rays. Rice’s whales are not likely to be adversely affected given the low expectation of these whales being present where most CMP fishing occurs. Sink gillnets may adversely affect giant manta rays, while CMP hook-and-line fishing may adversely affect oceanic whitetip sharks and giant manta rays.

Overall, the analysis of effects concluded that the CMP fishery is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of giant manta ray and oceanic whitetip sharks. In response to a question that a Biological Opinion could be reinitiated if takes were less than anticipated, Ms. Lee noted that reinitiation is not limited solely to documentation indicating higher takes. The Biological Opinion would also factor in impacts from other fisheries, such as those in the reef fish and shrimp fisheries.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.