THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel Agenda

Stacie Crowe, Chair | Paul Medders, Vice Chair

Doubletree by Hilton North Charleston Convention Center
5264 Internation Blvd., North Charleston, SC 29418
July 15-17, 2025

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC, from July 15-17, 2025.

The AP approved minutes from the October 2024 meeting. The AP also approved the agenda for the July 2025 meeting after adding one item to other business.

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

Trish Murphey, SAFMC Chair, gave an update on the habitat committee, focusing on the development of the Coral 11 and Shrimp 12 amendment. AP members expressed interest in attending or listening to the public hearings.

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 March 2025 Council meeting. AP members discussed plans for integrating prey habitat use information into the designations of essential fish habitat (EFH) for managed species, as well as the potential issues that may occur.

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

AP Discussion:
The AP's plan is to identify:

1. example species, review literature,
2. top prey for those species,
3. habitat use by prey,
4. habitat use by predator
5. write up a draft prey dependency paragraph.
6. develop best practices for other species and/or fmps.

The working group requested feedback on which species to include in the example species list. The AP pointed out that the council's fishery management unit (FMU) may be changing and that the list should exclude species that may be removed. The AP also discussed trying to integrate eDNA information to define diet composition.

AP Action:
The AP approved the proposed working plan and identified the following species to work with: Gray Triggerfish, Red Snapper, Dolphinfish, Golden Crab, and Gag Grouper. Additionally, Erin Spencer volunteered to join the working group.

2. **Revision to Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Flows Policy to address impacts from freshwater discharges and impediments to river flow (*Attachment 2*)**
Description: During the October 2024 AP meeting, the AP 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 three times to discuss edits. The AP reviewed the proposed revisions.

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

AP Discussion:
The AP discussed the importance of stormwater runoff. They recommended looking into state policies for water control language as well as watershed studies for flow regimes. The working group should review estuary needs for flow and then look upstream for potential impacts. Finally, the working group should emphasize EFH linkage and importance. The policy should be written holistically and not be site-specific.

The working group plan is to clean up the body of policy and send it to the AP as well as water quality state representatives to get feedback before finishing specific policies.

AP Action: The group recommends adding in:

- **interbasin transfers of water,**
- **rediversion of water,**
- **storm water outfall,**
- **storm water collection/flow from development,**
- **municipal wastewater discharge,**
- **thermal discharge from wind farms,**
- **salinity impacts from shallow water dredging.**

Stacie will write up the tide gate policy section. Wilson volunteers to write up the irrigation section. Cameron will address the stormwater conveyance and volunteered for the working group.

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

Description: Council staff summarized information on the space industry's activities based on presentations that the AP has received in the past, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request submitted by the SAFMC, and comment letters submitted on proposed projects in the South Atlantic region. Staff also reviewed the potential consequences of space launches off the east coast of Florida and the upcoming development proposed by SpaceX. The AP discussed what the long-term and short-term impacts could be on habitat and the surrounding fisheries, and where data could be collected.

AP Discussion:

The AP recommended looking into the following data sources:

- Wharf study project
- Previous biological opinions for other space developments
- Previous comment letters submitted by entities like USFWS and Florida State agencies
- California state records for Vandenberg Space Force Base
- Previous EAs for Cape Canaveral
- MMPA permits for launches for Vandenberg Space Force Base, CA
- HBOI, Marine extension people from the University of Florida or Florida Tech
  - Dr. Cherebin may be a good contact
- Point Nemo
  - 1500 miles in South Pacific used for controlled deorbiting issues
  - Currents are slow
  - It's a remote location
  - We could review why this location was selected; could inform some points to consider
  - There should be an international agreement to be reviewed
- A literature review in the Indian River Lagoon on the impacts of pollutants
- Southern Environmental Law Center
- Erik Linstrum is a contact who worked for NASA – Paula will contact
- Could the council ask fishermen for known debris information
- Historical rocket/military monitoring in NC too

        - Wallops Island, Virginia, do they have any monitoring? – Brenden can reach out
        - The site used to have blast testing with permanent closures, similar to military operations
    - Spacex South Padre Island in Texas
    - Cumberland Island, GA was going to get a spaceport until comment letters shut down development
    - Water quality monitoring observational networks in the Indian River Lagoon
    - Lisa Havel
    - Florida DEP contacts for water management districts

Additionally, the AP highlighted that the propellants used are gelatinous and have to be detonated during launch failures. This causes the pollutants to be spread everywhere and enter the ground and surrounding water. The AP wants to analyze the number of failed launches and the detonation zone.

