

**MEETING REPORT**  
**MACKEREL COBIA ADVISORY PANEL**  
**SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL**  
**Charleston, South Carolina**  
**March 31, 2025 – April 1, 2025**

The Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel (AP) met to discuss topics supporting management of the coastal migratory pelagics fishery, including Florida east coast zone cobia, Atlantic Spanish mackerel, and Atlantic king mackerel. Below is a summary of the group's discussions and recommendations. The AP approved motions for recommendations to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council), but a summary of all viewpoints relevant to each motion/recommendation are included.

**Advisory Panel Members**

Thomas Newman, Chair  
Kevin Aman, Vice-Chair  
Tony Benevento  
Stanford Carter\*  
Stephen Donalson\*  
Charles Griffin\*  
Alana Harrison  
William Jones  
Melissa Leone  
Charles Locke  
John Mallette  
Butch Olsen\*  
Michael Oppengaard  
Jot Owens  
William Palmer\*  
Steve Saunders  
Robbie Waddick  
Bill Weeks\*  
Benjamin Shepherd, Mid-Atlantic\*  
Chris Ludford, Mid-Atlantic\*

**Council Members**

Tom Roller  
Dr. Carolyn Belcher  
Trish Murphey  
Jessica McCawley  
Amy Dukes

**Council Staff**

Christina Wiegand, CMP Lead  
Myra Brouwer  
John Hadley  
Julia Byrd  
Mike Schmidtke  
Nick Smillie  
Allie Iberle  
Dr. Judd Curtis  
Ashley Oliver  
Meg Withers

*\*AP member not in attendance.*

The Mackerel Cobia AP approved minutes from the November 2023 meeting and the agenda.

**Report from the Council's Mackerel Cobia Committee Chair**

Dr. Carolyn Belcher, vice-chair of the Council's Mackerel Cobia Committee, addressed the AP. She provided updates on recent Council discussions relevant to Coastal Migratory Pelagics (CMP), many of which were discussed during the meeting. She thanked the AP members for taking the time to provide the Council with their expert feedback.

### **Update on Recently Submitted Amendments**

Staff provided an update on active amendments relevant to the Coastal Migratory Pelagics Fishery Management Plan, including the CMP Framework Amendment 13, Comprehensive Recreational For-Hire Limited Entry Amendment and Comprehensive For-Hire Reporting Improvement Amendment.

### **Mackerel Port Meetings Report**

In 2024, at the urging of their Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel, the Council hosted a series of 16 in-person and six virtual port meetings along the Atlantic coast. Port meeting attendees discussed their perspectives with other fishery participants and local Council members. Council staff reviewed the draft report from this effort and updated the AP on recent Council discussions related to potential management actions.

AP members provided the following feedback on the port meetings:

- The port meetings were enjoyable and well received by members of the fishing community. These types of meetings should continue to be used to get mackerel fishermen engaged in the management process.
  - Introductory presentations should continue to briefly go over the management structure in layman terms and note the difference between these types of meetings and formal public comment.
  - Breakout groups were a great way to encourage discussion and avoid individuals talking over one another.
  - Visiting communities that are not regularly visited in-person illustrated that Council members and staff were invested in the needs of those communities.

AP members provided the following feedback on the next steps following port meetings:

#### *Updating Atlantic Spanish Mackerel Catch Levels Based on SEDAR 78*

- There were significant concerns about the recreational MRIP data that went into the stock assessment. Results from the MRIP FES pilot study should be available soon and the AP feels that the Council should wait for those results because they could have significant implications for the stock assessment and resulting overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations.
  - The next Atlantic Spanish mackerel assessment is scheduled for 2028, but the AP members would like to see it prioritized earlier in the schedule.
    - Overall, the stock assessment process needs to be improved so that assessments can occur more rapidly, and unnecessary closures can be prevented.
- In addition to recreational data, it was noted the environmental changes are affecting the distribution of Atlantic Spanish mackerel and the stock assessment process needs to incorporate data from up north, especially the NEMAP survey, because without those data the picture of the stock and what it is producing is incomplete.
- Implementing the SSC's catch level recommendations, based on SEDAR 78, could have serious consequences for the Atlantic Spanish mackerel fishery, which is a critical fishery for commercial and recreational fishermen.

