

GULF OF MEXICO FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

ADMINISTRATIVE/BUDGET COMMITTEE

The Driskill

Austin, Texas

August 14, 2023

**VOTING MEMBERS**

- Joe Spraggins.....Mississippi
- Dave Donaldson.....GSMFC
- Jonathan Dugas.....Louisiana
- Dakus Geeslin (designee for Robin Riechers).....Texas
- Bob Gill.....Florida
- C.J. Sweetman (designee for Jessica McCawley).....Florida

**NON-VOTING MEMBERS**

- Kevin Anson (designee for Scott Bannon).....Alabama
- Kesley Banks.....Texas
- Susan Boggs.....Alabama
- Billy Broussard.....Louisiana
- Dale Diaz.....Mississippi
- Tom Frazer.....Florida
- Michael McDermott.....Mississippi
- Lisa Motoi.....USCG
- Anthony Overton.....Alabama
- Chris Schieble (designee for Patrick Banks).....Louisiana
- Andy Strelcheck.....NMFS
- Ed Walker.....Florida
- Troy Williamson.....Texas

**STAFF**

- Assane Diagne.....Economist
- Matt Freeman.....Economist
- John Froeschke.....Deputy Director
- Beth Hager.....Administrative Officer
- Lisa Hollensead.....Fishery Biologist
- Mary Levy.....NOAA General Counsel
- Natasha Mendez-Ferrer.....Fishery Biologist
- Emily Muehlstein.....Public Information Officer
- Kathy Pereira.....Meeting Planner - Travel Coordinator
- Ryan Rindone.....Lead Fishery Biologist/SEDAR Liaison
- Bernadine Roy.....Office Manager
- Carrie Simmons.....Executive Director
- Carly Somerset.....Fisheries Outreach Specialist

**OTHER PARTICIPANTS**

- Peter Hood.....NMFS
- Evan Howell.....NOAA

1 Kerry Marhefka.....SAFMC

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TABLE OF MOTIONS

PAGE 8: Motion that the council approve the final 2023 budget as written. The motion carried on page 8.

- - -

1 The Administrative/Budget Committee of the Gulf of Mexico  
2 Fishery Management Council convened at The Driskill in Austin,  
3 Texas on Monday morning, August 14, 2023, and was called to  
4 order by Chairman Joe Spraggins.

5  
6 **ADOPTION OF AGENDA**  
7 **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**  
8 **ACTION GUIDE AND NEXT STEPS**  
9

10 **CHAIRMAN JOE SPRAGGINS:** I would like to call the Administrative  
11 Budget Committee together, and it's myself, and we have a  
12 vacancy, and so, if somebody would like to be, you know, my vice  
13 chair, I would sure love to see somebody, and then Mr.  
14 Donaldson, Mr. Dugas, Mr. Gill, Dr. Sweetman, and Mr. Geeslin  
15 are the members. At this time, I need to have an approval for  
16 the minutes of the January 2023.

17  
18 **MR. DAVE DONALDSON:** So moved.

19  
20 **MR. BOG GILL:** Seconded.

21  
22 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Is there any discussion? We didn't adopt  
23 the agenda? Well, then I had better go back. Okay. Let's go  
24 back to adopt the agenda before I do that. Yes, ma'am.

25  
26 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CARRIE SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and  
27 good morning. We will not need to go through -- I will not need  
28 to go through Tab G, Number 6(b), because Dr. Howell is going to  
29 cover that, and so we'll just have Tab G, Number 6(a), and then  
30 we'll go to 6(c).

31  
32 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** So (a) to (c)?

33  
34 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Yes.

35  
36 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Okay, and so we're taking (b) out. All  
37 right. Is there any problems with that? If not, could I have a  
38 motion to adopt the agenda?

39  
40 **MR. GILL:** Move to adopt the agenda, as modified.

41  
42 **MR. DONALDSON:** Second.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** All right. All in favor; any opposed. It  
45 carries. All right. Now how about we go to a motion to approve  
46 the minutes of January 2023?

47  
48 **MR. GILL:** So moved, Mr. Chairman.

1  
2 **DR. C.J. SWEETMAN:** Second.

3  
4 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** All right. Any opposed? Okay. We will  
5 move straight into the Action Guide with Dr. Simmons.

6  
7 **PRESENTATION OF THE 2021-2022 AUDIT REPORT**

8  
9 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I will  
10 take the committee through Item Number IV, which the first item  
11 is a presentation of our 2021-2022 biennial fiscal audit. This  
12 was completed on August 9, and our council chair and our  
13 committee chair were in attendance at that meeting, where the  
14 independent audit firm issued an unqualified opinion, and the  
15 summary report is presented in Tab G, Number 4 for everyone's  
16 information.

17  
18 This review also included our coral reef conservation award, and  
19 so we have our admin award and a small coral reef conservation  
20 award as well, and it included both those awards during the  
21 review. Mr. Chair.

22  
23 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Okay. Any discussion on the audit? I can  
24 tell you that I listened through it, and I guess Beth is going  
25 to go through it, and I can tell you that it was about the  
26 easiest thing I've done in a long time, and so go ahead, Beth.

27  
28 **MS. BETH HAGER:** Well, thank you very much, General. It's quite  
29 a bit of work to get there, but it's great when the end result  
30 is quick, and so we have included, as Dr. Simmons said, the  
31 report in Tab G, Number 4. The results are summarized on the  
32 first few pages of this report.