For the comment letters, it would be good to add in maps, emphasize the economic impacts, the potential impact for recreational fishermen who don't receive the Notice to Mariners (NOTMAR), and the large environmental impacts.

AP Action: The AP recommends that the SAFMC approve the gathering of data and the creation of a working group to analyze the data related to frequency of launches, hazard zones, and space debris and their impacts on local fisheries. This could potentially lead to the development of a Policy on Space Developments in the South Atlantic Region. If it is determined that a policy is appropriate, then the AP would recommend that the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), Gulf of America Council, and Caribbean Councils at a minimum should be involved in its creation.

4. **Habitat Conservation Division (HCD) Essential Fish Habitat consultations and information on beneficial use of dredging material projects (*Attachments 4a-4c*)**
Description: Anne Deaton, NMFS Habitat Conservation Division (HCD), reviewed EFH consultations submitted to HCD in 2024. There were 335 consults for docks and piers and 101 for mining. Anne reviewed the Central Atlantic call for wind energy and the Port Everglades deepening project. Living shorelines are increasing in number as well, there were 290 in NC. Then, the AP received a presentation on impacts on the surrounding habitat from beneficial use of dredging material projects from Jenny Davis, National Center for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS) staff. Finally, Council staff reviewed information gathered on site selection and best practices of beneficial use projects for use by HCD.

AP Discussion:
- HCD is developing time of year restrictions for developers based on at risk species.
    - AP would be interested in seeing those.

- The Port Everglades project involves 29 acres of direct impacts and 197-564 acres of indirect impacts including sedimentation.
    - They must do water quality testing, maintain oceanographic data, and relocate 65733ish coral.
    - Environmental review and habitat assessments could come from this project, including mitigation and sedimentation formation
    - Fine sediment at Port Everglades is of great concern for coral programs and conch reproductions
- When the HCD makes a recommendation, who enforces it?
    - The Army Corps of Engineers receives the recommendations and forwards them to the applicant
    - The applicant and the Corps then replies back to HCD with agreement or refusal
    - HCD can deny further consultation if follow-throughs don't occur
- Living shorelines can vary from gray to green.
    - The Nationwide permit for living shorelines includes native rock so some can be basically breakwaters
    - The prefabricated units tend to lean to grey side of the scale
    - Most development projects are buying companies that prefab to produce products and reduce costs
    - Wave attenuators in Florida Skyway had mitigation.
    - Grey is popular but people are starting to question it
    - Permit sections have check-ins on monitoring of living shorelines
- After receiving the presentation from Jenny Davis the AP discussed:
    - Permanent fixtures versus temporary ones.
        - Effective containment of materials needs to be discussed, as well as the tradeoff of benefits on maintaining barrier islands
    - March mounds in Galveston Bay are also being used in the panhandle in Florida
        - These may be better in a low-energy water flow type area
    - Did you track any fauna use?
        - Bivalves and fiddler crabs are tracked
        - the use of sediment is elevation dependent
        - the organisms that are there prior to sediment addition are buried and lost but colonization is rapid
        - Fish and Wildlife Service has been tracking bird usage
    - Beneficial use is a nature-based solution but not necessarily a living shoreline
        - Living shorelines don't create an upland impact
        - Thin-layer placement occurs in floodplains
        - Thin layer placement is a technique not to be included with living shorelines

        - Is there an optimal ratio of open water to mudflats to sediment depth to enhance nursery area use? Probably but it changes depending on location –possible study
    - The approach should not go over a certain threshold that is communicated to other applicants
        - Should you design for future sea level rise or current conditions
            - That's a regulatory issue more than anything else
    - The Manomet effort was an Army Corps-supported effort to find good candidate sites
    - There is a large effort to put out the spatially comprehensive map to identify good locations where marshes are struggling the most
- Staff summarized the accumulation of information that had been gathered.
    - We need to synthesize the literature with a summary document
    - The Manomet document has rating feasibility
    - The NC Coastal Habitat Protection update on thin layer placement should be a paper that HCD could assist with to help with consultations

Charlie Deaton will reach out to Anne for collaboration

The AP is concerned about limiting beneficial use to thin-layer placement. Beneficial use is an umbrella term and should stay that way. This should be noted during future conversations.

