THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel Agenda

Stacie Crowe, Chair | Paul Medders, Vice Chair

Via Webinar
January 28 and 29, 2026

Other than the starting and ending times of the meeting, times indicated on the agenda are approximate, and the order of business may be adjusted as necessary to accommodate the completion of agenda items. Interested parties should be aware that discussions may start earlier or later than indicated.

Public comment will be solicited at the beginning and at the end of the meeting. Those wishing to comment should indicate such in the manner requested by the Chair, who will recognize individuals to provide comment in-person or on the webinar.

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

- Welcome and Introductions
- Approval of Agenda
- Approval of Minutes (July 2025)
- Public Comment
- Habitat and Ecosystem Committee Chair Remarks – Trish Murphey

1. Integration of Revised Food Webs and Connectivity Policy Information into EFH designations and Policy Update issues– Kathleen Howington, SAFMC (*Attachment 1*)

2. Revision of the Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows policy to address impacts from freshwater discharges and impediments to river flow – Kathleen Howington (*Attachments 2a and 2b*)

Break

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

4. SAFMC Citizen Science Program updates – Julia Byrd (*Attachment 4*)

January 29, 2026, from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm

5. Habitat Conservation Division (HDC) Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) consultations -Anne Deaton (*Attachement 5*)

6. Spawning Special Management Zone Working group report- Chip Collier (*Attachments 6*)

7. Resilient Fisheries projects overview and EFH project update – Lara Klibansky, SAFMC contractor (*Attachment 7*)

Break

8. SAFMC 2025 Annual Habitat Report - Kathleen Howington (*Attachment 8*)

9. SAFMC Habitat Communication strategy – Kathleen Howington (*Attachment 9*)

10. Review HEAP workplan 2025-2028 and Future Meetings – Kathleen Howington (*Attachments 10a and 10b*)

11. Other Business

Public Comment

Adjourn

Attachments:
Attachment 1: Integration of Revised Food Webs and Connectivity Policy Information into EFH designations Presentation
Attachment 2a: Alterations to the Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows Policy Presentation
Attachment 2b: Alterations to the Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows Policy
Attachment 3: Space Industry Activity Impacts on Habitat Presentation
Attachment 4: Update of SAFMC Citizen Science Program Projects
Attachment 5: Review of HCD Consultations for 2025 Presentation
Attachment 6: Spawning Special Management Zone Working Group Report Presentation
Attachment 7: Resilient Fisheries Projects Overview and EFH Project Presentation
Attachment 8: 2025 Annual Habitat Report
Attachment 9: Habitat and Ecosystem Outreach and Communication Strategy
Attachment 10a: HEAP Workplan 2025 - 2028 and future meetings Presentation
Attachment 10b: HEAP Workplan 2025-2028

Overview
Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel

The Advisory Panel will approve the minutes from the July 2025 HEAP meeting and the agenda for the current meeting. Trish Murphey, NCDMF, Chair of the Habitat and Ecosystem Committee and SAFMC Chair, will make opening remarks

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

   Description: The working group assigned to determine how to integrate prey habitat use information into the existing Food Web and Connectivity Policy has met once since the July 2025 HEAP meeting. During that meeting, the working group encountered an issue deciding how to separate prey data that are utilized in the Ecopath/Ecosim model. Lauren Gentry (FLFWC staff) is working on the issue and will report back to staff once she finishes her analysis. Additionally, the most recent Food Web Policy and Climate Policy don't integrate the updates included in the Fisheries Ecosystem Plan (FEP) II document. The Advisory Panel will discuss what to do with the FEP II information and how to integrate it into the policies.

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

   AP Action: Provide recommendations for how to integrate the FEP II Food Web information into the Food Web policy.

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

   Description: During the October 2024 HEAP meeting, the HEAP recommended that the Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows Policy (Flow Policy) be updated to address impacts from freshwater discharges and impediments to river flow. In December 2024, the Council approved moving forward with the update. Since then, the Flow Policy working group has met four times to discuss edits. The HEAP will review the proposed revisions.

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

   AP Action: Discuss additional edits for the policy. Decide if the Flow Policy is ready to share with water quality experts for review.

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

   Description: Council staff has been gathering information on the space industry's impacts on the habitat and fishery surrounding the Cape Canaveral area. The HEAP will discuss where additional data could be gathered and the best next steps to handle the data that has been gathered.

AP Action: Make recommendations on how to compile information on space activity impacts on the surrounding habitat, volunteers for the working groups, and any other appropriate next steps.

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

   Description: Julia Byrd, Council staff, will provide an update on SAFMC Citizen Science Program activities and advisory groups, as well as updates on the SAFMC Release, FISHstory, and SMILE projects. Staff would like to identify 1-2 AP members interested in serving on the Citizen Science Projects Advisory Panel.

   AP Action: Identify 1-2 AP members interested in serving on the Citizen Science Projects AP.

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

   Description: Anne Deaton, NMFS Habitat Conservation Division (HCD), will review EFH consultations that HCD submitted in 2025. This will provide AP members and the Council with a view of HCD activities as specified in the recently approved Habitat Blueprint and a view of significant developing issues in the region of interest to the Council.
   AP Action: Discuss upcoming projects that may be of concern. Provide recommendations and suggestions as appropriate.

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

   Description: The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council established five Spawning Special Management Zones (SSMZs) in 2017 where fishing for, harvest of, and/or possession of snapper-grouper species is prohibited. Three of these SSMZs are natural sites with a sunset on regulations after 10 years, while two artificial-reef SSMZs did not have the sunset provision. The Council intended to use the 10-year period to gather additional information to determine whether the natural sites are functioning as effective spawning areas for the focal species listed in the System Management Plan for the SSMZs.
   To support the evaluation of the SSMZs and other protected areas, the Council established the System Management Plan (SMP) Workgroup. Based on guidance from the SMP Workgroup, Council staff developed a questionnaire for the Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (HEAP) to inform this evaluation. This questionnaire is a condensed version of the full assessment that will be completed by the workgroup. Responses from the HEAP will be summarized and incorporated into the workgroup's report to the Council. Information and links can be found in the presentation.

   Please complete the evaluation tool prior to the meeting. Results will be discussed during the meeting.

AP Action: Provide recommendations and suggestions as appropriate.

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

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

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

   Description: Council staff will review the draft annual report summarizing regional habitat activities that occurred during 2025 that have been submitted by panel members via email.
   AP Action: Review the draft report and discuss any other information that needs to be integrated.

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

   Description: The HEAP is tasked with developing an outreach and communication plan for habitat information. Staff will review the draft FAQs and future communication plans.
   AP Action: Provide feedback on the FAQs.

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

    Description: The Panel will discuss the short- and long-term goals for the HEAP.
    AP Action: Approve the revised HEAP work plan for submission to the Council. Approve the next meeting dates and methods.

11. **Other Business**

Public Comment

Adjourn