

SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE

Webinar

September 7, 2023

Transcript

Scientific and Statistical Committee

Dr. Jeffrey Buckel, Chair
Dr. Frederick Scharf, Vice Chair
Dr. Walter Bubley
Dr. Jared Flowers
Dr. Kai Lorenzen
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Dr. Genny Nesslage

Dr. Marcel Reichert
Dr. Fred Serchuk
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Dr. Chip Collier

Attendees and Invited Participants

Rick DeVictor
Shep Grimes
Nikhil Mehta

Observers and Participants

Other observers and participants attached.

The Scientific and Statistical Committee of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council convened via webinar on September 7, 2023, and was called to order by Dr. Jeff Buckel.

INTRODUCTIONS

DR. BUCKEL: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the September 2023 South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Scientific and Statistical Committee webinar. My name is Jeff Buckel, and I'll be chairing the meeting this afternoon. Along with Vice Chair Fred Scharf, we thank you all for attending. Judd, first up is voice recognition, and is that right?

DR. CURTIS: Yes, that's correct.

DR. BUCKEL: All right, and so do you have a list of -- The list was just up, and we'll just go in that order, and so starting with Fred, if he's on, and, if you don't hear it, we'll just go to Dustin next. Fred and Dustin are not here yet. Wally.

DR. BUBLEY: I am here. Wally Buble, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

DR. CURTIS: I don't see Chris Dumas yet signed-in, and so let's go on to Jared.

DR. FLOWERS: Jared Flowers, Georgia DNR, Coastal Resources Division.

DR. LORENZEN: Kai Lorenzen, University of Florida.

MS. MARKWITH: Anne Markwith, North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, Fisheries Management.

DR. NESSLAGE: Genny Nessler, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

DR. REICHERT: Marcel Reichert, SSC.

DR. SCHUELLER: Amy Schueller, NOAA Fisheries.

DR. SERCHUK: Fred Serchuk, SSC.

DR. CURTIS: I don't see Alexei signed-in yet, and so let's go on to Jennifer.

DR. SWEENEY-TOOKES: Jennifer Sweeney-Tookes, Georgia Southern University.

DR. TURNER: Steve Turner, SSC.

MR. WALSH: Jason Walsh, North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, Fisheries Economics Program.

DR. BELCHER: Carolyn Belcher, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Coastal Resources Division, and current chair for the South Atlantic Council.

DR. WILLIAMS: Erik Williams, Southeast Fisheries Science Center.

DR. CURTIS: Okay.

DR. BUCKEL: All right. Thanks, everyone, and, if anybody joined, Fred or Dustin or Chris or Alexei, please chime-in now. I see Fred Scharf is on. Fred, do you want to do voice recognition?

DR. SCHARF: Thanks, Jeff. This is Fred Scharf, Vice Chair of the SSC and member of the faculty at UNC-W.

DR. BUCKEL: I don't see any of the others. Judd, I guess, if they pop-on, we could get them to introduce themselves, but we'll move on for now, and so the next item on the agenda is reviewing the agenda for this meeting, and so does anybody have any questions about the agenda, or issues with the agenda? If so, please raise your hand, and that's the raise-hand button on the webinar tool. Okay. Seeing no hands, the agenda -- Go ahead, Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you, Chair. Just one overarching comment. This assessment hasn't been -- It will be updated six years from the time the last one was done in 2015, to a terminal year of 2021, and, in addition, some of the materials talk about alternate stock assessment models, and so on and so forth, and I have no problem with some of the issues, but it begs the question of what is a research track assessment and what is an operational assessment, and I think we probably should have some discussion about that, because I think this one is on the borderline. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: I agree, Fred, and, yes, we'll definitely talk about that. Thank you. Any others? Okay, and so, seeing no others, we'll consider the agenda approved. The next item is to approve the minutes from our July SSC meeting, and those are in Attachment 1b, and I know we had some edits sent into us, and the listed attendees was missing some folks, and so Steve Turner, Genny, Judd, and, Judd, you have -- Did you make those changes?

DR. CURTIS: I have not made the changes in the minutes yet. Once we've approved kind of the revised minutes, then we'll make those changes, or I guess garner all the edits that need to be made to the minutes, and I see that Shep might have some legal counsel for those here. Shep, let me see if you're unmuted.

MR. GRIMES: I'm unmuted, and I'm here. I just have one change. Thank you. Page 27, and it's my statement, top of the page, the second sentence, and "I" should be "it". It's critical stuff, and that's all. Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Shep, and thanks for joining us today. First, if you haven't looked at the list, make sure your name is included, and, if you're not on there, let Judd know, so we can have the list updated, or corrected. All right. Any other -- Please raise your hand if you have other corrections to the minutes. All right. Judd, if there are no hands, we'll consider the minutes approved, pending those two sets of revisions. Okay, and next up is public comment, but, before we go there, Judd, do you have any other items that you would like to cover before we go to public comment?

DR. CURTIS: No, and the only two items -- There were two recent documents added, just this morning, and one was 4a, just a brief overview presentation of the climate governance policy and then, to reflect that, just a revised overview as well, but very minimal changes.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. Thank you, Judd. All right, and so, next, we're going to move on to the general public comment period on the overall agenda, and so, if you have any comments on a specific agenda, item, you can save those, and we'll have time for those particular items, and so any general public comments at this point? Please raise your hand, and Judd will unmute you.

PUBLIC COMMENT

DR. CURTIS: I am not seeing any hands raised, Jeff. I did want to direct the SSC to a written comment that was provided by Captain Jimmy Hull, and, it's there, and he's not able to attend right now, but I will just read his comment, so it's into the record.

He is commenting on the black sea bass workgroup results. The latest SEDAR stock assessment results for black sea bass showed a disappearance of population and the complete recruitment failure of black sea bass. I have fished for black sea bass off of northeast Florida for fifty years, and I agree this is correct. There are a very few adult black sea bass alive off of northeast Florida. This did not happen overnight, but has occurred over the past several years. When trying to understand what caused this black sea bass fisheries failure, you must look at the red snapper population off of northeast Florida. The adult red snapper population has never been greater than it currently is, and the egg production is enormous, with successful recruitment into an ever-growing and expanding population.

However, black sea bass in the same habitat have been crowded out, and their larvae have been eaten, just as they become competent, by juvenile red snapper. Now, with no adults, there is no black sea bass egg production in the area, and even larvae from distant areas have no chance for local recruitment, because of predation at the competent stage.

My statement and opinion are based on my lifetime of commercial fishing and your own fisheries-independent data, and now I ask your black sea bass workgroup what we can do to bring the black sea bass population back to northeast Florida. I am willing to help in any way possible with information and location of historical black sea bass recruitment habitat of Ponce Inlet, Florida, and the use of my vessels to sample and collect data. Jimmy Hull, Ponce Inlet, Florida. That's the only public comment we had, written public comment we had, Chair.

DR. BUCKEL: All right. Thanks, Judd, and thanks, Jimmy, for that, if you're on the line. We appreciate you providing your comments on the black sea bass situation off of Florida. Okay, and so, with no other hands raised from the public, we'll -- Just, before we move into Item 3, just to remind members of the SSC to -- You know, Judd does his best at taking notes during the meeting, that then become the final report, but if members of the SSC can also take notes during the meeting this afternoon. That way, when we send the draft report around, you can help flesh out Judd's notes.

I think that's it for me, and we'll move on into Item Number 3, SEDAR 86, the red grouper operational assessment, and I will point you to Attachment 3a, 3b, 3c, and 3d, and we're going to receive a presentation from Dr. Lew Coggins on this, and so, Lew, are you going to drive the bus?

SEDAR 86: RED GROUPEL OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT

DR. CURTIS: Sorry, Jeff. Before we get Lew geared up for the presentation, just a note on those attachments, and so the 3a is the data summary report, and then 3b are the presentations provided by the Science Center. In Attachment 3b, you have the original terms of reference from the red grouper operational assessment, and then Attachment 3c, the red grouper options paper, was actually put together by council staff, and so not to be confused with any materials provided by the Science Center.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Judd. I appreciate that, and maybe scroll down to just before the presentation, to make sure that folks are aware of the action items that we had for this, and so, as you're watching the presentation, the action items are to review the spatial consideration data summary for red grouper and recommend use of a one-area or two-area model for the operational assessment. If changes to the model structure are recommended, determine an appropriate assessment type to incorporate changes, and, with respect to those, as Judd mentioned, the council staff put together the different options that are potentially on the table, though, as Judd mentioned at a previous meeting, those are not exhaustive, and there could be others that we come up with. Lew Coggins, are you ready?

DR. COGGINS: Yes, Chair, I am ready.

DR. BUCKEL: All right. We can see the slides.

DR. COGGINS: I am not 100 percent sure what you're seeing right now, and I've tried to pull up the presentation, and do you see the presenter mode or something else, or what can you see?

DR. CURTIS: We've got just the PowerPoint mode, and that is not in presenter mode right now. If you swap those, we should be good to go. There we go.

DR. COGGINS: Okay. All right, and so thank you, Chair, and good afternoon to the SSC, and thank you for allowing me to brief you on some spatial considerations of the South Atlantic red grouper, which we believe are relevant to the SEDAR 86 stock assessment. My name is Lew Coggins, and I'm a stock assessment scientist with the South Atlantic Branch, and I work with Erik Williams.

The objectives of this presentation are to first review some information with you, which is comprised of a set of data summaries of red grouper that we have recently compiled associated with the fisheries, distribution and demographics of this species, and you will note that nearly all of the topics that I will review are not new to the SSC, as you have previously considered these issues in detail during past red grouper assessment reviews.

In fact, the discussion and data summaries that we will provide are consistent with recommendations made by the SSC and the CIE reviews of SEDARS 19 and 53. Now, because

SEDAR 86, as mentioned, is an operational assessment, and the terms of reference specify the assessment model structure to be essentially identical to the model used in SEDAR 53, the second objective of this presentation is to request the SSC to recommend that the Science Center have the flexibility to explore alternative assessment model configurations.

To refresh your memory, the SSC made the following statement in the review of SEDAR 19, and, you know, the important bit here is that to address a significant source of uncertainty, the SSC recommended consideration of a two-stock model for the next assessment, because of the distribution of South Atlantic red grouper, and so let's have a look at that distribution of red grouper in the South Atlantic.

The map on the left shows the relative catch rate of red grouper in chevron trap sampling from SERFS, as reported in the trends report, and note that there are two distinct aggregations off of the North Carolina coast and off of the Florida coast, especially south of Cape Canaveral.

Throughout this presentation, I will refer to the north being the northern region and the south being the southern region, and, for the purposes of the summaries, the demarcation will be either north or south of the Georgia-South Carolina state boundary line, and so north will be the Carolinas, and south will be Georgia and Florida.

Okay, and so now we'll look at some data, and, first off, we'll look at some landings data, and so, when the data for SEDAR 86 first began to become available to us, we were originally struck by the divergence in the headboat landings between the north and the south, and this is displayed in this top figure, where landings, in numbers, are shown through time, and note that there is a difference in the scale between the north and the south.

In particular, since approximately 2009, the southern landings have predominantly increased, though, as you can see, there is a decline during the last two years, but then, during the same time, the northern landing have diminished to extremely small values in recent years. When we looked at other time series of landings, we saw other evidence of divergence. Considering the commercial landings, in pounds, in the lower figure, it's apparent that, in the last two decades, the northern landings show a large increase in the late 2000s, followed by a large decrease. Conversely, the landings in the south have been slightly declining, or stable, at low values over much of that time.

The general recreational landings also showed divergent patterns between north and south, and northern landings, in numbers, have fallen from a high in 2008 to very low landings for the last decade or so. Alternatively, southern landings have been highly variable, but approximately stable in mean over the entire time series, and so, considering landings, all the northern fisheries show a similar pattern of decline in recent years.

Another way to look at the spatiotemporal patterns in the recreational fisheries is to consider this figure, and what we have here is, along the Y-axis is latitude along the east coast, and along the X-axis is time. The colored points are the proportion of positive angler intercepts for red grouper across all recreational modes from the MRIP survey, and so you can see the same aggregations of fish are apparent in this figure, where you can see low, but consistent, angler intercepts for red grouper off of the Cape Fear, and then not many positive angler intercepts are observed going south, until reaching north Florida, south of the St. Johns River, and particularly south of Cape Canaveral.

Additionally, the proportion of positive angler intercepts falls to a very low value, essentially zero, off of North Carolina, beginning in approximately 2015, while the proportion of angler intercepts remains stable, though highly variable, off of eastern Florida. Note that, because of the difficulty of estimating red grouper effort, we chose to report the proportion of positive angler intercepts as a measure of angler success in this fishery from the MRIP survey.

Moving on to indices, we also wanted to look at indices of relative abundance for the two regions. If we consider the fishery-dependent indices, and first look at the headboat index in the upper panel, we again see that the northern index, you know, is showing this overall decline from approximately 2007, though the index has been highly variable for the past six or seven years. Conversely, the southern index has been increasing over that same time period.

The commercial indices, in the lower panel, again show a declining trend in the north, since approximately 2008, and the southern index shows a stable, though highly variable, pattern through that time. Now, note that, in both of these panels, there is a dashed line at 2017, and this is to remind us that these indices are deemed unreliable for assessment models after that time, due to the potential effect of fishing regulations. However, we chose to show them here, in the hopes that they were useful to inform differences between the northern and southern regions.

This figure shows the fisheries-independent indices, and the figure shows the coastwide, meaning North Carolina to Florida, and then the northern index for the combined chevron trap and video counts from the SERFS. Unfortunately, data sparsity in the southern region did not allow construction of a credible index, but we do see the same trend in the SERFS index and the other information that I just previously reviewed for the northern region, namely that the red grouper abundance has declined markedly since the late 2000s.

Additionally, the coastwide index shows essentially the same pattern as the northern index, suggesting that most of the information for red grouper in the coastwide SERFS index may be coming from data in the northern region.

This analysis was prepared by Matt Damiano in our branch, and he analyzed the SERFS video index data using the vector autoregressive spatiotemporal model, the VAS model, from 2011 through 2021, and the results shown here indicate the same disaggregated distribution pattern as is apparent in the chevron trap data from the SERFS trends report. Additionally, his analysis shows a low and relatively stable index of abundance over this time period, as also shown in the index that we just looked at.

