

FINAL
SUMMARY REPORT
FULL COUNCIL I
SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL
September 2025

The Council met on Monday, September 15, 2025, Tuesday, September 16, 2025, and Friday, September 19, 2025, in North Charleston, South Carolina. The Council adopted the agenda for the week and approved minutes from the June 2025 meeting. Newly appointed and re-appointed members took the Council member oath, and the 2024 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year award was presented to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's SRA Offshore Patrol Vessel Team and SCDNR's PFC Andrew Alexander.

Litigation brief:

- NOAA GC provided an update on NMFS lawsuits on red snapper: The Court concluded that the regulations allocate resources equitably and promote conservation. NMFS will continue to keep the Council informed of future developments. For the Amendment 59 lawsuit filed on July 3, the parties agreed to stay the proceedings until the appeals court rules on the prior suits given the similarity of the issues.

Reports

State agency representatives provided reports to the Council.

- Florida – FWC finished year 1 of EFPs with over 22,000 applications and over 1,000 participants. Year 2 is underway and participants could start fishing in September.
- Georgia – successfully hired for-hire observer (early July). Also received funds from the state to increase creel intercepts; GA is doubling the number of interviews. Still working on state offshore permit (focuses on 9 species that are federally managed, including mackerels and dolphin).
- South Carolina – work on artificial reefs. Jordan Wolfe hired for for-hire observer program.
- North Carolina – Pamlico sound survey discontinued because vessel was damaged beyond repair and there are no funds to repair her.

Due to the limited time on the Council's September meeting agenda, Best Fishing Practices staff prepared a recorded presentation along with a survey to gather Council members' feedback on the Best Fishing Practices Campaign. An email with the survey was sent to Council members and Council staff provided an overview of the results during the Council's second session on Friday, September 19th, 2025 (refer to report from Full Council II).

Council liaisons from the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils provided reports.

Andy Strelcheck and Dr. Clay Porch provided updates from the Southeast Regional Office and the Southeast Fisheries Science Center, respectively.

Southeast Region:

- SERO launching Permits version 2.0 in October 2025.

- Reduction in SEFHIER contract so real-time services have been curtailed. Agency will look to reinstate contract if funding is available in the future.
- Lost economics and social science staff so the SEFSC has filled in. Also brought in a contractor (anthropologist).
- Prioritization process (across Councils) is being implemented and SERO will continue to juggle and prioritize workload and continue to inform the Council.
- Work coming in from the CCC (regional pilot on the west coast that will be extended to other regions). This plan will inform NMFS on how best to allocate resources. Update at upcoming CCC meeting.
- Question regarding Section 7 consultation for manta rays affecting the SG fishery – Not aware of substantial issues with this fishery.
- Red snapper commercial closure – SERO has been following quota monitoring procedures and closure package has been sent to HQ where it remains under review.
- Council members asked several questions regarding the prioritization process. SERO intends to integrate priorities with the Council during the workplan discussion.

Southeast Fisheries Science Center:

- Thanks to the Council for advocating for the Beaufort facility and the plan is to maintain presence in the area.
- Staffing has been reduced across the center, so the ability to manage operations and provide scientific advice is compromised. The Center remains in the triage phase and continuing to evaluate the full extent of the changes and how to continue to conduct priority activities. Using advanced technology and AI to improve efficiency.
- Fishery-independent surveys – there will be delays in video-based abundance indexes. AI is showing promise in the Gulf to improve efficiency, and the intent is to do the same in the SA.
- Experienced captains have been lost so Center is looking for ways to mitigate (e.g., contracting with states).
- Lost about half of port agents so hard maintain sampling coverage. Center is working to mitigate this by working with state partners.
- Lost the ability to do bycatch research.
- Assessment capabilities are reduced. Current stock assessments can be supported, but need to look to simplifying stock assessments to get scientific advice out more quickly and meet future needs.
- Reduced ability to support protected resources activities.
- CEFI has been discontinued due to staffing losses. The Ecosystem Status Report will continue. Center is looking to automate the process so reports can happen annually.

