



Stacie Crowe  
Chair  
[CroweS@dnr.sc.gov](mailto:CroweS@dnr.sc.gov)

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

# **Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel June/July 2026**



# What is a policy?

- The Council develops EFH policy statements to address specific habitat needs and activities that affect habitat
- EFH policy statements provide detailed descriptions of habitat resources, discuss potential impacts to those resources, and identify actions that protect EFH.
- The Council's EFH policy statements and recommendations provide NMFS, state agencies, other Federal and regional habitat partners guidance and rationale to conserve and protect EFH in the South Atlantic region.
- The Council may revise EFH policies and recommendations or develop new policies as needed to address its habitat mandates.

# Integration of Revised Food Webs and Connectivity Policy Information into EFH designations

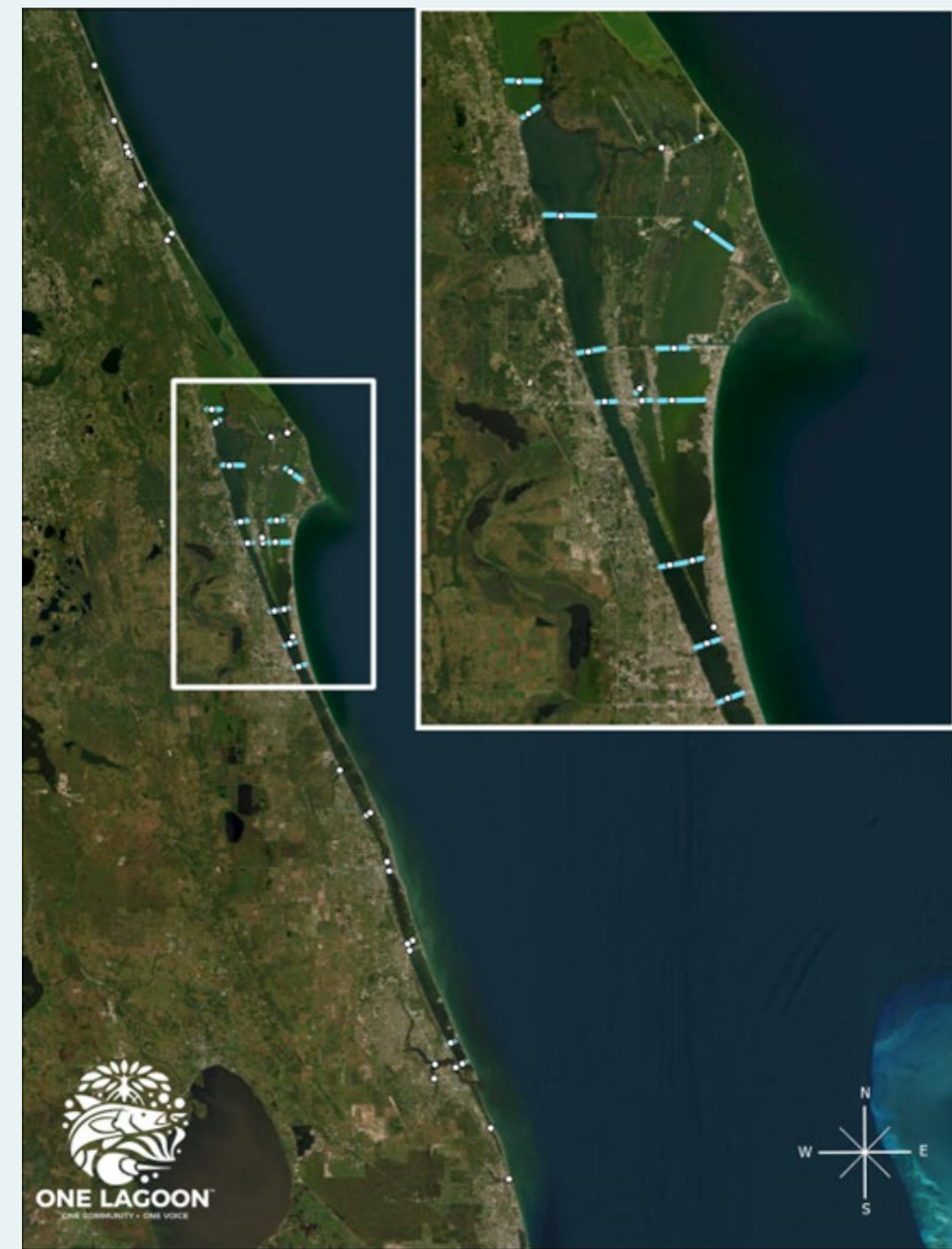
- The most recent Food Web Policy and Climate Policy doesn't integrate the updates included in the Fisheries Ecosystem Plan (FEP) II document.
- The group integrated the information into the policy as an appendix, updated references, and added two crosswalk tables and links so the information is accessible.