Okay, and so we also wanted to look at differences in growth among fish sampled from these two different regions. This age-length plot shows the southern data and the von Bertalanffy fit to those data in red, and the northern data, and the fit to those data, in blue. The dashed-black line is the fit to the overall dataset, and so, before we consider the fits, there are some fairly apparent patterns in this data. First, you can see that there are proportionally fewer older fish, say fish over age-fifteen, in the southern data, as compared to the northern data. Additionally, there are fewer large fish, over say around 800 or so, in the southern data, as compared to the northern data.

Now, examination of the curves does not really suggest, you know, large gross differences in growth rate, and there is the suggestion that the northern fish grow a bit faster than the southern

fish and that the northern fish reach a slightly larger size. However, those of us that are familiar with these kind of analyses know that these kinds of differences can also result from things like differences in exploitation patterns, for instance.

DR. REICHERT: Can I ask a quick clarifying question? Are those fishery-dependent and fishery-independent data combined for the growth curve?

DR. COGGINS: Yes, Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: Okay. Thank you.

DR. COGGINS: Nevertheless, you know, the model selection clearly favors separate von Bertalanffy parameters for each of these datasets, indicating that these differences are at least important in a statistical sense, and so we conclude that there is at least weak evidence for differences in growth.

As a reminder, the SEDAR 19 CIE review recommended a need to investigate sub-stock structure for red grouper assessments, and a subsequent recommendation was that an initial step is to look for differences among age and length distributions between the northern and southern regions, and so that's what we did. I am going to now show you a set of age and length composition plots like these. In all cases, the data colored in blue are from the north, and in red are from the south, and these plots contain both the frequency of the ages, or lengths, as bars, and an estimated density for those distributions, and I plotted only the years with relatively large sample sizes, and you can see all of them in the document that's in the briefing book.

However, here in this presentation, I will only show a subset of those distributions that I believe make a couple of points relatively well, and so, in this slide, you can see eight years of age comp plots from fishery-dependent data, and the main point I would like you to notice is that, overall, the north and the south appear different, particularly with regard to the north having more older fish.

Here are age compositions from fishery-independent data, and, overall, a similar pattern is generally apparent, though perhaps less striking, with more older fish observed in the north. Here are eight years of length composition plots for fishery-dependent data, and the main point I would like you to notice here is that, overall, the north and the south are different, particularly with regard to the north generally having more large fish, and, finally, here is eight years of length composition plots from fishery-independent data, and, again, while not as striking as the fishery-dependent data, you can see that the north generally has more larger fish.

Okay, and so, to switch to another topic related to -- Still related to spatial distribution of red grouper, and also the recruitment dynamics of red grouper, I wanted to remind you of your input during the SEDAR 53 assessment, and so, in answer to the question regarding key uncertainties, the SSC pointed out that there was multiple lines of evidence that point to the fact that the dynamics of red grouper in the South Atlantic are not independent of the Gulf of Mexico. The SSC went on to point out that, if this is true, this dynamic has management implications for rebuilding the South Atlantic red grouper stock, and so we thought that it would be useful to review a few key scientific products that will be available before the end of the year that will hopefully provide some

additional insight into this key uncertainty related to the South Atlantic red grouper stock assessment.

The first question that is frequently asked, when this key uncertainty is raised, is about genetic differentiation between the Gulf and the South Atlantic stocks, and, as the SSC is aware from your past reviews, the current information available suggests no genetic differentiation between the stocks. There is an ongoing investigation to explore this question more thoroughly, and I recently learned that Dr. Portenoy's results will be available before the end of this year. I have also learned that the preliminary results have not yet contradicted previous work, meaning still no large apparent differences, but, again, those results are preliminary and subject to change.

Another study that is familiar to the SSC is the biohydrodynamics simulation modeling being done by Roger Brothers and colleagues, and, in discussions with Roger, he has told me that is preliminary modeling is showing that a majority of South Atlantic red grouper are originating from spawning activity in the Gulf of Mexico. Further, this appears to be largely a result of the fact that the amount of spawning activity in the South Atlantic is much less than that in the Gulf, and I just learned, from Roger a couple of days ago, that he tells me that he figures that he will have initial results of this work available by the end of October, and so I know we'll all be looking forward to seeing those results, as well as the results from the study that I mentioned previously.

With all this background in mind, our evaluation of the available evidence suggests that a single-stock model, as was used in SEDAR 53, may be indefensible. We have also considered other models that could be worth exploring, and this schematic of a continuum of model structure is potentially useful. The extremes are a single-stock model, as was used in SEDAR 53, and then fully separate northern and southern region assessment models. In between are approaches that link recruitment dynamics spatially or a use areas-as-fleets approach.

We believe that which of these approaches are most appropriate should be dictated by the data availability and the science that would inform the model's structural assumptions. Initially, we believe that it makes sense to pursue a northern region assessment model and continue to evaluate the need, and the data in particular, for some of these other options.

Okay, and so, to summarize our request to the SSC today, first, it would be helpful to have your recommendation considering the approaches in the options paper including in the briefing document that was referenced earlier, and this is essentially a recommendation on the need to investigate alternative model structures. Second, and related, we wonder if the SSC would endorse a SEDAR 86 that differs from a typical operational assessment, and some related questions would be your willingness to review such an assessment and what additional oversight, such as working groups and revised terms of reference and so forth, would be needed. Okay. That concludes my briefing, and thank you for your attention.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Lew, for that excellent presentation. All right. Judd, we can -- I am not sure if we want to leave that slide up, Lew, that you had.

DR. COGGINS: Sure.

DR. CURTIS: I will put that back up. Let me pull it up so we can see the hands raised as well.

DR. COGGINS: Do I need to do anything, Judd?

DR. CURTIS: I've got control now, Lew, and I will just -- Here we go.

DR. BUCKEL: We can start on the first slide, because, first, we'll take questions for Lew, and so, that way, you can scroll to particular slides that folks might have questions on, and so, before we get to the agenda items, are there questions that SSC members have for Lew on his presentation? All right. Go ahead, Steve.

DR. TURNER: Thank you. Lew, I am less optimistic than you about the life history information suggesting two separate groups. I think looking at differences in size-at-age, rather than growth, might provide stronger information. I don't think that -- You indicated very low confidence in the life history information suggesting differences, and I agree, and I even less optimistic than that, but the overall problem still exists. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Judd, any other hands? Go ahead, Fred Scharf.

DR. SCHARF: Lew, I was just wondering, and when was the last assessment completed for red grouper in the Gulf of Mexico, and are you able to speak at all about the stock-recruit relationship that's included in that assessment? I am just thinking -- You know, I'm trying to think forward about, if the results from Brothers work indicates that a substantial amount of red grouper recruitment in the South Atlantic is originating in the Gulf of Mexico, how those two -- How those two population dynamics models can be linked.

DR. COGGINS: As for the terminal year for the last Gulf red grouper assessment, my recollection is that it was -- I should look it up, because I may get it wrong, but my recollection is that the terminal year was 2019, or 2018, and, as for the stock-recruit relationship that was estimated -- 2017 is actually when it was, and I just got that clarified, and so, as for that stock-recruit relationship that was estimated, you know, I'm not really sure how to characterize it, other than I think it, you know, suffers from a lot of the same kind of problems that we typically have in estimating stock-recruitment relationships for these species of fish. You know, there is -- I am not sure that I want to go into that a whole lot more.

Relative to trying to think about linking the two assessments, or trying to use the Gulf of Mexico information on productivity, or production, to inform a South Atlantic stock assessment, I will tell you, Fred, that I'm not real optimistic about being able to do that, simply because of all the -- Of all the kind of untested assumptions that would have to be included as essentially structure within the assessment model.

When I have been considering assessment methodologies for the South Atlantic, I've been much more focused on thinking about looking at these two areas separately and looking at using just mean recruitment models, and deviations around those means, in thinking about -- As has been done in some recent assessments in the South Atlantic, and thinking about how to characterize recruitment in those potentially separate northern and southern stocks. I am not sure if there was another part of your question that I'm missing or not.

DR. SCHARF: No, and that's it. Thanks, Lew. You know, I'm interested to see the results that the modeling shows. You know, I'm wondering if the recruitment is coming from a particular

location, you know, what segment of the stock biomass is generating recruits that would be distributed in the South Atlantic, and whether that can be sort of disentangled further to inform the South Atlantic assessment, just thinking broadly about those. Thank you.

DR. COGGINS: So, following-up on that just a little bit, one of the things that I have asked Roger to do in his simulation modeling is to split out the spawning effort up the west coast of Florida, from the Keys, from Georgia-Florida, and North Carolina-South Carolina, so that we can look at the contributions to recruitment in the South Atlantic, the simulated contributions to recruitment in the South Atlantic, separate for each of those locations.

DR. SCHARF: Great. Thanks, Lew. I appreciate it.

DR. BUCKEL: Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: Thanks, Lew. That was a very nice overview, and I've got a quick question, and I think it kind of follows on some of the other questions, and do we know about the distribution, and I should know that, but around Florida? Are they found all the way around the Florida Keys, because there's a number of species that are found in the South Atlantic, and then not around the Florida Keys, and then again in the Gulf of Mexico, and is that the case for red grouper also, or are they basically found all the way around? Do you know?

DR. COGGINS: They are found throughout the Keys and the Dry Tortugas and all the way around the west coast of Florida.

DR. REICHERT: Okay. Thanks for that clarification. I appreciate it.

DR. BUCKEL: Are there other questions for Lew? Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: There are a lot of difficulties with this assessment, and I appreciate the presentation, because it was crystal clear, but one of the things that strikes me is that most of the positive angler intercepts are really from the south, and there is very little positive intercepts for red grouper anywhere north of the most southern areas. Is that a concern? That's my first question.

Another question is, and, again, this is -- I don't expect an answer to it, but, because of the problems that have been discovered with answering the questions in the MRIP surveys, the whole reliability of the data that have been collected suggests that there might be a significant reduction when that is corrected for in the MRIP landings, because they think they've been overestimated because of the way the questions were asked. I don't expect anyone to solve it now, and it probably won't be solved for a number of years, but I'm just wondering, and would that have an impact on the assessment? Thank you.

DR. COGGINS: Fred, I can't claim to be an expert on the MRIP survey, and so I'm afraid there may be others that can do a better job answering that. As for your point about few angler intercepts off of North Carolina, and whether that's a problem, you know, we know that -- We know that there have been significant landings of red grouper off of North Carolina, and we also know that, when we look at, for instance, Roger's work, you know, the majority of the spawning in the South Atlantic for red grouper actually is off North Carolina, and so it's not as though -- I don't think we want to interpret those data to mean that, at least in the recent past, there haven't been considerable

-- Well, I'm not sure if that's the right word, but there haven't been reasonable numbers of red grouper off of North Carolina, and I think we know that, but I think we also know, and have quite good evidence, that, overall, it appears as though the abundance of red grouper has really diminished in the South Atlantic, and that's reflected both in the indices that I showed you as well as in the landings. The fact that there is a decrease in the MRIP positive proportion intercepts I don't think is unexpected off of North Carolina.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Lew. Erik Williams.

DR. WILLIAMS: Thank you, Jeff. Just to sort of fill in some of that questioning around that one figure that Lew presented from the MRIP data, I was the one who generated that figure, and that is intercept data only, and it is not FES data, and so it's not the effort part of the survey, and so it is not going to fall victim to the concerns that are going on right now with the expansion of the effort survey, and so this is just intercept data, and it's just looking at the proportion of times that red grouper show up in the overall intercepts, and so it's an immediate recall, because it's an intercept, and it's right when the trip ends, and, really, the only issues there is how often are people reporting red grouper, and it includes both landed and discarded catch in that proportion positive, and so it is recreational data.

There is always reporting issues with that, to some degree, but I wouldn't -- I also would not go as far as to say that proportion positive is a good measure of abundance. It's really just a measure of exactly what it is, and it's how often did they intercept a trip, a recreational fishing trip, that claimed to have caught red grouper. Beyond that, that's where you get into a little dicey information, or influence, and whether that represents abundance or not. I think it's better than catch per unit effort from the MRIP survey, because the effort part of recreational fishing is extremely difficult to capture accurately, but hopefully that says enough there.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Erik. That's helpful in interpreting that graph. Other questions for Lew? Judd, if there's no hands, I'm going to ask if you could scroll to one of the length frequency plots that showed the differences in size, and so, Lew, I'm trying to figure out how these patterns could come up, and like an alternative explanation could be that these are the same stock of fish, and the individuals from the south, as they get bigger, they move north, and do you know of any mark-recapture work that's been done that could shed light on that potential?

It just seems so odd that there is consistently a lack of small fish, right, in the north, and then it's kind of an opposite pattern than the typical length frequency, right, and you start out with lots of small fish, if recruitment is constant, and then, as you get to older fish, they decline in numbers, and so I understand that this could just be a recruitment pulse, and I'm not sure how many years are combined here, but it does -- The consistency of this, other than in the fishery-independent data, that might have some selectivity to smaller sizes, for these datasets, where they catch the bigger fish, and it seems like another explanation could be movement.

DR. COGGINS: Thanks for that question, Jeff. That certainly occurred to me as well, to think about what's the overall recruitment dynamics there, and how are those fish getting -- Yes, could this be a result of migration, and, you know, all the mark-recapture information that I've seen for red grouper suggests that there is no evidence of kind of large-scale migration for smaller fish as they mature, as they get larger, and so, I mean, I guess I haven't ruled that hypothesis out completely, but I think that we don't have good evidence to support that.

You know, the other thing, the other way, and I will just say this, that I think that you can kind of envision a lot of different mechanisms that would result in these kind of divergent patterns, everything from, you know, the larger fish in the south being cropped out by more intensive fishing, more intensive exploitation, to, you know, in a lot of fish stocks, especially endangered fish stocks, where their endangerment is a result of lack of recruitment, this is exactly the pattern that shows up, is you just start seeing the older fish, and you don't see any young fish, because they're not being recruited, and so that clearly seems, to me, as a viable hypothesis as well.