33  
34 Basically, the firm issued an unmodified opinion with no  
35 disagreements or proposed adjusting entries. There were no  
36 questioned costs or material weaknesses. All judgements and  
37 accounting estimates were found to be reasonable. No instances  
38 of fraud or illegal acts were noted, and so that's most of the  
39 report, on the first few pages.

40  
41 If we get to the last page, on that, we show a table of our  
42 comparative expenses over the past three audit cycles. The  
43 years summarized here include all funds expended during these  
44 periods, including the coral program and the carryover. I would  
45 like to express my appreciation to Jessica, Karen, and Kathy for  
46 their efforts in helping me keep all of our figures straight.  
47 We have a great team, and I sincerely appreciate them. That's  
48 it.

1  
2 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Like I said, listening to the auditors in  
3 the briefing, it was like I don't know why we're here. Mr.  
4 Gill.

5  
6 **MR. GILL:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On Slide 3, it talks about  
7 questions costs, and my question is who questions the costs, and  
8 what was the question about?

9  
10 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Beth, do you remember, on Item 3 there?

11  
12 **MS. HAGER:** There were no questioned costs, and it was just --  
13 It was a just a note, so that they could make that talking  
14 point. The auditors went through and checked for any  
15 questionable expenses or anything, anything that was outside of  
16 the budget or outside of the scope of what we should be spending  
17 money on.

18  
19 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Okay. Any other questions? Do we need to  
20 adopt this? Okay. All right. Well, if there's nothing else,  
21 then thank you, Beth, and we'll move straight into the Review  
22 Final 2023 Funded Budget and Activities.

23  
24 **REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF FUNDED 2023 BUDGET AND ACTIVITIES**

25  
26 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so the  
27 next item is Item V, and it's the Review and Approval of our  
28 Funded 2023 Budget and Activities. The committee should review  
29 the funded 2023 budget, and staff is going to walk through that,  
30 and that's Tab G, Number 5.

31  
32 Now we have received our full funding for this year, for this  
33 \$4,278,800, and so, after we review and discuss, the committee  
34 should consider passing a motion, and so we do need some action  
35 on this eventually, to approve the final 2023 funded budget.  
36 Mr. Chair.

37  
38 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Okay. Any questions? Go ahead, Beth.

39  
40 **MS. HAGER:** In Tab G, Number 5, Item Number 5, we have a table.  
41 Well, we have two tables, and the top one is showing the 2023  
42 initial estimated budget, and that is alongside the 2023  
43 proposed funded budget, and the figures are rounded to  
44 thousands.

45  
46 Our initial projection, back in January, was based on a 6.35  
47 percent increase over the 2022 funding level, because that was  
48 what we had in our original grant request. At the time, we

1 weren't sure where our funding was going, and, obviously, since  
2 then, we have been fully funded, and we have received, as Dr.  
3 Simmons mentioned, \$4,278.8. That was an increase of only 3.2  
4 percent from 2022, and so the proposed funded budget is \$128,000  
5 less than the initial draft, and these are compared line items.

6  
7 The line items here you can see fairly clearly, and, if you  
8 scroll to the top, the majority of the changes were in travel  
9 expenses, and so the funded budget was adjusted to reflect the  
10 cost for the actual activity to-date and the remaining workplan  
11 for 2023. As we don't anticipate any decrease in activities  
12 though, we're continually looking for ways to implement cost-  
13 saving measures.

14  
15 This, obviously, can be challenging, because our primary  
16 activities are meetings and travel-related, and these costs are  
17 rising, as we all know, and we may see a small portion of the  
18 unspent carryover funds extended towards the end of 2023,  
19 depending on the costs incurred between now and then.

20  
21 As of June, we had expended 51 percent of our 2023 funding, and  
22 so, if you scroll to the bottom of the table, we're now halfway  
23 through the fourth year of our five-year award, and, as we're  
24 getting closer to the end of this award period, we're going to  
25 continue to update the council on the projected carryover for  
26 the entire award, and that's what we see at the bottom of this  
27 table here, this secondary table.

28  
29 It's a summary of the 2021 and 2022 periods, with the obligated  
30 funds to-date and the carryover balance. The total uncommitted  
31 funds that we're currently carrying forward from the first three  
32 years is \$778,700, and so that will possibly change as we get  
33 closer to the end of next year, depending on what the council  
34 decides to do with the carryover funding, as you guys start  
35 looking at that in the future, but we are going to keep showing  
36 you, so you will have that in mind. Any questions?

37  
38 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Any questions? Mr. Gill.

39  
40 **MR. GILL:** I move approval of the final 2023 funded budget.

41  
42 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Okay. I've got a motion and a second by  
43 Dr. Sweetman. Anything else? Anybody else? **Any opposed? Then**  
44 **the budget is approved.** Dr. Simmons, do you want to go to the  
45 next -- We're going straight in now, I guess, to the overview?

46  
47 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Yes, Mr. Chair. We can do that.  
48 Does that motion reflect what the committee wanted, just to make

1 sure, because we were going kind of fast there.

2  
3 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Yes.

4  
5 **OVERVIEW OF NOAA FISHERIES INFLATION REDUCTION ACT (IRA) FUNDING**

6  
7 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Okay. All right, and so the next  
8 agenda item is Agenda Item VI, and that's going to be an  
9 overview of NOAA Fisheries Inflation Reduction Act funding,  
10 including the regional management councils' IRA funding, and so  
11 I think Dr. Evan Howell is going to start us off with a  
12 presentation that is expanded from what was given to the CCC  
13 meeting, the CCC folks, on a virtual call on July 17, and so  
14 it's going to include some information about not only the  
15 councils, regional management councils, but also I think some  
16 data acquisition funding, as well as the \$20 million for red  
17 snapper.