Does the council approve the updated version?

- AP Action: A subgroup will work on a plan for integrating prey habitat information, and then the whole working group will meet to work through the test species approved by the Council in September 2025.

# Revisions to the “Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine and Nearshore Flows” policy to address threats to the Indian River Lagoon

- The AP recommended two additional bullet points in the summer meeting
- Edits and additions are complete
- The updated policy was approved for submission to the Council.
- Does the Council approve the updated policy?



45 bridge - causeway or bridge corridors  
Most of the earthen causeways in Brevard county

# Life Stage Information Updates for EFH Definitions



- [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
- The Coral, Sargassum, Spiny Lobster, Golden Crab, and Shrimp FMPs still need an update to meet this requirement.
- The working group provided draft information for the Coral, Sargassum, Spiny Lobster, and Shrimp FMP
- The AP provided extensive recommendations to improve the consistency, scientific rigor, and usability of the documents.
- The working group will provide an updated version and draft Golden crab information in January 2027



# Space Industry Impacts on Habitat

- Recommend Council support development of a standardized data collection tool.
- Council goal: To identify baseline information needed to evaluate habitat impacts associated with space industry activities.
- Data: launch timelines, debris locations, fish abundance, prey availability, noise and vibration effects, and other environmental indicators associated with launch activities and reentry events.
- Separately gather contaminant releases and water quality impacts via government channels
- Support using an existing reporting platforms that could incorporate space industry observations from fishermen.
- Does the council approve staff time to work on identifying an existing app and starting discussions on supporting data gathering?

# Resilient Fisheries Initiative Updates and Ecosystem Information Review

- Sarah Gaichas reviewed the SAFMC Ecosystem Information Review and Strategy Development Project, which will be completed later this year.
- HEAP provided feedback on the Council Ecosystem Data Review and SAFMC Options documents
- 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



# Mid-Atlantic Inflation Reduction Act Projects

- Recommend that Council staff continue monitoring Mid-Atlantic IRA projects for information applicable to South Atlantic fisheries management
  - Project 4: Climate-Ready Updates to the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Source Documents: Life History and Habitat Characteristics for Federally Managed Fish in the Northeast
  - Project 5: Operationalizing Ecosystem and Habitat Indicators to Support Climate-Ready Fisheries Management in the Mid-Atlantic
  - Project 6: Evaluating Data Needs and Management Strategies to Support Climate-Ready Fisheries Management
- 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.

# Review of the Integrated Ecosystem Assessments (IEAs) for the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic Regions



- 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.
- 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.
  - Subgoals:
    - 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

# Review of the Integrated Ecosystem Assessments (IEAs) for the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic Regions



- The AP also made the following recommendations for how to meet these goals
  - 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
  - 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.



# Review of Offshore Development Off the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Coast Presentation



- Members discussed the potential ecological implications of offshore mineral leasing and emphasized the importance of continued coordination with BOEM and NOAA better to 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 i.e. RFI on offshore mineral leasing.
- Recommend that Council staff continue monitoring offshore development activities and emerging federal initiatives.