DR. BUCKEL: Yes. Thanks, Lew. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: Jeff, I had the same thought that you had, but I think, also, there is an almost complete lack of red grouper in that area in between, and so, if there is significant migration, perhaps one would expect to catch those guys when they're on their way south, but, you know, it could still happen, but, anyway, I thought about the same thing, but I thought maybe not, or otherwise we probably would have caught them in that area. Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Marcel. Good point. Anne.

MS. MARKWITH: I was just going to follow-up on your question and kind of what Lew said, and I know, at least in North Carolina, we used to see those smaller grouper, but it's been a very long time, probably at least a decade, before we're seeing those recruits, like you would, and so it's almost where the recruitment has just kind of disappeared off of North Carolina, and so we're just left with those larger, older fish, and so I just wanted to put that out there, that it's probably more -- When Lew answered your question, it's more toward that, maybe, than the movement piece.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Anne. That's helpful. Okay. Other questions on the presentation? Okay. If there are no other questions for Lew, we will get into the requests to the SSC, some discussion on these items, and so, Judd, I'm not sure of the -- I am forgetting my order, and Judd just put in for public comment on the hands-raised document, and so, yes, we'll take any public comment before we move into the discussion of the action items. If the public has any comments on the presentation or this topic, please raise your hand. All right.

Judd says no hands, and so, Judd, I am wondering if we should pull up either the action items or the request to the SSC, the slide that Lew has for us here, and I know there is overlap, but we do want to populate the overview with comments, and so maybe we'll -- If folks can read these requests from Lew here to provide the recommendation considering approaches in the options paper, and so that's the third thing we need to look at, is that options paper. Then input on the need to investigate alternative model structures, and then the second bullet here of would the SSC endorse a SEDAR 86 assessment that differs from an operational assessment, and so we can -- We'll go to the action items which cover these.

DR. CURTIS: Jeff, just before we head over to the action items, I was going to bring up just the terms of reference for the operational assessment, as they currently stand, and then just run through, quickly, the options paper, to provide the SSC just kind of a potential roadmap of where we would need to go, should they select the two-area model over the one-area model, and what pathways forward we would need to do, as far as changing the terms of reference, et cetera.

DR. BUCKEL: Yes, I like that order, Judd. Thank you.

DR. CURTIS: So I will bring up the -- On the screen now, you see the SEDAR 86 South Atlantic Red Grouper Operational Assessment Terms of Reference, and so these were the agreed-upon terms, of course, before the assessment, before the spatial changes, or any potential spatial changes, are incorporated, and so, you know, if the SSC does decide they want to choose the two-area model that Lew has just presented, then we would have to go through a process of revising these terms of reference to incorporate that two-area model that would then need to be provided to the council and accepted by the council. Any questions on the terms of reference as they now stand?

DR. BUCKEL: Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: Just for clarification, I understand what the two-area model is, but, to the extent that there may be recruitment coming in from the Gulf of Mexico, how is that going to be handled?

DR. BUCKEL: Lew, would you like to comment on that?

DR. COGGINS: Sure. Essentially, the overall tactic is not try and estimate a stock-recruit relationship and to instead use the mean recruitment approach that you all saw, I mean, most recently, in the black sea bass assessment, I think, but also in the scamp assessment. You know, since we don't know, or I should say since we won't be specifically modeling the spawning stock biomass, or the numbers of spawners, or the spawning effort, because we don't know exactly what that is, if a significant portion of it is coming from the Gulf of Mexico, then it makes sense to just think about an average-recruitment-type model, without a stock-recruitment relationship.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred and Lew, on that. Other questions in reference to the terms of reference? Okay. Judd, did you want to go to the options paper next? Thanks.

DR. CURTIS: Yes, and so up now is the options paper that was put together by council staff as a variety of approaches that the SSC could recommend in order to tackle this new information and how to incorporate that into the stock assessment. These are, by no means, exhaustive, and it's just meant to illustrate a few different options, as far as approaches go, and so your first approach is just continuing on with the operational assessment, with the single-stock model as it stands, and then you see that's Approach 1. Under each of these approaches, we have pros and cons, and so, you know, this would not result in any disruption to the SEDAR schedule, and it tracks the rebuilding plan for the stock, and it remains consistent with the TORs, but it also then ignores any spatial structure in the population, as just presented, and is probably not consistent with BSIA anymore.

Your second approach would be to continue the operational assessment with the two-stock, or spatial, model. This addresses some of the concerns raised in SEDAR 19 that Lew illustrated in his presentation. There would be no disruption to the SEDAR schedule. However, some of the fallbacks are that no topical working groups were approved, and, you know, it requires a single-stock model as a back-up model, in case that proposed model does not pass the SSC review, and

changes to the model seems out of scope for an operational assessment, based on the terms of reference that were specified for this assessment.

Approach Number 3 is to continue the operational assessment, but develop topical working groups to address the two-stock, or spatial, model. This would need a schedule provided by NMFS. The pros for this is that it addresses those concerns raised in SEDAR 19. The spatial structure changes are done in a more open and transparent method. New terms of reference will need to be developed for this approach. This would result in some disruption to the SEDAR schedule. The assessment would need to be delayed to form these TWGs, topical working groups, and this, again, requires that single-stock model to be developed as a back-up model, and, also, these model changes seem to be out of scope for the operational assessment.

Then fourth approach is to conduct a benchmark assessment, and so, per the CCC meeting in May, now the benchmark is an option that is back on the table, and this serves as kind of a step in between the research track assessment and the operational assessments, where you can -- This allows for model changes and reconfigurations, and it has a stock ID workshop to identify these appropriate boundaries and any changes to spatial structure. This provides, you know, a review from the SSC of the data, or from all members of the panel, on the data inputs, given the changes in the spatial structure, and then it gives you more time to explore some of these consequences of changing that model type.

The drawbacks, of course, is this is going to take a little bit longer, and it would be the most disruptive option on the SEDAR schedule, depending on workload for NMFS staff, and when they can fit this assessment into the SEDAR schedule, and it's not clear which other species would be impacted, and so those are four potential approaches that the SSC could recommend. Again, it's not exhaustive, and so, if there is elements, or other ideas, those are also on the table.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Judd. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: A quick clarifying question. For Approach 3, the address two-stock or spatial model, is that whether or not a two-stock approach should be followed, or is that to talk a little bit more in detail what type of spatial models to use? In other words, how much -- That Approach 3, the working groups, how much detail are those working groups, or how much detail is expected? Does that make sense?

DR. CURTIS: Yes, and, I mean, that's up to the discretion of the SSC, how extensive I think those topical working groups would need to be, and it's a pretty major change to the model structure, and we would need to have a topical working group before, and so I can't give you an exact timeline, or estimate of a workload now, but, you know, thinking of other topical working groups in the past, and the lift required with those, it would be probably a similar expectation.

DR. REICHERT: So, if, today, we agree that this should be approached as two different stocks, does that answer the question in Approach 3, or are those questions going much further than that, is what I am basically asking.

DR. BUCKEL: Marcel, are you talking about the terminology of the two-stock or spatial model?

DR. REICHERT: Yes, and, I mean, if, for instance, the topical working group is tasked with whether or not this should be approached as two different stocks, that is also the question we are asked today, and so, if that question is answered today, do we still need that, or is the task for the topical working group a lot broader than that, is what I'm asking. Does that make sense?

DR. CURTIS: Yes, and I see. Thanks for clarifying, Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: Okay.

DR. CURTIS: I think the task today is to decide which model type is going to be -- Is the most suitable, either the one-area or the two-area.

DR. REICHERT: Exactly.

DR. CURTIS: If this Approach Number 3 was selected, and so the topical working group would go into their workgroup knowing that, you know, they're going to be looking at a two-area model.

DR. REICHERT: Okay. Thank you. Jeff, and Judd, do you need kind of recommendations -- Sorry, Genny. Go ahead.

DR. NESSLAGE: No, finish, Marcel. Finish, please, if that's okay with Jeff.

DR. BUCKEL: Yes, that's okay. Marcel, do you want to finish your thought?

DR. REICHERT: Well, my question, Jeff and Judd, is would you like to address that first question, whether or not, before we are talking about the approaches?

DR. BUCKEL: Yes, I think that's a good strategy, and so basically between Approach 1 and the others, but first we'll take Genny, and then we'll get to that question, Marcel. Thank you.

DR. REICHERT: Okay.

DR. NESSLAGE: Thanks. I guess some of the questions that were raised earlier about potential connectivity, or movement, between the north and the south, that we don't really have a grasp on, as well as it seems like there might be some differences -- It's hard to tease that apart, perhaps, from differences in fishery impacts, is what I heard, maybe incorrectly, but I am not feeling as confident as before in my understanding of the report, in that I am not sure -- I am worried, I guess I should say, about moving away from a single-stock model, because, if there is connectivity, and that's all that is keeping this stock together, then we might be going down a bad path. Am I misunderstanding the biology that was presented, perhaps?

DR. BUCKEL: Genny, I'm not -- Is that in reference to where I was asking about the movement of the larger animals?

DR. NESSLAGE: Yes.

DR. BUCKEL: So there is different mechanisms that could be at play to explain the different patterns in the length frequencies, and it sounded like there was more support that it was not

movement of larger animals from the south to the north, but rather different recruitment dynamics in the south and the north, such that the recruitment in the north has been low for a long period, and so all that's left is larger animals, and so it does seem to be -- You know, to Lew's point about, if you went to two stocks and did a mean-recruitment model, those recruitment patterns would be different between the north and the south.

You know, I don't know, right, what else is out there, but, based on Anne and Marcel and Lew's comments, it seemed like there was more evidence for this being differential recruitment patterns than movement of larger animals between the south and the north.

DR. NESSLAGE: But there's no evidence that rules it out, correct?

DR. BUCKEL: I guess -- You know, Lew mentioned mark-recapture information that showed that it didn't have large-scale movements, and that's, I guess, probably the biggest evidence that rules it out, but others please chime-in.

DR. NESSLAGE: Sorry, and I don't mean to rehash it all, and I guess I'm still not -- Well, I will shut up.

DR. BUCKEL: Well, I would like to hear from others. You know, it was convincing to me, but maybe it's -- You know, I feel like, with some of these question-marks, right, that have been brought up, that it leads more to getting more people together, either as the topical working groups or as a benchmark assessment, but Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you, Chair. To me, we have a number of different issues before us. One is we can use the same model that was used in SEDAR 53, but apply it to a different stock configuration than was in SEDAR 53, and that's -- That would be the easiest one, and I think that's Number 1, and I'm also concerned that we're -- We seem to be reluctant to look at changes in model configurations when a number of years have passed since the last assessment, and this is why I raised this question initially, and I don't know the answer to it, but I want to sort of promote some discussion about it, whether we think that, in six years, since 2015, there have been any advances in modeling approaches that would provide a better and more robust assessment, no matter what changes were made in terms of how many different geographic units are included in the assessment.

I am not familiar with it, but I'm always concerned when I see a long stretch go by, and then we - - It's easy to say, well, we'll just use the same modeling structure that we did six years ago, because to do otherwise would upset the schedule going into the future, but that's why we have a research track assessment as part of the options, and so I just pose that, because, again, I am not all that familiar with this particular species, but I am concerned that, you know, there may be times when we basically say, wait a second, that was done long before -- A long time ago, and there have been changes in modeling approaches that probably we ought to include in the future. Now, how much different those new modeling approaches are is really a question that we have to leave up to the people that are most familiar with what was done in the past and what is contemplated in the future. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred. Kyle Shertzer.

DR. SHERTZER: Thanks for letting me speak, and I just had a couple of points related to the size composition and the hypothesis of the larger fish migrating. I think Marcel pointed out that we don't see red grouper in that sort of in-between zone between the south and the north, which, if they're migrating, we would expect to see some at some point, but we don't.

The other part is, and maybe this is in your briefing book materials, and it was not in the presentation, but, if Lew were to have shown those fishery-dependent length compositions in the earlier years, leading up to 2009, there was actually quite a bit of overlap in the lengths between the south and the north, and you start to see that divergence of the lack of smaller fish in the north starting in 2009, but we don't see that prior to that, which is more consistent with recruitment failure in the north than it is with migration from south to north, and so I wanted to make those two points. The third point I wanted to make was that I got a message from Lew that he's unable to raise his hand, but he would like to speak. Thank you.

DR. COGGINS: Thanks, Kyle. I was just going to make some of those same points, and luckily Kyle and I were able to communicate offline, so that he could, because I can't seem to see how I raise my hand, and so I didn't want to just bust-in. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Lew. Feel free to just bust-in.

DR. CURTIS: Lew, that is, unfortunately, one of the side effects of becoming a presenter, is you no longer have the raise-hand option, and so just feel free to butt-in whenever you feel you need to say something.

DR. COGGINS: Okay. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: I was speaking before, and I was muted, but, Kyle, I just wanted to thank you for those points, and that matches, you know, what Anne Markwith had said, and so, yes, it seems like there is low support for movements of individuals from south to north. Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: I must not have lowered my hand. Sorry, Chairman.

DR. BUCKEL: The vestigial hand. Okay.

DR. SCHARF: I think it's my hand that was up, but, Genny, you can go first.

DR. NESSLAGE: Thanks. I guess I am still concerned, and I'm not -- Well, I feel like we're maybe -- I don't want to start arguing about the evidence, I guess, and I am going to stop myself, because I'm not sure that's the point of today's meeting, to solve the modeling problems and understanding the biology, and I think probably this is more of a procedural -- Getting enough information to figure out what the proper procedure forward is, correct, and, if that's the case, then I guess I feel as though there's definitely enough information to open the can of worms to explore new modeling approaches and see if they -- If there is sufficient data to actually do that successfully for an assessment.

The question then becomes not how much will the SSC allow with an operational assessment, but how much will the council allow, because, at the end of the day, we always more and better science, whatever you all have the time to be able to do, and the question is how much will the council

allow us to stray, and we've been zapped, in the past, for going too -- For taking the chain out a little too far, and so I guess I would -- I guess I'm saying I'm in the camp of, yes, I see the need to look at this more closely and consider alternative models. There is enough evidence here. What actually pans out, we'll see, but I don't know that this is our decision, other than we can make a recommendation, and is that correct, Jeff?

DR. BUCKEL: That's my understanding, Genny, but, Judd or Chip, please chime-in.

