

SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

FULL COUNCIL SESSION

Webinar

January 23, 2026

Transcript

Council Members

Trish Murphey, Chair
Jessica McCawley, Vice Chair
Dr. Carolyn Belcher
Amy W. Dukes
Gary Borland
Judy Helmey
Dewey Hemilright

James G. Hull, Jr.
Kerry Marhefka
Charlie Phillips
Tom Roller
Robert Spottswood, Jr.
Andy Strelcheck

Council Staff

John Carmichael
Myra Brouwer
Dr. Chip Collier
Julia Byrd
Dr. Judd Curtis
John Hadley
Kathleen Howington
Allie Iberle

Dr. Julie Neer
Ashley Oliver
Emily Ott
Dr. Mike Schmidtke
Nicholas Smillie
Suzanna Thomas
Christina Curtis

Observers and Participants

Other observers and participants attached.

The Full Council of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council convened via webinar on Friday, January 23, 2026, and was called to order by Chairman Trish Murphey.

MS. MURPHEY: Okay. We'll go ahead and call the meeting to order. I was going to ask Nick, if you could, before we start the meeting, if you could go ahead and explain the public comment process for folks, since we're doing this webinar. Could you do that for us, Nick?

MR. SMILLIE: Yes, and so we won't go too deep into the actual public comment process right now, but what we did want to point out, at the beginning of the meeting, for the attendees that are just tuning in, if you plan on taking verbal comment today, if you could, it would be really helpful if you went to the January 2026 council meeting page on our website, safmc.net.

There is a big button at the top of the agenda that says "verbal comment sign up". If you could click that, and register, it would help us get through those verbal comments in an orderly fashion, and, if you don't have a chance to sign up, once -- There it is. Perfect. I don't know who's doing that, but thank you. Then, when we get to the end of that list, then we'll go to hands raised, and so, if you're not able to find it at the time, then we'll just have you raise your hand, and we'll get to you for verbal comment.

MS. MURPHEY: All right. Thank you, Nick. All right, and so we'll go ahead and start. First, I would like to have approval of the agenda. If everyone noticed, this was a revised agenda that added a statement on financial conflict, but do I have any objections to this agenda? Hearing none, I'll call the agenda approved.

Then we'll go into approval of the minutes and, just explain there, even though these minutes are from the Joint Habitat and Shrimp Committee, that joint committees were made up of council-of-the-whole, and so we'll just go ahead and approve these minutes as Full Council, and so is everyone good with these minutes, or any objection to these minutes? Seeing none, we'll call those minutes approved.

Now we'll go ahead and, before we begin this main discussion of the amendments, I'll have Anne Kersting, with NOAA General Counsel, to give a brief statement regarding the basics of financial conflicts of interest, disclosure, and recusal under the MSA. Anne.

MS. KERSTING: Yes, and good morning. Thank you. Anne Kersting, and I'm an attorney advisor with the NOAA Office of General Counsel in the Southeast section. There's been a number of questions and comments about conflicts of interest and voting recusals related to this matter, and so I wanted to give you all a very general overview of the topic before we discuss the amendment that's on the agenda today.

To begin, very generally speaking, it is a federal crime for employees of the Executive Branch to participate in a government decision-making process if the employee, the employee's spouse, their minor child, partner, or employing organization has a financial conflict of interest.

For this purpose, council members are considered Executive Branch employees. However, because of the unique nature of fishery management councils, which are required to have members with special expertise in fishing matters and who are typically from the commercial or recreational fishing industries, the Magnuson-Stevens Act creates an exemption to this prohibition for council

members who disclose all relevant financial interest in harvesting, processing, lobbying, advocacy, or marketing activity within any fishery that the relevant council has jurisdiction over. This also includes employment with any entity that provides consulting, legal, or representational services relating to these activities.

This information is provided by council members to the agency, and this is done via the financial disclosure statements that you all fill out each year and that are publicly posted on the council's website. In certain instances, however, a council member must recuse themselves from a vote on a council decision even if they have made the required disclosures. The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires a recusal if the upcoming council decision will have a significant and predictable effect on a financial interest that's disclosed in your report. What does that mean?

A significant financial interest, it's defined in the federal regulations as an interest that is greater than 10 percent in the total harvest of the fishery, or sector of the fishery, affected by the council's decision, or a greater than 10 percent interest in the marketing or processing of the total harvest of the fishery or sector of the fishery affected by the council's decision, or full or partial ownership of more than 10 percent of vessels using the same gear type within the fishery, or sector of the fishery, that is affected by the council's decision, and so it is something that is significant.

A member who is recused from voting may still participate in council and committee deliberations relating to the decision after notifying the council of the voting recusal and identifying on the record the financial interest that would be affected.

I would like to close with reminding the council, as attorneys from NOAA GC have said in the past, that, if you have a vote coming up, and you have any questions about whether or not you should be recusing yourself from that vote, please contact NOAA GC as soon as possible, and we can look into that matter for you. Madam Chair, that concludes my comments on this item. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Anne. Do we have any questions? All right. Seeing no hands, we'll go ahead and turn it over to Kathleen and Allie to walk us through Coral Amendment 10/Shrimp 12, and so with the update on the social and economic information, and so take it away, Kathleen and Allie.

MS. IBERLE: Perfect. Trish, would you mind giving us a second? Kathleen is going to grab the screen for me.

MS. MURPHEY: No problem.

MS. HOWINGTON: You should be seeing my presentation, I hope. No, and that is the wrong thing. All right. One moment, everyone. I need to jump screens. There we go. Can everyone see my presentation?

MS. IBERLE: Yes, and we've got it.

MS. HOWINGTON: All right. Awesome. Okay and so hello, everyone. I apologize for that. My name is Kathleen Howington, and, of course, you've heard Allie. We are going to give you

just a quick run-through of all the changes that have occurred since the December council meeting last year, and so, first things first, some background.

Coral Amendment 11 and Shrimp Amendment 12 are in response to comments from rock shrimp fishermen petitioning for access to historically-important fishing grounds that were closed in Coral Amendment 8. The council has attempted this prior through Coral Amendment 10. That amendment, however, was disapproved, and so, in 2024, the council initiated work on the joint amendment to modify both the Coral FMP and the Shrimp FMP, with the exact same goal as Coral Amendment 10. Here's a little bit more of a detailed timeline.

Again, in July of 2022, Coral Amendment 10 was disapproved. In June of 2024, the council made a motion to develop a joint amendment to accomplish the same goal of establishing a shrimp fishery access area. In June of 2025, the council selected preferred alternatives. We had public hearings in August of 2025. We are now in January of 2026, where we will review the draft amendment and consider the approval for the formal review.

The purpose and need of this action, the purpose is to reinstate commercial access to a historically-important fishing ground for rock shrimp fishermen by creating a SFAA, or a shrimp fishery access area, along the eastern boundary of the northern extension of Oculina Bank Habitat of Particular Concern, and so that is this area right over here. The need is to optimize yield for the rock shrimp fishery by expanding access to fishing grounds, while minimizing negative impacts to deepwater coral.

For our one and only action, that, again, is to establish an SFAA along the eastern edge. We have three alternatives. Alternative 1 is no action, where Oculina Habitat Area of Particular Concern will remain as-is. Then we have Action 1, and this is to -- Or Preferred Alternative 2. This is to establish a shrimp fishery access area along the eastern edge of approximately 16.61 nautical miles squared. This is that green square right here, with the latitude and longitude that are identical to that which were in Coral 10.

I will go ahead and add asterisks on this “approximately”. The reason why that is there is because, depending on the program, the type of map you're using, the projection you're using, the measuring tool you're using, you can get different square mileages. Mine are specifically using ArcGIS Pro, and it's using a WGS 1984, with a circular projection, where the earth is round, and so it is not planar, where the world is flat. That is how I got that measurement that is specified in the amendments. I just wanted to make certain, if anyone goes in there to measure, that is how you do it.

