SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Revised Summary Report

Habitat Protection and Ecosystem-Based Management Advisory Panel Meeting

April 14-16, 2021 (Via Webinar)

The Habitat Protection and Ecosystem Based Management Advisory Panel (HPEAP) meeting convened virtually on April 14-16, 2021. Meeting agenda and overview may be found at: https://safmc.net/briefing-books/briefing-book-habitat-ap-april-2021/

Summary of March 2021 Habitat Protection and Ecosystem Based Management Committee

Steve Poland, SAFMC Habitat and Ecosystem Committee (HEC) Chair, provided a summary of actions by the Council's HEC in March and Roger Pugliese provided members a brief update on amendments under development by the Council.

NOAA Fisheries EBFM Activities for the South Atlantic Region: Deliverables Supporting FEP II Implementation

NOAA Fisheries staff gave presentations on the Ecosystem Based Fishery Management activities that tie into several FEP II implementation actions. Michael Burton, NOAA Fisheries SEFSC Beaufort Lab, gave a presentation on the South Atlantic Climate Vulnerability Assessment (CVA). The CVA is a tool to determine the likelihood that a species' productivity, abundance, or distribution would be affected by a changing climate. Fisheries experts participated in assessing species' vulnerability by rubric scoring of their sensitivity and exposure to expected climate scenarios.

- Species with high sensitivity and high exposure would be ranked highest in terms of vulnerability.
- 22 species in the very high category, including Atlantic sturgeon, striped bass, Nassau grouper, snowy grouper, speckled hind, Gag, Warsaw grouper, scamp, Goliath grouper, blueline tilefish, golden tilefish, penaeid shrimp, oysters, and other invertebrates.
- To assess potential for species distribution change, adult mobility, larval dispersal, habitat specificity, and sensitivity to temperature were used as sensitivity attributes.
- A species with high adult mobility, widespread larval dispersal, low habitat specificity and high tolerance for temperature change would be likely candidates for expanding their distributional range.
- Dolphin was rated as very high for potential distribution shift, about 40 species were rated high, and 25 species rated moderate potential.

Predicted changes in the South Atlantic:

- A 3-4^{o} C increase sea surface temperature in the South Atlantic (difference between average annual temperature from 2006-2055 and the average temperature from 1956 to 2005).
- Salinity is expected to increase 2-3 ppt.
- pH is expected to decrease, with the largest decrease around the Florida peninsula.

Note: Change in environmental parameters influence the change in species distribution.

The final report is currently being completed. Burton explained that these risk assessments can be used by the SAFMC to conduct Ecosystem Approaches to Fishery Management (EAFM) and scenario planning for climate change. Such efforts are underway at the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC).
(https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2018.00442/full)

Member Comments and Recommendations:
Critical Habitat CVA is being done in other council regions and would be beneficial to do for the South Atlantic. There are currently no plans, but it was suggested that it could possibly be done through the HPEAP.

Kevin Craig, NOAA Fisheries SEFSC Beaufort Lab, then gave a presentation on the South Atlantic Ecosystem Status Report (ESR). This report summarizes trends of selected ecosystem indicators, using seven categories,48 indicators and 182 time series. Categories include:

- Climate drivers such as Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation (AMO) or an ongoing series of long-duration changes in the sea surface temperature of the North Atlantic Ocean.
- Physical and chemical pressures, such as SST and SLR.
- Habitat state such as wetlands and seagrass cover.
- Lower trophic levels such as primary and secondary productivity.
- Upper trophic levels, such as fish abundance and diversity.
- Ecosystem services such as fisheries.
- Human dimensions.

The presentation reviewed several of the indicator trends.

- Downward trend in recruitment of winter/spring spawning reef fish and reasons this may be occurring.
- Minimal information provided on habitats such as wetlands and seagrass due to the difficulty of getting easily comparable data across states.

ESRs in other regions are used as operational reports for managers.

- Information can be directly incorporated into stock assessments.
- Used at the back end to inform single species decision-making.
- Used in risk assessments with the ecosystem indicators having been used to improve assessments or influence Council actions.

The draft is expected to be complete in May.

