

# **Meeting Summary Report**

## **Dolphin Wahoo Advisory Panel**

### **April 22-23, 2025**

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Dolphin Wahoo Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC on April 22-23, 2025.

The AP approved the minutes from the November 2023 meeting and the agenda for the April 2025 meeting.

There was no public comment given during the public comment session at the beginning of the meeting. Eleven written comments were submitted, with many expressing concern over the state of the dolphin stock and fishery. The comments can be read [HERE](#).

Kerry Marhefka, Chair of the Dolphin Wahoo Committee for the Council, provided opening remarks along with a framework for what the Council was expecting from the AP at the meeting. The AP was also updated on pending Council actions.

#### **1. Update on the status of amendments and Dolphin Wahoo related efforts**

Council staff updated the AP on the status of recent and developing Council actions and other Dolphin Wahoo related efforts including:

- Dolphin Wahoo Regulatory Amendment 3 (Modifications to the minimum size limit, recreational retention limits, and for-hire captain and crew bag limits for dolphin)
- For-Hire Reporting Improvements Amendment
- For-Hire Limited Entry Amendment
- Dolphin Wahoo Amendment 4 (Joint Comprehensive Commercial Electronic Logbook Amendment)
- Snapper Grouper Amendment 46 (Private Recreational Permitting and Education Requirements)
- Recent dolphin and wahoo fishery management actions of the Caribbean Fishery Management Council

#### **2. Update on the Dolphin Management Strategy Evaluation**

The NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) is conducting a management strategy evaluation (MSE) for the U.S. Atlantic dolphin fishery. The goal of this project is to develop an index-based management procedure that may provide catch level and management advice that best achieves the multiple management objectives of the fishery. SEFSC staff updated the AP on progress of the Dolphin MSE and recent stakeholder working group meetings.

#### **3. Modifications to the minimum size limit, recreational retention limits, and for-hire captain and crew bag limits for dolphin (Regulatory Amendment 3)**

Regulatory Amendment 3 includes measures that would extend the applicable range of the 20-inch fork length minimum size limit, modify recreational retention limits, and remove captain and crew bag limits for dolphin. Council staff reviewed the AP's previous guidance

on draft actions in the amendment provided at the [April 2022 meeting](#), asking if the AP would like to provide additional feedback or change their previous recommendations. The AP provided the following new comments:

General comments:

- It was stated that several peer reviewed studies had been recently published noting a decline in the dolphin stock and availability along the U.S. Atlantic coast.
  - [Damiano et al \(2024\)](#), [Rudershausen et al \(2024\)](#), and [Runde et al \(2025\)](#).
- Consider higher retention limits onboard charter vessels or leave limits “as is” for these vessels. Private vessels could have lower retention limits.
  - Charter vessels are under considerable economic and regulatory pressure.
  - Most conservation benefit will come from private vessels since these vessels account for the majority of dolphin landings.
  - In South Florida there has been an order of magnitude increase in private recreation vessels. Large increase also seen in the rest of the region.

DRAFT Action 1. Modify the applicable geographic range of the minimum size limit for dolphin

- Some AP members felt that there is a high release mortality associated with dolphin. This should be considered if implementing a size limit where one is currently not in place.
- Do not want to have to worry about a slightly undersized fish accidentally being kept when bailing dolphin. A size limit adds another potential violation.
- Other AP members noted that they would like to see the 20” minimum size limit extended throughout the management range.
  - Noted frustration that very little has been done to change dolphin regulations despite many years of a declining fishery.
  - A de-hooker can be used boat-side to keep the fish in the water and decrease release mortality for small fish.
  - Also noted that not everyone wants a size limit, so a hybrid approach may be appropriate that would allow a limited number of undersized fish to be kept but discourage targeting of small fish.
- Consider other pressures on the dolphin stock such as increased natural mortality from shark predation leading to declines in availability.
  - Increasing shark population and predation being seen in many fisheries in the region and is a notable problem.
- While addressed during Other Business, the AP passed the following motion in relation to a minimum size limit for dolphin:

**SUPPORT AMENDMENT 3 AS FOLLOWS: DRAFT ACTION 1, ALTERNATIVE 4, WHICH IS A 20” FORK LENGTH FROM FLORIDA THROUGH MAINE, WITH THE FOLLOWING CHANGES OF ALLOWING 1 FISH LESS THAN 20” BUT NOT LESS THAN 18” FORK LENGTH PER VESSEL FOR RECREATIONAL FISHERMEN, AND 3 FISH LESS THAN 20” BUT NOT LESS THAN 18” FORK LENGTH PER VESSEL FOR CHARTER VESSELS. INTENDED TO BE PART OF A VESSEL AGGREGATE. APPROVED BY THE AP (UNANIMOUS)**

Note: It was clarified that “recreational fishermen” referred to anglers on private vessels.