Alternative 3 is to establish a shrimp fishery access area along the eastern edge of the northern extension of approximately 24.16 nautical miles squared to allow, again, a shrimp vessel with a valid commercial vessel permit for Rock Shrimp South Atlantic EEZ (limited access) to trawl within this established area. This, again, is outlined in red.

Since December 2025, there have been some updates. Again, during the December council meeting, you received public comment regarding Amendment 10 from individuals favoring all Alternative one. Their comments have been integrated into Chapter 5.

Since then, we have updated the economic and social environment sections, Chapters 3.3 and 3.4, and we have updated the economic and social effects sessions, Chapters 4.1.2 and 4.1.3, and I'll go over specifics on that right now.

For the economic environment, we added in updated permit information. As you can see right here, we have RSLA and RSCZ permits. These are the rock shrimp limited access permits and the rock shrimp Carolina zone permits. Anything that happens in this amendment will only affect the permit holders of an RSLA, and that is the limited access vessel permit. As you can see right here, in 2025, there are 100 permitted vessels underneath that.

However, in further analysis, right now, there are only, as of -- Again, the timeline changed in here, the timeline, and so this is the 2019 to 2023 analysis. In 2023, there were only fourteen active RSLA permit vessels. This is defined as vessels that have these permits that caught and landed rock shrimp during this time.

As you can see here, there are major fluctuations annually each year for landings and revenue. In 2019 and 2023, the -- Or throughout 2019 to 2023, and I apologize, revenues were their highest in 2021, and landings were their highest in 2022. By contrast, in 2020 and 2023, their landings were actually below a million dollars, as you can see here, and so this reflects the high degree of variability for, you know, participation for landings, depending on the year. This is something that we have heard from our shrimpers, that this can be a variable fishery.

In addition, the annual landings for 2019 through 2023 were only 23 percent of the maximum sustainable yield and optimal yield for this portion of the fishery. The most recent peak year of landings, in 2022, were under 57 percent of MSY and OY, and so that's in 2022, and so consistently the rock shrimp fishery has been operating underneath OY.

This table right here is a summary of dealers. When we say dealers, we are defining these as somebody who has purchased rock shrimp harvested from South Atlantic waters. As you can see, in 2023, there were only five dealers. A max in 2021, and there were eleven. Throughout this time period, 2019 through 2023, this only accounted for 13 percent of the dealer's total seafood purchases, and so the dealers are a little bit less dependent on rock shrimp than the vessels are, and, as you can see right here, the price is highly variable from year to year.

Now, as for the social, as of October 2025, there are, again, 100 federally-permitted vessels. These are housed in Alabama, Florida, North Carolina, and then Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Jersey, and Texas combined are 20 percent.

Communities with the most commercial rock shrimp permits are located in the areas that I just mentioned, Alabama, North Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, and Texas. Gulf vessels are likely participants who seasonally migrate to South Atlantic waters, particularly during boom years, and so that can account for some of those, and then a large portion of the federally-permitted rock shrimp vessels are not active in the fishery, as you saw two slides prior.

From 2019 to 2023, a total of fifty-five unique vessels have landed rock shrimp. Nine could not be associated with a home address, but the ones that could be claimed home ports in Alabama, 28 percent; Florida, 28 percent; and North Carolina, 26 percent. The communities with the most vessels with rock shrimp landings are in Alabama, North Carolina, and then Florida, and then the

top rock shrimp communities are located in Titusville, Jacksonville, Atlantic Beach, and Fernandina Beach along the east coast of Florida.

Then, finally, right here, this table provides social vulnerability of rankings for place-based communities identified as important for the commercial rock shrimp fishery. Several of these communities exceed the threshold for one standard deviation, which means these communities would be the ones that are likely to exhibit vulnerabilities to any regulatory change. Again, we have Alabama; Bayou La Batre; Brunswick, Georgia; Venice, Louisiana; and then Pascagoula, Mississippi.

Now, when taking these new updates into account, the effects analyses chapters were updated, but there were no significant changes to these, and so there were some clarification, and some language changes, but, otherwise, the biological, social, economic, and administrative effects of the preferred alternative have not changed, and so there you go. Those are the changes that have occurred since December 2025. Trish, I hand it back to you.

MS. IBERLE: Kathleen, can you write in the hands-raised document for me?

MS. HOWINGTON: Yes.

MS. IBERLE: Thank you. Sorry Trish.

MS. HOWINGTON: My bad.

MS. MURPHEY: No problem. Thank you Kathleen. Do I have any clarifying questions from council, before we move into public comment, on the social economic information? All right. Well seeing no questions, we'll go ahead and move into public comment, and so I want to thank everyone that has joined us today, and, for those that would like to public comment, we're very grateful that you are here to take the time to join us online.

Some things I would like to go over with about public comment is we do want to optimize the time available for everyone to speak, and so we will not be responding to any questions, and, based on the number of folks that are here to speak, so far anyway, we were going to go with -- You'll all be given three minutes to speak, and, as typical, the display screen will show green when you begin your comment, and it will change to yellow when you have one minute left, and, when it goes to red, your time is up.

In order to ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to speak, I do need everyone to stick to the three minutes, and, if you do go over the three minutes, I'll have to cut you off, and so if you all please be respectful of that three-minute time limit, I appreciate it. From here, I'm going to just go ahead and have council members introduce themselves, and I'll start with myself. I'm Trish Murphey, and I'm with North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, and I'm chair of the council, and I'll just call on everybody by state. Jessica, if you would like to introduce yourself. This is Florida.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you, Trish. Jessica McCawley. I'm a council member from the State of Florida, and I am with Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

MS. MURPHEY: Jimmy.

MR. HULL: Hello. My name is Jimmy Hull. I'm the commercial seat from Florida, and I own Hull's Seafood in Ormond Beach, Florida.

MS. MURPHEY: Robert. Is Robert there?

MR. SPOTTSWOOD: I'm sorry. I couldn't get off mute. I'm here.

MS. MURPHEY: Would you like to introduce yourself, Robert?

MR. SPOTTSWOOD: Hi. Robert Spottswood, South Atlantic Council board member from Key West, Florida.

MS. MURPHEY: I'll go to Georgia. Carolyn.

DR. BELCHER: Carolyn Belcher, with Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Coastal Resources Division, and state representative.

MS. MURPHEY: Judy.

MS. HELMEY: Have you got me?

MS. MURPHEY: Yes, ma'am.

MS. HELMEY: Okay. Thank you. Thanks, Trish. My name is Judy HelmeY, and I'm with Georgia, charter fishing. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you. Charlie.

MR. PHILLIPS: Hi. I'm Charlie Phillips, Georgia, commercial, and I've been doing this a long time.

MS. MURPHEY: Okay. Thank you, Georgia, and we'll move to South Carolina. Amy.

MS. DUKES: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for being with us this morning and providing comment. I am Amy Dukes. I work for the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, in our Office of Fisheries Management, and I serve as the state agency representative for South Carolina. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Kerry.

MS. MARHEFKA: Thanks, Trish. Good morning, everyone. My name is Kerry Marhefka, and I represent the commercial fishery in South Carolina.

MS. MURPHEY: Gary.

MR. BORLAND: Gary Borland, representing the South Carolina recreational fishery.

MS. MURPHEY: All right. Thank you, South Carolina, and I'll move to North Carolina. Tom.

MR. ROLLER: My name is Tom Roller, a council member from North Carolina, and I'm a fulltime for-hire fisherman, based out of Beaufort, North Carolina.

MS. MURPHEY: Dewey.

MR. HEMILRIGHT: Dewey Hemilright, commercial fisherman, North Carolina.

MS. MURPHEY: Then last, but not least, from NOAA. Andy.