DR. CURTIS: Genny, that's exactly right, and so the results of this meeting, and the recommendations that the SSC makes to the council, will be reviewed next week at the council meeting, and, if the SSC determines that there is enough evidence that warrants looking at a two-area model, and that's the recommendation of the SSC, then the council will hear that and decide if that's the way they wish to proceed, and if that's going to include the benchmark approach or the continue the operational model, but on a two-area with topical working groups, et cetera, and the council will have the final determination on that.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Genny and Judd. Fred Scharf.

DR. SCHARF: I was coming back to the biology, and so I will open the door again, and sorry, Genny, but I just wanted to -- You know, you mentioned the evidence that was -- The past evidence that exists that, genetically, the Gulf and South Atlantic populations weren't distinct, and I'm assuming that means that there was no structure within the South Atlantic either, and then, if Dave Portenoy's new study shows the same thing, that we have a genetically-homogenized stock, I am not -- I'm not sure how that aligns with the recruitment data and the lack of --

So, if you have recruitment failure that's driving some of the size differences up north, and you don't have any movement in the adult stage across the middle part of the South Atlantic, it implies that there's some mixing that has to happen somewhere, and so maybe it's happening during the larval stages, and the recruitment bottleneck in the north is happening later, that there's some mechanism in the north that's limiting recruitment between the larval -- Between the transport of larvae and the early adult stage that's different than what's happening in the south. Regardless, I think that spending some time thinking about that, and how it impacts sort of the model structure, is going to be important, and so I just wanted to bring that up.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred. Amy Schueller.

DR. SCHUELLER: My thought, when I first went through these materials, was that I'm not sure that the options paper considers all of the important aspects, and, in particular, I thought it was a bit myopic on the pros and cons with respect to the science, and the risks associated with it, and, as I've been sitting here, I think there's also management risk that is -- Even if it's genetically mixed, it's possible that one portion of the population or the other could drive the results of the assessment in a way where you could be sacrificing yield in one area, but increasing risk on the other, and so I think that a good discussion of the actual risks associated with both science decisions and management decisions and the uncertainty need to be wrapped into this, and I agree with Genny that I think it seems like there's enough evidence here to make a recommendation to, as she put it, open the can of worms, and so that's, I guess, just where I was sitting on this.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. Thanks, Amy. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: I am willing to continue Amy's discussion, and I had a couple of other thoughts. One was to Fred Scharf's point, and I thought that perhaps larval transport by the Gulf Stream from south to north may be sufficient to support a genetic exchange, resulting in no genetic -- No significant genetic differences.

That goes more to the population's response to management. Even if there are no genetic differences between those two populations, or groups, they may still respond differently to management, which may support approaching this as two different populations, and modeling them as two different populations. I think those were different questions, or comments, than those that Amy mentioned, but just a couple more thoughts on my end. Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Marcel. Amy, I don't know if you wanted to spend time talking about the risks anymore, other than to make sure that we add that to the list for either the topical working group, or, if it goes to a benchmark, that those are discussed and thought through.

DR. SCHUELLER: I mean, I think that those are important things to make the council aware of, and, you know, as Marcel just put it, they might not be genetically distinct, but they may be reacting to management in a different way, and it could lead to, you know, a loss of yield in one area, and increased risk in the other, because maybe people are fishing in North Carolina as part of the coastwide, you know, acceptable catch, but, you know, maybe we should be taking it out of Florida. I mean, there's management implications for this too, and, whichever way the assessment goes, there needs to be some thought about that from the council side of things.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Amy. Okay, and so it seems like what I'm getting from the group is that, if you look at the options, there is the different approaches in the options paper, and there is -- We're in the 2, 3, or 4 approach, and not the -- We've gotten rid of the Approach 1, and is that what I'm hearing? We haven't heard from all SSC members, but, using Genny's terminology, the SSC is willing to open the can of worms with some modeling approach that considers the spatial complexity that Lew presented. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: I agree with that, and I would add to that that it's kind of based on the information that was presented today, and also based on previous recommendations by this SSC and the review panel when we reviewed the previous stock assessments, kind of as a justification for why we don't think Approach 1 would be the best option, just to throw that out there.

DR. BUCKEL: Marcel, that's a good point. This isn't coming out of -- You know, it's not some brand-new idea, that this is something that the CIE reviewers and SSC members and others have brought up before.

DR. REICHERT: Yes. Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: There's evidence to go in this direction. Thank you. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: I like the way this is being worded, and I want to steer away from the options, and no offense to staff who pulled it together, who are kind enough to try and guide our thoughts on this, but I think what's needed is a comprehensive overview, and careful consideration of all the available data and alternative hypotheses, and then putting together a model that is appropriate,

which I know the folks doing this will do that diligently, but I just wanted to make sure that we aren't saying, yes, a two-stock model is what we are supporting, because maybe, at the end of the day, after all the evidence is examined and argued, and the new information that's coming soon is considered, then maybe, you know, some tweak to a one-stock model might be appropriate, but incorporating spatial structure -- I really like the way Judd put that down on the screen. Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Genny. I am just wondering if we should add something to your point about it's open to modeling approaches to incorporate spatial structure if the data are available to do so, or something like -- I can't remember how you put it, but there is that option, right, that it still could be a one-stock model.

DR. NESSLAGE: I like the way Judd did this, and this is great.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. Thanks. Any comments on what Judd has there? I also feel like Approach 2, which was just to continue the operational assessment with the spatial model, without any topical working groups, and it sounded like folks thought the need for either a topical -- To get as many eyes on it as possible, to help make sure all the data are provided, or, you know, the most eyes on it as possible, in case there are datasets that might be helpful here, and so that's -- I guess that brings us to the other option of moving forward with the operational assessment, but with working groups to help with guiding this spatial modeling approach, if it's possible, versus moving from an operational with flexibility to a benchmark assessment. I would like to get some discussion on that from SSC members, please.

DR. CURTIS: Just one thing to think about, when recommending a continuation of an operational assessment with the inclusion of multiple topical working groups, is one of the kind of guidelines is, if you're looking at more than two topical working groups for an assessment, or for an operational assessment, it probably requires a more in-depth look, and so, i.e., a benchmark approach, and so, if we're thinking about data inputs regionally, stock identification regionally, unless that's all going to be one giant, comprehensive working group, then it may not be fit for an operational assessment. I'm just throwing that out there, but that's also a question to not only the SSC, but to the Center, and to the SEDAR approach as well.

DR. BUCKEL: I would like to hear from SSC members first on this, and then we can go to the other groups. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: I was thinking, and I agree with that approach, especially, if I remember correctly, red grouper wasn't a particularly data-rich species to begin with, and so that may complicate things further a little bit, you know, in terms of the data availability for either the north or the southern population, and that may require some different approaches, some different modeling approaches.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Marcel. Anne.

MS. MARKWITH: I was going to say that I agree with that approach too, whether it's, you know, topical working groups for an operational or going towards a benchmark, and the main reason is I think it adds transparency to the process, and so just changing the model -- In just my experience with the public, the more transparent you can be, particularly with stock assessments, the better off we're going to be, just because -- Yes. I guess this would be a question, and I see that Kathleen

has her hand up, but what is the time -- What would be the time differences between an operational with topical working groups versus switching to a benchmark and how that would affect the SEDAR staff?

DR. BUCKEL: Good points, Anne. We'll go to Kathleen, and then we'll -- Well, I want to hear from Fred, and then we'll go to Kathleen. Go ahead, Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you, Chair. I had actually the same comments. The differences -- We ought to be looking at the differences between Approach 3 and Approach 4, with respect to, one, timing and the ability to address the concerns, many of the concerns, that we raised, in terms of changes to how we would go about including either a two or multi-stock approach into the assessment.

I think, if I understood you correctly, we're now really deliberating between Approaches 3 and 4, and one of the biggest things, I think, is the timeframes involved. If we had a better understanding of how different the timeframes would be, I think we would -- I don't know whether we could have that, but that would be helpful in perhaps narrowing our choice. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred, and so hopefully Kathleen will weigh-in on that, to answer Anne and Fred's questions, and, also, to give Carolyn a heads-up, I am going to call on her to Genny's point about the council's -- Where the council is with red grouper and how quickly they're looking for something out of this assessment, for the management side, and so, Kathleen, please go first.

MS. HOWINGTON: All right, and so two points that I wanted to try and make, and, Jeff, please help me out in remembering all these. One is the question of what is appropriate for an operational and for a benchmark, and then secondly is going to be the timing and the order of things, and so, to the first one, operational originally was supposed to be tweaks to a model, an existing model that already is there.

The topical working groups were supposed to be focused on one specific point, which it does seem like this would be that, but, originally, the main point of an operational versus a benchmark, or a research track, is that the operational makes tweaks. If there are large changes to a model, that was supposed to then go into research track, or now benchmark, now that that is available to us as an option, and so I just would like the SSC to keep that in mind, that that was originally how these were built.

Now, this is an operational that has already been going, and this operational actually started last November, and so maybe we could initiate a topical working group just for this topic, but this is a pretty large change to the model. Honestly, I would not feel comfortable recommending -- If the SSC came to me and said this is our statement of work, and we would like to change the spatial structure of the model into two, I would feel very uncomfortable keeping that as an operational. That feels like a much bigger change, on top of what people have been saying about data availability, on top of this, you know, this is now a terminal year of 2021, and that then gets me into the time.

If the SSC decides to go forward with an operational, I am actually not going to be the SEDAR coordinator for this assessment, and it is actually going to be Meisha Key, who is actually currently on, and she's listening in, and so, if you all decide to go with a topical working group, I would

request that you come up with names today, as soon as possible, of who you would like to appoint and any other names of people that you think should be appointed.

Those names then need to go to the council, and we probably couldn't pull it off in a week. It would most likely be those names would go to the council in December for approval, and then a topical working group typically meets around three to four times, which the minimum is around six months, and so you're still not getting anything until mid-next year, at the best, for a time period.

For a benchmark, if the SSC decides to move forward with that, that is going to require pausing this assessment and again going through the approval and appointment process and getting terms of reference ready, and we're most likely then going to need to slip red grouper into the schedule, which would require me going to the council and asking them for prioritization of species, of which one would they like to get in.

Now, the good thing is we, again, have already started, and there is the potential for maybe a 2025 schedule, if the council approves it and the Center approves it, and everyone gets along and we can get everything turned around in that time, which we should be able to do on the SEDAR side, but we would need approval from everyone else. Most likely, it would be a 2026 start, and that would, again, require us to get the statement of work ready and get a benchmark slipped in, and we should have the time for that, but I'm not making any promises. I think that's all I wanted to say. Sorry for the long-winded answers.

DR. BUCKEL: That was very concise, for all that you had to let us know about, Kathleen, and so thanks very much. Just to make sure I got that right, that's a 2026 start for the benchmark for red grouper, if we went that --

MS. HOWINGTON: Most likely. There is potential for a 2025 start, but that would require the council to say we want to prioritize this over the ones we're already asking for in 2025 and the Science Center to say we get you, we've got you, and we're going to back you up on that and let's get started, and so let's just say 2026, in case.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks very much, Kathleen. That's super helpful. Steve.

DR. TURNER: It seems that we might be able to conduct an operational assessment if you apply the same model to two different stocks. Then you're not changing the assessment model, but you're just changing the information that goes into each model.

DR. BUCKEL: Lew, I don't know if you want to comment on that. You did mention that your approach for recruitment would be similar to recent BAM assessments.

DR. COGGINS: Yes, and, I mean, I can comment on the -- Not so much as to its appropriateness for an operational assessment or not, in terms of that term, but relative to the modeling structure, and that is essentially what my plan is, and what I've already started to do. One of the biggest -- Others have mentioned the potential problem with data availability, once we segregate these data into north and south, and clearly there are some years where we won't have as much composition data, for instance, that kind of thing, but, as least for the north, we still have a viable index for the entire time period.

The difficulty is probably going to be -- That may be the biggest difficulty for the south, is not having an index. However, I have already started trying to track that down as well, and, in particular, I've been able to obtain the information from the dive survey that's in the Tortugas, Keys, and southeast Florida, and there are some issues with using that that I think that we would have to think through, but it's potentially viable.

Then, if that was the case, then, following-up on Steve's comment, we could essentially use the same model structure. It would just have some different data inputs, including that index, and the other alternative for a southern region model would be some other data-limited type of an assessment model, and that would be -- That would come into play more if, for instance, we can't get a viable index for the southern region, and so, again, those are some specific thoughts about that, about the approach of trying to think about a relatively similar data structure, or, rather, a relatively similar model structure, with some different data inputs that I've been considering.

DR. BUCKEL: Great. That's very helpful, Lew. Thank you. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: Lew addressed my concerns and the points that I was going to make relative to data availability, and so thanks for that, Lew.

DR. BUCKEL: Lew, I really appreciate all the efforts you've put into this already, and I think that's helpful, in knowing that this operational assessment, with a working group to help out, to get some more eyes on it, is a viable option. Are there other comments from SSC members? It seems like there is a -- Is there more support right now for the -- There was more to add to what would be done, but the continuing on with the operational assessment, but with a topical working group? That's the sense I'm getting from comments from SSC members, and so, if you're not thinking along those lines, then please chime-in. I would like to hear from others. Go ahead, Steve.

DR. TURNER: I think the question is, is there biological information that would suggest that we need to have some sort of linkage between these two populations, potential populations, and would our modeling capabilities -- If that's the case, then we might have to shift towards a benchmark or a real change in the structure of the assessment, but I don't know if the data exists to do that, and so then I think the question is, you know, what is the SSC comfortable with, dealing with this as essentially two separate units, or does the data, and the SSC, think that there should be some sort of linkage?

DR. BUCKEL: Others can chime-in, and I didn't hear folks -- It seemed like folks didn't -- That there wasn't the evidence there for a linkage between the two, but others please chime-in if I misinterpret it. While folks are chiming-in on that, we'll take Wally and then Genny.

DR. BUBLEY: We're running the risk, and I don't know if this is even for us to decide at this point, but, if we go the route where we're utilizing an operational assessment, and we put together a topical working group, and then that topical working group finds out that there's more to this than just a simple fix, then are we delaying this even further, because, at that point, maybe the recommendation is a benchmark assessment, and then we've started a year later than we would have, and that's one concern that I would have with it. I mean, I think this approach is good, to

look into it, in the near-term, but I just want to put out that that might delay this even further, if we go this route.

