



THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

405 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201, North Charleston SC 29405

Call: (843) 571-4366 | Toll-Free: (866) SAMFC-10 | Fax: (843) 769-4520 | safmc.net

Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel Meeting Summary

Stacie Crowe, Chair | To be filled in December 2026, Vice Chair

Town and Country Inn and Suites, 2008 Savannah Hwy, Charleston, SC 29407

June 30 and July 1, 2026

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC from June 30 to July 1, 2026.

The AP approved minutes from the January 2026 meeting other than the misspelling of Brendan Runde's name. The AP also approved the agenda for the June/July 2026 meeting.

There was no public comment given during the public comment session at the beginning or end of the meeting. No written comments were submitted.

Tuesday, June 30, 2026, from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm

Tom Roller, North Carolina, Vice Chair of the Habitat and Ecosystem Committee, made some opening remarks. He introduced himself and welcomed all the newcomers. He also congratulated the Council's Habitat Committee Chair Trish Murphey on becoming a grandmother.

1. Integration of Fishery Ecosystem Plan II Information into the Food Webs and Connectivity Policy Information (*Attachments 1a and 1b*)

Description: The working group assigned to the [Food Web and Connectivity Policy](#) has paused work on the prey information integration plan to address the food web

information in the Fishery Ecosystem Plan II document that was approved by the Council in March 2018. The group has met twice since the January 2026 HEAP meeting to integrate FEP II information into the 2024 food web policy.

Additionally, in a previous meeting, the working group encountered an issue deciding how to separate prey data used in the Ecopath/Ecosim model. Lauren Gentry (FWRI staff) is working on the issue and will report back to staff once she finishes her analysis.

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

AP Discussion:

The AP was impressed with the integration efforts. The AP also wanted to reiterate that Lauren Gentry is very important, and we greatly appreciate her work.

AP Action: Approve the integrated food web policy for submission to the Council for approval in September.

2. Revision to Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows Policy to Address Impacts from Freshwater Discharges and Impediments to River Flow (*Attachments 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 five times. The HEAP reviewed the proposed revisions.

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

AP Discussion:

The AP recommended two additions

- Page 2 number 4 add in “causes rapid change or pulse events in conditions such as salinity, temperature, and DO”
- Page 3 number 8 add in “seagrass in Indian River Lagoon specifics”; contact Anne Deaton for specifics

AP Action: Approve the policy for Council review once two sub bullets are added.

3. Life Stage Information Updates for EFH Definitions Review (*Attachment 3*)

Description: [Subpart J of 50 CFR part 600](#) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act identifies the requirements of what the EFH definitions should entail. One of those requirements is that Councils must “identify in Fishery Management Plans (FMP) EFH for each life stage of each managed species in the fishery management unit”. Three FMPs are going to be updated through a resilient fisheries project, as discussed under agenda item 5. The Coral, Sargassum, Spiny Lobster, Golden Crab, and Shrimp FMPs still need an update to meet this requirement. During the July 2025 HEAP meeting, three volunteers were

identified to update these FMPs. Staff will provide recommendations for life history information on the Coral and Sargassum EFH definitions. Matthew Kenworthy will provide recommendations for the Shrimp EFH definition, and Cameron Luck will provide recommendations for the Spiny Lobster EFH definition. The AP suggested asking the Golden Crab AP to provide information on golden crab life history, but further conversations with Council staff determined that this would not be efficient.

AP Discussion:

The AP provided extensive recommendations to improve the consistency, scientific rigor, and usability of the documents. The AP recommended integrating citations throughout the text rather than separating references, maintaining detailed narrative descriptions while organizing information under standardized life stage headings, and including additional habitat-specific information where supported by the scientific literature. Members emphasized the importance of including spatial, temporal, depth, and seasonal information, migration patterns, climate-related impacts supported by available evidence, and stronger habitat associations for each life stage. The AP also supported including standardized graphics or tables summarizing habitat characteristics by species and life stage to improve consistency across Fishery Management Plans.

For Spiny Lobster EFH definitions, mention the use of artificial reef structures, climate impacts, as well as spawning information. There needs to be spatial and depth information added in for each life stage as well.

For shrimp EFH definitions, the AP recommended incorporating species-specific habitat requirements, spawning timing, temperature preferences, ecological requirements, depth ranges, and temporal habitat use. For rock shrimp, the AP recommended additional evaluation of estuarine dependency, diel vertical migrations, larval habitat use and distinguishing between obligate and opportunistic habitat use.