18  
19 I will follow that up with a presentation telling the council --  
20 After that July 17 call, the regional executive directors got  
21 together and we requested a different approach from what Dr.  
22 Howell is going to lay out for you. We won't know the outcomes  
23 of that until our call next week, and hopefully we'll know  
24 something by then, and so I will just provide an overview for  
25 you all to consider.

26  
27 This is all for information and to help us prepare for the  
28 October council meeting, if you want to give us some feedback on  
29 this particular IRA funding that the councils will be receiving,  
30 and that's good for us to have, so that we're prepared to bring  
31 that back in October, and so Mr. Chair.

32  
33 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Okay. Dr. Howell.

34  
35 **DR. EVAN HOWELL:** Thanks, everybody. I appreciate being here  
36 this morning. I'm going to give you an overview of the  
37 Inflation Reduction Act spending that we have within our  
38 control, our purview, at National Marine Fisheries Service.  
39 It's part of a much larger bucket that you've probably heard  
40 about within NOAA, and I will talk today about the piece that's  
41 run within Fisheries, but, also, we tuned it just to see, at  
42 this point, which pieces also have specific reference to this  
43 area down in the Gulf of Mexico.

44  
45 You will hear these described somewhat as buckets, and so, for  
46 us, what I'm going to talk about today is under Bucket 1, which  
47 is our coastal communities and climate resilience. It's a large  
48 bucket, and it's about \$2.6 billion, and most of that is going

1 out in terms of a notice of funding opportunity through the  
2 National Ocean Service, and so that's outside of our line office  
3 in NOAA, and we're on the National Marine Fisheries Service, and  
4 so, if we go to the next slide, what I will talk about today is  
5 that, under fisheries, we did have a full set of input that's  
6 about a \$1.2 billion investment, but, in this, it covers  
7 numerous things, including money for new facilities and some of  
8 the other things, in terms of some of the efficient and  
9 effective reviews and some money there.

10  
11 The bucket that I am going to talk mostly about today is a \$329  
12 million bucket called our Climate-Ready Fisheries Initiative.  
13 Just to give you a little bit of background, this is something  
14 that I think -- Personally, I've been working on it since last  
15 August, and I've been under -- We basically call it a gag order,  
16 and we were not allowed to talk about this, because so much was  
17 changing through time, and so, if things were approved by the  
18 Office of Management and Budget, we were not allowed to talk  
19 with anybody about this, outside of our small groups that were  
20 developing the proposals.

21  
22 When we first announced this and were able to talk, that was  
23 really the absolute first time that we were able to talk about  
24 this, and so it put us under a lot of pressure, in that there  
25 was pressure for us to move fast, and there is pressure from  
26 partners and key stakeholders for us to work together, and so  
27 what we've done is the approach that we did have to select what  
28 funding we would get in FY23, and I will reference a little bit  
29 about that, but most of the work will be done in FY24, which  
30 starts on October 1, and 2025 and 2026.

31  
32 All of the money that we receive has to be obligated by  
33 September 30, 2026, and so we have a three-year window to  
34 obligate the funds, and our approach right now is that there  
35 were some things that we could move on quickly, that we knew we  
36 needed to do, but, other than that, we've taken the last month,  
37 or month-and-a-half, as well as the next couple of months, to  
38 really continue to try to do some accelerated planning, now that  
39 we can talk with partners and stakeholders.

40  
41 We'll get into this specifically, and I did see the letter  
42 that's coming from the council, and so I understand that, and  
43 we'll go through that when we go through that portion of the  
44 IRA.

45  
46 Breaking down this bucket of the \$349 million, what this breaks  
47 down into, and the ones with the blue arrows are the ones that I  
48 will focus on today, but, ultimately, all of these buckets

1 together is what comprises that \$349 million. What you have,  
2 inside of the buckets, is sort of the descriptions that we've  
3 got, with their acronyms, and so thank you, Carrie, for  
4 expanding those for clarity, but, also, in red, it will give you  
5 an idea of the subcomponent leads in there.

6  
7 In this, the ones that I will reference today are the top one,  
8 and it's essential data acquisition and advanced technology, and  
9 this is about a \$105 million bucket, and it's our largest bucket  
10 in this \$349 million, and I will describe what that is.

11  
12 We have a climate and ecosystem fisheries initiative, which is a  
13 bucket that I can talk through and answer questions on, but,  
14 ultimately, that's across the country, and each region has  
15 modeling grids that will be delivered from our partner line  
16 office, the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research, to give  
17 us an ability to look five years in the future for climate  
18 impacts.

19  
20 Modernizing data is going to give us an ability to modernize our  
21 fishery-dependent datasets, but red snapper is a bucket that is  
22 pretty much this area, \$20 million that's going into this  
23 region, primarily in this area, as well as some of the South  
24 Atlantic, and I will talk in more detail about that.

25  
26 There's a North Atlantic right whale bucket, and there's a  
27 Pacific salmon bucket, and there's also this bucket that Dr.  
28 Simmons mentioned for the councils that I will go through a  
29 little bit, and there was also an administrative overhead bucket  
30 that was taken, and it did not come out of money that we  
31 proposed, but it was given to us as part of the Inflation  
32 Reduction Act spending at NOAA, and this allows us to get  
33 administrative support internally to help us run and program  
34 manage all of these buckets.