- Atlantic Spanish mackerel are available North Carolina from mid-April to late-September and in Florida in the winter months. Under the recommended catch levels and current allocations there is concern that Florida anglers would not have access to the fish when they are available (the fishery would close before the winter months).
- State implemented commercial bycatch limits are critical for commercial fishermen, but if the total annual catch limit (ACL) is exceeded, some states will not allow the current bycatch limit under a federal commercial closure.
- Any closures would result in lost data that would hinder improvements that are needed in the stock assessment.

**MOTION 1: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL REQUEST AN UPDATE OF THE ATLANTIC SPANISH MACKEREL OFL AND ABC RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE RESULTS OF THE FES PILOT STUDY BEFORE IMPLEMENTING ANY NEW CATCH LEVELS.**

**APPROVED BY ADVISORY PANEL (UNANIMOUS)**

*Management Measures to Address Based on Input Provided During Port Meetings*

- There was support for considering all of the proposed management measures that came up during Mackerel Port Meetings with the following notes:
  - Do not look at sector allocations until recreational estimates have been improved, including the MRIP FES pilot study.
  - Look at modifying the commercial Atlantic Spanish mackerel fishing year so that the Southern Zone would fish first, facilitating transfer of poundage between zones when available.
  - Consider step-downs for the commercial Spanish mackerel trip limit in the Northern Zone.
  - In addition to a reduction in bag limit, consider a vessel limit for recreational harvest of Atlantic Spanish mackerel.
  - Consider implementing regional zones for recreational Atlantic Spanish mackerel fishery to ensure all areas can harvest fish when they are available.
  - Consider modifications to the Atlantic king mackerel recreational bag limit and consider if implementing a vessel limit if needed.
  - Consider implementing “best practices” regulations for Atlantic king mackerel tournaments and tournament pre-fishing, similar to billfish tournaments and/or limiting the number of fish that can be donated and sold from tournaments.
  - Discuss live baiting in the recreational fishery and whether or not it should continue to be allowed.

**Giant Manta Ray Interactions with the Cobia Fishery**

The east coast of central and northern Florida serves as an important reproductive habitat for giant manta rays, which are considered threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Recreational anglers in this region target cobia by seeking out giant manta rays that cobia often follow, casting at or near them. This activity may result in entanglement or injury to giant manta rays. SERO Protected Resources Division staff provided information on recently published research and possible ESA considerations.

AP members provided the following feedback:

- In North Carolina fishermen rarely see giant manta rays, however they do sight cast for cobia by seeking out other ray species, such as cownose rays. There was concern that regulations related to fishing near giant manta rays, which is a Florida practice, could negatively affect their ability to fish near other species.
- In Florida, targeting cobia by following manta rays occurs in state waters, so AP members felt that it was not an issue for federal regulators to discuss.
- This practice only happens for a brief amount of time each year when the giant manta rays are around, usually for two to three weeks or less.
- It was suggested that braid or leader restriction may help to remedy any negative effects experienced by the giant manta rays, however AP members also felt the giant manta rays were large enough that it was unlikely any hook or line interactions were having a substantial negative effect on the animals.

### **For-Hire Reporting Improvement Amendment**

At their June 2024 meeting, the Council received feedback from the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office and Southeast Fisheries Science Center that data being collected through the SEFHIER program and for-hire logbook cannot be used for management due to low compliance and lack of validation. The letter included a list of recommendations to render the data collected through SEFHIER useful for management. The Council directed staff to initiate work on an amendment to address these shortcomings, including discussion of actions that can be taken in the near-term without an amendment, and consideration of actions and alternatives being explored by the Gulf Fishery Management Council. Council staff presented an update on amendment development to date.

AP members provided the following general feedback:

- There needs to be more enforcement of reporting requirements for the for-hire sector. For example, in the commercial fishery if logbooks are not submitted, fishermen are unable to renew their permit.
- The phone app-based systems currently used for reporting are not user friendly, even to just set up an account. This is especially challenging if fishermen are not as familiar with using this technology. Overall, there are too many resources needed to report (the app, internet, cell service). Compliance would improve if the Council could make it easier for fishermen to report.
- The Council needs to focus on developing something that they know for sure can be validated to get user buy-in early on. Any changes to the program should focus only on needed data gaps.
- Limited entry could improve reporting compliance, but the Council would need to work with law enforcement to ensure people were not running illegal charters.
- Vessels operating charters without the proper permits is a bigger issue than non-reporting and needs to be addressed before improvement to reporting can occur.
- There was some support for using observers to improve compliance and validation, but AP members would want it to be voluntary because of boat overcrowding concerns.