Executive Orders Discussion

The Council began discussion of Executive Order 14276 at its June 2025 meeting and subsequently solicited public input on what types of management actions may achieve the goals stated in the Executive Order. Public comments were accepted via the Council's website from July 28 through August 15, 2025. The Council also hosted an online meeting of its advisory panels on August 11, 2025, to gather their feedback.

To kick off the discussion in terms of the vehicles available to accomplish various actions, staff presented a tool to assist the Council select the appropriate amendment type and consider timing for different potential actions in the Snapper Grouper FMP. The tool also includes a list of actions that could be addressed through a framework amendment. Each amendment type is described, and examples of each amendment type are linked. The tool also includes timing estimates for both the Council and NMFS rulemaking processes. Staff will continue to develop this tool for other FMPs.

The Council then reviewed a summary of the themes present in public comments and advisory panel input on the Executive Order and a list of Executive Order action responses. The Council focused discussion on actions that were already underway to ensure they would be accommodated in the workplan and thus have a high chance of completion. Therefore, actions already underway were considered high priority. The following actions and associated timelines will be submitted in the Council's response to the Executive Order:

- Removing or considering ecosystem component designation for species in the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan.
- Snapper Grouper Amendment 60 which aims to address permit issues and improve commercial trip efficiency.
- Support for the development of state agency-led exempted fishing permits to test state management of the recreational red snapper fishery.

While not a regulatory action, the Council's letter will also include a description of how the Council is working to increase stakeholder engagement with the management and science processes. Stakeholder input is a fundamental component of the Council process and local ecological knowledge is critical in understanding what actions the Council can take to improve the competitiveness of fisheries in their jurisdictions.

Other recommendations will be considered for the Council's response to Executive Order 14192 or for addition to the Council's workplan, as is appropriate and time allows. In addition to Council specific actions, the Council recommends NOAA Fisheries prioritize the following items in their response to Executive Order 14276:

- Maintaining capacity of data collection (ex. dockside sampling) and conducting stock assessments in the South Atlantic region.
- Supporting the funding of citizen science and cooperative research initiatives.
- Eliminate the prohibition of share fin sales, which is detrimental to fishing business and contributes to shark depredation that has become problematic in South Atlantic fisheries.
- Removing the requirement to report discards in the commercial fishery or develop and fund a discard reporting program that will meet best scientific information available standards.
- Support funding for the Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant Program, especially the promotion and marketing and development, infrastructure, and capacity building priorities.

SAFMC Research and Monitoring Plan priorities

The Council revises their research and monitoring plan every two years. The research and monitoring plan was presented to the Council in June 2025. Due to limited time at the June

meeting, the draft research and monitoring was sent to committee chairs for their review and to prioritize research and monitoring topics for their committee. Council staff highlighted the recommended research and monitoring topics and presented the 2025-2029 South Atlantic Research and Monitoring Plan for the Council's consideration for approval.

NMFS expressed that the list of priorities far outstrips what NMFS could do, even without the current funding or staffing limitations. A suggestion was made to re-prioritize the list to focus what can realistically be accomplished. Council members pointed out that the list is meant to be inclusive of everything that is needed in the region and not only those items that are expected to be completed. The Council recognizes that there have always been more needs than what NMFS can cover and the list of outstanding items is not a reflection of NMFS' ability to meet the needs of the Councils. Additionally, the research and monitoring plan can also be a tool for other agencies or academic institutions to identify areas of needed research in the South Atlantic.

The Council ultimately decided not to spend additional time prioritizing research and monitoring needs and approving the plan as revised. The Council requested including the Citizen Science program's priorities in the plan for the next round of review (in 2027).

South Atlantic fishery independent surveys update

Dr. Tracey Smart from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources presented results from the Southeast Reef Fish Survey (SERFS) and the Coastal Trawl Survey, two long-running, fishery-independent programs that collect data along the South Atlantic coast.

