

**PUBLIC COMMENT SESSION
KITTY HAWK, NORTH CAROLINA
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CONGRESSMAN RUTHERFORD: Thank you, and, first, let me say thank you to the council members for your willingness to serve on this very important committee, the council, and I joined you today to share my strong support for the exempted fishing permit requests submitted by Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina.

I can tell you these EFPs would allow our states to improve their data collection and test a state-led model for managing recreational red snapper fisheries in federal waters. As a representative of the largest number of recreational anglers in the country, and as co-chair of the South Atlantic Red Snapper Task Force, this issue is incredibly important to my district.

Our coast is not -- It really is an extension of our Floridian way of life. Listen. Our beaches, reefs, and fisheries support our coastal economy, local jobs, and the small businesses that really make our community so great, and, when we talk about red snapper access, we aren't just talking about a weekend on the water. We're literally talking about livelihoods.

In fact, in my district alone, the recreational fishing industry supports nearly 4,500 jobs and contributes over \$500 million to our local economy. For years now, fishermen across the South Atlantic have watched red snapper populations grow to record levels, yet they continue to be restricted to a one or two-day season. That simply does not make sense, especially for the men and women who are out there on the water and experiencing it firsthand.

Frankly, the lack of days tells me the system we're using right now is simply not keeping up with the reality, and a big part of that is data. For too long, NOAA has relied on outdated and inaccurate models that simply don't reflect what fishermen are seeing. In fact, NOAA admitted, in 2023 in their study, that their estimates could be off by -- That they could be off by as much as 40 percent. 40 percent. Now, that's ridiculous, and it underscores exactly why states need the ability to collect better, more accurate, and more responsive data.

The good news is we have a proven roadmap. Under President Trump's first term, NOAA approved state management EFPs for red snapper in the Gulf. That shift put decision-making closer to the resource, strengthened the data we rely on, and led to dramatically longer, more predictable seasons. In fact, Florida's red snapper season was 126 days this year, and that speaks for itself, and particularly when you compare that to the lousy two-day federal season that we had in the South Atlantic this year.

Listen. When states lead, we increase access, conservation stays strong, and coastal communities thrive. The South Atlantic states are ready to take on this responsibility. They have the experience, the partnerships, and the commitment necessary to collect high quality data and manage this fishery responsibly. The EFPs will finally allow us to get a clearer picture of what's happening on the water, and provide anglers with the access they deserve, while still maintaining strong conservation outcomes.

I want to thank the council for engaging in these conversations, holding council sessions, briefing on lessons learned from the Gulf, and giving this issue the thoughtful attention it

deserves. Your willingness to explore state management options is an important step forward, and so today I respectfully urge the council to support the South Atlantic EFPs and efforts to move state -- Or move toward a state-led management system. This is the right step for our fishermen, the right step for conservation, and it's the right step for coastal economies that depend on this fishery, and, with that, I yield back.

SENATOR GOLDFINCH: Thank you so much for taking time to listen to our testimony today, and thank you to all the council members for spending your valuable time on this effort. I know what it's like to sit on endless amounts of committees, and dedicate your time and efforts to those things, and so thank you so much for that.

Congressman Rutherford summed it up pretty well, and so what I would like to do is focus a little bit on what the states can and have been doing and why they are going to be doing it well under these new EFPs. As a member of the state senate in South Carolina, I represent coastal communities and coastal counties.

Fishing in South Carolina is a \$7 billion industry. It is not just a recreational industry, but it's also a commercial industry, and we also have, as you know, recreation for-hire, but we also have boat builders in South Carolina. In fact, I think we're the second -- Now we are the second biggest boat builder in South Carolina. We have two of the most important fishing businesses, fishing corporations, in South Carolina. That's Pure Fishing and Rather. We are big -- Fishing in South Carolina is big business, and this red snapper moratorium, for lack of a better word, has been detrimental to our fishing communities and to our fishing economy.

South Carolina has been leading for years in preparation for these EFPs. I myself have written many provisos over the years to encourage DNR to get in the business of data management and to get in the business of enforcement of this data, once it's in play, and, to their credit, and to Director Mullikin's credit, they have done it. They have prepared, and, under Director Mullikin's leadership, which I am deeply, deeply impressed with, we're at the position now where we are able to take us from one or two days to many, many days, sixty in our case in South Carolina, sixty-plus in South Carolina, which means a tremendous increase of fishing opportunities.

It doesn't necessarily mean that it's an increase in fishing, and I want to make sure I'm clear about that. As a recreational fisherman myself, and I used to be a commercial spear fisherman, and commercial fisherman, I know firsthand that you don't always have the opportunity when the weather arises, and you don't always have the weather when the opportunity arises.

