

Standing, Reef Fish, Socioeconomic, and Ecosystem SSC
Meeting Summary
May 7 – 8, 2024
Virtual Meeting

The meeting of the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Standing, Reef Fish, Socioeconomic, and Ecosystem Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC) was convened at 8:30 AM EDT on May 7, 2024. The agenda for this meeting was approved along with the minutes from the February 2024 SSC meeting. [Verbatim minutes from past SSC meetings can be reviewed here.](#)

Dr. Jim Nance will represent the SSC at the Council's June 24 – 27, 2024, meeting in Houston, Texas.

Review of SEDAR 98: Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Terms of Reference and Participants

Dr. Katie Siegfried (Southeast Fisheries Science Center [SEFSC]) discussed the development of the terms of reference (TORs) for the upcoming benchmark assessment for Gulf red snapper (SEDAR 98). This assessment will be comprised of an in-person Data Workshop, a webinar-based Assessment Process, and an in-person Review Workshop with an independent peer-review to include the Center for Independent Experts. Dr. Siegfried lauded the interaction between SEFSC and Council staff to develop the initial draft TORs.

An SSC member asked about the stock identification process and thought it important to clarify that red snapper is being analyzed using a three-area model, even though it is a single-unit stock. Another SSC member countered that the three-area model was refuted by the peer-review for SEDAR 74 and asked about the flexibility afforded to the analytical team. Dr. Siegfried replied that the data could not be provided to satisfy both a two- and three-area model framework without significant increases in time requirements. However, the analysts could apply more flexibility to how mirroring between regions is used. The SSC member did not agree, stating that the central and eastern regions could be collapsed into the region formerly defined as the "east" in the prior two-area model. An SSC member recalled that the SSC passed a motion to continue development with the three-area model at its February 2024 meeting, following its review of SEDAR 74. Another SSC member thought that there would be no option for the analysts to explore alternatives if they were forced to use the three-area model. Dr. Siegfried replied that the three-area setup in the Data Workshop was mostly for data providers; however, analysts could explore other methods during the Assessment Process. An SSC member cautioned on attempting more complexity than was able to be supported by the data.

Regarding life history data, an SSC member recommended noting that those data should be considered by both source and applicable area. For the fishery-independent composite video survey (G-FISHER), Dr. Siegfried noted a desire to further explore variations in spatiotemporal patterns in composition data from the original three video surveys that make up G-FISHER.

For recreational catch statistics, Dr. Siegfried noted a need for a common data unit across all recreational data. Council staff thought clarification was needed to make sure the recreational catch statistics were provided in a manner germane with the three-area model. An SSC member noted Texas' opposition to the use of the 10.81 multiplier that was recommended during the data workshop in SEDAR 74. Council staff added that the multiplier predated the announcement of the bias by the NOAA Office of Science and Technology (OST) in the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) and asked if that would be re-evaluated. Dr. Siegfried replied that the calibrations for all the states needed to be verified considering the announced bias and thought that work was worth noting explicitly in the TORs. She added that she expected a staff member from NOAA OST attend the Data Workshop to support those discussions.

Dr. Siegfried discussed the SEDAR 74 review's comments on external surveys like the Great Red Snapper Count (GRSC), and the complementary study for Louisiana waters by LGL Ecological Associates. The main concern of the Review Panel was the estimation and treatment of catchability across different areas of the Gulf by various PIs. Thus, it was recommended that the principal investigators for the GRSC and LGL studies be available to assist as needed. An SSC member commented on catchability estimation and validation in the eastern Gulf, and model implications for the use of priors either informed or not by GRSC estimates.

Dr. Siegfried discussed the Assessment Process and noted that a strict continuity model based on SEDAR 52 would not be possible due to changes in the data and the use of a three- versus two-area model; however, a model bridging analysis will be provided to the extent practicable. Regarding status determination criteria, an SSC member noted the tendency of projections to recommend fishing a stock down to its biomass level at maximum sustainable yield (B_{MSY}). Another SSC member asked about fishing instead to optimum yield (OY). Council staff noted that $OY = 75\%$ of the yield at the fishing mortality rate at MSY (F_{MSY}). NOAA had advised the Council against setting the catch limit equal to OY. An SSC member recommended explicitly noting the OY definition in the TORs.