DRAFT Action 2. Modify the daily recreational bag limit for dolphin

- It was noted that smaller bag limits can create a challenge for marketing trips onboard charter vessels.
  - In North Carolina many customers are booking charters with the intent to keep large quantities of fish.
  - If retention limits are changed, consider keeping the bag limit at 10 fish per person but lower the vessel limit. This helps market trips with smaller crews.
- Lower limits could be considered onboard private vessels.
  - Open access of the for-hire permit may make it difficult to vary bag limit by vessel type. Private vessel owners may get a for-hire permit if they want to retain more fish.
- If the limit is too low, anglers will do something other than fish offshore (fish inshore, play golf, etc.).
- There are no guarantees that lowering the retention limits will lead to an increase in dolphin abundance.
- There was not a consensus among the AP on whether the bag limit should be reduced. Some members were in favor of reducing the bag limit for dolphin, while others were not.

DRAFT Action 3. Modify the recreational vessel limit for dolphin

- One of the goals of the FMP is to reduce conflict between users of the resource. A lower vessel limit would reduce conflict and competition.
- Private vessels could have a lower limit than charter vessels.
  - Charter vessels need higher limits to market trips to some clients.

DRAFT Action 4. Modify captain and crew recreational daily bag limits for dolphin onboard charter vessels

- The AP reiterated support for maintaining captain and crew bag limits (**Alternative 1 (No Action)**).
  - These limits are important on charter trips, particularly those with a low number of anglers.
  - Could be used as a conservation tool that also maintains the viability of the charter industry if individual bag limits are reduced.
- While addressed during Other Business, the AP passed the following motion in relation to the vessel limit and captain and crew bag limits:  
**SUPPORT AMENDMENT 3 AS FOLLOWS: DRAFT ACTION 3 & 4 VESSEL LIMIT IS 30 FISH FOR PRIVATE VESSELS, AND 36 FISH FOR CHARTER VESSELS, AND CAPTAIN AND CREW MAY RETAIN RECREATIONAL DAILY BAG LIMITS FOR DOLPHIN ONBOARD CHARTER VESSELS FOR A TOTAL OF 48 FISH.**  
**APPROVED BY THE AP (UNANIMOUS)**

#### **4. For-Hire Reporting Improvements Amendment**

The For-Hire Reporting Improvements Amendment seeks to make modifications to the South Atlantic Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting Program and the Southeast Region Headboat Survey to improve the accuracy, precision, and timeliness of landings, discards, fishing effort, and economic data for South Atlantic permitted charter/headboat vessels participating in the snapper grouper, coastal migratory pelagics, and dolphin wahoo fisheries.

This amendment includes measures that would modify reporting frequency, require trip notifications, establish approved landing locations, require participation in a validation survey, revise reporting of economic data, and modify “did not fish” reporting requirements. The AP provided the following comments:

##### Draft Action 1. Modify Reporting Frequency of Fishing Trips for For-Hire Vessels

- Most AP members wanted to maintain weekly reporting.
  - If shortened, 48 hours would be the minimum that should be considered.
- Being required to report before offloading passengers would be burdensome and potentially dangerous.
  - Need to stay alert looking for nautical hazards coming into port.
  - It takes time to help passengers off of the vessel and get ready for the next trip.
  - Many captains are not comfortable with a smartphone and are reporting via a computer.
  - A more stringent reporting requirement could compromise the quality of the data reported since captains may be rushing to report.
- Consider improving compliance through increased enforcement.
  - Increase the minimum fine for non-reporting.
  - Increase non-compliance notifications and implement a “strike system” where captains lose their permit if they receive multiple violations.

##### Draft Action 2. Require Trip Notification for For-Hire Vessels

- AP members were not in favor of a trip notification.
- While it was noted that reporting non-fishing activities could help with enforcement, non-fishing activities fall outside of the Council’s jurisdiction and should not be considered for a trip notification.

##### Draft Action 3. Establish Approved Landing Locations for For-Hire Vessels

- AP members were not in favor of establishing approved landing locations.
  - Picking up or dropping off clients at private docks is going to be problematic.
    - May need to use multiple private docks in a week.
    - Do not want to get a ticket if the location is not pre-approved. Offload locations can be added or changed on short notice.

##### Draft Action 4. Require Participation in a Validation and Estimation Survey

- AP members were not in favor of requiring participation in a validation survey.

- Concerned that an additional dock-side survey could be overly burdensome in some circumstances, such as if there needs to be a quick turnaround for another charter.

#### Action 5. Revise Reporting of Economic Data for Charter Vessels

- AP members were in favor of this action and noted that it would reduce the reporting burden for vessels that were not selected.

#### Action 6. Modify Requirement for “Did Not Fish” Reports

- AP members did not want to change did not fish reporting requirements.
  - If changes are made, consider increasing the advanced notice that could be given by allowing reports to be submitted up to 60 days ahead of time.