AP Action: AP staff will reach out to Jocelyn and Xaymara Serrano about a presentation on the Port Everglades project and Monomat about a presentation on their projects

5. **Central Virginia Offshore Wind (CVOW) update on habitat created by wind farms and fish mortality during construction (*Attachment 5*)**

Description: Brian Hooker, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, gave a presentation on the impacts of offshore wind development on the surrounding habitat and the fish mortality incident that occurred in 2024 during construction of the CVOW project.

AP Discussion

- Fish are getting caught in bubble curtain, causing barotrauma and death.
- It could also be explosions of bubbles because of construction.
- Biofouling has occurred over the last few years too.
- Fish without swim bladders could be impacted.
- Why only croaker?
    - The swim bladder and the noise generation could be the issue
    - It's mostly the Sciaenidae family
- What about explosives work? Don't they use bubble curtains?
    - Animals typically moved away from the bubble curtain

- Laura Busch will have a pile driving study on Atlantic sturgeon from the Navy in March 2026
- Joe Luskavich has worked on Sciaenidae and it sounds highly seasonal
- What level is of concern? - minimal
    - It's not all construction, it's just on occasion when a bubble curtain is meant to be used
- Could a slow start help limit this issue?
- Lots of uncertainty with ongoing development and experimenting with projects

AP Action: The AP recommends that BOEM look into male versus female differences in Croaker death and try to identify ways to scare fish away before turning on bubble curtains full blast.

6. **Telecommunication subsea fiber cables – Rita Melo, Morgan Paris, and Laura Cherney, AECOM Technical Services, Inc. (*Attachment 6*)**

Description: In October 2024, the AP received a presentation on wind farm footprints. The AP determined that there was very little knowledge on bioaccumulation and habitat impacts from cables and concrete mattresses. The AP requested a presentation on subsea fiber cables, since they have been in existence in the South Atlantic longer than wind farms. Information on the impacts of cables on habitat could be useful relative to the development of offshore wind farms. Rita Melo, Morgan Paris, and Laura Cherney from AECOM reviewed site selection, materials used, decommissioning details, bioaccumulation, and known long-term habitat impacts of subsea telecommunication cables.

AP Discussion

The AP was interested in the cable impacts on habitat and how they avoided hardbottom when laying cable. AECOM uses cameras, maps and plots to lay cables. They try to utilize existing routes and avoid hard-bottom.

AP Action: AP recommends that staff review the energy policy and the policies recommended in the presentation to make certain all are included

AECOM policy recommendations:

- **Subsea Cables + Essential Fish Habitat**
    - **Necessary Information for Essential Fish Habitat**
        - **Area disturbed by the cable and cable laying for each substrate type**
        - **Avoidance of areas with SAV or corals or other sensitive habitats**
    - **Surface-lay – Long-term, minimal disturbance**
        - **Area disturbed = length x width of cable**
        - **Possible sea floor resettling; habitat for pioneer species**
    - **Cable Burial – Short-term, moderate disturbance**

        - **Dependent on method Burial / Trenching– consider disturbance of habitats on plow/trenching area**
        - **Horizontal Directional Drilling – only area impacted at punch hole location**
    - **Return to baseline with possible removal/relocation of species, dependent on substrate**
- **Protected Resources + Installation**
    - **Identification via NOAA Section 7 Mappers or Essential Fish Habitat Mappers**
    - **Practices to follow to avoid harm or harassment**
    - **Permitting and feedback is usually the largest concern for timing**
    - **Working with BOEM and/or USACE**
    - **NOAA is always consulted (formally or informally)**
- **Species of Conservation Interest + Decommissioning Concerns**
    - **Offshore wind infrastructures provide new habitat for species that are rare or of conservation concern**
    - **Artificial habitat helps maintain local populations of these species; possible increases to ecosystem productivity or protection**
    - **Decommissioning implications for species and possible food web impacts**
    - **Use as possible permanent monitoring stations**
- **Social Considerations for Fisheries**
    - **Offshore wind structures or other cables in fishing waters**
        - **Different fisheries and equipment, different impacts**
        - **Increased occurrence vs loss of fishing grounds**
    - **Inclusion of stakeholders in the decision-making process**
        - **Improve communication with fishing industry**
        - **Consider mitigation and minimization practices**
    - **Data needed to support the fisheries community**
        - **Baseline fisheries data; Ongoing research and monitoring**
        - **Study impact to fishery and communities**

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 gave a detailed update on this project and a summary of the other Resilient Fisheries projects.

   AP Discussion
    - This project is different than ecospace and ecosim.
    - The AP recommends looking into the size of fish changes and the number of older females.

