



THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

405 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201, North Charleston SC 29405

Call: (843) 571-4366 | Toll-Free: (866) SAMFC-10 | Fax: (843) 769-4520 | safmc.net

Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel Meeting Summary

Stacie Crowe, Chair | Paul Medders, Vice Chair

Via Webinar
January 28 and 29, 2026

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC, from January 28 to 29, 2026.

The AP approved minutes from the July 2025 meeting after Brendan's name spelling is corrected. (It is also incorrect on the website. Staff will correct this error.) The AP also approved the agenda for the January 2026 meeting.

There was no public comment given during the public comment session at the beginning or end of the meeting. One written comment was submitted.

January 28, 2026, from 12:00 to 4:00 pm

Trish Murphey, NCDMF, Chair of the Habitat and Ecosystem Committee and SAFMC Chair, made opening remarks. She summarized the Coral 11 and Shrimp 12 amendments' approval process since July 2025, as well as the Habitat Committee's discussions of the July 2025 HEAP meeting.

1. Integration of Revised Food Webs and Connectivity Policy Information into EFH designations (*Attachment 1*)

Description: The working group assigned to determine how to integrate prey habitat use information into the existing [Food Web and Connectivity Policy](#) has met once since the

July 2025 HEAP meeting. During that meeting, the working group encountered an issue deciding how to separate prey data that are utilized in the Ecopath/Ecosim model. Lauren Gentry (FLFWC staff) is working on the issue and will report back to staff once she finishes her analysis. Additionally, the most recent Food Web Policy doesn't integrate the updates included in the Fisheries Ecosystem Plan (FEP) II document. The Advisory Panel discussed what to do with the FEP II information and how to integrate it into the policy. The Climate Policy was also updated in the 2018 FEP II document, and the website has been updated to reflect this.

Work group volunteers: Wilson Laney, Kevin Spanik, Chip Collier, Laurent Cherubin, Erin Spencer, and Lauren Gentry

AP Discussion:

- Kevin Spanik asked the group to specify the level of granularity the AP would recommend for use in identifying habitat.
- The group wanted to know more about Lauren Gentry's exploration.
- The levels of taxonomy and habitat use are at different levels and the working group needs to identify which layers to combine versus keep separate. For example, do we need to specify coral species, or can we just use hard bottom?
- No answer was determined.

AP Action: The AP approved the recommendation that the food web working group meet and integrate the 2018 food web policy into the 2025 Food Web policy. The AP recommends using track changes to track the differences.

Kevin Spanik and Lauren Gentry will work on a plan for the prey habitat information and then the working group will meet to develop recommendations for how to integrate prey habitat usage into the EFH definitions using the test species.

2. Revision to Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows Policy to address impacts from freshwater discharges and impediments to river flow (Attachment 2a and 2b)

Description: During the October 2024 HEAP meeting, the HEAP recommended that the [Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows Policy](#) (Flow Policy) be updated to address impacts from freshwater discharges and impediments to river flow. In December 2024, the Council approved moving forward with the update. Since then, the Flow Policy working group has met six times to discuss edits. The HEAP reviewed the proposed edits, adding in information on water quality, dikes, tidal gates, roadway/concrete runoff, weirs, culverts, and irrigation.

Work group volunteers: Wilson Laney, Stacie Crowe, David Web, Anne Deaton, Cameron Luck, and Matthew Kenworthy

AP Discussion: AP members were concerned about removing anadromous and diadromous terms fully.

AP Action: Add a bullet point to clarify that these policies do impact anadromous and diadromous species.

The AP recommends sending the policy to the following contacts for review:

- **Florida DEP: Scott Eastman**

- NC 401
- NC State stormwater work
- SCDES Water Quality Division: Karin Skipper, Director and Hydrology Section Manager Scott Harder
- Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP)
- NC Coastal Federation (Jacob Boyd: Saltmarsh Conservation Coordinator)
- St. Johns River Water Management District
- IRL National Estuary Program
- South Florida Water Management District,
- EPA Southeast Region - (Wilson has a name),
- US Army Corps 404 or 401 permitting section,
- Kelly Moore - Georgia federal consistency coordinator,
- TNC ecological flows researchers,
- PEW
- APNEP -<https://apnep.nc.gov/about-apnep/committees-teams/action-teams/ecological-flows-team>
- East Central Florida Regional Planning Council.
- DWR 401 contact: Water Quality Permitting Section Chief
- NC Department of Environmental Quality
- USACE
- SCDES BCM
- SCDES BOW 401 Water Quality
- USACE SAC- Regulatory

3. Space industry activity impacts on habitat (*Attachment 3*)

Description: Council staff have been gathering information on the space industry's impacts on the habitat and fishery surrounding the Cape Canaveral area. This research included contacting numerous government agencies, reviewing public comments on environmental assessments and impact statements, identifying any legal regulations on space debris, four peer-reviewed papers, and some anecdotal information that will be further pursued by staff. The HEAP discussed where additional data could be gathered and the best next steps to handle the data that has been gathered.