For coral and Sargassum EFH definitions, the AP recommended adding species-specific information describing spawning cues, settlement requirements, substrate preferences, depth and temperature relationships, seasonality, artificial habitat use where appropriate, and geographic origins of Sargassum. The AP agreed that maintaining comprehensive narrative descriptions during development would facilitate future conversion into standardized EFH definitions.

AP Action:

- **Continue development of the EFH life stage updates using the recommendations provided by the AP.**
- **Identify a volunteer to prepare life history information for the Golden Crab Fishery Management Plan, with Wilson Laney volunteering to coordinate with Charlie Wenner.**
- **Continue Matthew Kenworthy's volunteer efforts to develop the shrimp EFH definitions.**
- **Integrate the revisions and recommendations discussed during the meeting.**

- **Recommend obtaining relevant AP reviews prior to finalizing the EFH definitions.**

4. Space Industry Activity Impacts on Habitat (*Attachment 4*)

Description: Council staff have been gathering information on the space industry's impacts on the habitat and fishery surrounding the Cape Canaveral area. Staff reviewed the information that has been gathered over the last year.

AP Discussion:

The AP supported continued efforts to develop a standardized data collection tool. Members discussed the need to document launch timelines, debris locations, contaminant releases, water quality impacts, fish abundance, prey availability, noise and vibration effects, and other environmental indicators associated with launch activities and reentry events. The AP emphasized coordinating with existing monitoring programs, including Florida state agencies, NASA, Space Florida, citizen science initiatives, and other regional partners to avoid duplicating existing reporting efforts.

The AP recommended evaluating whether existing reporting platforms could be expanded to incorporate space industry observations rather than creating a standalone application. Members also suggested reviewing information from the California Coastal Commission and other organizations that have documented debris impacts and mitigation measures. The AP emphasized establishing baseline environmental conditions to better evaluate future impacts and recognized that space industry activities are likely to become an increasingly important regional habitat issue requiring proactive Council engagement.

AP Action:

- **Recommend Council support for development of a standardized data collection tool.**
 - **Present the AP's data recommendations to the Council.**
 - **Continue identifying baseline information needed to evaluate habitat impacts associated with space industry activities.**
 - **Return to the January meeting with an update on data collection tool development and stakeholder interest.**
- **Continue evaluating existing reporting platforms that could incorporate space industry observations.**
- **Compile and distribute additional reference materials, permitting information, monitoring programs, and relevant agency contacts to support future discussions.**
- **Contact Kellie Ralston (Bonefish and Tarpon Trust) to gather water quality data from the area.**

5. Resilient Fisheries Initiative Updates and Ecosystem Information Review (*Attachments 5a and 5b*)

Description: In 2024, the Council received funding for projects promoting fisheries resilience to ecosystem changes. Lara Klibansky gave an update on the Resilient Fisheries projects and provided an update on the recently held Ecosystem Data Workshop.

Sarah Gaichas reviewed the SAFMC Ecosystem Information Review and Strategy Development Project, which will be completed later this year.

- All Council Ecosystem Data Review (for background info only) ([html](#)) ([pdf](#))
- SAFMC Options (main document for review) ([html](#)) ([pdf](#)) ([google doc](#) for comments)
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AP Discussion:

Members discussed opportunities to improve the integration of ecosystem information into Council decision-making, including expanded use of ecosystem models, bottom temperature indicators, long-term monitoring data, and fisheries-independent survey information. The AP discussed incorporating additional oceanographic information, including upwelling indices, thermal tolerance information, and ecosystem forecasting products, to understand environmental influences on managed species better.

The AP emphasized the importance of identifying a manageable suite of ecosystem indicators that directly support Council policy objectives and management decisions. Members noted that ecosystem status reports should provide regular updates, identify data gaps and confidence levels, and clearly communicate how indicators are incorporated into policy development. The AP also emphasized establishing management goals and objectives before selecting indicators and recognized the value of maintaining flexible reporting products that can be updated as new information becomes available.

AP Action: Discuss the alignment of EFH policy objectives with existing indicators ([methods](#) and [results](#)) and prototype spatial bottom temperature indicators ([methods](#) and [results](#)). Provide feedback and recommendations on other portions of the report as appropriate.

- Submit recommendations on additional portions of the Ecosystem Information Review, as appropriate via links provided.
- Continue evaluating ecosystem indicators that directly support Council management objectives and future policy development.

6. Mid-Atlantic Inflation Reduction Act Projects (*Attachment 6*)

Description: The AP received an overview of the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) projects and discussed opportunities for collaboration and application to South Atlantic fisheries management.