I would venture to say that most people, over the course of the last four or five years, the weather, the one or two days that we get, made the decision not to go. That's me, and that's my fishing crew, and so I can speak for us, but I'm sure that there are others that have made that same decision many, many times.

The problem with that decision is that you have some people that push the boundaries, the limits of what they should do when they go offshore, and that can become a very dangerous situation when you're forced to only go one or maybe two days a year. Opening us up to sixty-plus days won't give us sixty-plus days of fishing, but it will give you an opportunity.

It will give fishermen an opportunity to get offshore, to spend money, to buy fuel, to buy ice, to buy bait, to buy rigs, to buy boats, and we'll give them the opportunity and the hope that they need, once again, to get out and start fishing for red snapper.

DNR, our DNR in South Carolina, is prepared for this. We've been preparing for it for years, with getting prepared for the EFPs, getting prepared with data, and getting prepared with enforcement. We're ready, we're willing, and we're able to do the data management, and to do the enforcement on day one, and so I thank each and every one of you for listening to our testimony. I wish you well in this endeavor. I ask you to support the states in their efforts to get EFPs. Thank you so much.

MR. GENTNER: My name is Brad Gentner, fisheries economist. Thank you for the opportunity to comment today. I want to thank the council for their service here. We know this is a hard job. I also want to thank Kim for her service, and it's good to be here on her last meeting.

I want to first say that CCA strongly supports the state management EFPs and urges the agency to work quickly to get these in place this year. I think, first and foremost, I want to applaud the agency's stalwart support for state management. I also want to thank Annie Hawkins for coming up to this meeting to put that support into words and show that NMFS wants to move these forward as quickly as possible. Now is not the time to drag our feet, and it's refreshing to see NMFS HQ and the Regional Office singing from the same songbook. We stand by to work with the agency and the states to get these EFPs in place for the 2026 season.

Second, I want to thank Florida for the time and effort they have put into the red snapper discard EFPs. The first year results really demonstrate the gains that can be made by decompressing effort and working to incentivize anglers to manage from the bottom up. This is exactly what EFPs are for, and we think these results only support state management.

Anglers are tired of top-down management. Anglers are tired of not being able to trust their regulators. As an economist, I'm a firm believer that incentives matter, and Florida's results demonstrate this. There are better ways to manage recreational anglers with carrots rather than sticks. Thanks again, Florida, for putting the hard work in here.

EFPs have long served as NMFS principal vehicle to test innovative management approaches, evaluate monitoring systems, and conduct conservation engineering and cooperative research, where standard regulatory frameworks limit flexibility.

In prior regional pilots, NMFS has used EFPs to authorize limited openings on specified days or require particular gear or handling practices to reduce discard mortality. Under purely federal openings, highly compressed seasons have produced derby dynamics, safety risks, and elevated discards that undermine both conservation and public trust.

State-managed EFP openings, built on near real-time reporting, independent validation, and in-season closure triggers provide a more measured predictable framework that reduces pressure on the water, improves safety, and better aligns limited harvest with local conditions. These benefits align with the best available science while respecting conservation limits.

There is real-world proof that this can work. Effort decompression in the Gulf of Mexico, or rather Gulf of America, through their state management EFPs, have shown that providing access over a longer timescale results in increased opportunity, similar landings levels, and lower discards.

The Gulf of Mexico red snapper EFPs, in 2018 and 2019, showed that state-designed monitoring programs and tailored seasons can function responsibly within federal guardrails, producing better data and accountability without compromising rebuilding goals. For our members in the coastal economies they sustain, this is not an abstract policy question. State management through EFPs is a practical, conservative approach to reduce discards, enhance safety, and restore confidence, by delivering a limited predictable opportunity matched to local conditions without exceeding conservative biological limits. In short, there's both good science and good governance. Thanks for the opportunity.

MS. GUYAS: I'm going to miss Kim so much, too. Kim, you're so awesome. Okay, and we, ASA, supports the exempted fishing permits developed by the states, and we ask that the council recommend that they be approved expeditiously, so that they're in effect for the 2026 planned openings.

This is really an opportunity to test transformational change that addresses two of the biggest challenges the council has faced in managing red snapper, getting better data on recreational catch and discards, and it's been great to see the states collaborate with each other and the fishing community to find solutions that balance reasonable harvest access and conservation of red snapper, and snapper grouper, while improving information used to inform management moving forward.

I attended one of the public workshops in Florida that they hosted to help get input on how to set up their EFP, and, I mean, I've got to tell you that anglers in the room were so excited to be able to work with the state to help to figure out a way out of this management conundrum that we've been in for so long now.

Since the EFPs have come out, I mean, even more excitement at the Florida press conference, where they talked about their plan. I mean, the charter captains who spoke -- They were just about crying. They were so, so, so happy at just like the idea that, hey, this is a possibility for us, like next year, and like we're finally there, and so I understand the questions about calibration, and common currency, and how are these data collection systems going to work, and I've commented on this before, but just a reminder that we do not have any of that now. These existing systems are not calibrated. They're not working for the council. They're not working for fishermen, and the proposed data collection improvements that the states have put forward are leaps and bounds ahead of where we are.