AP members provided the following feedback on reporting frequency and timing:

- Some AP members felt that one-hour or even 24-hours reporting requirement would be challenging for captains. For-hire operators often need to turn around to get back out on the next trip quickly or alternatively have to be up early the following morning for more trips, have family obligations, etc. Reporting frequency and timing should be as flexible as possible.
  - It was added that a 12-hour reporting requirement is the shortest amount of time feasible. In some areas where for-hire businesses operate, cell service and internet service are inconsistent and captains/crew live far from the dock (an hour away, at least).
  - Other AP members felt that there does need to be a time limit to avoid the year-end backlog. Additionally, if the time between fishing and reporting is too long it is hard to remember what was caught accurately as not everyone takes notes. A 48-hour reporting requirement should be sufficient.
- Fishermen are currently submitting weekly, if the Council makes that requirement more stringent it is just going to make compliance worse.
- The process of submitting data needs to be simplified. Decreasing amount of data, and thus the number of fields requiring an input, is critical to improving compliance.
  - It was suggested that the Council could allow fishermen to keep records and submit reports once a month. Catch information could also be submitted “in a lump sum” to simplify reporting for fishermen, but still provide the data needed.
  - Consider a method other than a phone app, like a website or paper to mail it in to the SERO office.

AP members provided the following feedback on trip notification requirements:

- Adding a trip notification requirement is just another task that fishermen do not want to participate in and it is only going to lower compliance. There are already so many things captains are trying to complete at the start of a for-hire trip, this would just be one more thing to add to an already lengthy to-do list.
  - If a trip notification requirement is implemented, it should only focus on fisheries right now and not be required for other activities. Adding requirements that are not critical is only going to frustrate fishermen and lower compliance.
  - If implemented, trip notification should be as easy as possible, for example open the reporting app and click a button to say the trip is starting.
- To decrease the burden, only a portion of for-hire vessels could be asked to participate in trip notification each year. Or, trips could be reported when they are scheduled, since most trips are scheduled well in advance.
  - It was noted that trips often change due to weather, vessel issues, or scheduling a trip last minute.
- Validation is the most important aspect of the for-hire improvement amendment and AP members were concerned that there are not enough port samplers or law enforcement officials to actively intercept vessels even with this program.

AP members provided the following feedback on landing locations:

- A landing location requirement is not feasible for the majority of the vessels used in the for-hire fleet, but especially smaller vessels which launch and land all over the county

and state. There are even occasions where for-hire trips will start and end at a client's personal dock.

- It was suggested that landing locations could be done similar to how they are reported in the commercial fishery where there is a place to enter the landing location on the form and afterwards it becomes an approved location.

AP members provided the following feedback on participation in a validation survey:

- Requiring participation in a validation survey is important and essential to program success and fishermen buy-in. It will be important to make sure any survey is quick and easy to access and complete.
  - Consider certified letter for validation survey similar to how observer letters are sent to the commercial sector.

AP members provided the following feedback on economic data collection:

- Any action that would simplify the data that needs to be reported is going to improve compliance. So, AP members supported moving to sampling for reporting of economic information as opposed to a census approach.
- It is fine for the Council to ask fishermen to report the charter fee, however there is no need to report fuel usage or cost. Not only is reporting this extra information tedious but it is captured in the charter fee. Any other information, including data that is used for disaster declarations, can be found in tax returns.

AP members provided the following information on 'Did Not Fish' report requirements:

- There is not a need for 'Did Not Fish' reports. If fishermen are submitting monthly reports and submit only 15 days, it is obvious which days were not fished.
  - There is a difference between 'did not go' fishing and 'could not go' fishing. It is more important to be able to note *why* the vessel did not go fishing.
- There is so much information fishermen already have to submit, focus on reporting of catch over everything else.

### **Citizen Science Program Update**

Council staff provided information on Citizen Science Program activities, including updates on the Citizen Science Program advisory groups, the Citizen Science Program's Project Idea Portal, Program evaluation, FISHstory, SAFMC Release, and the SMILE project.