AP Discussion:

- Point Nemo is in the Pacific and does not have a consistent legal guideline for how and why space debris is deorbited, so it will not help us with regulations in the South Atlantic.
- For these conversations, deorbiting means dropping debris into the water and not retrieving it.
- When discussing space debris, maybe call it underwater obstructions to ease people's comfort with the discussions.
- What can we do to make certain that this info is considered in EFH launches and space debris comment letters - Staff will integrate the information as much as possible.
- The HEAP is not against space exploration, KSC, or space activities

- We want to make sure that unintentional negative impacts are mitigated
- Current regulation is inadequate
- Need to emphasize that the AP is not against space exploration, national defense,
- Could we integrate space stuff into the energy policy?
- We could add a research recommendation to the council's research and monitoring document.

AP Action: Look into the following contacts for additional information:

- EPA
- Nautical chart providers may be collecting underwater obstructions.
- Laurent – NASA contact Dr. Erik Ryder; eric.a.revier@nasa.gov
- Ocean Conservancy NGO
- TNC – Brendan to reach out about FOIA
- NWF – Wilson will reach out
- Military base nearby should be monitoring, could be a good contact
- Patrick Space Force Base: Keitha Dattilo-Bain (keitha.dattilobain@spaceforce.mil)
- Staff knows the project manager on a project that is building a hangar at the Patrick Space Force Base down in Cocoa Beach. He provided the following contacts.
 - Steven Baker (Water Program Manager with Space Force)
 - James Henderson (PFAS Subject Matter Expert)
 - St. Johns River Management District.

4. SAFMC Citizen Science program updates (*Attachment 4*)

Description: Julia Byrd, Council staff, provided an update on SAFMC Citizen Science Program activities and advisory groups, as well as updates on the SAFMC Release, FISHstory, and SMILE projects. Staff asked if 1-2 AP members were interested in serving on the Citizen Science Projects Advisory Panel.

AP Discussion: The AP thinks this program is awesome and recommended additional funding sources, as well as an additional photo source.

AP Action: Kevin Spanik volunteered for the Citizen Science Projects AP.

5. Habitat Conservation Division (HCD) Essential Fish Habitat consultations and information on beneficial use of dredging material projects (*Attachment 5*)

Description: Anne Deaton, NMFS Habitat Conservation Division (HCD), reviewed EFH consultations that HCD submitted in 2025.

AP Discussion:

- USACE Wilmington Harbor Deepening project
 - Does deepening ports improve the economy?
 - Some comments have discussed this since deepening the ports doesn't meet the economic portion of the purpose for these projects
 - Having bigger boats is better for the companies.

- The EIS also investigates the economic component and provides an in-depth economic perspective.
- This project is under federal review
- Maritime transport and demand will increase with coastal populations.
- We need to balance the economic impact with the environment,
- Gag grouper spawning ground needs to be considered as well. Studies have been published showing that juvenile groupers are reliant on these spawning areas
- The sediment will be deposited in a mud flat creation concept.
- None of the details of the fill design for the beneficial use were listed
 - There were some approx. volumes, but no design released yet,
 - Probably not like mounds in Gulf
 - not going to add vegetation but may in future,
- The NEPA process for deepening and widening in Wilmington will involve overlapping with maintenance deepening and dredging
- The EIS for Wilmington has been released, and review is closed. Didn't have a thorough NEPA process,
- Beneficial use
 - The beneficial use projects in Georgia behind Jekyll Island
 - The residents wanted to protect the beneficial use area and add seagrass.
 - The Corps said no because the Corps wanted the sediment to go back into the system as well

AP Action: No Action.

6. Spawning Special Management Zones Working Group Report (*Attachment 6*)

Description: The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council established five Spawning Special Management Zones (SSMZs) in 2017 where fishing for, harvest of, and/or possession of snapper-grouper species is prohibited. Three of these SSMZs are natural sites with a sunset on regulations after 10 years, while two artificial-reef SSMZs did not have the sunset provision. Council staff developed a questionnaire for the Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (HEAP) to support an evaluation of the efficacy of these areas. Responses from the HEAP were summarized and presented to the HEAP.