35  
36 In going through red snapper, and I will go through the detail  
37 on this, and, again, this was a \$20 million bucket, and is all  
38 going out the door, and we are, I think, keeping hardly any of  
39 this, and maybe a tiny bit of funds for travel for some of the  
40 people involved on the federal side, but mostly the intent of  
41 this bucket was to get out to the states and partners to help  
42 with things in the region for red snapper.

43  
44 The subcomponent leads on this are Clay Porch and Andy  
45 Strelcheck, because of the regional aspect of this, and they're  
46 both not here today, and I think Andy might be on the phone at  
47 some point, but we're in close coordination with them, as well  
48 as working with Dave Donaldson at the Gulf States Marine

1 Fisheries Commission, and others, and so I will go through this.  
2  
3 Again, \$20 million that runs from -- We call them fiscal years,  
4 and that's October 1 through September 30 for us, and so FY23 is  
5 ending on September 30, and FY24 is starting on October 1, and  
6 we have \$20 million that will run over that period that I  
7 mentioned, and the overarching focus here is to improve  
8 recreational catch, effort, and discard estimates from federal  
9 and state surveys and improving the state and federal data  
10 exchange and harvesting power of advanced technology and  
11 artificial intelligence to provide more timely scientific advice  
12 from video and acoustic surveys in this region.  
13  
14 The emphasis will be placed on partnership with the Gulf States  
15 Marine Fisheries Commission, as I mentioned, and the state  
16 agencies, and, again, the intent of these funds were to go out  
17 the door, and it's not to stay internally on the federal side,  
18 unlike a few of the other buckets, and so this was the main  
19 overview. It is primarily for red snapper, and it's because of  
20 the issues with that key widespread fish species that the money  
21 was put there, but we do feel that the advanced that can be made  
22 with advanced technology, data improvements, state-federal data  
23 partnerships, will cross over to other species as well.  
24  
25 Again, the intent, and our goals, are to work collaboratively  
26 with the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, and we had a  
27 meeting, about a month or a month-and-a-half ago, with Dave and  
28 Gregg down there, and Clay and Andy and I and Richard Cody were  
29 down there, and it's really to identify how we can work closely  
30 with the Gulf States and work with them to increase the  
31 accessibility of state fishery-dependent survey data, to really  
32 create GulfFIN as sort of a central hub for data and modernize  
33 their ability to do so, and that's a huge investment for us in  
34 this bucket.  
35  
36 We also are looking to develop and implement Gulf of Mexico  
37 video and acoustic camera surveys to improve our reef fish  
38 timeliness and generation of density estimates. As Clay  
39 described this, this is sort of a mini Great Red Snapper Count  
40 that we can do on a more recurring timeline, at least through  
41 IRA, but this gives us an ability to extend that one point in  
42 time, and then a bulk of the money is to be invested in  
43 improving and groundtruthing estimates of recreational fishing  
44 effort and discards, which represent the two greatest sources of  
45 uncertainty in managing and assessing the Gulf of Mexico reef  
46 fish.  
47  
48 Again, for these, aside from the Gulf States Marine Fisheries

1 Commission, that's probably the furthest along, and we're still  
2 in conversations with Dave and Gregg and others, and we have the  
3 intent that is out there, but the mechanisms, and the way that  
4 we're doing it, we're still in development of this, and that's  
5 what we're doing over the next few months, is to create these  
6 implementation plans, and so we're offering this today to give  
7 you the overview of the intent of what we're looking to solve.

8  
9 We did make promises, and this is the way that we had to write  
10 these proposals for IRA, and we made promises to what we would  
11 achieve with the funding, but we didn't go through the details  
12 and the mechanisms as to how to achieve that, and so that's what  
13 we have, is we have the intent and the goals that are set, but  
14 we don't have the mechanisms set, and that's this planning  
15 timeline that we're on right now.

16  
17 The next bucket I'm going to talk about this essential data  
18 collection and advanced technologies. The subcomponent leads  
19 are Kristen Koch, who is the Science Director from the Southwest  
20 Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, with Tia Brown, who is the  
21 Deputy Director of the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center  
22 in Honolulu. They're the leads for this bucket, these two  
23 topics.

24  
25 Again, that's \$1.45, and so, in terms of -- We didn't get \$1.45  
26 billion, and I wish we did, and we have \$145 million, which is  
27 \$0.145 billion, and so there's just a decimal point error, and I  
28 apologize about that. If anybody wants to help increase that by  
29 ten, I'm more than happy to talk with you at the break, but we  
30 have \$145 million total for this bucket.

31  
32 It does include the data modernization piece, and so, again,  
33 we're looking at about \$105 to \$107.5 million going to this  
34 essential data acquisition and advanced technology. The goal of  
35 what we proposed for this was to mitigate the recent loss of at-  
36 sea survey capabilities, and this is in conjunction with losses  
37 that we had in COVID, the cost of inflation, the inability to  
38 hire staff for OMAO, or Office of Marine and Aviation  
39 Operations, and so how do we mitigate that in the short-term,  
40 while we try to rebuild.

41  
42 Again, essential data acquisition means that we're investing  
43 funds in getting the data that we need to get into the  
44 scientific process and manage the resources in the regions.  
45 This is across the country, but there is point of -- There are  
46 funds being -- Especially down in the Southeast, and so, again,  
47 that's part of advanced technology, is, while we're trying to  
48 mitigate to get us back to being able to collect data for

1 surveys at a level of probably back in 2018, because of the  
2 issues that we see, because of the need to incorporate and  
3 acquire even more data, we feel that, without incorporating  
4 advanced technology and diversifying the way we apply our data,  
5 we're not going to have a really bright future, and so we're  
6 looking to also operationalize advanced technology, and so, in  
7 this, we have about seven different advanced technologies that  
8 we have gone through.