        - This will not be covered in these projects, but it will be covered in the climate scenario planning.
        - Additionally, that subject is in the snapper grouper MSE and a few other projects as a concern
    - The Gulf stream has slowed down, is there a study about the loop current and impacts on recruitment and larval dispersal?
        - Not currently
    - Do you anticipate new data sources
        - They are using existing data

AP Action: The AP recommends adding a review of project 3 to the work plan.

The AP recommends adding the analysis of smaller-sized fish trends and non-stationarity of populations and growth ranges to the research and monitoring list.

8. **Loss of Changing Ecosystems and Fisheries Initiative (CEFI)**

Description: In 2024, the SEFSC received funding for the Climate and Ecosystem-Fisheries Initiative (CEFI). Under the current U.S. administration, these projects, which had been progressing, have lost financial and staff support. Matthew McPherson, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC), gave a verbal review of the SEFSC plans for CEFI projects and the future of climate readiness for the SEFSC.

AP Discussion

- All CEFI staff, three permanent full time employees, are gone along with 2 million in funding. Matthew reviewed the projects and their status:
    - The downscale climate models are still being created.
    - Snapper grouper recruitment – they are trying to recover some work with limited staff.
    - Dolphinfish Management Strategy Evealuation – This is still ongoing however, the future scenario enhancements will not be continuing.
    - Ecosystems status reports for all three regions – These will still progress just much slower. The ETA for the South Atlantic update is 2027.
    - Shrimp futures – This is still a priority, but will occur more slowly. The future scenarios and stakeholder workshops will be scaled down.
    - Habitat-related work for coral bleaching has been discontinued
    - They have lost expertise for supporting ecosystem modeling for ecopath/ecosim at Fish and Wildlife Research Institute.
- Integrated ecosystem affiliates are helping, and other funding is being scraped together to try and rectify the loss.
- Direct impacts on the council are being documented.
- Groups are identifying knowledge gaps.
- SAFMC is working on priorities with NMFS as well.

AP Action: No action

9. **2029 EFH 5-year review (*Attachment 8*)**

Description: The AP discussed how to integrate new life stage information into EFH designations under each FMP. The AP also discussed how to integrate abundance

information into the EFH designations. In so doing, the current EFH designations would move from level 1, which is based only on presence/absence, to level 2, which is based on the species' density. The AP also discussed how to make use of an Integrated Ecosystem Assessment if one were to be developed by SEFSC: What should be the goals and objectives of an integrated ecosystem assessment to be most useful in the South Atlantic region?

AP Discussion

The resilient fisheries project 3 will be looking into the distributions of the snapper grouper, CMP, and dolphin wahoo FMPs.

- They will also look into various models that may include abundance.
- They will not be focusing on estuarine regions.
- For the other FMPs the plan is to update the life history for each FMP, while looking into data sources, and eventually integrate abundance information.

When discussing the life history updates:

- The AP discussed that the larval distribution is extremely important and should be added to the User guide definitions for EFH.
- While we can't label EFH outside of our region we can identify larval transport pathways and discuss labeling EFH with other regions.

Other subjects of concern were noted:

- Noises associated with reef habitats help fish find where they need to go when transitioning between juvenile and adult life stages. Sound quality is part of a healthy habitat community.
- How are introduced invasive species affecting things?
- Genetics are important as well. We need to maintain genetic health.

When discussing the Integrated Ecosystem Assessment:

- The AP was interested in who has gone through this process the most recently.
- The Gulf of America identified its indicators in 2017.
- The IEA is very interesting because it looks at habitat, water quality, and social science as a holistic view of the region.
- Grays Reef produced a condition report that had developed indicators in it. Identifying them took three years.
- The identification of knowledge gaps is the most important and gives you a roadmap for what you need for the future.
- There is a workshop coming up that could tackle that.
- The first IEA would be to establish a baseline.
- Scott will check with Florida Keys staff IEA and see if there is a contact that could give us a presentation.

AP Action: Matt Kenworthy will try to update the information listed in the User Guide for the Shrimp FMP. Cameron Luck will update Spiny Lobster. The AP recommended reaching out to the Golden Crab and Spiny Lobster APs to help update the others. Kathleen will compile and email the data contact list for AP to add to. Kathleen will request presentations for NE and Gulf Councils on the process of creating indicators, objectives, and outputs for an IEA. The AP also recommends reaching out to Chris Kelble with the IES office.