MR. STRELCHECK: Andy Strelcheck, NOAA Fisheries, Southeast Regional Office, Regional Administrator.

MS. MURPHEY: All right. Thank you, everyone. I think I've got everybody that is online, and so, Nick, I guess I'll hand it over to you, and we'll start public comment.

MR. SMILLIE: All right. Thanks, Trish. I'm going to work on sharing my screen, so that we can get the stoplight up there. I'm not sure if folks are seeing my screen or not.

MS. HOWINGTON: We can see some pink coral.

MR. SMILLIE: That's my background. Let's see.

MS. HOWINGTON: Now we see the sign-up sheet.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay. The sign-up sheet. Then we'll get the timer on there. All right. How does that look to everyone?

MS. IBERLE: It looks good to me. Thanks, Nick.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay. Awesome, and so, like Trish was saying, I'm going to find you on the webinar. I will unmute you, and we'll go in order, starting with Laurilee and ending with Drew. Once we get through the comments on the sheet, then everybody on the webinar will have an opportunity to raise their hand, and I'll just go in alphabetical order, and I'll call on folks to submit comment.

We're going to start your timer here. You see the timer on the screen. It will turn yellow when you get to two minutes. It will go red when you get to 2:45, and then, at three, you'll have to end your comment, just so that we can get through everyone, and so, without further ado, we're going to start with Laurilee. Laurilee, I will find you and unmute you now. Okay. Can we get a mic check for Laurilee?

MS. THOMPSON: Can you hear me, Nick?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you.

MS. THOMPSON: All right. Here we go, and so, if you guys were paying attention whenever they showed that map of the HAPCs, if you looked at the southern part of the HAPC, south of 28 degrees, 30 minutes north, it was very, very wide. When you look at the north end of the HAPC, north of 28 degrees, 30 minutes north, it's very, very skinny, and the reason that it's wide going south, on the south end, is because, in 1996, the offshore side of the Oculina Reef was closed to trawling, and that was an attempt to protect the coral, although they did not protect not even one millimeter of coral when they did that. All they did was shut off the ability of the shrimpers to trawl in the soft bottom on the offshore side of the reef.

It wasn't until Coral Amendment 8, in 2015, when they did the northern expansion, that they did finally put a boundary onto the west side of the reef in the southern section, and so, when they started protecting the reef, starting in 1984, it was thirty-one years before they finally protected a lot of the Oculina coral, and so, in that time, yes, there was some damage that occurred.

It was done by scallopers, with scallop dredges, who had fished out the scallop beds, and they wanted to -- They found pockets of scallops in between the pinnacles, and so they created these goat trails, so they could trawl in between the pinnacles.

There were some rock shrimp boats that followed them in there. They were big Gulf boats. The rock shrimp boats that had been in the industry from the beginning, they did not go into the reef. They understood that the reef was very important to their fishery, and they ostracized the Gulf boats that did go in there, and damage did occur. It was not done by our local boats. We have done everything we can to protect the reef.

Rock shrimpers were the fishery in the south with VMS. They were the first industry in the south to have limited access endorsements to limit and start reducing the number of boats in the fishery, and then they have bycatch reduction devices that have dramatically reduced the amounts of finfish.

This little offshore sliver that's north of 28 degrees, 30 north, it's very important to the fishery in the years when the rock shrimp move to the offshore side of the reef. It's all we have left, and our boats are very careful not to go into the reef, and so thank you for this opportunity to comment.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Laurilee.

MR. SMILLIE: All right, and so next we have John Reed. John, I am going to unmute you on our end, and we'll just get a mic check from you. John, we're getting some audio from you. It just sounds like -- Okay, John, and we're going to try you one more time. I just unmuted you on our end. If you could unmute yourself and now try the mic check. It actually just sounds like running water. Okay, and so, John, we will come back to you. Kathleen, would you be able to get in touch with John and see if you can figure out what's going on with his mic?

MS. HOWINGTON: I'm on it.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay, and so now we're going to move on to Alex Aines. Alex, I've unmuted you on our end.

MS. AINES: Hopefully, you can hear me.

MR. SMILLIE: Yes. We can hear you, Alex.

MS. AINES: Perfect. Hi. I'm Alex Aines from Oceana. Oceana has been involved with coral conservation in the South Atlantic region for many years. Oceana encourages the council to proceed with caution in making any changes to these areas that are designated following the National Marine Fisheries Service guidance on habitat areas of particular concern, based on importance, sensitivity, stress, and rarity of the habitat.

Oceana opposes the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's proposed Coral Amendment 11/Shrimp Amendment 12. Mapping studies conducted in 2022 and 2025 did not note the presence of live, standing, dead, or coral rubble within the proposed SFAA for Alternative 2. However, that limited observation does not mean coral is not present, nor does it mean that opening this area to shrimp fishing will have no effect on coral habitat.

The Coral Advisory Panel has advised the council that a buffer strip of 1,000 meters should separate live coral reefs from bottom trawling. Preferred Alternative 2 does not follow the AP's advisement, and the draft amendment does not thoroughly respond to their concerns. The preferred alternative also creates unreasonable risks of bycatch. More research on abundance and type is needed to quantify potential impacts.

Additionally, wayward trawls can also damage corals outside the intended trawling area. The council should take steps to ensure that any changes to the coral HAPC include robust tools for monitoring and forcing fishing near the HAPC.

Many uncertainties and unanswered questions have been raised about the effects of this proposal on the HAPC. At the same time, there is no economic or productivity data showing that this area is important to the rock shrimp fishery. Given this substantial uncertainty, and lack of urgency to act, it makes sense to apply the precautionary principle. The council should take the time to study and understand the effects of this action before proceeding.

As is, the current amendment is inconsistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Specifically, the amendment does not comply with National Standard 1, prevent overfishing while achieving optimum yield. The SFAA will only minimally increase rock shrimp harvest, if at all, due to variability. The SFAA may impact coral, which are also necessary and beneficial habitat for rock shrimp and other fisheries. For National Standard 2, requiring management to be based on the best scientific information available, the best scientific information available doesn't support the SFAA. There's too little of a buffer.

Coral Amendment 10 concluded that the net economic benefits of the SFAA cannot be quantified, given the likely variability in usage of the area, as well as the exhibited variability in overall participation in the regional rock shrimp portion of the shrimp fishery.

NOAA determined that more robust analysis is needed to demonstrate that these benefits support a determination that the proposed action minimize adverse impacts to EFH to the extent practical. I don't think we got that more robust analysis in Coral Amendment 11.

The council established the HAPC as an EFH habitat area of particular concern for coral and red snapper and grouper species. An EFH HAPC for these species is a portion of EFH that is particularly vulnerable to fishing activities, and now we are opening this area to fishing, not that long after that area was protected. Taking final action on a flawed amendment will leave this amendment vulnerable to challenge. Oceana encourages the council to select the no action alternative. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Alex.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay. Next up we have James Moir. I think you're listed as Jim here. I've got you unmuted on our end. Would you be able to give us a mic check here, Jim? So it looks like you've got a green microphone. You might want to check your input there, because we are not hearing you, and your microphone has turned green. Let's see here. Allie, since Kathleen is working on John, would you be able to message Jim on here, and see if we can get his microphone working?

MS. IBERLE: Sure thing.

MR. SMILLIE: Thank you, and so I've muted you on our end, Jim. We're going to move to Molly Masterton. Molly, I have you unmuted on our end.

MS. MASTERTON: Thanks, Nick. Can you hear me all right?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you.

MS. MASTERTON: Great, and so thank you, Chair Murphey, and council members and staff. Thanks for having us. This is Molly Masterton. I'm a senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council, NRDC.