Dr. Siegfried reviewed the TORs for the Review Workshop. An SSC member thought it important for the Review Workshop to conduct its review considerate of the data available, as opposed to any subjective opinions about the optimal data availability.

Dr. Siegfried noted that the Data Workshop would have life history, recreational statistics, external surveys, and indices/shrimp bycatch working groups. Council staff requested that SSC members serving on panels during the stock assessment process will be asked to report out on the progress of those panels to the SSC. This occasional reporting will keep the whole SSC informed and will also assist future panelists of points of concern. The SSC offered the following volunteers for the SEDAR 98 Data Workshop (working group):

- Jim Nance (Indices and Shrimp Bycatch)
- Jason Adriance (Recreational Statistics)
- John Mareska (Life History; External Surveys)
- Trevor Moncrief (Recreational Statistics)
- Will Patterson (External Surveys)
- Jim Tolan (Life History)

- Steven Scyphers (Recreational Statistics; External Surveys)

SEFSC Progress Report MRIP-FES Steering Team

Dr. Cassidy Peterson (SEFSC) provided an overview of a desk Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) exercise to evaluate modifying catch limits using the percent change in a fishery index as a reference. Specifically, the project examined the effect of the unknown magnitude of recreational landings data on management performance for Gulf of Mexico stocks. To complete the analysis several assumptions were made, including no sector allocations, a single fishing fleet, and landings known without error.

The SSC supported the SEFSC's exploration of novel approaches in fisheries management but also voiced some concerns about the practicality of the presented exercise. The SSC and Council staff noted that these assumptions would not be valid for many of the stocks of interest and would require additional investigation to consider instances where one or more these assumptions are not met. For example, several SSC members noted that assuming no sector allocation is not reflective of current management goals for most species and that future iterations of the model will need to account for varying allocation. Another SSC member recommended relaxing the assumption that the proportionality between SSB and the index is linear to see how the model responded.

An SSC member asked how the MSE is more helpful than reviewing stock assessment results with and without MRIP-FES. Dr. Peterson replied that the goal of the exploration was to assess the effect on management rather than the stock assessment. She continued that once the MSE process is more developed, other management questions such as model complexity could be addressed. Dr. Peterson was asked to provide an example of how an MSE could engage partners, and she responded that management objectives within the various Fishery Management Plans would be a place to start. She also, suggested holding workshops with stakeholders to consider and prioritize management objectives, with the outcomes of these workshops reviewed by the SSC (this is akin to a stakeholder involved MSE). Council staff asked how using MSE would relate to managing to optimum yield and Dr. Peterson replied that a full stakeholder MSE would be required in that case.

Public Comment, May 7

Bob Zales II – Southeastern Fisheries Association

- A letter sent to Janet Coit, the Assistant Administrator of NOAA Fisheries, from numerous members of Congress and the Senate shares a perspective that he agrees with. MREP-FES, while considered the best scientific information available, is not correct and the agency admits that estimates are not correct.
- He likes the idea of working outside the box to expedite stock assessments. He supports finding a way to make annual updates by assessing what is happening each year rather than waiting for years between assessments. He suggests that stakeholders should be involved in that process because they are the first to recognize when there is an issue or when a stock is recovering.
- There is an issue with king mackerel. While he does not know if there is an issue with the stock or if the fish have just relocated, he knows they are not present where they have been historically.

Assessing Equity in the Distribution of Fisheries Management Benefits: Data and Information Availability

Dr. Steven Scyphers (SSC) summarized the National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine (NAS) study assessing equity in the distribution of fisheries management benefits. He noted that the study was requested by NOAA Fisheries and reviewed the study's statement of work, which includes the determination of the categories of information required to adequately assess where and to whom the primary benefits of commercial and for-hire fishery management accrue. The statement of work also evaluated what information currently exists within those categories and what additional information, if any, NOAA Fisheries would need to collect. The statement of work also included the identification of potential obstacles to collecting these additional data and of methodologies the agency could use to assess the relative distribution of benefits from federal commercial and for-hire fishery management based on available information.

Dr. Scyphers discussed the multi-dimensional nature of equity and noted that the NAS study focused on distributional issues including equity subjects (recipients) and criteria to measure equity using two approaches. First, the committee only considered the distributional benefits directly accruing from the issuance of permits and the assignment of quotas. Second, the Committee considered a holistic and multidimensional definition of equity.