DR. BUCKEL: Genny. Thanks, Wally.

DR. NESSLAGE: I'm think I'm thinking along the same lines as Wally, but I guess I'm wondering if that working group should review the available data and talk with the analysts about their ideas for potential modeling solutions and then provide new draft terms of reference, and, at that point, we would know whether or not -- I'm guessing it will be pretty obvious whether this is a tweak operational assessment or a full-on benchmark, but I don't think we're going to solve the answer today, with this group, is my guess.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Genny. To get a sense of the urgency from the council, Carolyn, if you could let us know how the council -- What your sense is from the council on urgency for getting a red grouper assessment.

DR. BELCHER: That's kind of a loaded question, because, as far as like are people like, pressure, pressure, pressure for this to be done as soon as possible, I can't speak to that effect. Obviously, it was put in the queue with a priority in mind when we went through the SEDAR scheduling, and so it's where it is, but I can say that we would -- In terms of trying to get something done in a short turnaround, if it's not right, I think the council would rather see the best appropriate model be applied through the appropriate mechanism, whether it's a benchmark or operational or research track, and I think that's where we would prefer to know that it's being done with the right tool than for us to try to find a shortcut to get something in a short time fashion that we're going to question what's going on with the uncertainty, because we didn't meet all the assumptions that we were hoping to meet going into it. Does that make sense?

DR. BUCKEL: Yes, it's very clear. Thanks, Carolyn. That's helpful, and so Genny had kind of an -- I will call it Approach 3.5 for the options, which is the topical working group to meet with Center staff, and that meeting would determine if it looks like a viable option for Kathleen to be able to sleep well at night that this is a tweak to an operational or if it's going to be bigger than that and require a benchmark. How do folks feel about that? Fred Scharf.

DR. SCHARF: Jeff, I agree, and I think that's a good approach, and I wondered if Carolyn could comment, you know, because Kathleen indicated that like, even if we -- Even if we decided to go this route, and we identified a topical working group, that that group needed to be approved by the council, and then that maybe it would not be possible that that would happen at the meeting starting next week, and I wonder if it's possible to make that happen at the meeting next week, so that the working group could start to work with the analysts this fall, so that, by the winter, you know, maybe by the December meeting, we could have a very clear direction as to whether it was going to be a tweak of the operational approach, versus a benchmark.

DR. BUCKEL: I see Chip just raised his hand, and so, Marcel, if you can hang on, we'll let Chip go, to that point, I think.

DR. REICHERT: No problem.

DR. COLLIER: To that point, in order to get people approved to this, we would need to put out a call, to see if people would like to join it, and a week's time is not sufficient, and so they would have to be part of the SEDAR pool in order to go through the process properly, and that's going to take a while, and so I think it would be -- December is going to be when people for the topical working group could get approved. There is an internal process that we could use if there's urgency, but we would still have to get the terms of reference revised and incorporated and approved by the council, and that would be likely in December as well, if needed, and so it looks like December might be the time period for that.

I'm also hearing discussion of potential for a spatial model, and the discussion of where the break occurs needs to be in there somewhere as well. Lew had definitely done his research in looking at the potential for a two-spatial model, looking at the Georgia-South Carolina line, but is that the appropriate line or not? I think there would have to be a topical working group looking into that as well.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Chip. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: I initially had the same thought as Fred, and I'm looking at the SEDAR 86 schedule, and so, initially, the report was supposed to be submitted to the council it looks like now, and that's the time, or in December of this year, and it looks like now that's when the working group is going to be approved, and my question is, if this is the route, you know, what would that do to the schedule, and are we talking about 2024, or possibly 2025, for this to be completed, and that seems to be kind of bleeding into another option for like a benchmark, and so I'm just wondering what other people's thoughts are. Also, from the council and SEDAR staff relative to the current schedule and how that would affect -- How these decisions would affect the schedule.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Marcel. I think the benchmark would be the start of 2026, and so then you're not looking for that to be finished up until I guess, at the earliest, 2027, or 2028, more realistically, and so -- All right. Folks take a look at what Judd has. Carolyn, go ahead.

DR. BELCHER: The other thing to kind of think about, relative to the idea of a two-stock model, is red grouper is under rebuilding, and so, if you change the definition of the stock, how does that impact our idea of rebuilding, if this is an operational?

DR. BUCKEL: That's a good point. Lew, to that point?

DR. COGGINS: Actually, my comment was not related to that.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. Do you have any thoughts on that, Lew? Have you thought about the rebuilding?

DR. COGGINS: I may not be the best person to take that one on. I mean, I think that, when it comes to -- I think that the biology that we're really starting to consider here, in terms of the recruitment dynamics -- Now, this is more from a scientific standpoint than perhaps the way that this question was posed, but, from the standpoint of thinking about this from the scientific standpoint, and the management options, you know, depending on what is really happening with the recruitment dynamics, it raises a whole suite of questions about appropriate management for the South Atlantic.

You know, if it's essentially a stocked fishery from the Gulf, then, you know, there's a host of different considerations to think about relative to management actions, but I don't think I really want to talk about that in any more specifics than that, but clearly the recruitment dynamics is really important in thinking about not only a rebuilding schedule, but thinking about just overall management options.

DR. BUCKEL: All right. Thanks, Lew, and then you had the point that you raised your hand for?

DR. COGGINS: Yes, and thank you, Chair. The only thought that occurred to me, when the idea of the appropriate breakpoint between these regions was brought up, you know, clearly there is some biological things, considerations, there, but, from a modeling standpoint, I think it's really important to think about the spatial resolution of the data that are available, and, in general, that's at a state level, and so, for instance, landings and so forth, and so I think that's a big limitation, or at least a big -- That's a big constraint, when we start to think about where appropriate demarcations could be in a spatial modeling framework, is just how the data is aggregated, and so that was the point I wanted to make.

DR. BUCKEL: Good point, Lew. Thank you. I think Shep was next.

MR. GRIMES: Thank you. I just wanted to respond to that rebuilding plan question, and the answer to that is that the council would have to figure that out, after whatever came out of the SSC. I think, if the SSC and the Science Center supported multiple stocks, and you produced an assessment -- You know, an assessment of those multiple stocks, then I guess there would be status determinations, or status determination criteria, associated with the different stocks, stock status information for different stocks, and then the council would take that into account and, you know, revise the rebuilding plan accordingly, potentially, and do multiple rebuilding plans. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Shep. That's helpful. Go ahead, Steve.

DR. TURNER: I will be quick. Please refresh me, and does a benchmark assessment provide assessment advice, management advice, or is it just stock structure and biology and then you need another SEDAR action, activity, to actually get the management advice?

DR. BUCKEL: Steve, it provides the stock status, but Kathleen looks like she raised her hand, and so she can speak to it as well. Go ahead, Kathleen.'

MS. HOWINGTON: You're good. You got it. Benchmarks are the ones that end on a deadline with management advice. Research tracks are the ones that do not, and they are more loose with the schedule, and so we are talking benchmark and not research track.

DR. BUCKEL: Yes. Thanks, Kathleen, and thanks, Steve. Okay. We'll do a biological break here, but just, while folks are doing that -- When you get back, take a look at what's on here, and, if folks are happy with what we have, then we'll -- I think we've dealt with all the action items, and we can move on to the next, Item Number 4, but we'll take a five-minute biological break. Be back on at 3:05, and we'll double-check and see if anybody has any comments on this. See you in five minutes.

(Whereupon, a recess was taken.)

DR. BUCKEL: While we're waiting on the last few, please read the text that Judd has here and be ready to provide any edits to him. All right. Let's go ahead and get started, and hopefully the others will join us here shortly. Marcel, I see you have your hand raised. Is that from before?

DR. REICHERT: I have a comment on the text.

DR. BUCKEL: Go for it.

DR. REICHERT: It says "the need for more open and transparent process", and I think what was mentioned was that this would address the need for a more and open transparent.

DR. BUCKEL: Great. Thank you. Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: One of the issues -- I mean, I think we have -- The points that are already written are okay, but one of the things that struck me, looking at the spatial data summary and analysis of red grouper, is it says that, unfortunately, the SERFS index in the southern region is unavailable, because data sparsity do not allow construction of a credible index. To me, that suggests that we're going to have to take -- The validity of what comes out of these assessments is determined by the data available, and, if one doesn't have an independent area in one area, particularly in the southern area, that's a big constraint, and it means that, quite frankly, the integrity of the models is going to be very different because of data available are significantly different between the northern and the southern region, and it will have to be looked at in a different fashion. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred, and Lew mentioned that he's been looking at a -- There's a potential source of an index of abundance from a scuba survey in that area, and that's been considered in the past for red grouper, but it was not used, because it was limited to the south, but, if you're just doing a southern stock model, then that could -- That's a viable option, and so he also mentioned that, if there isn't one that's available, then it might have to go to a data-limited approach for that, that particularly area, and so good points. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: Thanks, Jeff. I guess I'm a little worried about the way the last bullet is phrased, and I'm wondering if folks would be open to -- If this would still -- If an alternative wording would still capture this, and, if we were to get rid of that, and the reason why I'm concerned is that it sounds like we're automatically endorsing that, if it was possible, and so, in other words, the model structure could remain the same, and I guess I'm wondering if we could modify the first bullet to say something more like the SSC is open to alternative modeling and data treatment approaches that account for spatial structure, and that would leave the door open to all sorts of options, depending, as Fred mentioned, on the data available and how creative the modelers could get. Would that still address the concern behind the last bullet, but not make it sound like we're endorsing that option already?

DR. BUCKEL: That works for me. How do others --

DR. NESSLAGE: Judd, I think I was suggesting "alternative data treatment and/or modeling approaches". Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: That's great. Thanks, Genny, and then we would strike the last bullet.

DR. NESSLAGE: Exactly.

DR. BUCKEL: Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: To Fred's point, and something that Lew mentioned earlier, it may be good to acknowledge that the SSC recognizes the data challenges, the data availability challenges, relative to, you know, more spatial specifics, or a spatially-specific model approach, since we talked about that, you know, on several occasions. I think I mentioned before that, you know, red grouper, I think, was a fairly data-poor -- It was a relatively data-poor stock to begin with.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Marcel. Kathleen.

MS. HOWINGTON: All right, and so the way that I'm reading Bullet Point Number 3 is that you guys are recommending that SEDAR run a topical working group to determine if an operational or a benchmark approach is most appropriate. Do you mean an SSC working group that an analyst would convene to determine which one, and would bring, you know, new terms of reference to your October meeting, or do you mean a SEDAR topical working group is going to determine if an operational or a benchmark is okay, and then a different SEDAR topical working group is going to look into the geographic line and the spatial modeling changes? Do you see my confusion?

DR. BUCKEL: Yes, I do, Kathleen. I was envisioning some SSC members and some other folks, biologists or others, that had information on red grouper that we would get together to -- Where there would be more time than this meeting to think about is it going to be a tweak, right, or is it going to require a benchmark.

MS. HOWINGTON: Right. Okay, and so you and I are on the same wavelength, and so the timeline would be an SSC group, and not a SEDAR topical working group, but an SSC working group and analysts would get together, and they would determine if a benchmark or an AOA was appropriate, and then that means that you would not need to be appointed by the council in December, right, because SSC working group members don't need to go through the SEDAR appointment process.

DR. BUCKEL: That's correct, if the rest of the group agrees with that, what's written there, that it's an SSC working group, versus a SEDAR topical working group, for this initial meeting. Are folks okay with it being an SSC workgroup? I will put it another way. Raise your hands if you're not okay with that. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: You changed it since I raised my hand. I just wanted to -- I totally get what Kathleen is talking about, but I thought that, for our council working groups as well, that we have to have TORs and all that jazz, and we've done that before, and I just want to make sure that we recognize the timeline properly.

DR. BUCKEL: Chip or Judd to that point on getting the approval for the SSC workgroups?

DR. COLLIER: It can be done in an expedited fashion, where it's the Executive Director and the Chair, and they get together, as well as the chair of the committee, which would be the Snapper

Grouper chair. They can get together and talk about this, but, to me, it's really sounding more like a benchmark is needed than a topical working group to discuss whether or not another operational assessment is needed. If we're talking about alternative data treatments, alternative modeling approaches, modeling approaches are definitely one thing that needs to go through a benchmark process. It needs to be open and transparent, and that's not only according to SEDAR guidance, but it's also in the stock improvement plan, and I also see that John Carmichael has his hand raised. Go ahead, John.

MR. CARMICHAEL: Thanks, and I just wanted to make sure that you guys were clear. You know, I don't feel like you have to push this through as an operational or some way because of the timeline, given that we had this discussion earlier, because this was put on the schedule, because, you know, one of the reasons this was scheduled when it was is because red grouper is in a rebuilding plan, and the council really wanted to have an update, and a check, on that rebuilding plan, to see if we're making progress, to see if we need to make modifications to it.

You know, if we're looking at a situation where the evidence suggests that there's actually two stocks and not one, and we're going to need to change stuff -- You know, keep in mind that we're going to have to actually go back and update all of that rebuilding plan and everything, and so, you know, this could have major changes in the management, and we may not be able to just get a check on that past rebuilding plan and know where it stands, if all of the discussion here, you know, holds with the two stocks, and all the issues with those stocks, and so the council would be in the position of having to make some pretty significant changes, and I think it would be very important to make sure that those changes are built on an appropriate scientific basis.

If that means a benchmark, then that means a benchmark, but, you know, I would be concerned to, you know, have it perceived that we're fast-tracking an operational to deal with this stuff, because of concerns about timeline and getting things done, when we end up having pretty severe consequences and are, you know, subjective, you know added litigation risk and what have you, because we didn't use the most robust and appropriate process.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, John. I'm going to go to Kai and then Marcel.