I'm also optimistic that these can come together quickly and be approved for implementation late spring. When we went through this in the Gulf, with their EFP process, at the time, the Regional Administrator invited states to develop EFPs, in a letter that was dated September 29th, 2017. There wasn't much back and forth until the Gulf Council discussed draft EFPs and voted to recommend approval at their meeting in January.

Final EFPs were submitted by the states to NOAA by mid-February. Public comment in the Federal Register was in March, and the Secretary of Commerce announced that they were approved in April, and so it was really, really fast that all this came together.

I just want to thank NOAA leadership for their support of the EFPs, and their willingness to partner with the states to get this done, and, again, we're really grateful to the states for the tremendous amount of work they've already put in in developing these EFP proposals, and I do believe that the proposed data and management improvements will ultimately benefit all of us, and the resource, and so I hope the council can support them. Thanks.

MS. AINES: Hi. I'm Alex Aines, a scientist at Oceana. I know this is a topic of discussion for tomorrow, but Oceana recently submitted scoping comments on Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 61, which would consider whether the fishery management unit should be revised for seventeen species currently managed under the FMU.

Oceana understands the challenges that are posed by the significant cuts to federal funding and resources to support fisheries management across the country. Oceana and our partners are working to restore and protect funding to support ocean conservation, and fisheries management in particular. However, narrowing responsibility for management is not the way forward for any fishery.

Oceana strongly opposes any action that would remove these seventeen species from the FMU or redesignate them in a manner that reduces the council's obligation to manage them under the full requirements of the MSA. Removing or re-designating these species risks undermining the conservation and sustainable management of more than 30 percent of the fifty-five stocks in the fishery. This action would set a dangerous precedent for weakening protections for vulnerable marine life and undermining responsible fisheries management.

Each of the seventeen species discussed in the scoping document are currently included in the Snapper Grouper FMP because the council determined that they were a fishery under its authority that requires conservation and management. The Magnuson-Stevens Act, and its implementing regulations, dictates that such stocks must be included in an FMP. Redesignating species as ecosystem component, or removing them from the FMU entirely, would likely exempt them from ACLs and AMs, thereby weakening accountability and conservation measures.

This is especially concerning given the lack of stock assessments for many of these species and the potential for unmonitored fishing pressure to cause population declines. Oceana calls on the council to reject any action that would remove species from the FMU or redesignate them in a way that diminishes conservation obligations. Instead, we urge the council to strengthen its commitment to science-based precautionary management and uphold the integrity of the Magnuson-Stevens Act and NEPA. If the council chooses to move forward with Amendment 61, it should adopt a no action alternative and retain these seventeen species under full management and the FMU.

Then, quickly switching topics, while I have time, I also wanted to quickly comment in support of the black sea bass EFP application submitted by Kim. On-demand gear has gained considerable momentum in the South Atlantic, and this EFP helps to continue to build upon the goal of expanding use of on-demand gear, including during time-area closures, and ultimately

removing much of the risk to these whales and other marine animals that suffer entanglements. Thank you for considering our comments.

MS. BRUGER: Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to comment. My name is Catherine Bruger. I'm a second-generation fishery biologist from St. Petersburg, Florida, where I live now. I've worked in fisheries for about twenty years, first with FWC, and then nearly a decade with NOAA, at the Southeast Regional Office, and I'm here today as a manager for Fish Conservation for Ocean Conservancy, where my work focuses on ensuring sustainable fisheries, recreational management, and data modernization. In my role, I've been heavily involved in the implementation and ongoing execution of state management for red snapper in the Gulf, which is what brings me here today.

My comments focus on the state-exempted fishing permits for red snapper. Simply stated, the proposed EFPs do not comply with existing laws, do not prevent overfishing, and should be rejected as written. Based on the revised MSY proxy for overfishing, the proposed EFPs, by definition, will trigger an overfishing designation, and they have no safeguards in place to limit catch to existing science-based limits.

We keep hearing comparisons to the Gulf model of state-delegated management, but the proposed EFPs are vastly different than the framework that was implemented in the Gulf. Should the states wish to proceed here in the South Atlantic, major revisions are required to bring the proposed EFPs into compliance to ensure sustainable management and meaningful data collection.

Regarding data, there are nationwide data standards for recreational fishing surveys and data collection. These standards ensure durable funding and reasonable assurances regarding data quality. The west coast states follow these standards. The Gulf states are in the process of achieving these standards.