AP Discussion:

- Chip invited panel members to discuss their recommendations for SSMZs
- TNC work showed that spawning is occurring, so protections should be retained in the air of caution
- In terms of enforcement, has satellite information been made available?
 - Probably, but other tools would be more valuable
- The HEAP agrees that these areas are spawning. If the council agrees to extend management, then monitoring needs to continue and education needs to increase
- April 2024 seminar series discussed how to identify fish sounds with an AI algorithm to filter fish sound and presence,
- [Grays Reef Marine Sanctuary](#) has encountered the same issue of how to monitor stuff so far offshore

- GRMS uses AIS, hydrophone, buoy camera, and vessel/aerial surveys; each technique is specific
 - AIS isn't on small vessels
 - Hydrophones can tell you about fish and vessel noises but they don't tell you about people or activities
 - Satellite can see the whole area, maybe get the number of people, and determine peak activity
- All of the tools work together to determine time of peak periods and vessel types, which allows law enforcement to be more efficient

AP Action: The HEAP recommends that the Council retain all SSMZs management actions, which would extend the current closures beyond the sunset date of 2027. The AP also recommends improved monitoring, enforcement, and outreach commitments

7. Resilient Fisheries Projects overview and EFH project update (*Attachment 7*)

Description: In 2024, the Council received funding for projects to promote resilient fisheries. One of these projects' goals was to update the spatial distributions and habitat associations for species managed under the [Snapper Grouper](#), [Dolphin and Wahoo](#), and [Coastal Migratory Pelagics](#) Fishery Management Plans. Lara Klibansky gave a detailed update on this project and a summary of the other [Resilient Fisheries](#) projects, including projects looking to identify ecosystem indicators and ways to integrate ecosystem information into management choices.

AP Discussion: Lara posed the following questions and panelists gave the corresponding answers:

- What are the barriers in the South Atlantic to using Ecosystem Information?
 - No central repository for data
 - AFS has a database for gray literature
 - For raw data sets, the Mandy Karnauskas project is using git hub to centralize data
- There are a lot of indicators being developed, but are they useful in predicting management decision success? – no response
- If the Council uses ecosystem information the implementation pathway needs to be legally defensible. How do we formalize it? – no response
- Are there types of information or data that may not be appropriate for long-term trend analysis, but that could be used to inform more routine tactical decisions?
 - In terms of ecosystem indicators, perhaps the SERFs videos for non-managed species, which are currently non-priority species, get presence-absence could be useful.
 - The AP is interested in an Integrated Ecosystem Assessment (IEA), and the workshop discussion could center around that
 - The gaps in the presentation show why we need the IEA

AP Action: No Action.

8. 2025 Annual Habitat Report (*Attachment 8*)

Description: Council staff reviewed the draft annual report summarizing regional habitat activities that occurred during 2025 that have been submitted by panel members via email.

AP Discussion: The discussion is reflected in the updated annual report which is included in the March 2026 Council meeting briefing book.

AP Action: No Action

9. Update on Habitat and Ecosystem Outreach and Communication Strategy (*Attachment 9*)

Description: The HEAP is tasked with developing an outreach and communication plan for habitat information. Staff reviewed the draft FAQs and future communication plans.

AP Discussion:

- Add the following Acronyms:
 - NMFS – National Marine Fisheries Service
 - FMP - Fishery Management Plan
 - NOAA – National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration
- Add the following Questions:
 - Add who is affected by Federal regulations, identifying EFH
 - Add a subset under the what's the difference question:
 - Where are the EFH?
 - Include a link to the mapper
 - What organizations are involved in designation or providing information for efh/hapc
 - maybe make why and how EFH is designated
 - Have other councils designated EFH that overlap the South Atlantic?
 - Seasonal EFH?
 - Blue fish EFH comes down to us but dolphin wahoo EFH doesn't go up
 - Clarify what does EFH do.
 - How does identifying EFH accomplish the mission to protect habitat?
 - Include the regulatory requirement to identify EFH – in the why it is identified question
- Graphic:
 - Where does it start? - Maybe don't use a circle or have Magnuson be the external starting point, like a P-cycle.

AP Action: Approve the revised FAQs for submission to Outreach staff and the OCAP.

10. Review HEAP Workplan 2025-2028 and future meetings (*Attachments 10a and 10b*)

Description: The Panel discussed the short- and long-term goals for the HEAP.

AP Discussion: The discussion is reflected in the work plan that is in the March 2026 Council meeting briefing book presentation.

AP Action: The HEAP approved the work plan for submission to the Council. The next meeting will occur in person the week of June 22nd or 29th, with a networking event scheduled on one of the weekdays

11. Other Business - none

Public Comment

Adjourn