AP members provided the following feedback:

- Recommendation to give out an item at events, tackle shops, etc. that is of known measure that fishermen can put into pictures for SAFMC Release. This would decrease time spent out of the water measuring fish for the app, improving best fishing practices.
- Many individuals, fishermen included, are competition driven. SAFMC Release could capitalize on this by adding a leaderboard into the application for number of releases logged, time spent on the water, size of fish, etc.
- The Citizen Science Program could work with fishing clubs to see about getting data from their monthly or end-of-year competitions, since all of that information is typically verified by the club.
- Citizen Science data is absolutely critical to the fishing science and management process and the Council should illustrate its importance to those how make funding decisions to ensure the program continues to have the financial support necessary to be successful.

### **Draft Research and Monitoring Prioritization Plan**

SEDAR stock assessments include research recommendations that can improve future assessments. Council staff has compiled short-term and long-term research needs derived from recently completed assessments, upcoming assessments, and management and monitoring programs, such as the recent Mackerel Port Meetings effort. Staff presented the Draft South Atlantic Research and Monitoring Prioritization Plan. This draft will be reviewed by the Council at their June 2025 meeting.

The AP provided the following feedback on the Atlantic king mackerel and Atlantic Spanish mackerel sections:

- Any research and monitoring effort needs to consider the historical context of the fishery. It would be inaccurate to look at landings alone because management measures have changed over the years as well as participation, the economic environment, weather, communities, etc.
- A standardized fishery independent coastal migratory pelagics survey is critical in improving the science being used to manage Atlantic king and Spanish mackerel.
- Understanding changes in the distribution of Atlantic Spanish mackerel and somewhat Atlantic king mackerel is essential.
  - It is important for the SEFSC and the NEFSC to better collaborate on data collection and provision for assessments, including calibration between NEMAP and SEAMAP surveys.
- Stock assessment scientists should explore moving away from age-based distribution models in future stock assessments for both Atlantic king mackerel and Spanish mackerel.
- More information needs to be collected on the effect of shark depredation on the Atlantic king and Spanish mackerel fisheries.
- When conducting research on habitat consider:
  - Atlantic king mackerel are moving farther offshore than historically.
  - The effect of offshore wind development.
  - Coastal development effects on water quality and how Atlantic king mackerel and Spanish mackerel respond to those changes.
- A better understanding of Atlantic king and Spanish mackerel exports at fish auctions could help better describe the economic environment. Additionally, economic research should look at whether there is room for fishermen to enter and exit the Atlantic Spanish mackerel fishery as stock distribution changes.
- Consider conducting a management strategy evaluation (MSE) for Atlantic Spanish mackerel.

### **Lines of Communication Practice Run and Input**

Stakeholder input has always been a fundamental component of the council system. To ensure stakeholders concerns are heard and addressed, Council staff has begun developing a plan for holding stakeholder engagement meetings along the South Atlantic coast, meeting fishermen in their communities. These meetings, now called *Lines of Communication: Conversations with the Council*, will provide an opportunity for Council members to have productive dialogues with fisheries participants. By engaging stakeholders in this more informal setting, Council members will be able to build or improve relationships and increase engagement in the management

process. Building and maintaining relationships and momentum for participation in the management. A practice run of the *Lines* meetings was held with the AP to get input from fisheries participants on the effectiveness of the meeting design.

AP members provided the following feedback on the Sticky Wall Session:

- Some AP members felt it might be helpful to have pre-identified categories that would encourage discussion and keep attendees on topic. Other AP members felt that it was nice not having categories already identified because what is important to attendees is likely to change between communities.
  - Either way, the categories should be used to help encourage additional discussion.
- There was some concern that attendees are going to be frustrated, and it may be challenging to get constructive feedback and keep the conversation from devolving.
- Some AP members liked having staff write down comments to place on the sticky wall, others felt they would've liked some time to brainstorm and be provided with their own cards to place on the sticky wall.
  - It was suggested that an agenda could be posted both online and in the meeting room so that those that plan to attend can brainstorm in advance.
- Having prompting questions that encourage discussion which can snowball is fantastic, some suggest questions included:
  - What did you come to the meeting to talk about with Council members?
  - What was going better with your fishery five years ago?