DR. LORENZEN: Having listened to all of this, I agree, and I think it really needs a benchmark. I think there are too many worms in this can to not have a benchmark.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Kai. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: I agree. Yes, I agree, and I've been -- One of the questions that I had is, to me, it was not entirely clear what our recommendations, or our plans, were, but this supersedes that, and so I would agree with that, that, you know, given everything we discussed, and the fact that red grouper is in the rebuilding, and this would potentially change all of that, yes, I think --

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Marcel. So we've moved from Approach 3.5 to some members supporting Approach 4. Folks that are against Approach 4, recommending a benchmark assessment, please raise your hands and provide your thoughts. In Approach 3.5, this workgroup was going to get together and discuss whether to move forward with an operational with tweaks or a benchmark, and so we're just -- Instead of having that workgroup, we would make that decision today to go to the benchmark, given the issues that have been raised, and another one is

this recruitment coming from the Gulf, and that would also -- You know, as folks have mentioned, it's more than just one tweak. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: I don't want to be a naysayer, because I think -- My gut initially said benchmark as well, but I'm a little concerned that we have sufficient data for any of these alternative approaches, and that's kind of why I was suggesting the intermediate option, but if -- I always think a careful consideration of all the options is the best, if you can afford the time and the energy, and so I take back my intermediate approach, if there's support for a benchmark.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Genny. No hands, Judd?

DR. CURTIS: No hands.

DR. BUCKEL: So I guess we can delete this, and I think, based on what's been said, that it's not maybe, but do exceed, based on what Kathleen and Chip have explained and what SEDARs are - - What the operationals are set up for. Thanks. I think we've addressed the action items that are in the overview document, as well as the requests that the Center had in the slide presentation, and so that next bullet would be yes, for would the SSC endorse a SEDAR 86 assessment. I think the other two sub-bullets there I think were more in line with continue the operational, and so, with the benchmark, we would automatically review it, and there would be new TORs. Kathleen.

MS. HOWINGTON: Not topical working groups for benchmarks, and those are panels. I believe that's the wording that we use. Topical working groups are meant for operationals. Participants appointed, and just use that.

DR. BUCKEL: All right. Thanks, Judd, and thanks, Kathleen. One last chance, if SSC members have any comments on this, and then we'll move on to Agenda Item Number 4, if there are no hands. Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: Just a question. When will we provide the next advice on this stock? I think we've been told, or we've recognized, that it would probably take until 2027 or 2028 to do a benchmark, and, you know, what information will we have beyond that, and which we've already provided, for the years that we haven't provided, but before the benchmark is ready? Is that something we need to discuss? Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred. Kathleen, was it to that point?

MS. HOWINGTON: I can give you a general timeline of what could potentially be available. Most likely, again, we would start this in 2026. Benchmarks, in general, take around two years, depending on if you need stock ID, if you want to add that in, and, ultimately, a discussion needs to be had at the upcoming SEDAR Steering Committee meeting in regard to does a benchmark have a planning team, does a benchmark have stock ID, and we have not finalized those decisions yet, and so, when those decisions are made, then I can give you more of a detailed timeline, but, for right now, let's just say 2026, two years, with management advice, and a CIE independent review would be 2028, and then you all would receive it at the end of 2028, and so I don't know what would be available up until then, but I would definitely not recommend working on the current 2021 terminal year.

DR. BUCKEL: Chip, I saw you had your hand up, and I'm not sure if it was to Fred's question about what do we do in the interim.

DR. COLLIER: I was actually going to ask Erik if there was any wiggle room in the current SEDAR, in his current staff scheduling, where maybe we could squeeze this in as a benchmark, trying to rush it through the system, and I know Lew has done a lot of legwork already, and could we have a shortened data workshop to talk about some of the stock structure, where it should be, and then be able to have an assessment panel, in order to really look at the different assessment styles that might be appropriate, or modeling approaches that might be appropriate, and I see that Erik has his hand up.

DR. BUCKEL: Go ahead, Erik.

DR. WILLIAMS: Thanks, Chair, and, to answer Chip's question, I really can't answer that, because determining whether we can do an assessment is not constrained to my branch, in terms of understanding workload, because it involves so many other parts of the Center, and I can't answer that on my own, and so, yes, I don't even want to try to venture to answer that. It really has to be proposed in a sort of priority setting, and then the Center has to look at all the resources that would have to come to bear on a given project and then figure all of that out in an, unfortunately, complicated manner right now.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Erik. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: A quick question, and can someone remind me of the rebuilding schedule timeline, year-wise? Where are we in that, because that may dictate -- Doesn't that dictate if we need to provide the council with some additional recommendations or advice, but maybe not.

DR. BUCKEL: Any of the council staff, or others, that can answer Marcel's question about where we are in the rebuilding? I don't know, Marcel, where we are.

DR. REICHERT: Okay. I will see if I can look that up, real quick, also.

DR. COLLIER: I am just looking it up right now, and it started -- A rebuilding plan was started in 2019, ending in 2028.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Chip.

DR. REICHERT: Thanks, Chip.

DR. BUCKEL: Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you, Chair. I am just wondering, and, since the last assessment had a terminal year of 2015, we have some indices that we were provided in the spatial data summary of indices from the commercial, handline, headboat, and the SERFS, and so on and so forth, and would those be the data that we would use to indicate whether the rebuilding schedule is on time, or it needs to be changed, before we get the benchmark?

I'm thinking, if the -- I don't know what is the terminal year, in terms of the rebuilding schedule, but clearly the council needs to know, based on the existing information, whether it's going to be on schedule or not, and if continuation of the present advice is appropriate in the out years, which we haven't provided advice, before we get the benchmark assessment, and I think that would be -
- So I think we need to think about that, because, you know, we are responsible for trying to evaluate whether the rebuilding schedule is appropriate, in terms of will it be actually rebuilt by the end of the current schedule. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred, and, Judd and Chip, is there any -- I am trying to think of any precedent where the SSC has done something like that in between assessments, to look at data streams and give the council advice on how things look in terms of being on track, and, just because we haven't done it, it doesn't mean that we can't do it in the future, but if you can just remind me.

DR. CURTIS: One of the processes that addresses that, that hasn't gone through the South Atlantic yet, is the interim analysis approach, right, and we're going to get our first interim analysis on vermilion snapper in our October meeting, and, theoretically, that could be an approach where you look at it as a health check, or to see if you're on track with your rebuilding schedule, but we have not yet evaluated that interim approach, interim analysis approach, yet for the South Atlantic. It has been applied in the Gulf, for several different stocks, but we'll see that approach for vermilion snapper in October, and the SSC can maybe then determine if that would be an approach that they would like to see applied to red grouper, to see if the rebuilding time is on track.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Judd. Maybe if you don't mind adding maybe a comment there that, given the length of time -- Given that we're in a rebuilding schedule, and the length of time between the results of the next benchmark assessment and the last assessment, we would like to explore an interim analysis to provide information to the council. John Carmichael.

MR. CARMICHAEL: Thanks, Jeff, and, you know, Fred makes a good point. I think, in an ideal world, we would have this operational completed with the single-stock model, as originally envisioned, and it would give us that check on the existing rebuilding plan and where it stands, that we would have in place and the council could act on it while a benchmark assessment gets put into the schedule and then carried out.

If the feeling of the Science Center, and supported by the SSC, is wrapping this up would be inappropriate, given the issues that have been raised about two stocks, and certainly questioning the, you know, BSIA basis of the existing model, then I think the council has really no choice but to carry on with the existing rebuilding until they get the new information. You know, I'm not sure we can do much more than that, unless the SSC can come up with some type of interim information that would be better, but I'm not sure how you come up with interim information that's better if we're subscribing to the two-stock situation, and so it's quite complicated, it seems to me, as to where we go with this, and we're probably far from the ideal world.

DRAFT CLIMATE GOVERNANCE POLICY

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, John, and good point about, if we're making a decision of going to two stocks, but then trying to do something in the interim based on the one stock, and so I appreciate those thoughts. All right. Thanks, Judd. Any other comments on red grouper, before we move

into Agenda Item 4? All right. I don't see any hands, Judd, and so if you can scroll into Agenda Item Number 4, the Draft Climate Governance Policy, and if you could scroll down to the action items, real quick.

This is a document that NOAA Fisheries provided, and Judd is going to give a presentation on it, but I just wanted to remind you of the action items to comment on the proposed process to review the geographic scope of a fishery, and/or the determination of council authority, provide feedback on the application of potential implications of the proposed review criteria, metrics, and data sources. Then comment on the potential science and stock assessment implications of this policy and provide any additional comment and recommendations for the council, for the council to incorporate into their comment letter. Judd, you are on the docket, and there's your presentation, and so I will let you take it away.

DR. CURTIS: Okay. Thanks, Jeff. I have just put together a few slides here, as a summary and background on this NMFS Fisheries Climate Governance Policy that was just released earlier this year, in May, just to kind of provide some context to the action items and the feedback that we would like to get from the SSC.

You've seen the document, and just the purpose and need is to address kind of these increasing shifts in the geographic distribution of these fish stocks, and then a determination of, you know, which council assumes responsibility for fishery management plans and the geographic scope of these fisheries. This might include a shift in authority from one council to another, as far as we've seen already with the Gulf and yellowtail snapper, which is managed jointly between the South Atlantic and the Gulf Fishery Management Councils.

As you can see in the policy, there is four steps that they wish to get guidance on, and these are determining whether to review the geographic scope of a fishery and the designation of council authority, and Number 2 is the determination of the geographic scope of the fishery, designation of council authority for MSA 304(f), and the guidance for transitioning management from existing councils, if this is needed.

This flow chart just kind of summarizes those steps in the process, and this is provided in Appendix 1 of the policy document, and you have the four steps outlined there that I just read off, and then, in Appendix 2, they have the different kind of designations on how this might be implemented, whether it's one council and one fishery management plan, if you have multiple councils and one fishery management plan, or if you're having multiple councils and multiple fishery management plans.

The timeline, just to give you guys an idea for the development of these comments, and so, on May 15, NMFS distributed this draft policy, and this was provided -- A brief overview was provided at the CCC meeting in May. In July, the Mid-Atlantic SSC had a very extensive review of the whole draft policy and provided comments, and they engaged a lot of the stakeholders, as well as the SSC and advisory panels, in their whole process. That brings us to today, where the South Atlantic SSC has the chance for comment and review. Next week, the council will have a discussion on that draft policy, and it might be too soon for the SSC's comments to be incorporated, but, ultimately, the SSC's comments will likely be incorporated in the overall draft document, as an appendix, on top of the council's recommendations.

In October, the next CCC meeting, the development of all the joint comments from multiple councils will be provided, and then November 17 is the final deadline, and NMFS implemented a deadline for the submission of those council comments. These are just the action items here that we had provided in the overview that we want the SSC to provide comments on, and so I will just scroll back to the action items in the overview document for any of that feedback.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Judd. Here is your opportunity to comment on this NOAA Fisheries draft policy, and so we can take each action item at a time, Judd. Well, first, any public comment?

DR. CURTIS: Sorry, Jeff, and let me just add too that I have adapted some of these action items from some of the language that came out of the policy document, and I curtailed it to things that were more specific for the SSC, as far as like Bullet Point Number 2, some of the things like the proposed review criteria, metrics, and data sources described in the document that are pertinent to the SSC's deliberations.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Judd. Do we take public comment before we get into the action items?

DR. CURTIS: That's correct, yes, and so, if there's any members of the public that wish to provide comment, please raise your hands.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay, and so, before we get into the action items, do folks have any questions for Judd? All right, and so we'll move into the action items, and so the first one is comment on the proposed process to review the geographic scope of a fishery and/or the determination of council authority.

I will jump in, and I thought it wasn't clear where these numbers came from, and like I would have liked some scientific justification for some of these proportions of a fisheries landing and revenue, and I just -- Are those coming from -- Like the greater than 15 percent in the proportion of a fisheries landings revenue, and it just didn't -- It didn't seem like there was justification provided for some of the -- For within that proposed process, that those criteria are listed in Paragraph B, and then you go to Paragraph B and it's these proportions. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: Yes, and I had similar thoughts. Also, as we have seen in our previous conversation, many times, you know, those shifts in whether or not stocks are now crossing council boundaries come from stock assessments or discussions, for instance, within the SSC, during the review or otherwise, and so is that something that may start a consideration, or is this mostly coming from NOAA Fisheries? Do you know what I'm trying to say?

To me, it was kind of unclear, you know, if, at some point, there is a conclusion that, yes, there may be a change, or a shift, and what -- Can the SSC, for instance, initiate a review of the geographic scope, or should we -- In terms of procedure, do we bring that to the council, and then the council contacts NOAA, or, to me, that part of the process was not entirely clear to me, or maybe we don't have a role in that, as an SSC.

DR. BUCKEL: I think, if I understand it, this is the -- So, within NOAA Fisheries, they would be monitoring these and looking at these criteria, that, you know, if the indicator went above this, if you have a shift of 15 percent or more, then that would trigger the next -- What does it say? Letting

the councils know. Will notify the relevant councils and initiate the process. John Carmichael, is it to that point?

MR. CARMICHAEL: Thank you, Jeff, and it is to that point, and, Marcel, you raise a good question, and, as Jeff said, there's no clear role being provided to the council, including its SSC advisors, et cetera, until NMFS has decided that they feel a governance change is necessary, and so there isn't any role of the SSC in any of that advance determinations that would be going on, and that's one of the things that many of the councils have raised questions about, and as well as, you know, you mentioned looking at some information, and I guess it would go --

On a regular basis, they would look at various sources of information, to see if shifts are occurring, and then they would try to decide if it's enough to justify governance, and there doesn't seem to be any role for the councils, or SSC, in that process, and it's not very well spelled out either as to, you know, who would be doing that work, and is this Headquarters, Science Centers, Regional Offices, and nobody really knows at this point.

DR. REICHERT: Thanks, John.

MR. CARMICHAEL: I think, if you have concerns like that, those are good things to put in your comments, because that will certainly help as we pass these on to the agency.

DR. BUCKEL: Judd, maybe add that it's unclear who is going to do this, who is going to be monitoring the data sources provided in Step 2b. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: I have many comments, but I just wanted to first pile onto your first comment, Jeff, and I think we need to be even more strongly wording this section, and I think we need to simply say that these thresholds for transitions of management are completely arbitrary. There is no apparent biological or socioeconomic justification for these thresholds provided, unless you are not amenable to that modification, Jeff.