9  
10 There was a next-generation data acquisition planning exercise  
11 that helped identify the ones that we chose to invest in, and so  
12 we are investing in advanced technology to get to an  
13 operationalization to help us diversify this ocean acquisition  
14 to allow us to get the data that we need.

15  
16 Specifically for this region, one of the things that we decided  
17 upon early was to set aside a million dollars for the Southeast  
18 Fisheries Science Center to acquire another small boat, around  
19 the same size as the Southern Journey, and the reason for this  
20 was that a lot of the work that's being done, especially in this  
21 region, could use a small boat, could leverage it, and we made  
22 the purchase, and the money was given to Clay, and he's going  
23 out to look for that vessel now.

24  
25 There will be a retrofit that's also part of this, to ensure  
26 that it can do the operations needed in the Southeast Fisheries  
27 Science Center, and then, in our annual appropriations, we will  
28 set aside an operating budget for this vessel. This vessel now  
29 becomes part of our diversified fleet to help collect the  
30 information that we need in this region.

31  
32 Again, the goals for us here, what we promised in this, is that  
33 we said that we would operationalize the data tools that were  
34 recommended in this next-generation data acquisition plan, and  
35 that is almost finished, and I have a version in my inbox that  
36 we're reviewing for final content, and then we will release that  
37 to the public. That does identify the advanced technologies, as  
38 well as ways to acquire data for us in the Fisheries Service,  
39 and that was used to inform the prioritization for these  
40 advanced technology fleets.

41  
42 We want to lead us to a distributed fleet, so that we can  
43 leverage risk, and we don't have risk in one particular set of  
44 assets to acquire data, and we hope that the IRA can transform  
45 us into that diversified capability.

46  
47 We set this up under what we call Strategic Initiative Working  
48 Groups, and that allows us to have project management in each of

1 the advanced technologies nationally, with an established lead,  
2 and they are working to create proposals right now for how they  
3 are planning to operationalize those advanced technologies, and,  
4 again, the ones that we're talking about are uncrewed systems,  
5 omics, advanced acoustic systems, active as well as passive,  
6 optical systems, camera-based, remote sensing and satellite, as  
7 well as others, and then social science, which we put in there  
8 as a strategic initiative, and so these are all ways to acquire  
9 data that we're doing beyond the traditional means on our white  
10 vessels.

11  
12 Again, we emphasized the use of advanced technology and  
13 coordination with our strategic use of funds for this  
14 traditional platform data primarily in 2023 and 2024, to allow  
15 us to keep the cadence and the amount of data acquired to be  
16 commensurate with what the science needs are in the agency.

17  
18 Then this is the one that is specific to the councils, and what  
19 I wanted to point out is that Kelly Denit, who is the Director  
20 of the Office of Sustainable Fisheries, is the lead on this one,  
21 and I will go through the slides that she created for us, and  
22 it's sort of a high-level overview, and I know that Dr. Simmons  
23 is going to talk more on this.

24  
25 Again, I do understand that there's an active conversation in  
26 this space, and I will present you what we have currently right  
27 now in the current plan, and I will answer whatever questions I  
28 can on this, and then Dr. Simmons is going to go further, and  
29 there will be a discussion.

30  
31 The total amount is \$20 million in total funding from FY2023 to  
32 2026, and the way that it's set up, and that Kelly described it,  
33 is this will be proposal-based, and, in the proposals, the  
34 councils must create proposals that are focused on fishery  
35 management and governance topics.

36  
37 The actions that are funded under IRA will contribute to the  
38 following goals, and that would be implementation of fishery  
39 management measures needed to advance climate-ready fisheries,  
40 by improving climate resiliency and responsiveness, development  
41 and advancement of climate-related fisheries management planning  
42 and implementation efforts in support of underserved  
43 communities, and, again, if you remember, the entire bucket was  
44 called climate-ready fisheries, and our overarching proposal was  
45 to help the Fisheries Service, the councils, management and  
46 science, transform into an entity that is able to do climate-  
47 ready management and provide climate-ready science products.  
48 That is why you see a lot of this flavor overarching in the

1 guidance from these documents.

2  
3 Again, some of the priorities that were set forward, trying to  
4 operationalize the fish climate vulnerability assessments or  
5 other scientific products, like the ecosystem status reports,  
6 integrated ecosystem assessments, and, again, part of this is to  
7 get to just ecosystem-based fishery management, but really this  
8 climate-ready framework that we're really looking to move to  
9 over the years.

10  
11 Operationalize recommendations from the climate scenario  
12 planning efforts that have been done, implement management  
13 changes to address climate vulnerability, improve climate-  
14 resiliency of fisheries, including those are important to  
15 underserved communities, and so things you're hearing in  
16 fisheries and the EEJ input into underserved communities.

17  
18 Implement measures that increase the responsiveness of  
19 allocations or other management measures to climate impacts and  
20 develop and advance climate-related fisheries management  
21 planning and implementation efforts in support of the  
22 underserved communities, again.