Dr. Scyphers discussed select recommendations from the report, including that NOAA should:

- Develop and implement a contextual, place-based, and participatory approach to identifying and integrating multi-dimensional equity considerations into decision-making processes.
- Take advantage of current opportunities both within the agency and in academia to expand work on equity by generating dashboards and data summaries that more fully express the distribution of permits and quota holdings in the nation's fisheries.
- Develop guidance documents to inform and establish principles that lead to definitions of equity and processes for measuring and assessing equity over time by NMFS, regional science centers, and Council staff.
- Undertake a needs assessment in each region and at the national level that can provide guidance on different investment strategies for developing social science capacity and leadership within the agency.
- Transition to operational data collection and assessment programs, supported by the increased social science capacity.
- Commit to regular collection, analyses, and interpretation of social and economic data to characterize the full flow of benefits and beneficiaries from the nation's fisheries.
- Continue developing community-level indicators of fishing engagement, dependence, and reliance.
- Continue its work on equity in the nation's fisheries and move beyond a focus on distributional outcomes associated with permit and quota holdings to a more multi-dimensional assessment of equity.
- Elevate qualitative data/methods and mixed methods approaches to assessing procedural, recognitional, and contextual equity in fisheries management decision-making.

SSC members asked about participatory management including fishermen' traditional, local, and ecological knowledge in the into the fisheries management process. Dr. Scyphers replied that the study didn't provide a general answer due to the diversity and regional specificities in fisheries. The SSC asked about opportunities for short-term ways to include equity considerations in management. Dr. Scyphers noted that data limitations may be an hinderance. When NOAA Fisheries has information on participant lists, e.g., permit holders, the distribution of quota can be assessed; however, setting equity-related goals would be left to regional fishery management councils. At a community level, indicators can be used to evaluate where benefits accrue. He stated that equity must be linked to the management context and that the NAS study recommended more systematic data collection. For example, the social indicators should be updated frequently.

The SSC asked how the report was received by NOAA Fisheries and the agency's response to the recommendations. Dr. Scyphers indicated that this study is the first step of a two-part process. The second part would be a follow-up study that would assess equity in a set of fisheries. SSC members will look forward to the evaluation of equity in specific Gulf fisheries.

SSC members noted that most economists do not typically emphasize equity considerations and that more appreciation for the value of equity and qualitative information would be warranted. The SSC recognized the importance of access to fisheries benefits and noted that access to fishery governance, including to decision-making bodies like the Council is another significant consideration. The SSC asked how access to the Council process was discussed by the NAS Committee. Dr. Scyphers replied that Council dynamics were not discussed and noted that discussions relative to crew compensation and stakeholder diversity were limited by time. He noted that if a follow-up study is conducted, it may address some of these issues. The SSC expressed support for a follow-up study and approved the following motion:

The Gulf SSC recommends that NOAA Fisheries request the National Academies of Sciences to follow up on "Assessing Equity in the Distribution of Fisheries Management Benefits" with a second Consensus Study Report that, as noted in the current report, "would build on this contribution by evaluating equity in select, illustrative fisheries using the information available."

Motion carried with no opposition.

Equity and Environmental Justice Regional Plan

Ms. Christina Package-Ward and Ms. Heather Blough from the Southeast Regional Office (SERO) presented the Southeast Equity and Environmental Justice (EEJ) Implementation Plan. This plan integrates the National EEJ Strategy, emphasizing the distribution of benefits equitably, enhancing community engagement, and providing institutional support for underserved communities. The presentation covered immediate and long-term action items, including research and monitoring priorities, policy adjustments, outreach strategies, and governance involvement aimed at ensuring equitable access to fisheries management benefits.

The Council expects to update its research and monitoring priorities for the next 5-year period at upcoming SSC and Council meetings, with plans to incorporate any EEJ-related items that are not

currently included. The SSC then raised the issue of managing community expectations in EEJ efforts. Ms. Package-Ward noted that people appreciated being listened to, while Ms. Blough emphasized the importance of being open and transparent in communications. She also highlighted stakeholder skepticism about continuous improvement and the fear that this might be the only time from which they are heard.