Member Comments and Recommendations:

- SA ESR should be updated regularly since other regions are doing the same
- suggest having scoping meetings to get input on what indicators should be updated
- Important to fund updates since that it is important for ecosystem-based fisheries management.

Overview and Update on Regional Conservation Blueprints

Rua Mordecai, Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, gave a presentation on the updated Southeast Conservation Blueprint. The GIS-based blueprint identifies areas that are high priority for ecosystem health and connectivity, as well as those that are also important but in need of some restoration. The Blueprint is in the process of being updated to better address health and connectivity of coastal habitats which are also designated as EFH for Council managed species. The updated Blueprint will:

- Include extending coastal subregions into the ocean.
- Include improved hardbottom and deep-sea coral indicator.
- Support more refined priorities in the nearshore.
- Align with fish and habitat priorities of the Atlantic Coast Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP).
- Provide an improved approach to inland salt marsh migration corridors.

The Blueprint has been successfully used by over 100 organizations when seeking grant funding for conservation work. It is used to screen for areas needing protection and areas of potential partnership, including land trusts. Discussion noted that the South Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative (SALCC) funded some the Ecopath work. The SALCC expanded to the Southeast Conservation Blueprint, and now has state resource agency involvement and fewer roadblocks.

South Atlantic Regional Biological Opinion

Nicole Bonine, USACE, and Doug Piatkowski, BOEM, gave a presentation on the South Atlantic Regional Biological Opinion (SARBO) that was finalized in 2020.

- The revised SARBO is based on an updated framework of risk-based assessment for allESA species, rather than the previous environmental windows which were developed for loggerhead and Kemp's ridley turtles only..
- The approach is to look at each project holistically.
- The previous environmental windows developed for sea turtles forced dredging activity to occur in the calving season for Northern Atlantic right whales.
- Other actions are required that allow dredging during typical moratoria periods, such as relocation of sea turtles in the project vicinity using trawls.

Members Comments and Recommendations

- The USACE is trying to replace use of environmental windows with risk-based approach to minimize impacts to fish and habitat with no analysis done to assess effectiveness of this approach.

- Environmental windows are an existing science-based approach that is more effective than what the USACE has proposed and is not arbitrary.
- SARBO was a Biological Opinion for protected species and does not replace EFH assessments.
- Species are being found in different locations due to climate change and it is unclear if the SARBO took that into account.
- Environmental windows have worked in South Atlantic states, and public input is needed.
- The present approach, without NEPA, is outside of public view with the USACE initiated year-round dredging for the two ports in North Carolina, and Georgia.
- The Georgia project has not begun due to a lawsuit and the NC projects began mid-May and research conducted by USACE and state agencies and universities will be done during and after to obtain data on effects.

EFH Policy Statement on Beach Dredging and Filling, Beach Renourishment and Large-Scale Coastal Engineering

Because of the push to conduct dredging and beach nourishment projects outside of the typical winter months when biological productivity is lower, a study was done at Folly Beach which ended in 2020. Those results presented during the October 2020 HEAP meeting found the intertidal beach does recover within several months, but the subtidal area did not and had significantly lower biomass and fish species richness. Due to the changing processes associated with dredge and fill projects and increasing demand, the HPEAP will form a subcommittee to update the SAFMC Policy for the Protection and Restoration of EFH from Beach Dredging and Filling, Beach Renourishment, and Large-scale Coastal Engineering. The initial volunteers for the subcommittee include Wilson Laney, Paula Keener, Cindy Cooksey, Anne Deaton, Rene Baumstark, Paul Medders, and John Ellis. The subcommittee will meet in June via conference call to discuss next steps. Members will conduct working conference calls/ webinars providing review and edits to the existing statement and prepare for presentation/review/revision during the October 2021 HEAP meeting. The draft EFH Statement would be reviewed at the October meeting and revised for Council consideration and approval during their December 2021 or March 22 meeting.