DR. BUCKEL: I am very amenable to that. Thank you, Genny. That's much better said than I had. Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you, Chair. As I read this section, it said "may include", and it doesn't say "will include". It says that indicators of a significant change in location of species, subspecies, and/or stocks, and/or fishing effort that could affect council jurisdiction may include, but it doesn't require that they do include that 15 percent, and so, I mean, I think -- You know, I'm not a lawyer, but the word "may" simply means that it could, and it doesn't mean that it's etched in stone, and, again, it goes on to but are not limited to document shifts in stock distribution. There are a couple other things there, and so I'm thinking that, you know, this is not an either/or thing. The word "may" suggests that that could be used, but it's not preeminent. Am I reading it incorrectly? Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: No, I don't think you're -- The "may" is -- I guess it could -- I'm not sure why they put the number in there, I guess, is where I'm -- But, if they had some justification for the number, it would have been nice to have cited something along those lines, and that's all I was -- I was just curious where that came from, but, yes, you're right that it's not a hard-and-fast rule, that they're providing some flexibility there.

DR. CURTIS: Fred, I'm trying to capture your point there. Can you summarize that a little bit again for me, so I can capture that?

DR. BUCKEL: Judd, maybe, just in the first bullet, it's unclear where the numbers originate, and there's no scientific or socioeconomic justification.

DR. SERCHUK: That's fine.

DR. BUCKEL: Then thresholds for transitions in management are arbitrary, but there is -- But there is some language that there's flexibility, and I don't -- Fred's point was just that, you know, they use the word "may", and that they're not -- That it's not a hard-and-fast 15 percent, for example.

DR. SERCHUK: I mean, clearly, if there was a documented shift in stock distribution, that might be something that would be worthy of consideration, and we see that in things like black sea bass, that are moving further north, and so the Mid-Atlantic Council may need to work better with the New England Council on that, but I saw that these were not hard-and-fast, and I don't know where the numbers came from, but they're not given as absolutes, and so I didn't really spend a lot of time on it, other than to look at the last one about documented shifts in stock distribution, which is something that, you know, the SSC would certainly be involved with. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred, and so, Judd, I think what Fred is after, on that edit that you just made, is, instead of "and language on the application of rules is ambiguous", "but language on the application of the rules provides flexibility". It's not hard-and-fast, or it's provides flexibility, something like that. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: You addressed my comments. Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Go ahead, John Carmichael.

MR. CARMICHAEL: Thank you, and, you know, you're not wrong in saying that it was arbitrary. As I recall discussions at the CCC, you know, numbers like this that are in here were something that they were interested in input on, to figure out, you know, what is an appropriate amount, and like how much of a shift in recreational effort do you think it would take to say we think the stock distribution is shifting, you know, to support the idea that the stock distribution is shifting.

Then, importantly, for us, dealing with what we do, in terms of recreational data and effort, over what scales can you measure recreational effort? We have a lot of stocks where the PSEs are over 50 percent, and the estimates are not significantly different from zero on the landings, and what do we do with effort?

DR. BUCKEL: Good point. As others are thinking of their comments for that first action item, we can move on to the second, to provide feedback on the application and potential implication of the proposed review criteria, metrics, and data sources described in Section 3. We kind of hit on those underneath the first one, and so maybe put "see above" for now. You know, this is maybe a more -- Because we didn't get John's point about the recreational data, and we could put that here, that the recreational data, for many species, has high PSEs. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: Sorry, and I'm just having a hard time figuring out where to put my comments in these action items, and so I'm being more quiet than I might otherwise have been, but, yes, to add to that, I think we need to make the point that the South Atlantic relies heavily on recreational data sources, given the nature of many of our fisheries, unlike some of the other councils, and, therefore, the -- I would argue the uncertainty around the decision to make this sort of transition among councils is going to be -- Between ours and let's say the Mid, it's going to be much higher than, I guess, for many of the stocks for the Mid to New England, and, really, this doesn't apply to the other councils.

DR. BUCKEL: Good point, Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: I would like to hear from others on this document. Judd, I guess we'll move to the third bullet. Do folks have comments related to that bullet? Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: Given our previous conversation, you know, this has the potential to -- If the decision is made that those stocks, or the stock distribution, has changed, it may affect stock assessments and delay our ability to provide management recommendations to the councils, because, you know, like in red grouper, stock assessments have to be -- The schedule may have to be revised.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Marcel. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: Even beyond that, we have different review bodies popping between SEDAR and SAW/SARCs, and I don't even know how that would work. I know -- I can't imagine the mess that would ensue if there were stocks, every three years, popping back and forth between the different review schedules, and it just seems like an absolute nightmare to me, and I guess the other concern I have, and I'm not sure if this is the right place to put it, but the stock assessment capacity differs amongst the Centers, and does that mean there's going to be -- If let's say stocks move north, or stocks move south, how are we going to -- Have they thought ahead to how this is going to play out with regard to stock assessors and how their workloads are going to change among Centers? This just seems not well planned out. Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Genny. Jennifer.

DR. SWEENEY-TOOKES: Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: We are getting some feedback, Jennifer.

DR. COLLIER: Jennifer, you might have two different -- I see you're on here twice, and so you might be getting your voice through one and sound through another, and so it's going to be a bit of a challenge, but I will unmute you again.

DR. SWEENEY-TOOKES: I just specifically pointed out that we're treating some really big bodies of information as just sort of black boxes of accepted ideas, and so they have, down at the bottom, potential data sources, and I am sorry, Judd, and this is back to the Step 2 question, but

traditional ecological knowledge, stakeholder-provided information, ecosystem status reports, and, I mean, these are really big sources of information, but also extremely vague and squishy as to how this is gathered, where this is coming from, and, you know, is a simple email from someone who claims local ecological knowledge then -- One, from one person, is this a data source that has to be considered? I know you all did a really beautiful job of saying, you know, we need to be really clear about what these data sources are, but I just wanted to expand on that a little bit.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Jennifer. Fred Serchuk.

DR. SWEENEY-TOOKES: I can write that up, Judd, and send it to you.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you, and I wonder whether -- I understand the comment that was made in the transition of management between the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic, but I wonder whether we could be more general and just say transition of management between adjacent councils, for many stocks, are dependent on data sources having high -- Recreational data sources having high uncertainty, because it could happen with the Gulf as well.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Genny, are you okay with that change?

DR. NESSLAGE: Absolutely, and can I pile on and add another one to the list, while my mic is on?

DR. BUCKEL: Please.

DR. NESSLAGE: Okay. I think we need to highlight that -- Maybe I'm wrong, but I think we have the most unassessed stocks of the three councils on the east coast, and is that correct, and, if so, what does that mean for this document, if we have catch-based, you know, ABCs, and then we're just going to toss them to the Mid, because, suddenly, there is a spike, due to -- You know, we have a lot of -- What do we call them, from the stocks where they occasionally pick up and then -- They're not super targeted, and I am blanking on the phrase right now, but, when we talk about our unassessed stocks, it comes up, but, if someone remembers, it might be good to put that in there, that these are -- There is really no -- Go ahead.

DR. BUCKEL: I am not sure, and were you talking about the ecosystem species? I forget the term of --

DR. NESSLAGE: I will go back and look for the term. These are the unassessed stocks where they're not targeted, but we still -- There is enough of them that we still have to come up with an ABC, and they're not -- I will go look for it. Sorry. I am wasting your time.

DR. COLLIER: Is it data-limited? Is that what you're looking for?

DR. SERCHUK: Incidental or bycatch?

DR. NESSLAGE: All of the above, yes.

DR. BUCKEL: I think we've called them data-limited, yes, to Chip's -- Go ahead, Steve.

DR. TURNER: It's been covered.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: Sorry, and I didn't lower my hand, Chair. Sorry about that.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. No problem. All right. That was good feedback on this document. Thanks, everyone. Any addition -- The last action item is -- I will let you finish, Judd. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: Sorry. I have so much to say on this one. Under the -- Perhaps under the Other category at the bottom -- Have we not gotten there yet? Am I jumping ahead? My bad.

DR. BUCKEL: No, and I think we're there, unless -- Let's go there, and then we'll review, if folks have additional items for the others, but I was just giving Judd a chance to finish typing up that bullet, but he's done, and so let's go ahead, Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: Thanks. Sorry. I think it's imperative that we highlight, to NOAA, the fact that this is going to potentially negatively impact the commission, the states, and other stakeholders, including the fisheries and recreational anglers, in that management could be delayed, could be completely disjunct, and I'm not sure what the right phrasing is, but this could create massive chaos, not just for the federal aspect of these fisheries, but for the states and the commission as well, and so I would hope that they would entertain the concerns of the interjurisdictional bodies that are involved in some of these fisheries as well, even though we are the South Atlantic SSC, and I think we need to recognize them as well.

Just I don't know what our socioeconomic folks think, but this just seems like it would be really confusing, and potentially alienating, to our stakeholders, to have a process that could switch so - - What appears to be so easily and quickly, and maybe that's not what they originally intended, but the way the document comes across to me, and I would be scared, if I were one of our constituents. Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Genny. Jennifer.

DR. SWEENEY-TOOKES: I would like to respond to what Genny just said, and I think that that's absolute probable. At this point, I mean, what we see is that people are very confused already about who manages what, and in what ways, and so, to add this extra layer, without, you know, some really liberate and extensive education campaigns, or making things just abundantly clear, is going to be ineffective and probably result in even more confusion and resentment, and, Judd, I also dropped what I was trying to say earlier into the chat box, in case that's helpful.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Jennifer.

DR. CURTIS: Thanks, Jennifer. Let me go fish that up.

DR. BUCKEL: Fred Scharf.

DR. SCHARF: Jeff, I think -- I don't know whether this would go under the last bullet or the one up before, but, you know, in the document, I think we need to make a point that the procedure for feedback between the agency, between NOAA and the councils, has to be really clear, and it has to be abundantly clear.

You know, right now, under the determination, you know, it just -- It has this statement that says, when determining the geographic scope, NOAA Fisheries may choose to give the relevant council, or councils, a specified period of time of up to six months from the date of notification in which to recommend how the fishery, or fisheries, should be identified, pursuant to the considerations set forth in this document, and it's not really clear what that means, but there's lots of "mays" and "up to", and I think that the procedure for feedback between NOAA, when they make a determination that maybe the geographic scope has changed, that there is a very clear mechanism for feedback between the councils that are involved to decide what the outcomes are going to be.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Fred. I think Judd has got that captured. Take a look and see if you like that text. Other comments on the document relevant to these four action items? Go ahead, Steve.

DR. TURNER: Given the very long time periods in the SEDAR schedule, it seems like it could be very difficult for the council to provide scientific responses to fisheries within a six-month time period.

DR. BUCKEL: Steve, it wasn't clear to me if they were making management advice or just to recommend how the fisheries should be identified, right, and should it be identified as a South Atlantic Council or move it from the South Atlantic Council to the Mid-Atlantic, and so those outcomes that they list there.

DR. TURNER: So, you know, let's say we're in the middle of a benchmark assessment, and, in the middle of an assessment -- You know, where is the authority? Okay, they make this determination, and now you have a completely different structure under which to operate.

DR. BUCKEL: Yes, and I think that one of Genny's bullets, sub-bullets, might have captured that, and, Genny, correct me if I'm wrong. I'm looking for it now, but I feel like that's a similar concern that you had.

DR. NESSLAGE: Sorry, Steve, but can you just restate what you were saying?

DR. TURNER: I am concerned that, if Fisheries comes along and says, okay, we think there's a different stock structure than what you're working under, won't the council want scientific advice on the Fisheries Service's position, and wouldn't that take a good amount of time to develop, to develop scientific advice for the council to present to Fisheries?

DR. BUCKEL: I see John Carmichael's hand raised, maybe to that point. Go ahead, John.

MR. CARMICHAEL: I don't think Steve was fully done there, but, yes, we would want scientific advice, and particularly if we pursued some of the options about suggesting ways to work with

other councils on how we would do it, and we would want scientific advice, and they would want scientific advice, and so, yes, absolutely, Steve. Good point to bring up.

DR. BUCKEL: Apologies, Steve, if I cut you off. Did you have something more to add there?

DR. TURNER: No. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Steve. Go ahead, Fred, and thanks, John.

DR. SERCHUK: My comment relates to Appendix II, and, with the first item, one council and one FMP, and the recommendation says to allow liaisons from adjacent councils to vote on committee decisions, and that seems okay, but, when it comes down to multiple councils and one FMP, I disagree with the second bullet, the determination of which council has the lead, and, therefore, which Scientific and Statistical Committee provides advice, it seems, to me, that you would want to get advice from a joint coalition of SSC members from both councils, and so it's just not one SSC that's making the recommendation. If it involves more than one council, it should have membership from the SSC members from both councils. Do you understand what I'm trying to correct here?

DR. BUCKEL: Yes, and I agree with you. My guess is that they were thinking, okay, if there's going to be one FMP, then one council is taking the lead on that FMP, but I don't see any reason to restrict the folks that helped with that FMP be just that one council, and it could be both councils.

DR. SERCHUK: Exactly.

DR. BUCKEL: And both councils' SSCs.

DR. SERCHUK: Correct.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you. Any other comments on the draft document?

DR. CURTIS: Not to the draft document, but to Jennifer Sweeney-Tookes, and I'm having trouble pulling your language out of the questions box, and can you just email it to me, and then I can copy-and-paste that into our outline?

DR. SWEENEY-TOOKES: No problem.

DR. CURTIS: Thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: All right. If there is no other hands raised, Judd, should we move on to the next agenda item, or do you have any --

DR. CURTIS: No hands, and let me just wait to get Jennifer Sweeney-Tookes' comments, and I will pull that over for review, when they come in.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. While Judd is waiting on that, if folks could just read what Judd has typed up here and look for any changes that you would like made, while we're still on this agenda item. Go ahead, Steve.

DR. TURNER: In the last section, the second bullet, and I can't see it on my screen, but I think we probably need to add a sentence to it that the timing for providing feedback may be insufficient.

DR. BUCKEL: Steve, does that change --

DR. TURNER: Yes.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. Thanks, Judd, and thanks, Steve. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: Maybe it's because I can't see the whole screen at the same time, but I'm wondering, and do we have the idea that I think Steve mentioned earlier that this would disrupt stock assessments as well captured? If not, I was going to suggest that the very top blue sentence there, that stock distributions would change, that it may disrupt current ongoing scientific work, or ongoing stock assessments, and delay management advice.

DR. BUCKEL: Great.