Adherence to data standards remains aspirational. For instance, most states in the Gulf don't make their catch and effort information publicly accessible, and only one state produces estimates of uncertainty, or PSEs. The proposed EFPs, however, would circumvent this process entirely. I'm hearing interest in this region to improve data quality, but disregarding data standards assures data deterioration. If the states here are serious about the system, then there's more work to be done to build a more robust system that will meet the needs of anglers and managers.

Finally, I'll share a word of caution. State management in the Gulf has not necessarily improved things for the red snapper stock. Four out of five states in the Gulf are reporting smaller fish, and there's been press directly from the states describing the management tradeoff being made of longer seasons, but smaller fish, localized depletions, and reduced catch rates. It still remains unclear if overall stock health is improving under this management model. We offer additional recommendations in our letter, and I appreciate your time and the opportunity to comment. Thank you.

MR. LOCKE: Charlie Locke here, a commercial fisherman in Wanchese, North Carolina, as well as on the Spanish Mackerel AP, and I just wanted to give you all a win for the Spanish mackerel quota transfer that happened this year. You know, Chairman Murphey, she really

pressed to get the transfer when we needed it, and we got it in a timely manner. We've had probably the most horrendous weather, I think in thirty-four years of living here, I've seen this fall.

The days that we were able to get out, instead of only having 500 pounds, we were able to capitalize. If you only got two or three days a week, you weren't constrained to the 500 pounds, and so I just want to give you all a win for that, which you probably hardly get very few wins, but I'm giving you one for that, and I just want to say thank you for everybody who put the time in for that.

For the red snapper FMP for North Carolina, I have to agree with Chairman Roller on this. I'm really concerned with the 100-person limit, that we're going to find ourselves in a position like with summer flounder, and with our flounder fishery, where the recreational are going to look like, oh, the commercial is getting this, and we're only getting a few, and I'm concerned about that number. I feel like there's going to be some -- I don't know, and I feel like there's going to be some conflict that's going to come back on the commercial industry, and that -- Possibly, and that's just my thoughts.

Blueline tilefish, the 300 pounds starting January 1 will not work for North Carolina. We need to keep it May 1. In fact, I'm really -- When you started talking about step-ups and step-downs, I'm concerned, because a lot of the fisheries that I've been involved in, like amberjacks, we split the seasons, the January 1 and the July 1 start date, and that was going to give us equal opportunity, where, if we don't have the weather to work -- We really don't even start bottom fishing until May 15 here. Our weather is just terrible.

You all got here Monday, and you saw how bad the weather was. Well, our inlet is the last inlet north in the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction, and so we just -- We're up against weather, where Florida has a lot better days, more opportunity to work, and, if the quotas are all open January 1, by the time they get to us, unless you do a split season, really with everything -- We have one fisherman here that actually has a golden tile longline endorsement, and it's the first time we've ever had one here, and, luckily, he was able to fish all summer, because the quota wasn't caught.

This year, he probably won't, because, if it's historically caught early, he'll be shut out, and so I would recommend looking at split seasons for all the snapper grouper species, a January 1 start date and a July 1 start date. You split the quotas in half, and, that way, at least, as a fisherman in North Carolina, come July 1, I'm guaranteed to have access to that species.

I really -- I have a snapper grouper permit, and I use it for three months out of the year. You know, June, July, and August is really when I fish, and then we're Spanish by September, and so, you know, we want fair and equitable access in North Carolina. We're the most northern state in the region, and I just think it's something to be considered, but, anyway, I wanted to give you all a win for the Spanish mackerel. I appreciate it. Thank you.

MS. STEPHENS: Good afternoon, council. My name is Haley Stephens. I am the owner operator of a charter-headboat out of Ponce Inlet, Florida. I traveled a long way to be here today, because this conversation matters deeply to my family, my community, and the future of our fishery.

I want to begin by expressing our full support for Florida's new EFP to test state management. My business has had the privilege of participating in Florida's current EFP, and I can tell you, straight from my wheelhouse, this project has been a success on so many levels.

Our anglers have been satisfied with the requirements, regulations, and bag limits. They have felt included, empowered, and genuinely excited to participate in fisheries-dependent data collection. It's been really refreshing to see that level of enthusiasm and cooperation out on the water. For the first time in a long time, our anglers feel heard. Our fleet feels like someone is finally listening to what we've been saying for years.

Look, and you're going to hear a lot of opinions today, some even from people who don't have hands-on fishing experience. I live this fishery every day. I am speaking to you from practical reality and not speculation. This EFP has strengthened cooperative research. It has collected truly valuable data. Yes, science is so cool. It has fostered real buy-in from stakeholders, and, most importantly, it has rebuilt trust in the process, something that's been missing for far too long.