# **Modeling the feasibility of marsh elevation enhancement in South Carolina: Site selection, economic analysis, and decision support**

- 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 Action:**

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

# Communication Strategy



- 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 Action:

- EFH Frequently Asked Questions document is posted on the Habitat webpage website.
- Continue development of habitat outreach and communication materials.
- Consider future outreach products addressing emerging habitat issues, including space industry activities.

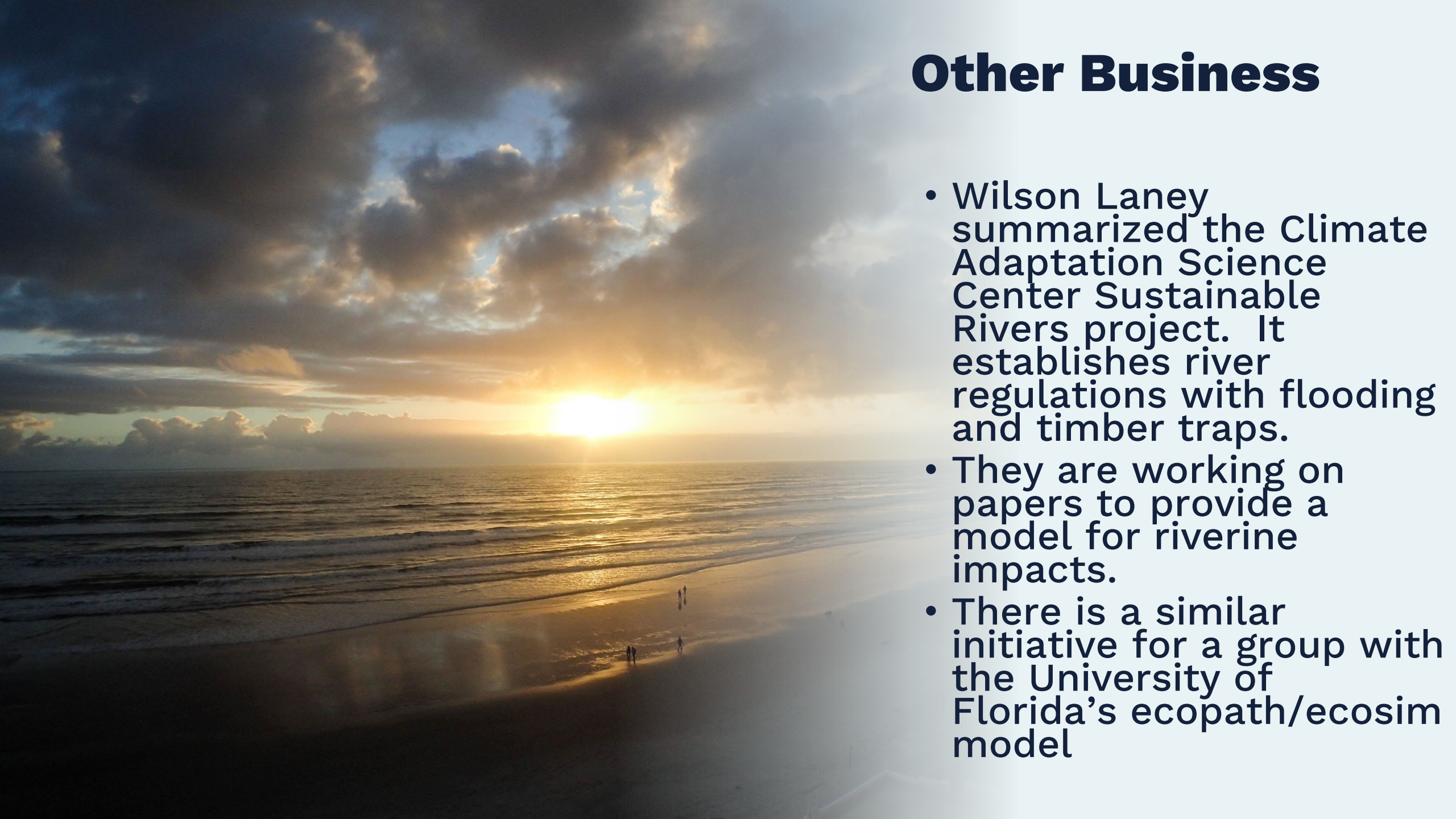


# The HEAP Workplan 2025–2028, Appointments, Future Meetings, and Elections

- The AP reviewed the HEAP Workplan for 2025–2028.
- The next AP meeting will be via webinar January 25–26, 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.

# Workplan

|                                               |                                                                                                       |                                           | x                               | Future to be decided at the meeting |             |                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
|                                               |                                                                                                       |                                           | x                               | Underway                            |             |                                  |
|                                               |                                                                                                       |                                           | x                               | Finished                            |             |                                  |
|                                               | Activity                                                                                              | Notes                                     | Winter 2027                     | Summer 2027                         | Winter 2028 | Summer 2028                      |
| Reoccurring Habitat AP ACTIVITIES             | Communication strategy development                                                                    | Currently developing FAQs                 | x                               | x                                   | x           | <div>Conserve and Manage</div> x |
|                                               | Workplan update                                                                                       |                                           | x                               | x                                   | x           | x                                |
|                                               | Annual report                                                                                         |                                           | x                               |                                     | x           |                                  |
|                                               | Citizen science updates                                                                               |                                           | x                               |                                     | x           |                                  |
|                                               | EFH Consultations updates                                                                             | Anne Deaton                               | x                               |                                     | x           |                                  |
| Council and AP requests                       | Space program impact on habitat - staff update                                                        |                                           | x                               |                                     |             |                                  |