23  
24 The criteria here, I'm not going to read the whole thing, but,  
25 again, you can see this was set up a proposal-based system, and  
26 the council could submit these based on the goals they were  
27 looking to achieve. You know, the purpose of the IRA funding as  
28 well, and I've reiterated that the funds need to be obligated by  
29 September 30, 2026, and so this is a short-term investment, and  
30 that is why words such as "transformational" have been used,  
31 because this is a three-year pulse to really help us get to a  
32 future state that then the intent would be for us to be able to  
33 support that in annual appropriations, assuming that the annual  
34 appropriations are what we have now and not assuming increases,  
35 and so, again, the hope is that we can show this  
36 transformational capability, and we can also hopefully show  
37 that, if there is an increased need, we can advocate for that,  
38 but we should not plan for those being there post-2026.

39  
40 Again, there will be high-priority consideration given to  
41 actions that leverage existing tools, and not to create any new  
42 ones, and actions that are completed within this three-year  
43 timeframe, and then, where possible, cross-council projects and  
44 initiatives, where they make sense, and so those were the  
45 criteria that were set forward.

46  
47 In terms of the process, FY23, again, is sort of in the same  
48 spirit of we were given a very short time before September 30 of

1 this year to implement things, and so, rather than try to rush,  
2 let's work to get the conversation started and getting the  
3 planning team operating, and then we go to the out years, where  
4 most of the work would happen, and so FY23 is set up to allow  
5 for finalizing the priorities for projects, based on feedback,  
6 and initiating the specific grants to each council.

7  
8 Then, in the out years, they would release the proposals and  
9 execute the technical review to get this process started,  
10 determine the funding amounts to each council, and then adding  
11 funds to specific grants to the councils happening in that early  
12 time period, and I would assume more in the 2024 than later,  
13 because you want to get started on this.

14  
15 They would monitor progress through time, and then all the  
16 actions must be completed, or in the final phases of approval,  
17 by 2027, and that is said there because we have to obligate the  
18 funds from the federal government by September 30, but, if it's  
19 obligated to a grant for that mechanism, then there could be a  
20 way for it to extend beyond that date, because the money is  
21 obligated, but it would need to be finished up in short order,  
22 and so the 2027 is what they have is when things need to be  
23 finalized by.

24  
25 Again, the next steps, and I think this is the conversation, Dr.  
26 Simmons, that you're going to go through, but refine the  
27 priorities and criteria based on feedback, implement the grants,  
28 and the request for proposal opens, and then we would go through  
29 the technical review and get started in FY24, and then they  
30 would work with you to support completion of the identified  
31 projects and implementation of management measures.

32  
33 That is all that I have today for the overview, and, again, for  
34 us, we have been working on this for a long time, creating and  
35 revising and presenting, and OMB approved this a month or a  
36 month-and-a-half ago, and we started the conversations, and  
37 these are the presentations we've been given, really to give an  
38 overview of information, and now it's time for those  
39 conversations to get us to the final planning and execution, and  
40 so, with that, Dr. Simmons, thank you for the opportunity to  
41 speak here today, and I will turn it back to you for questions.

42  
43 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** All right. Thank you, Dr. Howell. Is  
44 there any questions? Mr. Gill.

45  
46 **MR. GILL:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Dr. Howell,  
47 for the presentation and the information. I would assume it's  
48 in the works, but, if it's not, I would like to request that we

1 get at least an annual update on the expenditure of these funds  
2 and the progress made relative to that, and I guess that would  
3 come somewhat from the Science Center, or perhaps from Dr.  
4 Simmons, but, from the agency standpoint, that you update us to  
5 as to what's happening and what progress is being made or not  
6 being made. Thank you.

7  
8 **DR. HOWELL:** I appreciate the point, Mr. Gill, and, yes, and, I  
9 mean, I think we're working on the timing of when we give those  
10 updates, and we're going to have to provide those updates to  
11 Congress, but their approach for IRA is that we want to be able  
12 to publicly state, you know, what we're working on, especially  
13 the things that are crossed over with partners, and, more  
14 importantly, if there are things that are internal, for  
15 transparency and communication, and so I appreciate your point,  
16 and I will take that back, and there's also more influence to  
17 get us to come up with that earlier.

18  
19 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Mr. Anson.

20  
21 **MR. KEVIN ANSON:** I'm not on your committee, and thank you for  
22 recognizing me. Thank you, Dr. Howell, for the presentation and  
23 the information. Just a point of clarification, and you  
24 mentioned obligated, funds being obligated, and then the actions  
25 being completed within three years, that time period, and I just  
26 wanted to make sure that you can have funds obligated, but then  
27 that's obligated toward a project that can be multiple years in  
28 length, and then that activity would go on for the additional  
29 time and then be completed, and so I just wanted to make sure,  
30 and do the funds have to be obligated and completed,  
31 essentially, by the end of FY26, or can a project be started,  
32 i.e., obligated, the funds obligated, but then go over past that  
33 time?

34  
35 **DR. HOWELL:** I will give you what I know today, which is that,  
36 as far as I'm aware, and we're looking at the mechanisms, if we  
37 obligate, as the federal government, by September, we can  
38 obligate to a contract or a grant or a project that can extend  
39 for the life of that project, but it would depend on the  
40 mechanism, and so it will be an active conversation, but, yes,  
41 as far as I'm aware, there is the potential to extend beyond  
42 that, based on the mechanism.

43  
44 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Mr. Geeslin.

45  
46 **MR. DAKUS GEESLIN:** Thank you, Dr. Howell, and I appreciate you  
47 sharing this with us, and I'm certainly encouraged by all the  
48 multiple streams of funding coming in to address really complex

1 issues, and as we, as council members, and you all at the  
2 service are dealing with, and we've got the IRA coming our way,  
3 and we've got the rec initiative that Mr. Strelcheck laid out a  
4 couple of meetings ago, and, more recently, we have the FES  
5 challenge that we need to navigate through.