- Council members expressed appreciation for this update. One member noted that red porgy have been showing up noticeably in landings in the Mid-Atlantic region according to reports prepared by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and encouraged communication with researchers in other regions to keep track of such occurrences and report back to the Councils as appropriate.

Dolphin management

The NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) is conducting a management strategy evaluation (MSE) for the 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. Dr. Cassidy Peterson and Dr. Tom Carruthers updated the Council on progress of the Dolphin MSE and recent modeling efforts.

To keep work on the MSE moving forward in a timely manner, the Council approved a motion to allow the Council Chair, Dolphin Wahoo Committee Chair, and SSC Liaison to approve the Terms of References on the Council's behalf after review by the SSC in Fall 2025 and before the December 2025 Council meeting. Below are highlights of the discussion:

- Researchers are conducting the MSE utilizing the outlined operating model structure and uncertainties, management objectives and performance metrics, and management procedure structure.

- The Council reviewed and agreed with the proposed MSE management objectives, performance metrics, and operating model uncertainties.
- The Council agreed to the revised timeline as presented, noting that the requested analysis relevant to Dolphin Wahoo Regulatory Amendment 3 would be ready for use ahead of the proposed MSE adoption.
 - The Council will engage in discussion to refine the MSE at the December 2025 meeting.

MOTION: ALLOW THE COUNCIL CHAIR, DOLPHIN WAHOO COMMITTEE CHAIR, AND SSC LIAISON TO APPROVE THE TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE DOLPHIN MSE UPON REVIEW BY THE SSC IN FALL 2025.

APPROVED BY COUNCIL

Council staff also provided a brief overview of recent research on dolphin and findings.

- Two recorded presentations on dolphin are on the Council's website and linked below:
 - [Trends in Dolphinfish Lengths Caught in the Southeastern Recreational Fishery](#)
 - [Seminar Series: Trends in Dolphin Abundance Along the Atlantic Coast, 1986 to 2022](#)

Informational session on state management

At the June 2025 SAFMC meeting the Council requested holding an informational session on joint state-federal management of Council-managed species. Presentations were requested on the federal perspective and regulatory options from the Southeast Regional Office, the Council role in implementing state-based management of Red Snapper in the Gulf by the Gulf Council, a state perspective by the Florida FWCC, and a broader Atlantic perspective by the ASMFC.

The Council discussed questions, concerns, and issues to be addressed if joint state-federal management of Red Snapper is considered in the South Atlantic. Below are highlights of the discussion:

- If a state's allocation needed to be revised, how would that be accomplished? Information would be gathered for a revision and would have to go back through the Council.
- Recalibration of data (e.g., state surveys) can also lead to reallocation. During follow-up discussion at the end of the meeting week, Andy Strelcheck clarified on the record how this was approached in the Gulf.
- The SA states will have to consider issue of discards of other species when fishermen target red snapper (not an issue in the FL Keys but elsewhere in the SA).
- Length of recreational seasons is affected by many factors, such as changes to minimum sizes, changes in fishing effort, etc, consequently there is variation among state seasons.
- States' having different survey methodology resulted in a huge challenge and caused delays in the stock assessment for red snapper in the Gulf. States would need to consider this before implementing successful state management programs.
- Part of the success in the Gulf is attributed to the large increase in available fish.
- The Great Red Snapper Count in the Gulf contributed to the increase in red snapper quotas but there are still issues regarding how the data are incorporated into the assessment.

