



May 29, 2025

The Honorable Seth Magaziner  
United States House of Representatives  
252 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515-3902

Dear Representative Magaziner,

Thank you for your letter to the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) inquiring about the current state of our nation's fisheries. The impacts of recent reductions in personnel and funding at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are not yet fully known. We anticipate these impacts will affect NOAA Fisheries science and regulatory programs, enforcement capability, and legal counsel, all of which contribute to effective management of US Federal fisheries. As these cuts have unfolded, there have already been impacts to the Regional Fishery Management Councils' ability to sustainably manage fisheries. The reduction in NOAA resources and uncertainties about near-term and sustained funding have caused disruptions to Council activities and affected our public process. The CCC remains committed to working closely with NOAA Fisheries to sustain public engagement in managing the fishery resources of the United States. We offer the following responses to your questions.

- 1. How has the science, policy, and implementation of fisheries management in each of your regions been influenced by the cuts to NOAA?*

Budget and personnel reductions at NOAA have reduced capacity to conduct fishery-independent surveys, assess fish populations, and provide the Councils and public with timely information to make well-informed management recommendations. Public meetings in fishing communities are critical to the Council process, but uncertainty about funding has hampered our ability to plan for robust public participation. The recent staff reductions have caused prolonged delays in the publication of regulations required for allowing fishery access. In some cases, emergency rulemaking has been required, which further diverts NOAA resources.

In the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions, the 2025 stock assessment schedule has been altered in response to staffing and budget constraints at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center. Several planned assessments have been downgraded to data updates, which provide less robust scientific information for setting catch limits. Adjustments to the 2026 schedule are also underway, and further disruptions are anticipated. Furthermore, all research track assessments originally scheduled for 2026 and

---

**Caribbean**

Chair: Carlos Farchette  
Executive Director:  
Miguel Rolón

**Gulf**

Chair: Jonathan Dugas  
Executive Director:  
Dr. Carrie Simmons

**South Atlantic**

Chair: Trish Murphey  
Executive Director:  
John Carmichael

**Mid Atlantic**

Chair: P. Weston Townsend  
Executive Director:  
Dr. Christopher Moore

**New England**

Chair: Rick Bellavance  
Executive Director:  
Dr. Cate O'Keefe

**North Pacific**

Chair: Angel Drobnica  
Executive Director:  
David Witherell

**Pacific**

Chair: Brad Pettinger  
Executive Director:  
Merrick Burden

**Western Pacific**

Chair: William Sword  
Executive Director:  
Kitty M. Simonds

2027, except for longfin squid, have been paused. Research track assessments are critical to address complex scientific questions that increase our understanding of individual stocks and support sustainability.

The Southeast Regional Office Social Science Branch, which is made up of economists and social scientists and responds to the needs of the South Atlantic, Gulf, and Caribbean regions, is down by three positions which is half of their recent total branch staff. As a result, their capacity has notably decreased and there will likely be delays in completing analyses necessary for evaluating fishery management actions and submitting amendments to modify regulations. Stock assessment capacity available to the South Atlantic Council has long been inadequate and is further reduced due to loss of an analytical position. Despite managing over 60 stocks, the Council will receive only 2-3 assessments per year for the foreseeable future. Additionally, travel restrictions have reduced the efficiency of recent regional assessment workshops. Approval and implementation of amendments submitted by the South Atlantic Council to improve and modernize commercial fishery data through an electronic logbook and modernize the Wreckfish ITQ program have been delayed.

Nearly all finfish species (representing 36 species) managed by the Gulf Council have been impacted by the recent loss of funding for the dockside sampling component of the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS). This survey has allowed samplers to interview for-hire headboat participants at the dock to ask about the fish they have caught and collect biological information on individual fish (i.e., fish lengths and weights) since 1986. A continuously running decades-long (nearly 40 years) fishery survey, like the SRHS, is rare in any region and provides an essential long-term time series to monitor the abundance and health for numerous fish stocks. Data from the SRHS is either used or considered for use in *every* Gulf finfish stock assessment. For lane snapper, the SRHS is the only landings data stream used when conducting that data limited stock assessment. A dockside intercept component is fundamental in a survey design to provide validation to the catch logbooks reported by survey participants. If that validation/dockside intercept methodology is absent, data from that survey is not considered suitable for input in stock assessments or management decision making.<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, nearly all other fleet-specific fishery surveys, whether conducted by a state or the Federal government, have a dockside sampling component. Therefore, this funding loss will disrupt the historical fishery time series, introduce greater uncertainty into stock assessments, and tremendously restrict the Gulf Council's ability to monitor a substantial portion of the economically important fish species it is tasked to manage.

The US Caribbean fisheries depend on larvae and juveniles of shared species with other Caribbean countries. The reduction in NOAA personnel and budget has affected the Caribbean Council's capacity to interact with key Caribbean institutions such as the FAO Western Central Atlantic Commission (WECAFC), which is in charge of the fisheries in the Caribbean Sea. This has reduced the Council's efforts that started in the 1970s for pan-Caribbean management of important species like spiny lobster, the most important species in the US Caribbean economy.