AP Discussion:

Members expressed particular interest in the diadromous species project and discussed the potential value of incorporating additional biological information, such as genetic sampling, into future research efforts. The AP also discussed the project's efforts to develop distribution maps intended to assist fishermen in avoiding bycatch and recognized the value of continued outreach to the fishing industry.

The AP devoted considerable discussion to the projects focused on operationalizing ecosystem indicators and developing climate-ready fisheries management approaches. Members emphasized the importance of identifying management questions before selecting indicators and discussed how ecosystem indicators could support Council decisions related to risk policy, stock assessments, quotas, habitat management, and discard estimation. The AP also discussed the importance of establishing ecological baselines, identifying desirable and undesirable ecosystem changes, and developing practical thresholds that can be incorporated into future management decisions. Members agreed that several of the IRA projects could provide valuable information for future revisions to South Atlantic EFH definitions and broader ecosystem-based fisheries management efforts.

AP Action:

- Recommend that Council staff continue monitoring Mid-Atlantic IRA projects for information applicable to South Atlantic fisheries management especially projects 4, 5 and 6.
- Encourage continued review of projects focused on ecosystem indicators, climate-ready fisheries management, and document modernization.
- Consider incorporating lessons learned from these projects into future EFH definition updates and ecosystem-based management initiatives.
- Provide recommendations to the Council regarding projects that should be revisited during future HEAP meetings.

7. Review of the Integrated Ecosystem Assessments (IEAs) for the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic Regions (*Attachments 7a and 7b*)

Description: Representatives from the Mid-Atlantic Council and the Southeast Fisheries Science Center gave a summary of their respective IEAs and related processes, goals and objectives, pros and cons, and lessons learned.

AP Discussion:

The AP reviewed presentations describing the Gulf of Mexico and Mid-Atlantic Integrated Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) programs and discussed how similar approaches could support ecosystem-based fisheries management in the South Atlantic. Members discussed the evolution of ecosystem approaches to fisheries management, the use of ecosystem status reports, automated reporting tools, ecosystem indicators, and risk assessments to inform Council decision-making. The AP recognized the substantial effort required to develop and maintain an IEA but agreed that the framework provides an effective mechanism for integrating ecosystem information into management decisions.

The AP discussed the development of ecosystem goals and objectives for the South Atlantic, emphasizing improved understanding of habitat quality, ecosystem productivity, ecological relationships, invasive species, spawning habitat, climate change impacts, and stressors affecting managed species. Members also discussed the importance of identifying meaningful indicators, incorporating habitat information into ecosystem risk assessments, improving habitat characterization and mapping efforts, and ensuring that ecosystem information remains adaptable as new scientific information becomes available. An IEA for the South Atlantic can / should also include social and cultural objectives that relate to ecosystem management (e.g., commercial and recreational fishing success, etc.) The AP agreed that ecosystem monitoring and periodic reassessment are essential components of an effective ecosystem management framework.

AP Action:

- **Recommend the following IEA goals and objectives.**
Mission statement: Integrate ecosystem information into management decisions
Overall goal: To manage for ecologically sustainable utilization of living marine resources while maintaining ecosystem productivity, structure, and function.
 - **Determine and track the indicators that indicate the most important resources and habitat that the council is charged to manage.**
 - **Gain a better understanding of bottom activity throughout the South Atlantic Bight by analyzing ecological relationships between sand bottom and reef relationships, predator-prey interactions, and how they interact with each other.**
 - **Gain a better understanding of threats and pressures of natural human causes stressors and impacts.**
 - **Conduct comprehensive population assessments of ecological and economically important species**
 - **Specific immediate issues? Investigate habitat questions and immediate needs?**
 - **Habitat characterization and identification – NOAA has committed to mapping the shelf in the South Atlantic Bight, FL mapping is ongoing, and sanctuaries are mapped**
 - **Invasive species assessment and risk analysis – SERFs could turn the crank on distribution and abundance to allow that to be integrated in**
- **Consider ecosystem indicators that improve understanding of habitat condition, ecosystem productivity, species interactions, and ecological change.**
- **Continue evaluating approaches for integrating habitat information into ecosystem risk assessments and Council decision-making.**
- **Encourage coordination with other Councils and NOAA programs to build upon existing ecosystem assessment frameworks.**

8. Review of Offshore Development Off the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Coast Presentation (*Attachment 8*)

Description: The AP received an overview of offshore development activities in the South and Mid-Atlantic regions, including offshore wind energy, offshore mineral development, and related federal initiatives.

AP Discussion:

Members discussed the timing of the National Academies study on offshore mineral resources, recent Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) leasing activities, and proposed research evaluating historic deep-sea mining test sites on the Blake Plateau. The AP also discussed opportunities to evaluate long-term environmental effects by comparing historic impact sites with adjacent control areas.