I want to share something personal. You know, I didn't overfish red snapper. Going back to SEDAR 15 in 1999, when the discard rate jumped from 37 percent to 96 percent I was in the first grade. That's the same age that our oldest son is today, and, as someone who has advocated so strongly and so publicly for meaningful involvement, that really hits home, and it forces me to ask. If we don't do something different, is my son -- Is our next generation of working watermen and women still going to be fighting the same battle when they're my age in 2044?

It's no secret that our current process moves slower than when I asked my kids to please put on your shoes. There has to be a better way, and maybe, just maybe, these EFPs are going to show us what a better way could look like. We often say that we're not managing fish, and we're managing people, and, in that same spirit, you aren't just fishery managers. You are fisheries leaders.

Every person that cared enough to be in this room today is a leader in our fishery, and what do real leaders do? They don't just give up and try to close down the ocean. They don't stand back and say, okay, good luck. No, and real leaders stand together. We work towards solutions, and we say, come on, let's all go.

We have to collaborate. We have to stay engaged, and we absolutely must demand the best from everyone, from our fishermen, our divisions and agencies, our teams, our port agents, our science, and our scientists, and, yes, from one another. I believe this can work. I believe we can rebuild the trust, and I believe that we can create a future by championing our fishery, beginning by empowering those at the local level. Thank you for your time.

MR. WISCOTT: Good afternoon, council. My name is Charles Wiscott, and I'm a commercial fisherman by trade, where I participate in the Atlantic sea scallop fishery, operating three full-time limited-access vessels. I'm here to voice my public comment for myself and fellow commercial recreational fishermen in the opposition to the current blueline tilefish and black sea bass regulations in both the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic regions.

While effective conservation is important, the present rules no longer reflect the reality observed by fishermen, charter operators, and coastal communities up and down the seaboard. These regulations are unnecessarily restrictive, economically damaging, and based on data that does not match what we are consistently seeing on the water.

Blueline tilefish anglers across both regions continue to see -- They continue encounter robust and expanding blueline tilefish populations, yet the current catch limits and access restrictions are still based on earlier assessments that were conservative, incomplete, or applied with significant uncertainty buffers. The split region approach between the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic, while originally intended to protect the stock, has resulted in inconsistent, confusing, and overly cautious regulations that do not reflect the current strength of our fishery.

Recreation and commercial fishermen are reporting healthy numbers throughout the entire depth range of the species, far beyond what present management framework suggests. The lack of updated regionally-coordinated stock data has created limits that hinder access without producing clear conservation benefits.

Black sea bass abundance remains exceptionally strong, especially in the Mid-Atlantic, where large biomass has been repeatedly documented by fishermen and supported by numerous on-the-water observations. Despite this, recreational anglers continue to face short seasons, low bag limits, and restrictions that do not align with the highly-visible and widely-acknowledged health of the stock.

In the South Atlantic, similar inconsistencies are felt, as rigid and overly conservative management measures continue, even though stock conditions have improved significantly. The lack of regulatory flexibility has placed unnecessary strain on charter operators, tackle shops, marinas, and local businesses that rely on stable access and predictable seasons. The fisheries would benefit greatly from updated assessments that capture real world conditions across the range of species management, current abundances, and distribution observed in both regions, improved cooperation and consistency between the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic Councils.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and your continued work on responsible fisheries management. I ask you that you prioritize a timely reassessment and modernization of regulations for blueline tilefish and black sea bass in the Mid and South Atlantic. Thank you.

MR. DAVIS: I would like to thank you for your time. I would especially like to thank Haley for giving me a heads-up about this meeting. If it weren't for her, we wouldn't be here, me and my family. I represent my son and my father, which are fishermen, commercial fishermen, and headboat captains. My father is still a headboat captain. He's eighty-seven, and still holds his license, and my son is hoping to be a captain, and I want a future for him.

I'm real impressed with the snapper openings in Florida, how it's been operated, and I would like to see that come up to our area. Even though we starting out with a hundred positions, it's better than nothing. It's better to get our foot in the door, and figure out how it's done, and get larger each year.

As far as the bass, the bass is another one. Three per person is better than two. It's a number. Three per person is better than two, but we have an Achilles heel on our boat. We are still under

the whale zone, ten knots from November until May. We cannot go over ten knots. We face anywhere from a \$10,000 fine to a \$50,000 fine if we do, and plus \$10,000 if our AIS system is cut off.

Now, we've had this for fifteen years, and we've lost numbers of passengers because of this whale zone. They come on a boat, and they see us doing ten knots, and they see the other boats pass us, and they jump on those boats. That being said, with the bass fisheries, we're not able to go out past twenty-five miles on our trips. It takes three hours just to reach twenty-five miles.

It's a twenty-mile whale zone. In that twenty-mile zone, there's nothing but bass. Now, we basically start our trips in March. If we start our trip in March, we try to -- We have to get offshore these bass, and we would have no fishing time. We would have to go out and fish an hour, and then turn around and come back, and, within that twenty miles, slow back down to ten knots, and almost have a heart attack slowing down and speeding the boat up just to make ten knots, and this has been going on for fifteen years straight with us. It's like a ball and chain. Plus, that monitor that's on our boat, we have people that steal our fishing positions. It happens all the time.