FEP II Implementation and Strategic Planning

Roger Pugliese gave an overview of accomplishments on FEP II Implementation Plan Two Year Roadmap actions and remaining needs. The FEP II Implementation Plan is organized into nine chapters/policy statements: 1) Food Webs and Connectivity, 2) Climate Variability and Fisheries, 3) Marine Aquaculture, 4) Submerged Aquatic Vegetation, 5) Beach Dredging/Renourishment and Large Scale Coastal Engineering, 6) Energy Exploration and Development, 7) Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows, 8) Non-native and Invasive Species, and 9) Artificial Reefs.

Member Comments and Recommendations:

The HPEAP provided input on and priorities for actions to be accomplished for 2021 and 2022. The HPEAP's recommended ranking for policy revisions is below. Actions under each policy

statement were reviewed, and those considered a priority for implementation in 2021-2022 were identified (see below).

Recommended Priority Actions for 2021-2022

South Atlantic Food Webs and Connectivity Policy (Medium)
Characterize seasonal patterns for managed species exhibiting seasonal north-south movement.

South Atlantic Climate Variability and Fisheries Policy (Medium)
Council develop and engage in a cooperative process to explore ways to adaptively manage species that are or are expected to shift/expand their ranges.

Marine Aquaculture Policy (Medium)
Develop a non-fishing research priorities document specific to aquaculture in order to identify data gaps related to siting and species interactions with aquaculture facilities.

Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Policy (SAV) (High)
Regional partners in cooperation with Council, investigate potential effects of climate change and sea level rise on SAV communities within the South Atlantic coastal region.
SAV Session tentatively scheduled at Fall HPEAP meeting highlighting actions accomplished by NC and FL partners:

- Review existing mapping efforts to determine the geographic extent and data gaps
- Monitoring protocols - effective protocols by salinity, return intervals and sentinel sites.
- Update on partners efforts to compile existing information on water quality requirements for SAV within specific water bodies and identify data gaps.

Beach Dredging/Re-nourishment and Large Scale Coastal Engineering Policy (High)
Council to provide supporting information on grain size compatibility and ecological and economic benefits of using compatible sand to the USACOE and CZM agencies. Address in Policy revision

New Action *– Need to conduct mapping of nearshore environments targeted as borrow sites. Determine recovery of past removal sites to help inform recommendation on site siting.*
Note: Investigate availability of COE mapping and access for use. Focus on use of sand shoal habitats by Council managed species, prey and other regulated species. HPEAP to investigate literature on sand transport dynamics including better understanding sand movement generally and associated with storm events. Investigate nearshore Navy mapping information. Reach out to NOS as coordination on bathymetry/sand distribution information. Investigate enhanced placement methodologies to minimize recovery time. Need for time of year restrictions and criteria to minimize impacts.

Provide revised policy to regulatory agencies reviewing large scale dredging and coastal engineering projects.

Energy Exploration and Development Policy (High)
Work with federal agencies to develop a non-fishing research and monitoring document in order to identify data gaps and monitoring protocols related to siting and species interactions with offshore energy facilities. If Policy Revised - Priority for 2021-2022
Note: Opportunity to build on best management practices document to be developed through CCC Habitat WG activities in 2021. Integration into future Policy. Compatibility of wind and offshore aquaculture development. Opportunity for sampling platforms observing, EDNA, acoustics etc. (multiple use).

Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows Policy (Low)
Note: None identified.

Non-Native and Invasive Species Policy (Low)
*Evaluate annual level of ballast water from vessels transiting the South Atlantic region***.**

Artificial Reefs Policy (Low)
Review Federal management and operation plans for artificial reefs to determine if they are up to date and meet the guidelines put forth by ASMFC Artificial Reef Committee and as permitted by USCOE and update as necessary. Encourage state partners to do the same.

Development of a SAFMC Habitat Blueprint
Myra Brower provided an update on the development of the Council's, Habitat Blueprint. The Council directed a Council /staff team to develop a scope of work for the project during 2021 with the intent to approve the Blueprint by the end of the year. The workgroup will receive input from the Habitat Committee and Council to develop the Blueprint, including how the HPEAP will be involved. The Committee directed the workgroup to focus the Blueprint on the habitat program for purposes of strategy and programmatic evaluation. It is not the Council's intent, however, to de-couple ecosystem and habitat activities since they are fundamentally connected.