AP members provided the following feedback on the Topical Discussion Session:

- Need to better explain why the Council wants this information and how it could affect management decisions.
- The questions surrounding trip satisfaction were a little too broad. While they narrowed down near the end it will be important to make sure conversation doesn't devolve and Council members get the input they need.
- It's important to make sure questions apply to all sectors or acknowledge the difference between the sectors and components.
  - For example, for commercial and for-hire fishermen, satisfaction is considered over the course of a season not a single trip, whereas for private recreational fishermen, satisfaction per trip is fine.
  - Recommendation to use colored dots to split people up into breakout groups for this session in order to ensure a mix of individuals in each group.
- It is better to have the person taking notes on the flip chart standing at the front of the room (as opposed to at the table) so that attendees can see that notes are being captured.
- Consider using technology that would allow groups to brainstorm together and have it immediately visualized on a screen such as Poll Everywhere.

AP members provided the following feedback on the Informal Discussion Session:

- Consider doing this session first to break the ice and get attendees thinking before moving into the sticky wall and topical discussion.
- Alternatively, could add an informal session before the meeting starts (i.e., a meet-and-greet prior to the actual meeting).



- A meet-and-greet might help attendees feel more comfortable in the meeting room.
- If this was separate from the main event, it is unlikely fishermen will leave because they now have thoughts and ideas that they want to discuss.
- Consider using categories developed during the sticky wall session for topics during this informal session.
  - It will be important to keep the tables discussing the management process and citizen science, but releases could be a revolving topic.

AP members provided the following feedback on *Lines of Communication*, generally:

- Building trust is going to be an important part of Lines and in combating the perception that Council members don't care about fishermen, the resource and are involved in the industry.
- There was support for doing all three activities at the meeting because the variety of ways to provide input is likely to be most effective.
- Recommendation to use social media as an advertising platform for these meetings and to include a virtual sign-up form on the website to get an idea on the number of likely attendees.
  - It will also be important to advertise (and even hold meetings) at places that fishermen are already frequent such as fish houses, fishing clubs, etc.
    - Could even include a suggestion box at these locations.
- Hosting these meetings in a neutral environment will be important to getting attendees from all sectors and components. There was support for looking at venues that typically host weddings, community colleges, etc.
- All *Lines of Communication* attendees should be signed up to receive the South Atlantic Bite newsletter.

### **Election of Chair and Vice-Chair for the Advisory Panel**

The Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel elected a new Chair and Vice-Chair, each to serve a two-year term.

**MOTION 2: NOMINATE THOMAS NEWMAN AS THE CHAIR OF THE MACKEREL COBIA COMMITTEE FOR A TWO-YEAR TERM.**

APPROVED BY ADVISORY PANEL (UNANIMOUS)

**MOTION 3: NOMINATE KEVIN AMAN AS THE VICE-CHAIR OF THE MACKEREL COBIA COMMITTEE FOR A TWO YEAR-TERM.**

APPROVED BY ADVISORY PANEL (UNANIMOUS)

### **Other Business**

#### *Otolith Collection*

- It was noted that there has been a shortage of lengths and otoliths for Atlantic king mackerel and Atlantic Spanish mackerel. The last couple of years there has been a decrease in the number of charter trips, making collection challenging, but NC Division of Marine Fisheries is actively looking to increase collection.

*Conservation and Management of Atlantic Bonito*

- Atlantic bonito (*Sarda sarda*) have become a popular fish to target, especially in the springtime. Currently there are no regulations related to recreational or commercial harvest. AP members would like to discuss the ten criteria for conservation and management outlined in the Magnuson-Stevens Act.
  - Some AP members felt that it is important to get a head start on considering management needs for a fishery that is getting bigger with social media.
  - Other AP members expressed concern about the lack of science showing that there is a need for management and a concern about the capacity to conduct proper science and management for this species given the current lack of resources.

**MOTION 4:** REQUEST THE COUNCIL ASK THE AP TO HAVE A DISCUSSION ABOUT ADDING ATLANTIC BONITO TO THE CMP FMP.

APPROVED BY ADVISORY PANEL (8 IN FAVOR - 1 OPPOSED - 2 ABSTENTIONS)