

Summary Report

For-Hire Reporting Advisory Panel Meeting January 29, 2025

The South Atlantic Council's *Ad Hoc* For-Hire Reporting Advisory Panel (AP) convened via webinar on January 29, 2025.

At this initial meeting of the AP, members introduced themselves and their affiliations/experience. All but one (*) of the AP members were in attendance.

Brian Bacon (RI)*

Adam Nowalsky (NJ)

Chris Kimrey (NC)

Rom Whitaker III (NC)

James Skinner (SC)

Mark Phelps (SC)

Richard Stoughton (SC)

Kevin Dezern (GA)

Haley Stephens (FL)

Bob Zales, II (FL)

Melissa Leone (FL)

Council members in attendance: Tom Roller (NC), Amy Dukes (SC)

Southeast Regional Office staff in attendance: Jessica Stephen, Michelle Masi

Comments from the public were requested at the beginning of the meeting. One commenter asked whether South Atlantic Council (Council) staff and Gulf of Mexico Council staff were in communication to ensure actions being considered by both Councils are in agreement. Council staff replied in the affirmative. No other public comments were received during the webinar meeting and none were provided via the online public comment form.

1. Potential Council actions to improve the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER) Program

Staff provided an overview of how the meeting would proceed and background information on Council activities relative to the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER) Program. Staff indicated the Council had received several presentations through 2024 on topics related to SEFHIER and other for hire-reporting programs. The Council initiated an amendment to improve the SEFHIER program in June 2024.

Staff clarified the amendment is a comprehensive amendment that amends the Snapper Grouper, Dolphin Wahoo, and Coastal Migratory Pelagics fishery management plans.

Staff presented a summary of available permit information, which the Council reviewed in March 2024. The summary included data from 2008 through 2020 as more recent information regarding the number of permits is not accessible from the Southeast Region Permits Office.

Staff noted the South Atlantic Council's amendment is about a year behind the one being prepared for fisheries under the jurisdiction of the Gulf of Mexico Council.

AP members asked about control dates. The Council issued a control date for the for-hire sector in June 2016 and again in December 2023. Staff clarified that the more recent control dates do not supersede previous ones. In other words, the Council may use any control date that has been established to develop a limited access program.

Below are general comments followed by comments on each potential action/topic:

- Reporting apps need to be streamlined and made more user-friendly, particularly E-trips. AP members using VESL noted it was easy to use.
- There is a lot of concern with current reporting requirement for federally permitted vessels having to report their inshore trips.
- Data will never be accurate because fishermen are afraid reporting correct information will lead to more restrictions down the line.
- There is severe lack of trust in management.
- More regulations will not lead to better compliance. Education and outreach need to be the focus to improve compliance.
- Most captains have multiple permits.
- Focus on determining why compliance is low.
- Compliance at the state level is high in South Carolina. The program has been in place for a long time and fishermen are used to reporting. The state has invested a lot in education and this has resulted in good compliance.
- Reporting requirements (and other requirements) need to be different for headboats and charter vessels.
- Reporting requirements are burdensome and are causing some fishermen to forego buying a permit and fishing illegally.
- AP members acknowledged that open access permits make reporting requirements harder to enforce. On the other hand, there is a general feeling that for-hire permits will one day become limited, so there is some level of motivation to comply with the current reporting requirements.
- General sentiment that existing regulations are not being enforced, so why add more restrictive requirements?
- A "little bit of enforcement might go a long way toward compliance".
- Lack of accountability for the private recreational component was cited numerous times during the AP's discussion.
- Is there too much effort? Is the universe just too difficult to properly enforce in order to have a successful reporting program?
- What is the level of compliance that is needed to be able to use the data in management?
- Education and outreach are critical to a successful reporting program. A short video tutorial would be far-reaching and inexpensive (e.g., HMS shark endorsement).

Reporting frequency and timing of report submission

- Some captains run multiple trips a day and don't have time to report after each offload.

- Reporting requirements may get in the way of customer satisfaction and lead to fewer returning clients.
- AP members had concerns about reporting prior to offloading as there is no cell service offshore and captains that don't have a mate have to focus on navigating the vessel so they can't report while underway.
- Weekly reporting is working. AP members agreed that reporting within an hour or 30 minutes of arriving at the dock is not feasible and would result in a drastic decline in trip satisfaction.
- For headboats, a common practice is to keep a personal paper logbook onboard (like a journal) and write down the trip's catch/info prior to offloading. Also, taking a photo of the catch on the deck prior to offloading. Both of these practices are excellent tools if a reference is needed when completing the 'official' weekly electronic VESL reports.
- With weekly reporting, headboats already have a high compliance rate.
- Daily reporting or every 48 hours would be feasible for some for-hire captains but not others.
- Captains that are used to weekly reporting and are compliant would find it harder to comply if reporting were to be required on intervals shorter than a week.

Trip declaration

- Some captains may need to move their vessel multiple times (e.g., to get fuel) so the requirement for a trip declaration has to allow for vessel movements that don't signal a trip.
- Requiring a declaration every time a vessel leaves to dock is not realistic.
- There was general agreement that a trip declaration requirement would help with data validation.
- How a trip declaration is accomplished will be important. It needs to be as easy as possible.
- If captains have to declare a trip that is not associated directly with their business, it will create more distrust among fishermen because they will question why the data are needed.
- Some AP members preferred a trip declaration over increased frequency of reporting.

Approved landing locations

- AP members expressed concerns regarding private docks needing to be approved landing locations.
- Some captains pick up and drop off clients at private docks. How would these locations be accounted for?
- Consider that waterfront access is diminishing. Vessel owners have to be flexible on landing locations.
- Consider that smaller vessels have more flexibility than larger ones in where they can land.
- There are town or city ordinances in place that restrict where charter vessels can operate.

Reporting of economic data for charter vessels

- There was agreement among AP members that economic data should not be collected and fishermen are reluctant to provide it.
- Some AP members felt that, if necessary, the agency could obtain economic data through the Internal Revenue Service and the requirement to provide it on for-hire trip reports could be eliminated.
- Some AP members acknowledged the importance of economic data for disaster relief.
- Some AP members acknowledged that economic data are required to properly analyze the effect of regulations.
- Some AP members suggested the reporting of economic data be voluntary, not mandatory.
- Some captains may be providing false economic data because filling in those fields is mandatory. This is more harmful than useful.
- There was general agreement that if reporting were limited to fishing activity (e.g., catch), compliance would improve.
- Some AP members spoke about the importance of obtaining information to know the true value of the for-hire industry.

Did Not Fish Reports

- Some captains use them to get out of reporting. There is concern with abusing the flexibility DNF reports are intended to provide.
- Some captains appreciate the flexibility in that DNF reports can be submitted 30 days in advance.
- There was general agreement that DNF reports are useful to for-hire captains and the current frequency (up to 30 days in advance) is adequate.
- An Ap member suggested increasing the 30-day timeframe to 60- or 90 days.

Validation survey

- AP members acknowledged the need for data validation and that it would require an additional burden on them.
- Some AP members do not believe that there are enough resources to properly validate reported data.
- Some AP members viewed a validation survey as simply more bureaucracy.
- Dockside intercepts are a good tool for validating catch, but still don't provide validation for fish that were released during the trip. One of the best ways to validate releases/discards would be to increase onboard observers on trips.
- If dockside surveys were to occur, they should be conducted between the agent and captain (not the customers), as the captain is more knowledgeable and the customers may be less experienced in identifying fish, etc.

2. Election of Chair and Vice Chair

- The AP elected Bob Zales II as Chair
- The AP elected Haley Stephens as Vice Chair.