We don't have a lot to add beyond previous comments, but we're still urging the council to select the no action alternative for these amendments to the Coral and Shrimp FMPs, just so that you can ensure you're continuing to prevent trawling in this buffer strip area, and best protect the really globally-unique and vulnerable *Oculina* coral ecosystem from direct or indirect impacts, including drifting sediment and unintended collisions with shrimp nets.

It's a challenging history, and challenging decision, so we appreciate, you know, the nature of this decision, and, as the council is aware, in 2022, NMFS disapproved the previous iteration of this proposal, primarily on the basis that the council hadn't provided adequate analysis to demonstrate the action would minimize adverse impacts on EFH, essential fish habitat, according to the requirements of the MSA, and also that the council hadn't adequately demonstrated how bycatch would be minimized according to the MSA. NMFS also noted the objectives of the council's Coral FMP, which emphasized the need for enhanced protection in designated HAPCs, such as this one.

I just want to underscore two points about the corals and this area, having followed this over the last decade or so, and there are two points that I think the council and NMFS and most commenters seem to agree on. The first is that, you know, by significantly reducing the width of the buffer strip here between the fishing grounds and the known -- The mapped positive high relief habitat occurring in the west of the OHAPC boundary, the proposed action could very well impact coral

habitat through sedimentation, carrying of disease and whatnot, and so the indirect impacts to EFH and to the corals.

Number two is that, you know, even though most recent mapping and surveys aren't showing live or low-relief habitat in these areas in a kind of indisputable way, everyone seems to agree that low relief and coral rubble could be providing substrate for recruitment and recovery in this area from previous events, and that's a reference to both NMFS' 2022 letter and the most current EA, at page 47.

Our review of these points, and really the most recent EA from January, is that those facts haven't changed. The access area proposal hasn't changed significantly either since 2022, nor have the available data and analysis that were the context for our chief concerns, and so, again, we just want to thank you for the opportunity to comment.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Molly.

MR. ZALES: Next up, we have Bob Zales. Bob, you are unmuted on our end.

MR. ZALES: Am I unmuted on mine?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you loud and clear.

MR. ZALES: Can you hear me?

MR. SMILLIE: Yes, sir. We can hear you.

MR. ZALES: Okay. Bob Zales, the Executive Director of Southeastern Fisheries Association. I've provided numerous comments on this issue since I've been involved with it, and I want to point out a couple of things. Number one, in your economic information, that showed there were only fourteen boats involved in the rock shrimp fishery in that area over there off the Cape, at one of the local docks, they had -- In 2024, they had eighteen boats that unloaded rock shrimp.

The increase of that four boats, from fourteen to eighteen, was primarily due to the fact of the heavy duty shrimp imports that have come in that are decimating the total shrimp industry, and these people had rock shrimp endorsements, that they had not been using, but, because of the imports, then they jumped back into the rock shrimp fishery, and so that shows you how important this fishery is to the economy, the local economy there, the people that are there, the many small families that participate in this.

A key thing is that, all these environmental groups that are so worried about this coral, I'm amazed that nothing is being said by any of these people about the extensive polluted discharges coming out of Okeechobee, and all of the inlets south of the Cape, that go out into the Gulf Stream and move all these pollutants north, and that are clearly destroying the bottom. I mean, there's been comments made by commercial guys over there, whether it's rock shrimp or reef fish or whatever, of much of the bottom being decimated, nothing but a desert now, because of these pollutants. That's a far more serious issue to us than what is here.

In regard to stuff that happened in 2022, as compared to today, NMFS has created new information, and they have new data, that shows, this area that they're proposing to reopen, there is no coral there. There's been questions about sediment raised from rock shrimping. The sediment is not bothering any coral. This is all based on the NMFS Fisheries Service's own information, and own data, and so you need to pay clear attention to that.

In the documents that are here, it's got in here that it states that Alternative 2 or 3, either one, is not expected to result in direct negative biological impacts to deepwater coral, as no coral pinnacles are known to exist. They're intended to be located in an area where coral presence is not expected, and so it could be a negative impact to gear close to the stuff, but technology today, which we pointed out in previous comments, these shrimpers -- You can take a chair, in whatever room you're sitting in, and a shrimper can shrimp around that chair, and not touch it, based on the technology that they have today, and so that's where we are.

This thing needs to be moved forward. You need to allow these people to get back to work. The economy over there needs it. The small families need it, and the administration, clearly, by the executive orders that have been issued, mandate that the commercial fishery be improved. Thank you

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you very much, Bob.

MR. SMILLIE: All right. Thanks, Bob. We are going to move on to Michael Gravitz, and, Michael, I've got you unmuted on our end.

MR. GRAVITZ: Mic check. Can you hear me?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you, Mike.

MR. GRAVITZ: Terrific. Well, thank you, council, for giving all of us the opportunity to speak today. I am the Senior Policy Advisor for the Marine Conservation Institute, and we've been following this saga, almost like the movie *Groundhog Day*, for the last five or six years. It feels that way to me, and I'm sure it feels that way to you. It's a weird comedy, but, really, this is not a comedy. This is just sort of weird.

Our scientific concern about this bottom-trawling proposal close to the last best *Oculina* reefs in the world is not rooted in opposition to fishing, but in the disproportionate risk posed by reopening even a small area to bottom trawling adjacent to the last remaining intact *Oculina* reefs.

As documented in the council's own analyses, the economic benefits of this action are uncertain, in fact not being able to be calculated, while the potential ecological consequences would be irreversible. We submitted, yesterday, a letter from over 250 marine scientists, and other kinds of scientists with relevant expertise from around the world, including some of the major marine conservation experts, like Sylvia Earle, who grew up in Florida, Callum Roberts from England, Rashid Samila from Canada, over a dozen people who work in Florida institutions and labs, including some of your own Coral Advisory Panel members, and they all say, in this letter, that this is a bad idea.

I just want to comment on three things. You call this an historically-important fishing ground, yet, prior to its closure in 2014 or 2015, depending on how you count it, only an average of 2 percent of the VMS points for rock shrimpers were inside this area. It peaked, right before it was closed, at 5 to 8 percent of the points, and so it's really hard to imagine why this would be so important.

You admit, in the analysis, that the western edge of this SFAA would be as close as 360 meters to live *Oculina* coral, and yet the Coral AP, and good science, suggests that shrimp fishing should occur no closer than 1,000 meters to live *Oculina* corals, and, finally, people have said, well, the currents won't take any sediment from the east to the west, and yet the only real data from the bottom of the ocean, over 279 days, or 89 days, taken in the late 1970s, shows that there are plenty of currents, both tidal and seasonal and other kinds of upwellings, that were quite frequent. Thank you very much.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you for your comments.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay. Thank you, Michael. We are now going to go to another Mike, Mike Merrifield. I've got you unmuted on our end, Mike.

MR. MERRIFIELD: Can you hear me?

MR. SMILLIE: Yes, sir. We can hear you.

MR. MERRIFIELD: Okay. Thank you for the opportunity to give comment here. I've been involved in this conflict before it was even Coral Amendment 8. The reason that I got involved in it was because we were getting ready to make another mistake like we did when we created the first closed area, which missed a lot of the coral, and eliminated a lot of the rock shrimp fishing.

If we had gone with the first proposal that came from the Coral AP, there would be no rock shrimp fishing on either side of the reef north of the -- From this expansion, and so I got involved in it, and collected a lot of data from the shrimpers, and then we had a lot of the data that came from the VMS, because the VMS clearly shows where they fish.

So, based on that, we came up with boundaries that would allow rock shrimp fishing to continue, and, in those boundaries, there were a lot of areas that the rock shrimp fishermen -- Where there were VMS dots from fishing, especially on the western side, that they just said, no problem, and we'll just give those up, and we don't -- We'll let that go.