10. Update on Outstanding Habitat Blueprint Tasks (*Attachment 9*)

Description: In December 2023, the AP was restructured and its role clarified with the approval of the Habitat Blueprint. The Habitat Blueprint also included a list of items for the AP to focus on, including an update of information presented on the website and the development of an outreach and communication plan. For the outreach plan staff developed a series of questions for a "Frequently Asked Questions" document. Kathleen Howington reviewed progress on the webpage for the Habitat Program. The Panel reviewed and provided feedback on the draft FAQ.

AP Discussion:

The AP understood the issue with webpage crowding and did not like the list of suggested questions for the FAQ. They made the following recommendations.

AP Action:

For the website, the AP recommended adding a drop-down with links to partners organized by type and in alphabetical order.

The AP recommends creating the FAQ question list again, starting simply with questions like:

- **habitat versus ecosystem defined**
- **What is EFH?**
- **Why is EFH identified?**
- **What does EFH do?**
- **How is EFH designated?**
- **What habitats are EFH?**
- **How is the council involved?**

The goal should be to take a normal person through a linear EFH crash course. They also recommend adding a list of common acronyms, linking to other websites for succinctness, and showing ways for the public to follow up with additional resources.

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

Description: The Panel discussed the short- and long-term goals for the AP.

AP Discussion

The AP provided feedback on the Workplan. There was support for exploring more frequent informational presentations like the SAFMC seminar series, for example, Port Everglades.

AP Action: Approve the revised AP work plan (see attachment below) for submission to the Council. The AP approved the next meeting as two four-hour long webinars to be held the week of January 26, 2026. The AP recommends starting a Habitat Seminar series.

12. Other Business

- Wilson brought the Reef Keepers documentary to the attention of the AP. It focuses on three scientists' efforts to conserve and restore corals in southern Florida.

- The council will schedule a seminar for 2026.

Public Comment
Two written comments
Adjourn

	Activity	Notes	Winter 2026	Summer 2026	Winter 2027	Summer 2027	Winter 2028	Summer 2028	Winter 2028
Recurring Habitat AP ACTIVITIES	Communication strategy development	Currently developing FAQs	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Workplan update		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Annual report		x		x		x	x	x
	Citizen science updates			x		x		x	
	EFH Consultations updates	Anne and Manomet	x		x		x	x	x
Council and AP requests	Space program impact on habitat: reaction to FOIA? Next steps?	Need information		X					
	Revise the Flow policy		x						
	Spawning SMZ working group report - could be a habitat seminar	Chip Collier	x						
	Resilient Fisheries	Lara Klibansky (as needed)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Integrated Ecosystem Assessment - goals and objectives	Requesting presentation from Gulf and Mid		x					
Projects with potentially high habitat impact	Offshore energy updates	BOEM		X					
	Subsea transmission cables - could be a habitat seminar	Sea Risk Solution		x					
EFH 5 Year Review (complete December 2029)	Identify Higher abundance locations and (improving EFH tier structure)	Work Starting fall 2025		x	x	x	x	x	x
	Implement 2024 EFH Recommendations (food web working group)	Work Starting Jan 2025	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	additional life stage information for EFH clarification in each FMP	Work Starting Fall 2025		x	x	x	x	x	x
ITEMS PER MEETING:			**8**	**12**	**9**	**7**	**8**	**9**	

x	**Future to be decided at the meeting**
x	**Underway**
x	**Finished**

Other long term goals	
Goal	**year**
Habitat Production relationships and map using Ecopath/Ecosim Modeling species habitat use using SEFIS and AI Compiling habitat data with the Climate vulnerability assessment Requesting a Habitat assessment from NMFS Expand Deepwater CHAPCs Deepsea mining - university of hawaii presentation? Brendan Runde contact	

Other short term goals	
Goals	meeting
EFH assessment on wind farms - HEAP discussion on how to handle decommisioned windfarms/art reef/efh	Winter 2026
Manomet	2025
Port Everglades coral project? - could be habitat seminar	2025

Research and monitoring goals	
Goals	Meeting
HCD request for information: Review grain size compatibility and ecological and economic benefits of using compatible sand to the USACOE and CZM agencies. Flow working group: NOAA Fisheries in cooperation with the Council, develop a list of regionally specific requirements or Best Management Practices for flow-altering projects that can potentially impact EFH or other resources and support scheduling projects to not coincide with spawning migrations or early development of sensitive species. Food Web working Group: Characterize life history of primary prey for Council managed species, including snapper grouper, king and Spanish mackerel, cobia, dolphin and wahoo.	