The SSC expressed concerns about the feasibility of actions due to potential costs. Ms. Blough clarified that costs for immediate and near-term actions had been considered. Council staff inquired about the use of AI technologies as multilingual liaisons. Ms. Blough noted the effectiveness of such AI outreach initiatives in other agencies and mentioned exploring these technologies could be beneficial later.

The SSC asked about existing case studies or examples of leveraging community liaisons. Ms. Blough did not know of any specific case studies but expressed hopes that this could become an extension of the Sea Grant programs. The importance of understanding women's participation in the industry and the specific challenges they face, especially as dealers which could impact many fishers downstream, was noted by the SSC.

The SSC asked about the presenters' involvement in EEJ focus groups and the availability of research transcripts. Ms. Package-Ward indicated involvement in the effort but noted that transcripts would not be available due to regulatory constraints. The potential involvement of states and universities, given their connections to underserved communities, was discussed, with Ms. Blough emphasizing a collaborative approach and the ongoing development of networks.

An SSC member highlighted the effective involvement of external contractors in contacting and engaging with Vietnamese speaking shrimp vessel owner/operators for consideration of placing new electronic logbooks (ELBs) on vessels through NOAA Fisheries' early adopter program. Ms. Blough agreed with the potential for the use of external contractors in EEJ initiatives. Lastly, the SSC commented on the lack of consistent funding for social science within management and questioned the promise of future funding. Ms. Blough mentioned that EEJ is gaining priority with carry-over funds and the hiring of a national EEJ coordinator, indicating support from leadership.

Alternative Assessment Methods for Gulf Stocks

Dr. Siegfried reviewed the SEFSC's response to the Council's August 2023 request for an evaluation of alternative assessment methods for Gulf stocks. She also discussed recommendations of the March 2024 SEDAR Steering Committee and the SEFSC's ongoing efforts to re-imagine the stock assessment process in the southeastern U.S. SEDAR project timelines have increased in duration in recent years, affecting throughput, while the Council requests improved assessment timeliness and capacity. Dr. Siegfried also noted that the Council has requested more prescriptive TORs, and more cohesive and inclusive documentation for stock assessment reports, in which it would like to include SSC reviews and projections.

Dr. Siegfried continued briefing the SSC on the recommendations from the March 2024 SEDAR Steering Committee. The research track process, while introduced to increase throughput, did just the opposite and underperformed relative to SEDAR cooperator expectations for flexibility. In

response, the SEFSC has discontinued any use of the research track process. Further, the SEFSC proposes eliminating assessment nomenclature altogether, and negotiating assessment complexity and timing directly with each SEDAR cooperator. Moving away from the nomenclature will reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings about assessment appropriateness to the data compared to the quality presumed based on an assessment name (e.g., “benchmark” versus “update”). Dr. Siegfried gave examples of additional requests from cooperators, termed “add-ons,” like in-person workshops and webinars, and their expected time requirements. The SEFSC also recommended, and the Council identified, key stocks to be assessed in a regular rotation. These key stocks would not necessarily be those with the most data, but rather those with continually pressing management needs. Lastly, the Dr. Siegfried highlighted other efficiencies that the SEFSC was considering that address the Gulf Council’s August 2023 request. Those include less time-consuming approaches for analyzing all species, pairing the appropriate degrees of complexity based on the needs associated for that species.

The SSC agreed with moving beyond the research track approach and discussed the timing requirements for assessments and additional requests by the cooperators. An SSC member asked if data provisioning across multiple species at predetermined intervals had been discussed. Dr. Siegfried confirmed and expressed a desire to avoid repeated work in data provisioning for different species. She added that procedural best practices workshops could achieve efficiencies and automation in this area. The SSC discussed the key stocks idea and debated both the definition of a “key stock” and the stocks identified by the Council at its April 2024 meeting (red grouper, gag grouper, red snapper, gray snapper, and greater amberjack). The SSC also discussed the idea of attempting more multispecies assessments for gains in data provisioning efficiency. Dr. Siegfried responded that the SEFSC has not operationalized such an approach. However, promise remains for a multispecies data provisioning effort.

Aside from crowded scheduling, Dr. Siegfried noted that data provisioning remains one of the largest hurdles to throughput. While standardization and automation efforts have streamlined the provision of commercial finfish landings, recreational removals, length data, and observer data, age data and shrimp bycatch are still very time consuming. This hinders data provisioning in general, especially for age-structured stock assessments. She added that improved coordination efforts and data scoping for SEFSC led assessments was being used, and increased communication with data providers, analysts, and stock assessment leads was being prioritized.