However, on the southeast side of that northern expansion, that is an important area to them, and it's an important area because it's the beginning of where the fishing begins, and then it goes offshore from there, and so, in terms of economic value, it's a matter of do you cut through the middle of the herd, and split the herd, and then you only get the part of the herd that goes offshore, or do you push the herd offshore from the shallower side, and then work offshore, and so it's hard to put economic value on that little sliver. It's all about the technique in which they use to fish.

The other thing is so the economic value is really hard to determine there, but the fishermen saw this to be a very important area that they wanted to maintain. At the time, the council wanted to rush the Corral Amendment 8 through, and didn't want to go back into public comment to make a change for this specific area, but said that they would address this and correct it in a later

amendment, and here we are thirteen years later and trying to get this -- You talk about Groundhog Day, and I've been living this thing for a long time, and I think it's just time that we -- There's plenty of buffer there. They've fished this area for years, decades, before we closed it, and so I think it's time that we take Alternative 2 as our preferred amendment, or alternative, and pass this amendment. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Mike.

MR. SMILLIE: Thanks, Mike. Next, we Drew Martin. Drew, it looks like you've got two accounts, and so I'm going to try the web account. You are unmuted on our end, if you would be able to unmute yourself there.

MR. MARTIN: Yes, and can you hear me?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you.

MR. MARTIN: Great. My name is Drew Martin. I'm a member of the Marine Team for the National Sierra Club, and also a member of the Sierra Club here in Florida. I did want to say that our group opposes this amendment, and we are asking you to do the no action alternative.

I wanted to respond to one of the previous commenters that said that no one has mentioned the water quality. We're absolutely concerned about water quality, but adding the trawling onto already difficult environmental circumstances is just going to add more damage.

Your economic figures indicate that there's really no strong economic need for this, and that there is no shortage of shrimp. We believe that the long-term economic benefits of protecting *Oculina* corals is more important to the long-term economy, because these coral beds will provide fisheries for future generations of different types of fish that utilize these coral beds as their habitat, and can be harvested in other ways than shrimp trawling, or any kind of trawling.

As you know, even though oftentimes corals may not appear to be present, they may very well be in a gestation period, and the constant disruption of the undersea bed makes it difficult for them to recover. I would like you to not move forward with this.

I'm also concerned that some of the voting members of this council have economic benefits to derive from this, and should be recusing themselves from the vote. We think that people should be voting who are not deriving a specific benefit from their vote, and, if you are receiving a specific benefit, you should be recusing yourself.

I want to talk about the fact that trawling, or dragging anything along the bottom, creates a lot of disruption in things in the water column that is damaging to the corals. Also, with climate change, I am particularly concerned that we are not in a position to harm an existing resource, when we may be losing our surface corals at this time. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Drew.

MR. SMILLIE: Thank you, Drew. We are going to move on to Joshua Voss, if I can find you on here, and so we've got you unmuted on our end.

DR. VOSS: Good morning, and thank you. Can you hear me?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you, Josh. Thank you.

DR. VOSS: Very good. Thank you for the opportunity to share a comment with you today. I'm a research scientist, as well as a recreational fisher from Florida, and I'm also a member of the Coral AP. The first thing I would like to comment on is the fact that the Coral AP was not convened by the council or given the opportunity to develop additional feedback to Amendment 11 and 12. In fact, we've not convened at all in the past three years, and so there seems to be a concerted effort to make sure that our voices are not being shared in this process.

We've been very clear that a larger buffer area is needed to protect these critical *Oculina* habitats, and the main reason for that is that, unlike other corals that derive most of their energy from photosynthesis, *Oculina* are entirely dependent on feeding in the water column, and, when sediment is raised into the water column, it literally chokes them, and prevents them from being able to feed effectively at all during that time.

Secondly, several studies have demonstrated that sedimentation effects on coral larvae, which is how corals sexually reproduce and repopulate that area, are negatively impacted by both sediment in the water column and sediment as it falls onto the benthos again, both preventing larval sediment and smothering out larval recruits when they come into that reef and start to recover, and so, while the argument that the corals have not been detected, it could be from the continued sediment in that area being resuspended.

On a personal level, I really don't understand why the potential benefits to a limited number of commercial rock fishers outweigh the risk to the *Oculina* HAPC and its associated grouper populations and the long-term support for this economic and recreational fishery that I and others want to continue to be able to use, and so I strongly support Alternative 1 and hope the council will take that action. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Joshua.

MR. SMILLIE: Thank you, Joshua. Next up, we have Gail Ladd. Gail, I am not seeing you on the webinar, and so we will come back, or maybe you could raise your hand, if you have a different name on the webinar sign-in. We will come back to you after we get through the rest of the sign-ups here. We're going to go to Robert Mahoney, who I am also not seeing on the webinar. Robert, if you are on here under a different name, please raise your hand, and we'll come back to you.

MS. HOWINGTON: Nick, I believe Gail is underneath Drew Martin.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay. Thanks for that.

MR. SPOTTSWOOD: Can you guys hear me? I'm sorry. I had to step out for a second.

MR. SMILLIE: Yes. Is that Robert?

MR. SPOTTSWOOD: It's Robert Spotswood. Yes, sir.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay. Yes, we can hear you, and so we're going to go back to Drew Martin. I've got you unmuted on our end, Drew. It sounds like you have Gail with you, Drew Martin.

MR. MARTIN: Actually, Gail is on -- She may come in under -- She needs the web -- I need to send her the web link. Can someone put that in -- I put it in the question box, and can one of your staff just forward that to me, and I will send that to her, so she can get into the webinar, and I believe Steve Mahoney may need the same thing. Their emails, by the way, are in -- When they signed up to comment, they should have put their email in there, and so you might be able to send them each an email.

MS. HOWINGTON: I can do that, Nick.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay. Thank you very much. We're going to go back to John Reed, at the top. John, you are unmuted on our end.

DR. REED: Hello. Can you hear me this time?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you. No running water this time.

DR. REED: Excellent. Okay. Thank you very much. I just want to mention that the deepwater Oculina reefs off the Southeast coast are unique, found nowhere else on earth. These hundred-foot-tall mounds of coral have been built up over a thousand years, and this is probably primarily due to this persistent upwelling of cool nutrient-rich water, which provides food for these corals.

This is not sedimentation. This is called nepheloid layer, and nepheloid layer is where the nutrient-rich water feeds an organism called POM, particulate organic matter. This is what the corals eat, particulate organic matter, and they get this from this persistent, periodical upwelling of water. It moves to the west. It moves on the bottom. It's not on the surface. It does move to the west.

Secondly, we have -- In the past fifty years, we have, you know, over hundreds of hours of bottom time with the Johnson Sea Link Submersible and dozens of scientists working out there. We've seen the nets. We've seen the shrimp nets on the reefs, on the bottom. Not calico scallop dredges, but shrimp.

We've also had current meters out there on the bottom, documenting, again, that the bottom waters are totally different from the surface, and, at 300 feet, the water often moves to the west, up on the shelf, that would move any sediments over the reef, and, as Dr. Voss pointed out, these corals are very fragile. Their larvae are very fragile, and any sedimentation could be detrimental, and even cause disease. In fact, one of your members, a Coral AP member, Sandra Brooke, did her PhD dissertation on the reproduction of coral.

Finally, I just want to mention that it is unbelievable, and how can the council justify not inviting the members of the Coral AP to these meetings for the vote? This is a coral amendment, and the Coral AP is not allowed. Explain that to the public, and, historically, they have fished out there throughout the past fifty years, and so that's all.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, John.

MR. SMILLIE: Thank you, John. Next, we are going to go back to Jim Moir. I've got you unmuted on our end.

MR. MOIR: Can you hear me now?

MR. SMILLIE: Yes, we can hear you.