Next steps will be to bring to the Habitat Committee in June 2021 to review draft goals and objectives for what is to be accomplished and clarify what the habitat program accomplishes including:

- EFH designation and mapping.
- Conservation of EFH through rule in FMPs
- Council comment review process and overall EFH Consultation process and the Council and NMFS roles.
- Potential prioritization approach for how EFH policies get reviewed and updated over time.
- Evaluate how the various tools and services that have been developed over the years, how they are meeting the habitat program's goals and objectives of the Councils Habitat Program, and the partners in the region.

SAFMC Habitat and Ecosystem Webpages/Fishery Ecosystem Plan II Dashboard, and Digital Dashboard and Web Services

Tina Udouj, FWRI provided members with an overview of the Habitat and Ecosystem Digital Dashboard and Web Services and their use. Roger Pugliese provided members with an overview on the Habitat and Ecosystem Webpages/Fishery Ecosystem Plan II Dashboard.

Members Comments and Recommendations:

- Appreciated the presentation on the tools; likely the most comprehensive Council database available and it has made it as easy for stakeholders to use and create maps and reports of interest to them.
- Interested if there was a plan to put out a report that could be provided to the Council members as well as the general public and stakeholders at large that shows the site's use and utility.
- Recommended developing a tutorial or video on the website that walks people through the dashboard and webservices.
- Revisions use the newest technology from Arc GIS Online.
- If not already occurring, should collaborate with the folks at NOAA OCM here in Charleston, for the NOAA Digital Coast.
- There are things beyond this that are connecting with our ocean observing partners and crosswalks with BOEM.

Members were reminded to provide additional information on how they or their staff use the tools or other people have used them which is important as the Council during the Blueprint development, discusses tools to meet their habitat needs.

BOEM Research and Energy Development

Brian Hooker, BOEM provided an update on research and energy development activities focusing on renewable energy**.** In the Atlantic, BOEM has approved 10 Site Assessment Plans to put out meteorological lidar buoys.
Currently 14 commercial scale wind facilities under review.

In or affecting the South Atlantic region:

- Kitty Hawk Wind is the only active lease.
- The Governor of North Carolina has expressed interest in moving ahead with some additional leasing.
- The renewable energy program in the South Atlantic region is affected by the previous administration's issuance of a withdrawal notice of certain areas for Leasing Disposition which affected consideration of any new leasing beginning in the summer of 2022 and ending in and the summer of 2032. This also applies to the oil and gas program, but does not include shore protection, beach, renourishment and restoration.
- BOEM studies are wrapped up for 2022 and planning for 2023 will include a studies development plan through the Standing Committee for Offshore Science under the National Academy of Sciences.
- Some planning areas identified south of Cape Hatteras extend down into South Carolina.
- Leases for new areas would have to be issued by July 1, 2022 unless changes to that timeframe come from Congress.

Members questioned access to fishing in the area and it was noted that there is no prohibition at all on other activities. The Coast Guard has also indicated no intent to do any type of rulemaking around wind farms. There will be contemporary construction setbacks, zones for safety, but once those construction zones have been lifted, access is open.

Member Comments and Recommendations:

- Consider possible multiple uses for these platforms like aquaculture or use of innovative technologies for monitoring.
- There is an opportunity for acoustic telemetry programs, for all the different species of fish that are being tagged and for Marine Mammal monitoring.
- There is an opportunity for site monitoring, looking at the trends, long-term monitoring and even exploration element also so important in terms of filling in the gaps, in our knowledge about the ocean.

Kitty Hawk Wind

Rick Robins and Brian Benito Avangrid Renewables provided members an overview of fisheries evaluation and update on Kitty Hawk Wind. The Kitty Hawk Wind Construction Operations Plan, which is 2.5 years in the development is with BOEM for review, for its sufficiency and completeness. Currently, project design has an 800 megawatt project about 122,000 acres total with 50,000 acres of development. This first project up to sixteen 14 megawatt turbines. When using larger turbines, they are spaced out further. In addition, the wind turbines offshore will need to be connected somewhere on shore, and developers are currently exploring that connection point, and that landfall to be in in Virginia Beach Virginia area.