Dr. Siegfried stated the importance of clarifying the desired levels of transparency ahead of planned assessments to ensure a smooth assessment process and noted how “transparency” was different from “participation.” The former, she contended, is maintained at all levels through rigorous documentation throughout the assessment process. However, the degree of participation tends to vary based on the inclusion of new data, methods, or consideration of other changes in fishery dynamics, as examples. Dr. Siegfried said that the SEFSC will continue working with the Council and other SEDAR cooperators to develop these reimagined stock assessment processes.

Dr. Siegfried reviewed the types of models used in assessing fisheries in the U.S. and specifically the Gulf. She summarized the data requirements for each and provided relevant examples. Some assessments are currently conducted with more complexity than is supported by the available data. Also, there may be mismatches between the resources needed to support complexity and a species’

regional priority or importance. The SEFSC does not plan to replace complex models just to simplify the process; rather, it will be a data-based decision how to proceed with stocks not identified as a key stock.

Council staff noted that simpler models could allow for the refreshing of catch advice more rapidly than more complex models, and that the decision on approach could be resource oriented. Also, Council staff asked when the Council could expect a list of data availability and modeling approaches proposed by species in addition to the key stocks previously identified by the Gulf Council. Dr. Siegfried replied that a proposed list of approaches could be developed following feedback from this discussion. The SSC agreed that complexity should not be the default choice, regardless of status as a “key species”. An SSC member expressed concern about recommend an analytical product as being consistent with the best scientific information available without having, at some point, explored everything known about that species. However, they acknowledged that reductions in complexity may be necessary and appropriate for some species. Another SSC member asked for an implementation timeline, and how the SSC might help this process. Dr. Siegfried said the goal was to implement these changes in 2026, and stressed support for not always relitigating decisions which have been determined to be the best practice for an application. The next step would be to understand the reimagined stock assessment process at the July 2024 SSC meeting. This process should include the key stocks identified by the Council and alternative assessment approaches for other species not identified as key stocks. The SEFSC should consider a list of species based on data availability that could be assessment through alternative approaches.

Overview of SSC Reorganization and Application Process for June 2024

Dr. Carrie Simmons (Council Executive Director) summarized modifications to the structure of the Standing SSC, which will absorb the Special Reef Fish, Ecosystem, and Socioeconomic SSCs due to them often being concurrently convened. The Standing SSC will have up to 21 members, comprised of scientists of various but explicit expertise. The remaining Special SSCs would have no more than three members each. Dr. Simmons stressed that the SSC serves as advisors to the Council and is expected to participate in in-person meetings and in stock assessments. The application period will be from May 9-31st.

Public Comment, May 8

Bob Zales II – Southeastern Fisheries Association

- He is glad to hear mention of involving stakeholders and advocates to get fishers involved in stock assessments. He thinks participants should be selected because of their historical knowledge and years of experience.
- He thinks discussion on key species to assess every few years should also involve stakeholder input.
- Greater amberjack has been managed since 1990 in Amendment 1. However, it has yet to respond to any fishery management measures for the past 30 years and the stock has continuously gone downhill. He thinks that qualifies greater amberjack for regular checkups.
- Working waterfronts are critical to all sectors and without them there is no fishery.

Other Business

No other business came before the SSC.

The meeting adjourned at 3:00 pm eastern time on May 8, 2024.

Meeting Participants

Standing SSC

Luiz Barbieri, *Vice Chair*
Harry Blanchet
David Chagaris
Roy Crabtree
Doug Gregory
David Griffith
Paul Mickle
Trevor Moncrief
Jim Nance, *Chair*
Will Patterson
Dan Petrolia
Sean Powers
Steven Scyphers
Jim Tolan

Special Socioeconomic SSC

Luke Fairbanks
Cindy Grace-McCaskey
Jack Issacs

Council Representative

JD Dugas

Special Ecosystem SSC

Steven Saul
Josh Kilborn

Special Reef Fish SSC

Jason Adriance
Mike Allen
John Mareska

[A list of all meeting participants can be viewed here.](#)