

**Ecosystem Committee Report
June 5, 2023
Mr. Kevin Anson – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab Q, No. 1**) of the April 2022 meeting and approved the minutes (**Tab Q, No. 2**) as modified.

Ecosystem Technical Committee (ETC) Report (Tab Q, No. 4)

Council staff summarized the discussions and recommendations from the April 2023 ETC meeting. The ETC began work on the Council’s task to identify, prioritize and recommend the top four Fishery Ecosystem Issues (FEI) for incorporation into the Council’s Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) process. Council staff presented a draft list of potential FEIs and ranking criteria. This list is preliminary and does not represent the ETC’s final recommendation or stakeholder feedback.

A Committee member commented that, from the list, discards and climate change may be of higher priority to the Council. Another Committee member thought an “urgency” component under the “pathway to actionability” criteria should rank higher. The Committee member also recommended the ETC combine “reducing discards” and “finfish depredation” as a single FEI. Council staff cautioned that the size and scope of FEIs may need some additional thought and refinement in order to be useful to the Council and inform management decisions. The Committee was encouraged to think about “reducing discards” as a FEI during Reef Fish Committee discussions, and how it relates to the various fisheries and fleets. This may help refine the size and scope of the “reducing discards” FEI and ultimately provide guidance for the Council to consider.

Another Committee member suggested that, in addition to discards, climate change may be another FEI that could be ranked higher given that its effects span the entirety of the Gulf (e.g., biologically, socially, and economically). Regarding the FEI loop, the Committee member recommended finding ways to engage outside funding and research entities, and letting them know of research needs that would support management decisions.

The Committee noted that if offshore wind energy, one of the FEIs in the draft list, was selected by the Council, the pathway to management may be limited to providing letters and encouraging extra-jurisdictional partnerships and not necessarily result in a fisheries management action. The SEFSC is developing an ecosystem-based fisheries management strategic plan with offshore wind energy listed as one of its priorities, since it’s also a focus of the current federal administration. SEFSC staff also suggested that, for the FEP to be successful, the priorities should be FEIs on which the Council can have a direct influence beyond submitting comments and letters.

The Committee recommends and I so move, to direct the Ecosystem Technical Committee to remove offshore wind energy and achieving optimum yield for the reef fish complex from the working list of FEIs.

Motion carried with one in opposition.

Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Recommendations on a Gulf of Mexico Ecosystem Model to Support Fisheries Management (Tab Q, No. 5)

Mr. John Mareska reviewed a presentation by Drs. Skyler Sagarese and Holden Harris to the SSC in May 2023 about a model to address ecological questions and how biomass targets could be achieved via modification of fishing pressure. The model was based on menhaden and its predators, and used Ecopath to evaluate trophic hierarchy and included fisheries data; Ecosim was used to evaluate temporal drivers, and Ecospace for spatial drivers. The model can still be improved with additional data on species overlap and bycatch, size of prey, environmental drivers, alternate configurations and robust reviews. The SSC thought the model would be valuable for identifying FEIs for the Council's FEP.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.