MR. MOIR: Sorry, and I had a confusion with my iPhone. My name is Jim Moir. I am the Indian River Keeper. I live in Stuart, Florida. I appreciate all of the comments today. I think that the council has failed to overturn the denial on Amendment 10, and it has also failed to give evidence that the Executive Order, either 14276 or 13921, have been met.

There is no economic evidence for an improved optimal yield from this SFAA proposal. I just don't understand how increasing their fishing area, and risking thousand-year-old corals, or, well, probably hundred-year-old corals, and an incredibly important fish spawning area, and aggregation area, for almost no financial gain, and perhaps even diminishment of their profitability.

This council has ignored science. It sets an incredibly bad precedent. We are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on coral research, and coral restoration, around the world, and in Florida, and we would risk the health of an incredibly important fish spawning ground, as well as an ancient coral reef, for an incredibly destructive practice of bottom trawling.

The idea that we have sent the best technology out there in order to determine what the bathymetry looks like, and, I mean, the Nancy Foster demonstrated that there is a nepheloid area layer on the reef, and that there are east-west currents and upwellings. It seems that, at every turn, the council has looked for a reason that is unsupported by science to go for Amendment 11 and 12, and the Alternatives, either 2 or 3, with no cause other than to potentially wreak horrible, you know, irreversible destruction on a treasure of Florida.

Certainly there are other problems, but we need to protect these marine protected areas, rather than imperil them. I am ashamed that the council would even consider opening up a less than 1,000-meter buffer area between these coral reefs, that are incredibly important economic engines, as well as environmental engines for Florida health. Thank you for your time today. I hope you go for Option 1, no action.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Jim.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay, and so we still have Gail Ladd and Robert Mahoney. I am not seeing them on the webinar currently, and so, if you are on the webinar, and didn't get a chance to sign up to this sign-in sheet here, go ahead and raise your hand if you would like to submit comments.

You can raise your hand by going to the top right-hand side of your screen and clicking on this what almost looks like a turkey icon, with a green arrow going up, and I see Sherry Anker has her hand raised, and so I'm going to go to Sherry and unmute you. You should be able to unmute yourself on your end, and we can get a mic check from you.

MS. ANKER: Okay. Sherry.

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you.

MS. ANKER: Okay. Great. Great. I had certain comments prepared, but I'm going to deviate a bit. First of all, for those of us who are very concerned about the health of our ecosystems, Floridian, we do fight for the health of our waters, and that's one of the reasons why we're being active today.

Certainly, many of us also have been dealing with the Lake Okeechobee storm water, Lake Okeechobee and other discharges, and so we're very aware of that, and we're very active, and we are consistent in that. As the President of the Conservation Alliance of St. Lucie County, we are consistent in advocating for clean water, but also functional ecosystems, and, with the Oculina, we have -- We are so lucky that we have this rare, one-of-a-kind, unique, however you want to describe it, Oculina coral reef off our coast in Florida.

What we want to do is we want to advocate for the no-action alternative. We understand that there are 2,000 species that depend on Oculina coral reef. We also understand that scientists have spent a great deal of their time documenting the just incredible magnificence of this Oculina reef, and so it's not only that the reef is productive, but it's also because people have devoted their lives to discovering, and researching, and now advocating for the protection of this rare diamond that we have off our coast.

We also know that we don't see any scientific evidence to bolster any claim of non-harm to this delicate ecosystem. We understand that there's been voluminous amounts of scientific research and data that have been submitted to you since 2021 to substantiate this argument. We understand that no economic argument to destroy Oculina can withstand the accusation of bias.

We do not understand the weakening of HAPC protection, and we also know that the Marine Conservation Institute has just submitted to you a list of 250-plus scientists who are all opposed to the opening of the Oculina HAPC. As Dr. Gilmore states, no habitat, no fish. Intact HAPC protection gives the remaining Oculina habitat a chance to live, to be productive, and to provide wonder-based stories for generations of children to come, and, with a healthy Oculina ecosystem, maybe more fish to catch, and so we give you full credence to the scientific, economic, moral, and ethical factors that provide every reason to deny Amendment 11 and 12 and choose a no action alternative. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Sherry.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay, and so we've got Sherry, and so, Sandra Brooke, I see you next on the list. I will unmute you on our end.

DR. BROOKE: Can you hear me?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you.

DR. BROOKE: Lovely. My name is Sandra Brooke. I'm a coral ecologist, and I've worked on the Oculina Banks for a number of years. Anyway, I would like to reiterate and support what the

other speakers have said in opposition to opening up these protected areas, and I would just like to reiterate and make maybe a couple more points, or a couple of points.

The currents along the Oculina Banks are strong and variable, and the VMS systems that track where the vessels are are on the boats, and not on the gear, and so the gear may be more than 500 meters removed from the location of the vessel. That means that it can drift into the closed area over the boundary and not be detected by law enforcement. Those edge areas have, you know, nepheloid sediment in some cases. Either way, the gear will kick up a sediment plume, which, as John and Josh mentioned, is detrimental not only to the benthic corals, but also to the larvae that might be in the water column.

Oculina spawns once a year, and there's a potential, and maybe a low risk, but you could remove an entire cohort if there was a lot of sediment in the water column, and there is no economic benefit that has been shown to opening this area. Less than 2 percent of the historic fishing effort was done in this area.

The argument that there are no coral mounds in that buffer zone, well, the point is it's a buffer zone. If there had been coral mounds there, that buffer zone would have been extended further east. The thing is that the mounds themselves have been so badly damaged that they're not showing much signs of recovery.

The currents that go over those mounds are extremely fast, and so the areas at the bottom, those low-relief areas on the edges of the mounds, are where we're starting to see small corals pop up. These areas may be where restoration recovery, or recovery rather, occurs, and so those marginal habitats, that aren't the spectacular high relief areas, may be critical to the recovery of the system. It's going to take many, many, many years. Those mounds are hundreds and hundreds of years old, and so they're not going to come back in a few decades.

The other thing is that one of the primary tenets of the Magnuson-Stevens Act is the precautionary principle, and this opening of an area that we fought to close, a lot of people fought to close, for good reason, is violating that precautionary principle, and for that reason I request that the council choose Amendment 1, or, sorry, the Option 1. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Sandra.

MR. SMILLIE: All right, and so next we have Peter Auster.

MR. AUSTER: Can you hear me?

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you.

MR. AUSTER: Great. Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity to speak. My name is Peter Auster. I'm a marine ecologist at University of Connecticut, and, while I've not worked directly in the Oculina ecosystem off Florida, I've worked in multiple other places on deep-sea coral ecology and connections to populations and communities of fishes and other large beasts that move around in the ocean.

I just want to raise my suggestion that the council choose Alternative 1, the no action alternative, for a variety of reasons that, with a lot of specifics from earlier speakers, just raise the large number of significant uncertainties that are highlighted in these discussions, and in the draft amendment, about upwelling, about patterns of recruitment, about distribution of new recruits, as Sandra just articulated, and on issues around ecosystem function, in terms of grouper habitats and many other ecological roles that these reefs play.

It's important to acknowledge that we're actually looking at conserving what remains of the *Oculina* reef habitats, and not what its entire distribution had been in the historic past, and that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, but, on a number of these issues for which we still lack a good understanding, trying to make decisions that are very high risk, and should incur greater caution before allowing actions to move ahead, and so again, I suggest the council choose the no action alternative. Thank you for your attention.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Peter.

MR. SMILLIE: Thank you, Peter. Next up, we have Lawrence Cromwell. Lawrence, I have you unmuted on our end. You'll just have to unmute yourself before you can speak. I'm not seeing you pop up with a green microphone, and so, Lawrence Cromwell, just try and unmute yourself in the top-right-hand corner of your screen. I'll try one more time here. Okay. I'm not seeing you on here, Lawrence, and I'm not seeing Gail Ladd on the webinar. I'm not seeing Robert Mahoney on the webinar.