DR. NESSLAGE: Which may prevent rebuilding of overfished stocks, and like lay it out for them. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Genny. Good edit. Steve?

DR. TURNER: No, thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: Could you scroll up, because I thought we had that earlier, and I just want to make sure that we -- Maybe not, and I thought we had that -- That last comment, I thought we already had that in there somewhere, but I will take another look when we get the report draft. Thanks. It doesn't look like we had it in there, and so thanks.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you. Any other edits or comments? All right, Judd, and should we scroll on to Agenda Item Number 5?

DR. CURTIS: Yes. Moving right along.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you for capturing all the comments up there.

OTHER BUSINESS

DR. CURTIS: The last piece of business, under Other Business, is, in our July meeting, we talked about forming an SSC workgroup, along with assistance with Center staff, to answer some of the questions that the analysts had on the black sea bass operational assessment. Attachment 5a is just a statement of work for that workgroup, which I will bring up here, and so we're just looking for some members to fill this group. We had Kai volunteer in July, and Jie was not able to make this

meeting, but he has also volunteered for this workgroup, and so we're looking for maybe two to three other members to join this workgroup to answer these questions.

Just an idea of what the timing and tasks would be are down below there, and so we would be looking at an initial three-hour webinar meeting sometime maybe the week of September 18 or September 25, to discuss the list of questions that the Center had, which are also outlined above, and then, once they -- Once that meeting is concluded, and the recommendations passed along, the Center will continue with their assessment and provide a preliminary report to the full SSC in our October meeting.

Potentially, if there is further questions, there could be another follow-up webinar meeting for the workgroup sometime maybe in November or early December, so that the Center could then provide a full stock assessment review to the SSC in a January or early February webinar meeting, and so please consider joining this, if you have interest. One thing that was also brought up during our ExCom meeting, and this was talked about during the July meeting, is a lot of these concerns are going to be not only relevant to black sea bass, but many other stock assessments moving forward, and so this may end up -- I shouldn't say this, but there could be discussion to have this as a more permanent workgroup, moving forward, but we won't hold you to being a member of that full workgroup, or extended workgroup, and this will only pertain to the black sea bass for now. We can discuss the application to other stocks and the workgroup roles at a later date.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Judd. It would be great to have -- It's awesome that we have Kai and Jie, both stock assessment scientists that have done projections, and so that will be very helpful, but it would be nice to have at least one more member of the SSC that has stock assessment experience in doing projections that will have the knowledge to provide to this group, and so, if you have that expertise, please volunteer, or Judd and I will voluntold you. That's the next step. If anybody wants to jump in right now, before we email you, I would appreciate it. Just raise your hand or chime-in. All right. Seeing no volunteers at this point, we'll -- Steve, go ahead.

DR. TURNER: I think there might be other people more qualified, but I would be willing to serve.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Steve. All right. Thanks, folks, and thanks, Steve, for volunteering, and Judd and I will send some emails to some folks that we talked about during the ExCom meeting that we think would be helpful to this workgroup, and so we'll send those out, and hopefully we can fill out this workgroup before the week of September 18 or the 25, and, just to remind you, hopefully this can be done in a three-hour webinar, or that's the plan, and so it's not a long, drawn-out, with many meetings, if that changes anyone's mind.

DR. CURTIS: Those dates are flexible, and the weeks are a little bit flexible. The only concern is just making sure that the Center has enough time to respond to the recommendations from the workgroup, to get all their work done before the October SSC meeting.

DR. BUCKEL: Yes, and we definitely want to try to get it done as soon as possible, for them to have time. Thanks, Judd. Okay. Did you have any other questions on that statement of work?

DR. CURTIS: No, and that's good. We'll email some SSC members, to try to get maybe one or two more members, and then, once that workgroup is formed, you will hear from me, and we'll start scheduling that three-hour webinar.

DR. BUCKEL: Great. Thanks, Judd, and thanks for putting this document together. All right. Next up is public comment, and so any members of the public that have comments -- We have Jimmy Hull's electronic submission, relevant to black sea bass. Any others that are on the call today, please raise your hand if you would like to make a comment. Okay. Seeing no hands, we'll take that as no public comment.

The next agenda is the Consensus Statements and Recommendations, and so we'll give folks a chance to read through the notes that Judd has taken during the meeting today and to provide any edits on our statements. Then you'll have another chance to do that when you receive the draft report by email, but, while everything is fresh -- I think it's helpful while the discussion is fresh in everyone's mind, to do a quick read-through, and so, Judd, if you could scroll up to the top. Thanks.

CONSENSUS STATEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

DR. CURTIS: This is Agenda Item 3, the red grouper spatial considerations, and so we had just the comments kind of all captured under just the request, the Center request, to the SSC, but, if there's anything else to add, please chime-in. Add or edit, I should say.

DR. BUCKEL: Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: The last bullet point, the very last sentence, it says that some interim information may be available, but dependent on the modeling structure, and do we mean that the information is dependent on the new modeling structure or how that's used depends on the new modeling structure, or whether we can do that at all? Okay. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Judd, just a minor edit in the first bullet, that maybe "the SSC is open". Fred Serchuk.

DR. SERCHUK: The last time the SSC provided catch advice, through what years did it go through? Do you recall? Was it three-year advice? What I'm saying is that will there be a need to extend the advice that we had before we get the next assessment?

DR. BUCKEL: I think the rebuilding plan -- Chip said that it went through 2028, Fred.

DR. SERCHUK: Okay.

DR. BUCKEL: That should be about the timing.

DR. SERCHUK: Okay. That's fine. If that's the case, I have nothing to add. I was just concerned that the recommended scientific quotas, or scientific advice, didn't go through -- That it ended before we would have the next assessment.

DR. BUCKEL: That's a good question, Fred. Chip, just let us know if that's incorrect, about the 2028.

DR. COLLIER: No, that's correct, and there was a landings stream provided out to 2028, but I believe they stopped increasing the landings after four years, and I will have to go back and look at the amendment. Because it is in a rebuilding plan, there is expectations that the population would be rebuilding as well, but it's typical that the council will hold landings after four or five years, and I just need to see which time period that is.

DR. BUCKEL: All right. Thanks, Chip. All right. If there's no other hands for this item, we'll scroll to the next. I think that looks good, Judd. Thank you.

DR. CURTIS: I will pause here to address the first two bullets.

DR. BUCKEL: Fred Serchuk, do you have a hand up for this section, or is that from the last?

DR. SERCHUK: No, that was from the last one, but I do have, at the end of this section, a question, after we get going through all of our comments here, and I have another comment that I would like to make. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Okay. Go ahead, Chip.

DR. COLLIER: Looking at the ACL that was recommended, or developed, for red grouper, it was stated that it was capped at 2020, or until modified, and so the 2020 value is going to be in place until it's modified.

DR. BUCKEL: Great. Thank you.

DR. CURTIS: Are we good to move on to the last two bullets?

DR. BUCKEL: Maybe, on that last bullet, to be clear, "the number of assessed stocks in the U.S. South Atlantic", and it just goes to -- Jennifer.

DR. SWEENEY-TOOKES: I may have gotten a little over-enthused when I used "pandering", and so maybe we should dial that back, and they don't present a viable, or concrete, inclusion. There's not a real plan there. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Thanks, Jennifer. All right, Judd. If there's no other hands, scroll down to the last two action items on there. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: The very top sentence, I'm wondering if we want to bring the "which" clause up and say, if stock situations have changed, this may disrupt stock assessments, and then "delay and possibly prevent rebuilding of overfished stocks", and so it would be "disrupt ongoing stock assessments, delay advice and potentially prevent", and I'm wondering if we want to add "ending of overfishing and rebuilding of overfished stocks", just to point out that it's kind of the whole point of Magnuson, and, actually, this might blow up and -- Then it would also provide a little wiggle room there in the wording. Then, when Judd is caught up, I have a second one, if you will entertain it.

DR. BUCKEL: Let's let Judd -- Genny, you had "may prevent rebuilding or may --" Is that --

DR. NESSLAGE: Yes, “and rebuilding of overfished stocks”. In other words, going to --

DR. BUCKEL: “May prevent ending overfishing”.

DR. NESSLAGE: Yes.

DR. BUCKEL: Go ahead, Genny, on your next one.

DR. NESSLAGE: I also thought that it would be good to potentially make the first bullet under the next action item a second bullet, the recognition, just to highlight that the first one is more about our state and interstate partners, and the second one is more about our stakeholders, and I don’t want the stakeholders to get lost in the shuffle, and so thanks, if folks are okay with that.

DR. BUCKEL: I am. Others, if you’re not, raise your hand. Marcel.

DR. REICHERT: The third bullet point on the one there, the stock assessment capacity and workloads differ greatly between regional Science Centers, I think it would be good to indicate why that remark is there. Is that not something recognized in the document, or -- Because, in itself, yes, this is true, but why did we put it in there? Maybe “fully recognized” or something like that, but maybe someone else can help jog my memory there.

DR. BUCKEL: Genny, go ahead.

DR. NESSLAGE: Thanks, and I think I was ranting there. I think this -- I like your wording suggestion, Marcel, but then also perhaps we want to consider, I guess, pointing out that this policy doesn’t take into account the current NOAA staffing structure, which would create chaos, but you don’t have to say that, Judd, and sorry.

DR. BUCKEL: Good edits. Thank you. All right. If there are no other hands, Judd, I think we’re good to scroll down to the next item, which I think was not much on black sea bass, right, unless anybody has decided to volunteer for this black sea bass workgroup in the last ten minutes. All right. Seeing no hands, let’s see.

The draft SSC report will be provided to the council at their meeting next week, and so we’re going to do a quick turnaround, Judd, and is that right? You will get the draft to me, and I will send it out to folks, and so that’s really -- Or do we just move forward with what we have, Judd, and provide me some guidance on when the council needs it.

DR. CURTIS: I think we can provide this draft overview here to the council next week, and you can include a couple of slides, and mostly with the red grouper, and that was the one thing that was -- That the council would like to hear about as well. As I mentioned, for the climate policy governance document, these recommendations, and SSC feedback, will be incorporated into a larger council document, as an appendix, and then those will be relayed onto the SSC, to represent the South Atlantic’s concerns, and so we have a little bit more time, I think, to work on that, and the final comments weren't due until November 17, or it will probably early October, when the CCC meets, and I think that’s the 11th through 13th of October, and so there’s still some time, if you want to wordsmith some of those recommendations, or add some new ones, but, mostly, yes, the red grouper topic was of interest for the council meeting next week.

DR. BUCKEL: Great. Thanks for that reminder, Judd, and so be on the lookout for an email from me with the draft SSC report that you can do any wordsmithing that you would like, and I will give you a timeline, so we can get that back to Judd by September 29. All right. Then, Judd, next meetings, and so October 24 to 26 in Charleston, and that is an A.M. start on the 24th, correct?

DR. CURTIS: Yes, but, before we get into that, I think Fred Serchuk has a comment.

DR. BUCKEL: Sorry, Fred. I didn't see your hand.

DR. SERCHUK: Thank you, Chair. As you may recall, at the last SSC meeting, we had three members that departed from the committee, and we have three new members. I know one of the members that left the committee I believe served more than fifteen years, and that's Anne Lange, and I wonder whether the SSC sends a letter of appreciation, or the council sends a letter of appreciation, for that lengthy service. If not, I think it would be -- I think people would appreciate receiving that, having devoted that much of their time to the SSC, and I'm just asking whether any sort of recognition of long service was rendered to her.

DR. BUCKEL: Fred, I sent a letter from the SSC, you know, stating that we thanked her for her long term of service. You know, I didn't know how many years it was, and so I didn't specify that in the letter, unfortunately, but I did send Anne a thank-you letter for her many -- I wrote "many years of service".

DR. SERCHUK: Okay. I just wanted to make sure, because she had served a very long time on it. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Yes. Thanks, Fred, for that. Scott had as well, Scott Crosson had been on -- Well, all three, really, and Eric -- I don't know the number of years, but they were all -- They had been on the SSC for a long time.

DR. SERCHUK: Okay. Thank you.

DR. BUCKEL: Judd, do you want to talk about the 2024 meetings?

NEXT MEETINGS

DR. CURTIS: Yes, and so our next meeting will be in October in Charleston, and, as Jeff mentioned, we've got a sizable list again for that meeting, and so we're going to start Tuesday in the morning, probably, you know, at 8:30 a.m., and so you'll have Monday as a travel day, and then we'll finish up at noon on the 26th, and so look for some travel information coming your way, probably next week, with hotel reservations, and we'll be at the Town & Country again for this meeting in Charleston, and what I don't have here is we'll probably need a January webinar to address the black sea bass assessment results and provide catch level recommendations, so the council can have those at their March meeting.

Then, in April, we'll have another in-person meeting, and that will have the Socioeconomic Panel meeting on Monday and Tuesday and the SSC meeting Tuesday through Thursday, and, just for

reference, we've got our council meeting next week here in Charleston, and then the last meeting of the year will be December 4 through 8 in Beaufort, North Carolina.

DR. BUCKEL: Thank you, Judd. I will just open it up if anybody has any questions on the next meetings or anything else that we covered today, any other SSC member questions. All right. Well, thank you all for a job well done today, and, Judd, thanks, as usual, for taking great notes while simultaneously monitoring all the webinar hands, and I also appreciate you organizing the agenda and the overview and the documents.

It's always super helpful to get that briefing book well ahead of the meeting, and, also, thanks to council SEDAR staff, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center, and, Erik, I think you're still on here, and thanks for your help today, and also please pass along a thanks to Lew. I think he dropped off, but, as many of the SSC members mentioned, he did an incredible amount of work to help us with our discussion today, and so please pass along our thanks to him, and thanks to the council members for joining us today, as well as Shep. We always appreciate and are helped out by you folks being on, and so thanks, everyone, and, with that, the meeting is adjourned.

(Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on September 7, 2023.)

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Transcribed By
Amanda Thomas
September 21, 2023

Attendee Report: Scientific & Statistical Committee Meeting (Sept 7, 2023)

Report Generated:

09/12/2023 07:17 AM EDT

Webinar ID	Actual Start Date/Time	Duration	# Registered	# Attended
709-833-707	09/07/2023 12:24 PM EDT	4 hours 28 minutes	63	50

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