Members discussed the potential ecological implications of offshore mineral leasing and emphasized the importance of continued coordination with BOEM and NOAA to better understand ongoing research activities and proposed development projects. The AP agreed that offshore development activities should continue to be monitored to identify projects that could affect South Atlantic fish habitat and Council-managed resources.

AP Action:

- Identify offshore development projects with the potential to affect South Atlantic habitats: RFI on offshore mineral leasing.
- Recommend that Council staff continue monitoring offshore development activities and emerging federal initiatives.

9. Modeling the feasibility of marsh elevation enhancement in South Carolina: Site selection, economic analysis, and decision support (*Attachment 9*)

Description: Lexi Watson, South Carolina Sea Grant, reviewed how locations are chosen for thin layer placement projects including how locations are modeled, the modeling tool, economic analysis and what mitigation efforts are made to ensure that the project doesn't negatively affect the surrounding habitat.

AP Discussion:

Members discussed the intended users of the tool, including state resource agencies, permitting authorities, and project managers responsible for marsh restoration activities. The AP reviewed the modeling framework used to identify suitable project locations and discussed how site-specific environmental data are incorporated to improve model accuracy and support restoration planning.

The AP also discussed regulatory considerations, beneficial use of dredged material, habitat tradeoffs associated with marsh enhancement projects, and the importance of evaluating sediment characteristics, nutrient conditions, invasive species, and potential impacts to fish and wildlife communities. Members emphasized that restoration decisions

should be supported by field validation and long-term monitoring and noted that regulatory pathways for marsh elevation enhancement continue to evolve. The AP agreed that the tool provides a valuable framework for evaluating future restoration projects while recognizing the need for continued refinement as additional data become available.

AP Action:

- **Identify the most appropriate habitat policy for integrating future guidance related to marsh elevation enhancement and restoration planning.**
 - **Evaluate whether information presented on marsh elevation enhancement should be incorporated into existing habitat policies.**
- **Continue monitoring the development of restoration tools and regulatory frameworks applicable to South Atlantic habitats.**

10. Update on Habitat and Ecosystem Outreach and Communication Strategy
(Attachments 10a and 10b)

Description: The AP reviewed the Council's Habitat and Ecosystem Outreach and Communication Strategy and discussed revisions to the draft Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document.

AP Discussion:

Members provided editorial recommendations to improve the clarity and effectiveness of the outreach materials and discussed future opportunities for habitat-related communication products. The AP also supported continued development of outreach materials related to space industry impacts on habitat as additional information becomes available.

AP Action:

- **Integrate revisions to the draft Frequently Asked Questions document and finalize via email for the website.**
- **Continue development of habitat outreach and communication materials.**
- **Consider future outreach products addressing emerging habitat issues, including space industry activities.**

11. Review of the HEAP Workplan 2025-2028, Appointments, Future Meetings, and Elections
(Attachments 11a and 11b)

Description: The AP reviewed the HEAP Workplan for 2025–2028 and discussed priorities for upcoming meetings and future work products. Staff reviewed the upcoming open seats and appointment process. Finally, the HEAP held votes for Chair and Vice Chair.

AP Discussion:

Members recommended coordinating future discussions on coral habitat, offshore mining activities, and Florida habitat mapping efforts while continuing to monitor invasive species, submerged aquatic vegetation, and aquaculture initiatives. The AP also discussed

improving opportunities for members to review documents electronically prior to meetings through email and shared online workspaces. Staff reviewed upcoming appointment opportunities, and the AP conducted elections for Chair and Vice Chair.

AP Action:

- **Approve the revised HEAP Workplan for submission to the Council.**
- **Approve the proposed schedule and format for future HEAP meetings: via webinar the last week in January or first week in February 2027.**
- **There was one nomination for Chair:**
 - **Dr. Brendan Runde was elected Chair by acclamation.**
- **There was one nomination for Vice-Chair:**
 - **Shannon McAskill was elected Vice-Chair by acclamation**
- **Recommend that the council convene a joint Habitat and Coral AP meeting to discuss the possible expansion of the Stetson Miami Terrace HAPC further onto the Blake Plateau.**
- **Recommend the council support desk reviews for the Aquaculture and Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Policies to determine if a thorough update is needed.**

12. Other Business

Wilson Laney summarized the Climate Adaptation Science Center Sustainable Rivers project. It establishes river regulations with flooding and timber traps. They are working on papers to provide a model for riverine impacts. There is a similar initiative for a group with the University of Florida's ecopath/ecosim model

Public Comment

Adjourn