6  
7 As we continue to look at these circles swirling around, I just  
8 want us to think about how we leverage those and coordinate all  
9 those moving parts, so that we don't have three different  
10 distinct efforts ongoing and that we're not leveraging some kind  
11 of complementary, you know, goals in mind, and it seems like  
12 there's just a lot coming at us right now, and maybe we'll  
13 continue those discussions, and maybe hear a little bit more  
14 about some of that, during your lunchtime address. Thank you.

15  
16 **DR. HOWELL:** Point taken, and I appreciate that, and I think  
17 that, for all of us, we're looking to do that, and I think, in  
18 my mind, using the existing teams and mechanisms that are  
19 available for us, in terms of some of the crossover of the  
20 regional implementation teams, the transition teams, as well as  
21 the council process, but, also, if we can tighten our annual  
22 planning, and getting to Mr. Gill's point, and, I mean, if we  
23 have an annual planning, and I'm not sure how it's done here in  
24 the Southeast, but, if for the Southeast, the Science Center and  
25 the management entity come up with annual goals, and then we can  
26 look at progress there and make sure that we're still aligned,  
27 and I'm offering that as one potential, and you know it better  
28 than I do, but I think that's something that we can talk  
29 through.

30  
31 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Dr. Simmons.

32  
33 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you  
34 for the presentation. Evan, do you know when the decision will  
35 be made regarding -- I think it's like the data acquisition  
36 piece of the funding, and when will you know how much each  
37 region is going to receive? How is that process going to work?

38  
39 **DR. HOWELL:** Sure, and so, for us, we had to make a decision on  
40 what to allocate, meaning where to send funds for our Fiscal  
41 Year 2023, because, by the time we were approved, the money had  
42 to do, and it does not have to be spent, unlike most government  
43 money, in the fiscal year, in a two-year process for  
44 appropriations, and so the money that we received can extend  
45 until 2026, and that was something different for us, and so we  
46 don't have to spend it right now, but we had to allocate it.  
47 For us, we allocated it based on where we thought it needed to  
48 go, and so the initial things were say the boat at the Southeast

1 Fisheries Science Center, investments like that.

2  
3 For FY24 allocations, which we expect more to go out the door,  
4 we are looking to make those probably in the next couple of  
5 months, and I think that there need to be an initial proposal  
6 put together by September 30, and so we're kind of in that point  
7 right now, and I think that's why you might be feeling a little  
8 bit of a push for us to get some plans together, and so I do  
9 think that, if there are things that you want to offer as  
10 feedback, now is a great time to do it, to get it into that for  
11 the FY24, and we will be asking for funds every year through  
12 2024, 2025, and 2026.

13  
14 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Go ahead, Dr. Simmons.

15  
16 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and so I can  
17 certainly work with Dr. Walter and Dr. Porch, but, I mean, in  
18 the Southeast, we are so data-poor, for many of our surveys, on  
19 many of our just highly-targeted species, and we don't have  
20 basic life history information.

21  
22 We don't know where many of the species are recruiting to,  
23 because the current surveys that we have don't capture that, and  
24 so I think that there's a lot of work, you know, that we could  
25 do there to build upon the current process, and I understand  
26 that, after a certain number of years, that that funding goes  
27 away, but perhaps there's a better way, during this trial  
28 period, that we decide to phase out a different survey and move  
29 forward with one of the new surveys, or whatever happens that  
30 way, but there's just many data gaps in the Southeast that I  
31 really hope that some of this funding can be used to help us  
32 fill in those gaps.

33  
34 You know, just for example, we don't know where some of the king  
35 mackerel recruit to, and we don't know where the amberjack, the  
36 small amberjack, are recruiting to, and we don't have a survey,  
37 currently, that captures that, and so that's just an example.  
38 Thank you.

39  
40 **DR. HOWELL:** That's a great point. I would recommend, for any  
41 council, and I will say that here specifically, work with your  
42 local Science Center and Regional Office. They are the best  
43 point of contact right now, in sort of allocating out what's  
44 needed, and we have these issues throughout, but you have a very  
45 unique situation here, with the number of species that you have  
46 and the paucity of data that you have.

47  
48 Each region has their own unique -- Some might see a tremendous

1 need on one species, and you might have a tremendous need on  
2 multiple, and so I do think that talking with Clay and Andy  
3 about, you know, what techniques -- I like your approach of like  
4 how we might take out something out to transform to that new  
5 survey that would be more long-term and stable, and that is  
6 something that we can talk about, and so I would say let's  
7 continue to work with them, and feel free to reach out to me  
8 directly as well, and I think that's what we're looking at here,  
9 is sort of those essential data needs.

10  
11 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Any other questions? Thank you, Dr.  
12 Howell. We appreciate it, and thank you so much for coming  
13 here, and that was very interesting, and we look forward to the  
14 lunch.

15  
16 **DR. HOWELL:** Yes. Me too. Thanks very much.

17  
18 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** All right. Dr. Simmons.

19  
20 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** All right. Thank you, Mr. Chair,  
21 and so I'm going to now walk the committee through Tab G, Number  
22 6(c), and so these slides speak to a follow-up, and we had  
23 several follow-up meetings, but kind of the outcome from the  
24 meetings we had after the July 17 briefing, and this just speaks  
25 to the regional management council pot of the IRA funding that  
26 we're talking about, the \$20 million that the councils  
27 potentially would receive.