Things we have protected for sixty-five years, and my father started it sixty-five years ago. He passed it down to me, and I've found an extra 3,000 or 4,000 different places, and, every year, more and more of them are being lost, and so, as far as the bass, I would love to see three per person, and, if we start in March -- We have to start in March, and we're going to lose our business if we don't, because of insurance, and because that's when we have to start.

All winter long, we're stuck with the Coast Guard inspections, getting our boat ready to go, and, because we're over sixty-five foot, we have this ball and chain upon our back all winter long. We love the whales. We never want to see one hit. It would never -- Even if we do think about hitting one, we always have somebody observing on our boat. Even if we're not under the whale zone, we only make fourteen knots. Even that, after we get outside the whale zone, it's not enough time to get us past the sea bass, and so, if this is closed in March, we lost that March.

Our insurance in a quarter, just our insurance a quarter, is \$20,000 a quarter. That's what it is to cover our business, our docks and our boats, and we cannot operate --

MS. MURPHEY: Mr. Lesle, we'll have to -- If you could wrap up, please.

MR. LESLE: Okay. I just -- I would like to thank you all for the snappers. I know we need to do something with the bass. I want the bass to work out for everybody, even up here, and all the way down to Florida, where they're able to fish when they have their season during the winters, but three per person is better than two per person, and that's what I would like to see. Thank you for your time.

MR. NEWMAN: I hope you all find a meeting with some better chairs next time. Thank you all for the opportunity to comment. My name is Thomas Newman. I'm a full-time commercial fisherman, as well as an employee of the North Carolina Fisheries Association, and I want to briefly highlight two major concerns with the agenda this week, the never-ending recalibration of recreational data and the push for state management of red snapper to the EFPs.

MRIP has been a growing concern for managers, scientists, and fishermen across both sectors for years, and now the Fishing Effort Survey appears to have overestimated recreational effort, which directly translates into overestimated harvest. As a result, recreational catch and discard estimates will need to be revised once again.

This is at least the third major revision to recreational data in just over a decade, and it's not just a correction going forward each time. The entire series all the way back to 1981 is erased and rewritten. It is impossible to manage fisheries effectively, much less fairly, when the sector responsible for the majority of the removals is operating under a data system that changes every three or four years. These constant revisions undermine confidence in stock assessments, quota decisions, and allocations across the South Atlantic.

Secondly, I want to address the pilot testing of state management of recreational red snapper harvest through EFPs. The council has listed this effort as a high priority under Executive Order 14276, which focuses on restoring American seafood competitiveness, but reallocating quota and piloting a brand new management system outside of the FMP process is the opposite of what this executive order calls for, and it violates the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Equally troubling, none of the four EFP applications include federally-required information. No projected harvest, no total mortality modeling, no discard estimates, no quota impact analysis, and no assessment of impacts on other fisheries. EFPs were never intended to circumvent the FMP process or create sector advantages. They're supposed to be a limited testing tool that must remain within the bounds of MSA.

Before moving forward, I urge the council and NOAA Fisheries to address these concerns openly and ensure that any future actions remain lawful, equitable, and grounded in sound science, and, outside the agenda, I also would like to stress that we need the Mackerel Cobia AP to meet regularly.

There's no reason to stop AP meetings until the next Spanish mackerel stock assessment. This staff, and the council, has done a lot of hard work at port meetings and outreach on many other issues not directly tied to the stock assessment. We owe it to our fishermen who came out and got involved to continue to meet regularly and discuss and meet their needs and concerns. An engaged and informed AP is needed to build public trust in this process, and having AP members meet regularly, engaged and prepared, will greatly enhance the upcoming stock assessment when it gets here. Thank you very much.

MR. ODEN: Hi. My name is Jeff Oden, and I live on Hatteras Island, a little island just south of us, with seven villages. At one time, there were thirteen fish houses on that very island. There are two left, two, and nobody has done more to that detriment on the working waterfront than this council, and my first comment is on the two-for-one.

It was the first agenda item the other day, and I made a point to want to listen to the whole council, and, when you got to the end, on the two-for-one, you kicked the can down the road another year-and-a-half. I have a friend who is eighty-two years old, and he may not make a year-and-a-half. He's trying to sell that permit, and he may not get around to doing it.

I'm seventy-three, and I've got another friend in the county who is seventy-eight, and there are probably four or five more that are in their seventies. Why kick the can down the road and not do it today?

I mean, is there a rational reason? I mean, somebody ought to answer it. I mean, right now, there are 272 of us left active. That's according to the observer program. That's all that's left. There are 540 permits out there, and the other half are probably by the rich and famous, who want to sponsor their sport. That's where our industry is, and this council keeps kicking the can down the road.