- In the Gulf, as the population of red snapper rebuilt, it changed its location. Areas where red snapper were not abundant began to be filled-in as the fishery was rebuilding.
- SA states will have to enhance their data collection programs to have enough data to successfully allocate and manage red snapper at a state-by-state level.
- Concern regarding how well data collection programs are representing the abundance of red snapper and how this will affect allocation to states. However, many different alternatives to allocation can be considered.
- Gulf Council did consider “conservation equivalency” but ultimately went with “delegation” because of the amount of time it would require maintaining the conservation equivalency.
- Acknowledgement that FL has well established data collection programs that gather a lot of information on red snapper whereas the other SA states lack that. How do the states in the Gulf pay for their expanded data collection programs? Was some of the Deepwater Horizon money used for expanding/implementing state data collection programs?
- How are the fishery-independent data collection program in the Gulf being used? Are they used to inform state by state allocations and to track red snapper condition? Fishery-independent data are coming into play as well as the Great Red Snapper Count in terms of where the fish are located. It provided characterization of the bottom that added to the understanding of red snapper distribution in the Gulf.
- G-Fisher is a partnership with SESFC, FL, and other Gulf States. It is anticipated to be a flagship survey in the Gulf but it is still very new. Biggest challenge is in the Western Gulf where turbidity is an issue.
- States are requesting Congressional allocation to fund progress towards state management. However, there are no details to share currently.
- States intend to submit EFPs to test data collection for 2026 and test out state management. This will be presented to the Council at the December 2025 Council meeting.
- How is the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) figured into the management process? The GSMFC worked to host states’ meetings but did not get into the data collection components. The GSMFC were instrumental with testing LA Creel in MS and AL and have hosted discard workshops.
- Coming up with states’ apportionments for red snapper was a long and laborious process.
- The Gulf states devoted several years to meeting and discussing state management approaches and allocation of red snapper.
- ASMFC could also fill the role of supporting/coordinating SA states’ meetings.
- There is a lot of momentum in the SA to explore state management of red snapper and the conversation should continue.
- Having a common clearinghouse for survey data will be critical moving forward with state management of red snapper and will greatly facilitate the process. Millions of dollars of IRA funding was provided the GSMFC to provide a clearinghouse for state data in the Gulf. ACCSP could meet this need for the Atlantic.
- A Council member inquired as to whether the total ACL for red snapper can be allocated to each sector and then be reduced but that sector’s corresponding discards. This was suggested due to a concern that the commercial industry has been thus far “coupled” with

the recreational sector through the discards. The SEFSC replied that it could be done and the Council can choose to apply sector discards to sector allocations.

- States are looking at recreational component only for EFPs and to simultaneously work through the Council process, the Council approved the following motion:

MOTION: INITIATE A PLAN AMENDMENT FOR STATE MANAGEMENT OF RECREATIONAL RED SNAPPER.

APPROVED BY COUNCIL

- The intent is for states' EFPs to inform this amendment and it does not necessarily have to follow the Gulf's model.
- This topic was listed as high priority in response to EO 14276 and provides an opportunity for states to collect better data.

To address increasing the states' role in data collection for Red Snapper, the Council also identified topics and potential presenters for the planned December 2025 data session:

- ACCSP: their role in supporting state data collection and ability to serve as a clearinghouse for new state data sources.
- MRIP: their role in the state-led data collection programs in the Gulf, and their ability to support South Atlantic states.
- LA Creel: program scope and costs (development, start-up, and implementation)
- FL FWC: Results of the recent EFPs
- GSMFC: Overview of projects to improve estimates of discards and fishing effort

DIRECTION TOT STAFF:

- To focus the time available at the December 2025 meeting, a subset of the above topics will be included in the agenda. Some topics will be more informative later on (e.g., LA Creel) or additional information will be requested to inform the South Atlantic Council's discussion in written form (e.g., Gulf's IRA discard projects).
- Allocate sufficient time on the December 2025 agenda to discuss the state's EFPs.
- Prepare a letter to send to the SEFSC requesting details on activities the Center can no longer accomplish, activities conducted in cooperation with states that the Center can no longer support, and opportunities for increased state cooperation to complete priority tasks.
- The Council clarified that the recreational data sub-committee that was intended to be assembled in December 2025 is no longer needed at this time. States are working on EFPs so the focus is on the work ahead.
- Request that info re how the FES transition plan is progressing be included in the MRIP update in December 2025.