Reductions in staffing at NOAA have hampered the ability to move Pacific groundfish regulations through the Council process and into implementation phase. The slowdown is occurring due to delays in reviewing analytical packages prior to final action by the Council, as well as a slowdown in the review and approval of final regulatory packages that are being transmitted by the Council for implementation. Actions that have been slowed include several which alleviate regulatory restrictions upon Pacific groundfish fishermen.

2. *How have these cuts impacted your ability to implement Executive Order 14276, entitled “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness?”*

The Councils’ goals directly align with the stated goal of EO 14276 to “promote the productive harvest of our seafood resources.” To comply with the EO tasking, NOAA Fisheries requested that Councils submit recommendations to reduce burdens on domestic fishing and increase production, and to commit to a work plan and schedule for implementation to ensure these actions are prioritized. Proposed workplans are required by early fall 2025 and will be responsive to NOAA’s determination of the “most heavily regulated fisheries.” The Councils and NOAA are redirecting resources to meet the Executive Order requirements, which impacts our ability to meet existing requirements and develop new initiatives that will improve the responsiveness of fisheries management to real-time ocean conditions. Close coordination between NOAA and the Councils will be required to implement EO 14276, but resources are already stretched thin.

3. *Are there specific fisheries that have faced significant impacts?*

Reductions in NOAA support have already caused delays in implementing fishing specifications for the Atlantic sea scallop fishery, one of the most valuable fisheries in the Nation, and disrupted the highly valuable Northern Gulf of Maine seasonal scallop fishery.

The 2025 clam dredge survey, which was slated to sample ocean quahogs on Georges Bank for the first time since 2016, is likely to be cancelled. Ocean quahogs support a valuable commercial fishery with an estimated ex-vessel value of \$17 million in 2024. Without this essential survey data, a 2026 stock assessment for ocean quahogs is unlikely and will compromise the Mid-Atlantic Council’s ability to provide accurate catch limits for 2027 and beyond.

A cancelled gray triggerfish assessment leaves this increasingly important stock in an unassessed status. A canceled cobia assessment has indefinitely delayed anticipated harvest increases. Red grouper are currently in a rebuilding plan implemented in 2019 and estimated to be complete in 2028. Multiple delays in assessing the stock have prevented the South Atlantic Council from receiving any updates on rebuilding progress during rebuilding leaving the Council unable to monitor rebuilding performance as required under the Magnuson-Stevens Act; no information on rebuilding progress will be provided until after the rebuilding plan is expected to conclude.

The Gulf Council is currently working with NOAA Fisheries to rebuild several finfish stocks, including gag grouper, red snapper, gray triggerfish, and greater amberjack. Stock assessments are underway for red snapper and gray triggerfish and planned for gag grouper and greater amberjack. However, recent reductions in the Federal workforce at the NOAA Southeast Fisheries Science Center, which conducts many of the stock assessments on Gulf finfish, have led them to caution the Gulf Council about the ability to produce as many stock assessments per unit time as it has in the past. This will require the Gulf Council to prioritize, to an even greater degree, these stocks in rebuilding plans, and diverting resources away from other economically and socially important species like red grouper, king mackerel, cobia, and others.

Personnel reduction will affect data collection and analysis for the spiny lobster and the deep-water snapper grouper complex managed by the Caribbean Council, amplifying uncertainty and jeopardizing the needed stock assessment, which is essential for these species and the US Caribbean fishery economy.

4. *Based on the current and proposed cuts, how do you think fisheries management will be impacted in the future?*

Under the current and proposed cuts, it is unlikely that the US Federal fishery management system will be able to continue managing the 500+ species that fall under Federal jurisdiction. Councils and NOAA Fisheries will need to align priorities and consider how to minimize biological and socioeconomic risks in an increasingly uncertain system. In general, reduced scientific information (quality, availability, frequency) will lead to increased uncertainty in stock status. This uncertainty is expected to result in lower catch limits for many stocks, with potentially negative economic consequences for affected fishing communities.

There may be reduced capabilities for NOAA to conduct surveys, generate best available science for decision-making, and allow for flexible management approaches. The Councils are supportive of cooperative research, including use of advanced technologies, however these approaches may be limited under the proposed cuts.

Reduced science, policy, and administrative staffing at NOAA is likely to limit our capacity to increase flexibility in the future. The fisheries science and management enterprise may need to be simplified, which could present challenges to adapt and respond to resource conditions and the needs of fishing communities.

The Councils, individually and working through the CCC, are committed to remaining close partners with NOAA as we develop future scenarios.

Thank you again for your inquiry.

Sincerely,

Council Executive Directors:



Cate O'Keefe, NEFMC



Chris Moore, MAFMC



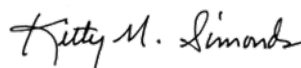
John Carmichael, SAFMC



Miguel Rolon, CFMC



Carrie Simmons, GFMC



Kitty Simonds, WPFMC



Merrick Burden, PFMC



Dave Witherell, NPFMC