My next item is the EFPs. It's little wonder, with no accountability on the recreational side, why our industry is where it is. It's pretty obvious that this is going to be a direct giveaway. You know, even though there's not a state fishery in the whole council jurisdiction, not one state water fishery for red snapper, and yet you're going to let the states have it? What about the industry? Do we get anything?

We used to be 3,500 pounds of that industry, or 35 percent of that fishery, and we're down to less than 5 percent now, and this will probably get us below one. Where's our take in all this? Anybody got an answer? I would love to hear it, but, anyhow, you all need to remember that you all have to act within the Magnuson framework, and, you know, that equates to fair and equitable, and so you better do your homework before you go down this path, and I think you know what's coming if you don't, and so thank you.

MS. HARRISON: I'm not confident that you all read my emails, so I brought my emails with me, in a large version, and I'll also email it to you, but this is so I can reference it as I speak. Let me get my -- I don't have my script yet. Please, can you pause? This isn't like Saturday Night Live. We're not actually live on TV. All right.

Okay, and so my question for the council is simple, in theory. How do you all decide which fisheries to accelerate management for, and which fisheries must suffer a slow, painful death? How did you all decide that improving our commercial king mackerel fishery wasn't worth including in your letter responding to Executive Order 14276, and I do wish this was the Gulf Council, so you all could respond to me, and I'm sure Jeff did too, but I'll continue.

Here's a chart. This top plot line is sales of king mackerel and Spanish mackerel combined into one plot line, because they're on the same AP, and so you have the past ten years of data, where we averaged \$10 million a year in sales for the past ten years, average. Some years we go up to \$13 million, and one year we had \$9. Your next plot line here at \$4 million is every single grouper that you manage. This line, the green one, every snapper, and I broke it down to wahoo, triggerfish, jacks, hogfish, grunts, black sea bass.

Collectively, all of those other species, except for mackerel, come to \$25 million a year in sales. King mackerel and Spanish mackerel are over \$10 million, and so they represent almost 40 percent of your sales, and yet it's not on this agenda meeting, and it wasn't on the meeting agenda last time, and so I go into fair and equitable, and how is that fair and equitable?

It seems that you all have little like care for economic data in your decisions, and, if you did, you would be talking about king mackerel, because that fishery is going to go through a major shift

here in the next two years, because we're seeing an exodus of permits from the commercial boats into the recreational boats, so that they can -- They do what they do with them, but that's not -- I regressed there.

I downloaded you all's budget. Your annual budget for 2025 was \$5.25 million. The only species in the South Atlantic that can foot your bill is king mackerel, and yet you waste so much time on everything else, and I did -- I fact checked myself, and I took a content analysis of the past five years of your Full Council transcripts, just Full Council session, right, and so two, or maybe three, sessions of meeting, and I took your past five years. I don't have this meeting yet, but it won't matter. It's a zero, because you all didn't talk about Mackerel, and so, in the past five years, you mentioned mackerel, king mackerel, 148 times. You mentioned red snapper 805 times, over five-times as much.

Here we go. Here's your sales of red snapper versus king mackerel. Everybody see that? Look, and you can kind of see that orange block. That's red snapper. About -- I think it's \$600,000 a year, and so, after this meeting, I do think that some of you are going to say, oh, you have to be patient, Alana, and the assessment process takes a while, and king mackerel is on the list, right, but I count on you.

MS. MURPHEY: Ms. Alana, we've got to get you to --

MS. HARRISON: Okay. Hold on.

MS. MURPHEY: All right. Thank you.

MS. HARRISON: Hold on. I should have had -- I should have more time to talk about this, but you won't hold the AP meetings for mackerel, and so I would like to have a few more seconds. You all -- It takes so long to get an assessment done because you all constantly push things back, and you always vote on things that matter more to you all, and you push things back and push things back, and look at white grunt, and you all do that with a laugh every time, like ha ha, white grunt. No, it's not -- This is like real life, and we -- Just last week, the fish dealer in Hatteras had to take a --

MS. MURPHEY: All right. Thank you, Ms. Alana. We appreciate your comment.

MS. HARRIS: Yeah. All right. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

MS. CALLAWAY: My name is Lillie Callaway, and I come from a long line of watermen and women on the Outer Banks. I represent the Miss Oregon Inlet II headboat out of Oregon Inlet, North Carolina. I would like to say that I am in favor of moving the black sea bass limit to three fish per person per day. Since we operate in a seasonal location, and are completely shut down in the winter months, this change would help support us during our busiest months on our ocean trips. Thank you for your time.