28  
29 In a memo to Ms. Denit and Dan Namur and others, we made it  
30 clear that we don't want to compete for the funding against  
31 other regional management councils. We felt like it's not  
32 practicable or really an efficient use of our resources to  
33 compete against other regional councils for this pot of funding.

34  
35 In the proposal to us, the councils were encouraged to develop  
36 collaborative projects, and we felt that a competition would not  
37 support the collaborative, you know, camaraderie of us putting  
38 together these proposals, if that was in fact the encouragement  
39 for this fund, and so we felt that that was counterproductive.

40  
41 The other concern that we had was the list of priorities that  
42 was presented to the regional councils, and many of the regional  
43 councils aren't on even footing, as far as like the ecosystem  
44 status reports, and we're working on updating ours, but many  
45 other councils get those on an annual basis, and other regional  
46 councils have climate vulnerability indices, and we don't have  
47 one of those in the Gulf right now, and so, if we were to  
48 compete, many of the councils really weren't on even footing to

1 start with, and, if we're being, I guess, graded on whether or  
2 not we could operationalize those various products through the  
3 council process, and so that was the other concern regarding  
4 competition.

5  
6 Then, you know, just being nearly impossible to come to you all  
7 to talk about, you know, having a plan without having a number  
8 that we know that -- We also thought that it created an undue  
9 administrative burden for all involved.

10  
11 One of the proposals to the regional management councils was the  
12 additional proposed funding of \$2 million to be divided up among  
13 the regional councils, and there was a couple of different ways  
14 that could happen. It could be equally, or it could have been  
15 based on our council apportionment on our admin award, but we  
16 just felt that was too small to start with, and so this is the  
17 initial pot of money that we're expecting come October 1.

18  
19 We thought that that was too low to create a framework for  
20 developing these programs, which require more stability and  
21 workload and other things for infrastructure, staffing-wise, for  
22 us to really try to operationalize this and use this funding  
23 appropriately, and so, as part of this, the IRA funds cannot be  
24 used to pay for current staff, which is the other reason we  
25 thought that the \$2 million divided among the regional councils  
26 was too small, because -- Unless you take your current staff and  
27 move them to the IRA responsibilities, and we are currently at  
28 capacity with the current ongoing council activities, and so,  
29 again, we thought that number was too low.

30  
31 More practicable initial funding would be something we came up  
32 with around \$6 million, and that could be equally divided  
33 amongst the councils, and that number was kind of -- Different  
34 councils had different needs, but one of the things that we were  
35 thinking about is that would help a council hire a contractor  
36 for three years, because it's very difficult to bring someone  
37 onboard and hire them when you only have one year of funding,  
38 and, by the time you get them in place, sometimes you only have  
39 eight months of funding left, and we thought that could provide  
40 stability, and that would be a more appropriate number to start  
41 with for the regional councils.

42  
43 Each council would then provide a budget and a narrative for  
44 review and approval, prior to the release of that funding. We  
45 really appreciate the concept of the funding, but we just felt  
46 that initial funding was just too low.

47  
48 If we were to get something like more along the lines of the \$6

1 million to start with, that would give us roughly \$14 million  
2 left, and then that could be allocated across the councils,  
3 depending on, you know, what the final decision is, and we would  
4 be able to provide those proposals, and we would have a known  
5 budget that we could bring to our council, and constituents  
6 could weigh-in for those particular funds, and that would help  
7 us prepare and, you know, have actual operational activities  
8 that we could better incorporate into our management decisions.

9  
10 What staff is recommending for our follow-up steps is we have a  
11 call, and so we put this request in, and we don't know any of  
12 our answers yet, and we have a follow-up call with all the  
13 regional management councils and NOAA leadership, and that's  
14 going to happen on August 22.

15  
16 Hopefully, once that initial funding amount is determined, staff  
17 will develop a budget and a narrative to submit to the Regional  
18 Grant Coordinator, and that will have to happen ASAP, right,  
19 because they're releasing that money on October 1 of this year,  
20 is our understanding, and then, during our October council  
21 meeting, we'll brief the council on that and start thinking  
22 about, depending on this process and what they decide, whether  
23 it's going to be competitive or not, how we go about developing  
24 our proposals and budget narratives for the remaining funding  
25 and what that would look like and what we might accomplish with  
26 that funding for October. I think the next slide is just  
27 pictures from our trip to the Keys for questions and feedback.

28  
29 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Okay. Is there any questions for Dr.  
30 Simmons? Mr. Gill.

31  
32 **MR. GILL:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Dr. Simmons.  
33 Do I understand correctly that there have been no discussions  
34 with the agency leadership to this point relative to this  
35 concept, and their reaction to it, and that is coming after  
36 this, or during this, call here next week?

37  
38 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** I mean, I think there's been side  
39 conversations, but no formal consultation, since this proposal  
40 was developed and sent back to NOAA leadership. I think that's  
41 what we're trying to accomplish with the August 22 call.

42  
43 **MR. GILL:** So there's no indication, at this point, whether the  
44 agency is willing to entertain this idea or not, and you will  
45 determine that next week and then see what you do from there,  
46 correct?

47  
48 **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SIMMONS:** Correct. That's the boat we're in,

1 I believe.

2

3 **CHAIRMAN SPRAGGINS:** Okay. Any other questions? Since Item (b)  
4 has been scratched from it, we'll move forward now to Other  
5 Business. Any other business that we need to bring up? If not,  
6 Mr. Chairman, that completes our report.

7

8 (Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on August 14, 2023.)

9

10

- - -