MS. HOWINGTON: We just got a message that the Drew Martin with their hand raised is Gail.

MR. SMILLIE: Okay, and so you are unmuted, Drew, or Gail.

MS. LADD: I am unmuted, if you can hear me.

MR. SMILLIE: We can hear you.

MS. LADD: Are you ready for me?

MR. SMILLIE: Yes. Go ahead whenever you're ready.

MS. LADD: Oh, dear. Hello?

MR. SMILLIE: Gail, we can hear you. Go ahead and proceed with your comment when you're ready. We can hear you, Gail. If you don't mute yourself again, we can hear you, and you can proceed.

MS. LADD: Now I can't hear you.

MR. MARTIN: Are you able to hear us now?

MS. SMILLIE: Drew, if you're able to let her know that we can hear her. Okay. It looks like we're having some technical difficulties there, you all. Apologies for that. We are going to have to move along, and I'm not seeing any other folks on the webinar, and so I guess we will go ahead

and proceed. Trish, what do you say? We're trying to work on getting Gail unmuted, but it seems like we've been having some technical difficulties, and we can't get her on.

MS. MURPHEY: Okay. That's fine, Nick. We'll go ahead and close public comment, and if you can contact her, and ask her to provide her comments online, that would be great, and, anybody that wanted to comment, and just couldn't, the technical stuff messed up, please just, you know, put your comments online. I'll go ahead and close public comment, and we will move into the council discussion of moving forward with Coral Amendment 11 and Shrimp Amendment 12, and so do you want to put the hands-raised thing up, and we'll start discussion?

MR. SMILLIE: Okay. Allie, I just stopped sharing my screen. Are you able to get the hands raised?

MS. IBERLE: Sure thing. Hold on one second.

MR. SMILLIE: Or Kathleen. I'm not sure who had it pulled up.

MS. IBERLE: I think it's going to be Kathleen on this one, because she has the draft motion, but I am more than happy to share my screen.

MS. HOWINGTON: I can do it. Give me two seconds. I don't want to do what I did last time, where I accidentally shared my notes page, and so I am making certain that I have the correct thing pulled up.

MS. IBERLE: Trish, thanks for your patience.

MR. SMILLIE: Then it looks like Andy has his hand raised. Andy, did you need to say something?

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes, and so, before we got to talking about any motions, I feel like we owe it to the public to at least have a little bit more conversation about this amendment. It's certainly been a controversial amendment, and I want to thank everyone that's, obviously, spoken today, both for and against the amendment.

You know, in reviewing the amendment over the past few days, and kind of preparing for this meeting, I think all of us acknowledge that the Oculina Reef is unique, and, obviously, of global importance, and we want to protect it, as managers. I think the shrimp industry wants to protect it, as well as the coral community, and conservation community at large.

You know, there's been concerns expressed about the lack of, you know, economic support for this. We, obviously, did the economic analysis, and it indicates that, obviously, the economic value can greatly fluctuate, and it's very difficult to determine the value of expanding this small area to the shrimp industry, but it is known to be a historic shrimp ground.

I also have heard loud and clear, obviously, the concerns about upwelling, and sedimentation, and, you know, we, the council, has, I think, carefully tried to look at that issue and balance the ability for shrimpers to access areas of historical shrimping that are adjacent to the reef, while still maintaining buffers between the Oculina corals, obviously, and the shrimp grounds, and then the

shrimpers have indicated, obviously, you've been providing additional buffers to the lines where the boundaries are drawn.

Overall, I mean, I think the discussions, which we've had in much more depth at prior council meetings, are now reflected in the amendment, and the council's decision-making, with regard to addressing the agency's reasons for disapproval, and even more so reflected in the fact that this is now a joint amendment, and we're looking at, obviously, the goals of both management plans, and so I just wanted to leave with that, and certainly open it up if other council members have comments, but I think it's important to recognize this is certainly a complex issue, and that we have tried to look at the science on all sides, both in support of and in opposition to the decision as to whether we should move forward with this access area. Thanks.

MS. MURPHEY: I'm not seeing the hands up yet, but that was the plan, Andy, was to have further discussion on this, and so I would like to go ahead and -- Like I said, I don't have the hands-up thing yet, and so, if somebody can see hands, we'll call on it, but, yes, we were definitely planning on for discussion. That's why we're going to do this after public comment.

MS. IBERLE: Trish, Charlie has his hand up.

MS. MURPHEY: Okay. Charlie.

MR. PHILLIPS: Thank you, Madam Chair. I guess you can hear me okay. Yes, and everybody agrees that this is a unique and special area, and, even though I don't have any financial, you know, dog in this fight, because it's been probably thirty years since I ran a shrimp boat, I am familiar with shrimping and how dragging works, and things like that, but a lot of the things that we hear are they're worried about what might be, and we've looked at this for a very, very long time, and we're still at, you know, having questions about what might be, and I think the council has looked at this, and we did not pick the most liberal of the options.

The council came back to what we feel like is middle of the road, and so -- As far as the rock shrimp guys, they're not going to be dragging that all the time. They will work it when the shrimp are there, and shrimp move around, and so it's not going to be important all the time, or maybe even every year, but it is important, and so I am satisfied with where we are now. I understand the concerns, but I don't believe we are going to be causing harm to the reef, and so I will let it -- I'll stand right there. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Charlie. Do we have other folks that would like to speak, council members who would like to speak on this? Jimmy.

MR. HULL: Thank you, Madam Chair. Jimmy Hull, commercial seat, Florida. You know, my eyes are wide open, and, during our council discussion on these amendments, I feel like the council has done its due diligence in regards to the needs of protection of the Oculina habitat and the needs of achieving optimum yield in the rock shrimp fishery, which are both requirements for the council, and the Preferred Alternative 2 is the best alternative to achieve both.

I also want to make clear that I do not own or operate shrimping vessels, and so I feel like we've done what we should do, and have paid very close attention to this, and have studied it, and we

have responsibilities to both protect the habitat and to achieve optimum yield in the rock shrimp fishery, and I believe that we have come up with the best alternative to do that. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Jimmy. I've got Jessica. Go ahead, Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you, Trish. I just wanted to thank everybody that we heard from today, the members of the public that commented. I just appreciate them tuning in, and I appreciate the folks that submitted written comments. We have had a fair number of those, and I spent some time reading those, but I am still in the same place that I was before at previous council meetings.

I support reopening this area. I do believe that it provides a buffer. Seeing what came out of the new mapping study from the Nancy Foster in April of 2025, which didn't find any coral in this proposed area, and, also, this amendment is responding directly to the Executive Order, and I believe the number of that order is 13921, to reduce regulatory burden, improve access to the resource, and enhance economic profitability, and I just wanted to reiterate some of those points. I've spoken on this on the record many times. I was on the council when this area was inadvertently closed the first time, and I support reopening this area. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Jessica. Amy.

MS. DUKES: Thank you, Madam Chair, and I will also agree with fellow council members that have gone ahead of me. Learning the history of this particular issue has really been an eye-opening experience for me. I've only been on the council for a short time period, but going back, and reading the record that has been built, everything that's been along the way, I too feel that moving forward with Preferred Alternative 2, and opening this access area up again, is the correct path for the council.

I too agree that thank you very much for everyone that has weighed into this this particular issue. It has absolutely brought public awareness to the importance of this issue and the sensitivity of our coral and our coral reefs. I still hold the fact that we are still protecting coral through the OHAPC, and we know that there is coral found there, and that will continue to allow that coral to be maintained, and grow in capacity, but I go back to the opening this area.

There's been no evidence of coral in these areas, and there's not expected to be any directed gear interactions with coral mounds that are adjacent to it. The fishermen have come back and said they're doing these self-imposed buffers. We really want to see if opening this area will help us to better achieve that OY for the rock shrimp fishery, but also then balancing all of these concerns with the protection of the coral, and so, again, Preferred Alternative 2 is the best path forward to achieve both of those. Thank you.