### **5. Research and Monitoring Prioritization Plan**

Council staff presented the draft 2023-2027 Research and Monitoring Plan and requested recommendations from the AP on any additional areas of research that should be included or prioritization of research and monitoring tasks for dolphin and wahoo. The AP provided recommendations to:

- Incentivize dolphin tagging and incorporate tagging data into management strategy evaluation.
- Monitor for dolphin spawning areas.
- Research range shifts for dolphin.
- Improve recreational data potentially through recreational reporting, a private recreational permit, and requiring tournaments to report all landings.

### **6. Update on the SAFMC Citizen Science Program**

Council staff provided an update of program activities and recent efforts of the Citizen Science Program including the Program’s Project Idea Portal, Program evaluation, FISHstory, SAFMC Release, and SMILE project.

### **7. Feedback on making the for-hire Dolphin Wahoo Permit limited entry**

In December 2023, the Council directed staff to initiate an amendment to consider a limited entry program for the for-hire components of the Dolphin Wahoo, Snapper Grouper, and Coastal Migratory Pelagics fisheries. The Council has received feedback from the Snapper Grouper and Mackerel Cobia APs advising the Council to consider limited entry for the for-hire permit for their respective fisheries.

The Dolphin Wahoo AP had not had an opportunity to provide input on the topic. The AP provided the following comments:

- Many expressed concern over limiting the number of for-hire permits and were not in favor of considering limited entry for the Dolphin Wahoo fishery.
  - Concern about the cost of the permit becoming too expensive and a financial barrier for new entrants.
  - It was suggested that if the goal is to professionalize the fishery, look into requirements that other professions have implemented such as continuing education credits.

- It was noted that limiting entry could help protect fishery resources: “the pie is only so big”. It could also help with logbook reporting compliance.
- If limited entry is further considered, need to make sure that new participants can enter the fishery.
- Trends in the number of for-hire vessels participating in the Dolphin Wahoo fishery vary by region.
  - Increased participation in the Florida Keys.
    - It was noted that many for-hire vessels are not federally permitted in South Florida.
  - Decreased participation in full-time charter vessels in the Outer Banks.
  - Overall, have seen an increase in “.com” charter boats and part-time participants that undermine pricing for charter trips.
- The AP noted frustration over not having up to date permit information past 2020 and that this information is vital for the AP provide a more thorough recommendation for the Council.

## 8. *Lines of Communication run-through*

A practice run of the *Lines* meetings was held with the AP to get input on the effectiveness of the meeting design. Due to time constraints, the AP was only able to complete the “sticky wall” portion of the meeting. The AP provided the following comments:

- Unless there’s a major issue that angers fishermen, getting people to show up could be a challenge.
  - Target popular personalities in a community to help get the word out.
  - Make it a fun and welcoming atmosphere.
  - Make sure that people feel heard.
  - Consider a web-based option since many people do not want to travel.
- This could create a good opportunity for people to feel heard by the Council and to speak off the record about fisheries issues.

## 9. Other Business

The AP addressed the following topics during Other Business:

- **Spearfishing for wahoo:** An AP member noted that there was growing concern over increasing spearfishing effort directed towards wahoo off of the Florida Keys. This concern was captured in the most recent [fishery performance report for wahoo](#). One potential recommendation was to only allow the use of pole spears when spearfishing for wahoo.
- **Minimum size limit for wahoo:** The AP asked about the status of their recommendation of a 24” minimum size limit for wahoo, which is also captured in the most recent fishery performance for wahoo. Staff noted that this was a standing recommendation of the AP, but the Council had not initiated an amendment that would change wahoo regulations. It was reiterated that this was a unanimous recommendation of the AP.
- **Minimum size limit, vessel limit, and captain and crew bag limits for dolphin:** An AP member provided draft motions related to actions considered in Regulatory Amendment 3. The AP discussed these draft motions and unanimously passed two motions addressing the minimum size limit, vessel limit, and captain and crew bag limits for dolphin. These motions are captured earlier in the report under discussion of the amendment. The AP

also considered a motion that would recommend decreasing the bag limit to 5 dolphin per person onboard private vessels and 6 dolphin per person onboard charter vessels. This motion did not receive a majority vote and did not pass.

- **Matching HMS regulations in the pelagic longline fishery for dolphin and implement a more restrictive commercial trip limit:** It was recommended that the Council consider matching HMS regulations in the pelagic longline fishery for dolphin to make regulations consistent between HMS and non-HMS permitting vessels.

Some AP members also noted that a year-round commercial trip limit should be considered for dolphin to support sustainability of the stock and avoid localized depletion. In response, a commercial AP member noted a low trip limit had the potential to “make or break” the profitability of a trip. It was also noted that commercial landings have been very low in recent years.

#### **Advisory Panel Members**

Jon Reynolds, Chair

Brice Barr\*

Richard DeLizza

Richard Harris

Glen Hopkins

David Moss

Paul Pancake

John Nappo\*

Brian Bacon\*

*\*AP member not in attendance.*

Rom Whitaker III, Vice-Chair

James “Chip” Berry

Robert Frevert

Earl Harris, Jr.\*

Jay Kavanagh

Dan Owsley

Tim Scalise

Bill Richardson

Randall Morgan\*