Various types of foundations are being evaluated at this stage with one offshore substation, or Electrical Service Platform. Planning development and fisheries review found there is no hard bottom, charted shipwrecks, artificial reefs or HAPCs in the leasing area of Kitty Hawk Wind north, and minimal fishing effort.

Representatives highlighted increasing structural habitat in the area would result in pelagic species of interest to the Council increasing in the project area, on a seasonal basis, once constructed, including dolphin or mahi, wahoo, King Mackerel, cobia and spadefish, to name some. This would provide potential additional fishing opportunity.

Southeast Connectivity and Adaptation Strategy (SECAS)

Mallory Martin, SECAS Coordinator USFWS, and Hilary Morris, User Support and Communications for the Southeast and South Atlantic Blueprints, provided members a presentation on SECAS. Eighteen SECAS staff are represented across the entire southeast, as well as the agency staff and the organizational representatives from those individual entities support SECAS. SECAS delivers value to the partners:

- as a collaboration forum, a place to come together and, and identify priority actions, and, and understanding common information in science needs.
- as a delivery hub, information hub for delivering that science.
- helping to support decision making related to conservation.

- as a connected network of lands and waters that support thriving fish and wildlife populations and improve quality of life for people across the 15 states to two territories and marine waters.
- connects the lands and waters, and connecting wildlife and people, representing those challenges that are present for conservation now, and both into the future.

SECAS intends to accomplish a goal of 10% greater improvement in the health function and conductivity of southeastern ecosystems by 2060 which call for 1% improvement, every four years.

SECAS goal report will annually show how information is used from these existing monitoring programs and other ecological assessments, to provide the common metrics, baselines, and trend information. The Southeast Conservation Blueprint is a living spatial plan that identifies potential areas for a range of conservation actions which can include:

- management actions.
- economic incentives.
- protection.
- restoration.
- acquisition.
- how it contributes to partner conservation efforts.

So far 10 different applications have brought in over $9 million to secure more than 13,000 acres and restore 3500 acres which includes coastal habitat that is designated as EFH or EFH-HAPC or protects inland habitat which may affect coastal systems.

The blueprint is a tremendous tool for helping local communities and municipalities consider natural resources and connectivity during their planning processes and has been used to inform coastal wetland grants and by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission in helping to enhance the fisheries portions of those grant applications. States who prepared the proposals received almost $9.5 million and about13,500 acres of habitat were put into permanent conservation.

SECAS is now an Executive Committee of the Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies with a standing steering committee, comprises five state agency directors, as well as the Regional Director of Fish and Wildlife Service, who provide the oversight and strategic direction to this initiative now.

Members Comments and Recommendations:

- with a lot of tools available, SECAS stands out as doing a great job in helping people use the Blueprint.
- With such a large area and a lot of focus inland, it was emphasized that inland activities have a great influence on water quality, habitats downstream so conservation of those upper areas is just as important, or more important supporting the primary focus of the Panel being coastal.
- Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuarine Partnership, has a similar large area that is not just coastal, and might be an opportunity to partner with SECAS.

One additional area of interest to the Council is the 30 by 30 National Goal that was announced by the Biden Administration in January and is intended to conserve 30% of the nation's lands and waters by the year 2030. SECAS representatives indicated the southeast Blueprint could provide a great foundation possibly identifying starting points linking state, federal, non-governmental organizations, private landowners, and businesses to foster some engagement along that diversity of participation.

Update on Council Coordinating Committee Habitat Workgroup Activities

Roger Pugliese provided members an update on CCC Habitat Workgroup activities in 2021 being focused on initiating development of a best practices document for advancing wind energy development. In addition, the WG will continue to advance and enhance coordination NMFS Fisheries Science Centers on supporting priority habitat research supporting management.

Members Comments and Recommendations:

- The value of the working group efforts is the focus on addressing the impact of wind structures and for advancing consideration of multiple use for these platforms.
- The sooner those conversations take place in the process of the development of the platform the better since it is much more difficult to go back or maybe even impossible to go back and retrofit some of those platforms for consideration of multi-use purposes.
- Categorical exclusions could be used when replacing different types of equipment, including monitoring devices.