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, Amy. Do I have any other council members who would like to speak? I'm not seeing any names for hands. I would like to weigh-in myself on this. As everyone else has, I've appreciated all the input from everyone. I've learned a lot about corals from a lot of the commenters that have presented, that have provided their comments and everything.

As a habitat person and a fisheries manager both, this has been a difficult discussion, decision, for me, but, you know, I've listened to both sides' deliberations over since Coral 10 and now, up to now, and I do understand the value of the coral, and I do understand its uniqueness, and its rarity,

and, you know, my habitat hat, when it goes on, I'm thinking about the sediment, and, you know, how fragile this coral is, but I go back to my fisheries manager hat, and hear the history of this, and how this area had been expanded into, I think by accident, and was supposed to be fixed, and so, in theory, it really should not have ever -- This particular area should not have ever closed.

You know, the fishery itself is pretty heavily managed. It has VMS, it has limited access. From the mapping perspective of the coral, that area has shown, through the two studies, that there's no indication of coral in that area, as well as the predictive modeling, that the SSC actually approved as BSIA, and that modeling has shown none, and so I am still in support of this fishery, of opening this area.

I think this is where we're having to balance that habitat and that fishery, and so I think this is the best way forward. We aren't opening up the bigger piece. This is a smaller piece. The fishermen are aware of that coral, and aware of their gear, and so, just to explain where I'm at, and I am in support of moving forward with Alternative 2, and so, with that, I don't know if anyone else needs to say anything or if we move on to make a motion. All right. Seeing no hands, would someone like to make a motion for the Coral Amendment 11 and Shrimp amendment 12? Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you, Madam Chair. I would like to make a motion to approve Coral Amendment 11/Shrimp Amendment 12 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Coral and Live Hard Bottom Habitat of the South Atlantic Region and the Fishery Management Plan for the Shrimp Fishery of the South Atlantic Region, respectively. This is for formal secretarial review and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate and give staff editorial license to make any necessary editorial changes to the document/codified text and give the council chair authority to approve the revisions and re-deem the codified text.

MS. MURPHEY: Robert, would you like to second? I see your hand.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Robert might need to be unmuted, since he had to jump off and then jump back on.

MS. MURPHEY: Robert, are you unmuted, or can somebody unmute Robert?

MS. IBERLE: You should be unmuted on our --

MR. SPOTTSWOOD: Can you hear me now?

MS. IBERLE: Perfect.

MR. SPOTTSWOOD: Yes, and I'll second Jessica's motion.

MS. MURPHEY: Okay. Thank you, Robert. Any discussion? I see Charlie's name.

MS. IBERLE: Charlie, you should be unmuted on our end.

MR. PHILLIPS: I was just going to second, and thank you, Jessica.

MS. MURPHEY: All right, council. Any discussion of this motion? I see no names, and so I guess we will call this motion, and I think this is a voice or --

MS. BROUWER: Trish, we'll do a roll call vote.

MS. MURPHEY: Yes, a roll call vote.

MS. BROUWER: So I will read off names, and, council members, please indicate verbally yes, no, or abstain, and starting with Belcher.

DR. BELCHER: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Borland. Gary Borland.

MR. BORLAND: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Thank you. Dukes.

MS. DUKES: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Helmey.

MS. HELMEY: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Thank you, Judy. Hemilright.

MR. HEMILRIGHT: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Hull.

MR. HULL: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Marhefka.

MS. MARHEFKA: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: McCawley.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Phillips.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Roller.

MR. ROLLER: No.

MS. BROUWER: Spottswood.

MR. SPOTTSWOOD: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Strelcheck.

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: Murphey.

MS. MURPHEY: Yes.

MS. BROUWER: **The motion passes.**

MS. MURPHEY: Thank you, everyone. Do we have any other business? Not hearing any -- Any hands, you guys?

MS. BROUWER: No hands, Trish.

MS. MURPHEY: Okay. All right. With that, I'll go ahead and call this meeting adjourned, and so thank you, everyone. Everyone that listened online, and council members, thank you very much for taking the time to meet on this webinar.

(Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on January 23, 2026.)

- - -

Certified By: _____ Date: _____

Transcribed By
Amanda Thomas
January 27, 2026

FULL COUNCIL ROLL CALL VOTE 2025-2026

DATE: January 23, 2026

LOCATION: Webinar

MOTION: Approve Coral Amendment 11/Shrimp Amendment 12

NAME	YES	NO	ABSTAIN
Belcher	X		
Borland	X		
Dukes	X		
Helmey	X		
Hemilright	X		
Hull	X		
Marhefka	X		
McCawley	X		
Phillips	X		
Roller		X	
Spottswood	X		
Strelcheck	X		
Murphey (Chair)	X		

January 2026 Council

Attendee Report: Meeting

Report Generated:

01/23/2026 02:13 PM EST

Webinar ID	Actual Start Date/Time	Duration	# Registered
429-107-267	01/23/2026 09:33 AM EST	2 hours 9 minutes	102

Staff Details

Attended	Interest Rating	Last Name	First Name
Yes	Not applicable for staff	Council	South Atlantic
Yes	Not applicable for staff	Brouwer	Myra

Attendee Details

Last Name	First Name
Aines	Alex
Anker	Shari
Belcher	Carolyn
Bianchi	Alan
Blough	Heather
Borland	Gary
Brogan (Oceana)	Gib
Brooke	Sandra
Bunting	Matthew
Burton	Joshua
Byrd	Julia
Carmichael	John
Cherubin	Laurent
Colombo	Adriana
Cromwell	Lawrence
Crowe	Stacie
Curtis	Judd
Curtis	Christina
DeVictor	Rick
Deaton	Anne
Delaney	Glenn
Delaney	Angela
Dukes	Amy
Eldredge	Laura
Figueroa	Alena
Glaser	Danica
Gore	Karla
Gravitz	Michael
Grimes	Shepherd

HEMILRIGHT	DEWEY
Hadley	John
Helmey	Judy
Howington	Kathleen
Hull	James
Hussey	Kate
Indovina	Jesse
Johnson	Matthew
Jones	Tom D
Karazsia	Jocelyn
Kellison	Todd
Kersting	Anne
Knowlton	Kathy
Levy	Mara
Long	Delores
Marhefka	00Kerry
Martin	Drew
Masterton	Molly
McCawley	00 Jessica
McCoy	Sherylanne
McLemore	Michael
McMullen	Ryan
Mehta	Nikhil
Mendez-Ferrer	Natasha
Merrifield	Mike
Moir	Jim
Murphey	00Trish
Neer	Julie
O'Hara	Tim
Oliver	Ashley
Ott	Emily
Philips	Charlie
Ramsay	Chloe
Reed	john
Roller	00Tom
Runde	Brendan
SHUTT	Denise
Schmidtke	Michael
Schopmeyer	Stephanie
Sepsenwol	Zoe
Smillie	Nick
Solorzano	Damien
Spottswood	Robert
Strelcheck	Andy

Sweetman	CJ
Thompson	Laurilee
Treece	Andrea
Van de Stouwe	Erik
Vara	Mary
Vogelsong	Kenneth
Voss	Joshua
Walia	Matt
Willis	Tim
Withers	Meg
Zapf	Daniel
auster	peter
collier	chip
sandorf	scott
zales	bob
Atwell	Sam
Cohen	Joel
Fahey	Matt
Griner	Tim
Johnston	Calvin
Ladd	Gail
Lehmann	Wade
Nicholas	Neriah
Puglise	Kimberly
Stephens	Haley
Strelcheck	Andy
Whitaker	David
thomas	suz

Attended

89

Email Address

administrator@safmc.net

Myra.Brouwer@safmc.net