|                                               | Deepsea mining - university of Hawaii presentation                                                    | Unavailable for summer 2026               | x                               |                                     |             |                                  |
|                                               | Resilient Fisheries                                                                                   | Lara Klibansky (as needed)                | x                               | x                                   | x           | x                                |
|                                               | Expand Deepwater CHAPCs                                                                               |                                           | x                               |                                     |             |                                  |
|                                               | Integrated Ecosystem Assessment - staff update                                                        | Requesting presentation from Gulf and Mid | x                               |                                     |             |                                  |
| Projects with Potentially high habitat impact | Offshore energy and development updates                                                               | BOEM                                      |                                 | x                                   |             | x                                |
|                                               | EFH assessment on wind farms - HEAP discussion on how to handle decommissioned windfarms/art reef/efh |                                           | X                               |                                     |             |                                  |
|                                               | Mapping off of Florida                                                                                | Brendan contact                           | X                               |                                     |             |                                  |
|                                               | Subsea transmission cables - could be habitat seminar                                                 | Sea Risk Solution                         | Habitat Informational webinar ? |                                     |             |                                  |
| EFH 5 Year Review (complete December 2029)    | Identify Higher abundance locations and (improving EFH tier structure)                                | Work Starting fall 2026                   | x                               | x                                   | x           | x                                |
|                                               | Implement 2024 EFH Recommendations (food web working group)                                           | Work Starting Jan 2025                    | x                               | x                                   | x           | x                                |
|                                               | additional life stage information for EFH clarification in each FMP                                   | Work Starting Fall 2025                   | x                               | x                                   | x           | x                                |
| ITEMS PER MEETING:                            |                                                                                                       |                                           | 15                              | 7                                   | 9           | 7                                |



# 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

An underwater photograph of a fish, possibly a wrasse, resting on a sandy seabed. The fish has a mottled brown and white pattern. To the left and right of the fish are large, colorful coral structures with various shades of orange, red, and white. The background is a deep blue-green water column.

**Thank you**