

FINAL
SUMMARY REPORT
HABITAT AND ECOSYSTEM COMMITTEE
SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Jekyll Island, GA
March 4, 2025

The Committee approved the minutes from the September 2024 meeting and the agenda for this meeting after adding two topics to other business.

1. Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (HEAP) Report

Stacie Crowe, SCDNR, HEAP Chair, delivered the October 2024 HEAP report. Staff reviewed the letter summarizing the HEAP’s five-year Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) review.

- a. The Committee asked questions about beneficial use projects and what their purpose could be. Stacie described the various projects that could be considered Beneficial use. Staff explained that there is a lot to be learned, and the knowledge for consultations in the Southeast is limited, which is why it’s important for the HEAP to help compile this knowledge.
- b. The Committee was interested in why the HEAP requested an Integrated Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) and wanted to know what the goals for using the IEA would be. The Committee gave direction to staff to return to the HEAP and request further guidance.
- c. Marine spatial planning or updating the ecosystem status report may be more helpful with increased development in the South Atlantic.
- d. The Committee reviewed and approved the EFH letter with no modifications.

The Committee approved the following motions:

MOTION 1: Approve the EFH 5 Year review letter as written for submission.

APPROVED BY COMMITTEE

APPROVED BY COUNCIL

MOTION 2: Move that the HEAP recommended definition of Living Shorelines be adopted for use by the SAFMC:

SAFMC Living Shorelines Definition:

- A living shoreline is a coastal management approach that stabilizes and protects the shoreline using a suite of options that promote the use of natural materials, such as native plants, sand, rocks, and oyster shells. The details of material usage and percentage of material type are determined by state management bodies.
- Unlike traditional hard structures such as seawalls, living shorelines should maintain the natural connections between upland, intertidal, and aquatic environments.
- This approach not only minimizes erosion and aims to reduce wave energy but also provides valuable wildlife habitat, maintains or improves water quality, and supports ecological resilience.
- Living shorelines should be designed to spontaneously grow and adapt over time, making them a dynamic, nature-based solution for coastal protection and management.

APPROVED BY COMMITTEE

APPROVED BY COUNCIL

2. Annual Habitat Report

Council staff reviewed the annual report including habitat activities during 2024, as outlined in the Habitat Blueprint. The Committee commented that this report was interesting and helpful.

3. Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel Workplan

Council staff reviewed the HEAP’s workplan and approved the following draft agenda items for the July 2025 meeting:

- a. Review progress on the habitat website.
- b. Review progress on the habitat program communication strategy
- c. Essential Fish Habitat Consultations
- d. Review of beneficial use projects and discussion on future impacts
- e. Revision of Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine and Nearshore Flows policy to address impacts from freshwater discharges and impediments to river flow
- f. Space program impacts on habitat (if the information is available).
- g. Projects with Potential Habitat Impacts:
 - i. Central Virginia Offshore Wind (CVOW) update from Dominion Energy on habitat created by wind farms and fish mortality during construction
 - ii. Sea Optic fiber cables
- h. Climate readiness projects overview and EFH project update
- i. Climate and Ecosystem Fisheries Initiative (CEFI) Overview?
- j. Identify higher abundance locations and additional life stage information for EFH clarification in each fishery management plan (improving EFH tier structure)
- k. Integrate food web information from food web policy into EFH definitions
- l. Work plan update

4. Other Business

- a. The HEAP will provide input on the Research and Monitoring plan via email for the June 2025 Council meeting.
- b. Staff displayed the Habitat website, highlighted the inclusion of a new EFH mapper, and discussed the plans for improving this mapper long term.

MOTION 3: Approve the HEAP agenda items listed for the July 2025 HEAP meeting.

APPROVED BY COMMITTEE

APPROVED BY COUNCIL

DIRECTION TO STAFF:

Request goals and objectives for the IEA from the HEAP during the July 2025 HEAP meeting.

Note: Council staff drafts the timing and task motion based on Committee action. If points require clarification, they will be added to the draft motion. The Committee should review this wording carefully to be sure it accurately reflects their intent prior to making the motion.

Timing and Task(s)

MOTION 4: Direct staff to do the following:

- Request that the HEAP discuss the goals and objectives for an Integrated Ecosystem Assessment for the South Atlantic region and bring those back to the Council for consideration at the September Council meeting.
- Submit the EFH Letter to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

APPROVED BY COUNCIL