MR. COX: I would just like to speak on king mackerel for a few minutes. You know, you guys had the port meetings, about a year-and-a-half's worth, and there wasn't much said about it. You know, there was no summary. We've been waiting to hear some results from the meetings, but, you know, the thing about the king mackerel is, in Morehead City -- In North Carolina, there's

about fourteen or fifteen tournaments a year, and it keeps growing, and, you know, I've got heartburn over the fact that you're letting recreational-caught fish be sold.

You know, the commercial man is always at a disadvantage, and you guys are not doing anything to help us with this. You know, the thing about that king mackerel tournament is that they're supposed to be sold in the name of charity, but you don't have no way to prove it, because those prices are not extracted from the other king mackerel landings, and so I don't see how that's legal.

Then let's see. Moving on to -- There was a lot of time talking about the private recreational permit, and where did all the work on that go? It's just so much time and money has been spent with this council on things that just evaporate, and I don't understand it.

Going to the snapper grouper for-hire permits, you know, this is open access, but you continue to beat down the commercial permits with a two-for-one. Everything nowadays is set up to help the recreational guy, but the commercial guy, who is feeding our nation, and our community, and our restaurants, is not getting any help from this council, and it's very frustrating.

I've been in this fishery for forty-five years, and we -- Listen. Commercial reps on this council, we need your help. You heard it from Alana, and you heard it from Jeff, and you're hearing it from me. Help us with these things. You know, the for-hire permits, there's like 2,600 of them, and the commercial guys are just fading away, and these permits are being sold to the recreational guys, who just want to keep more fish to support their hobby and get a patch write-off, but I'm just saying we need your help, commercial reps. Step it up. Thank you.

MR. ZALES: Bob Zales, Executive Director of Southeastern Fisheries. Sorry, I'm not able to attend in-person. I had personal issues that I've had to take care of, and I've been trying to listen to as much of you all's meeting as I can, and I'm going to talk primarily about the state management EFPs.

You all should have all received a comment from me representing the folks that I do in our association, and I'm going add to that, because I believe I put in there that I was anxious to hear the discussion that you all had, and, with that, I've got more concerns now than I did.

I also want to thank Genio and his staff for listening in to you all's discussion, because clearly it shows the interest that the Fisheries Service has in this, and, when you talk about a rec state management EFP proposal, it's not just about the recreational fishery, because this is a mixed-use fishery. It includes recs, for-hires, and commercial. The stock assessment plays with everybody.

You all heard us talk about already, over the past few years, about the extremely high discard mortality attributed to the rec sector, because there's no accountability there, and that impacts the stock assessment, and that reduces the amount of fish that all of us can catch, whether you're rec, for-hire, or commercial, and, until that issue gets addressed, we're never going to get this problem fixed. Your own documents state that.

I'm going to take you all and give you all back, and I'm going to take you the dinosaur age and a little bit of history, and my memory make kick in here, because I'm seventy-two now, but, years ago, when the dinosaur MRFSS was there, and this is back in the 1990s, there was a fellow by

the name of -- I believe his name was Charlie Moore, and he worked with South Carolina, and, with all due respect to you all from South Carolina, and I love you all to death, and you do a great job, but Charlie Moore -- You all had, back then, a recreational data system for your for-hire fleet that outdid everybody in this country, to my knowledge.

I learned a lot from that at the meetings and places that I was with Charlie. We use you all's model, in a sense, parts of it, to work on the for-hire survey that I was instrumental in helping Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission and the Fisheries Service design and implement, and somehow you all have failed to keep up with that initial program, especially for your rec data.

Florida right now, for the South Atlantic side, clearly is the leader here, and I appreciate Jessica and her staff and all the hard work they put into this, because they do a great job, but, the other three states, you all are not anywhere close. This EFP is not in a position for you all to move forward with in its current state. There are so many variables that are missing here that have the high potential to negatively impact the commercial fleet, and we cannot stand that.

You all are going to have to get your information together before you do this. The reason why the Gulf program has worked pretty well, and it's got some issues, is because all that was put together before they submitted these EFPs -- They had everything together, and they got everybody on the same scale, as Clay talked about earlier.

MS. MURPHEY: Bob, I'll ask you to wrap it up, please.

MR. ZALES: Okay. You all's scale is different for all this. You're going to have to get your scales on the same page, and so I'll be sending some more comments before your meeting ends, and I appreciate the opportunity here, and I appreciate everything that you all are doing. Thank you very much.

MR. BRANNON: Thank you, council, and thank you to NOAA staff today that was there, and specifically the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Amy Dukes and Blaik Keppler. I know they've worked very hard on this issue.

My name is Gettys Brannon. I'm the president and CEO of the South Carolina Boating and Fishing Alliance, and I'm also a member of the Snapper Grouper AP. I want to hit on a few things today that have already been covered, and so I'll probably be pretty quick. I would like to point out that, over this process in the last few years, and especially over the last years, the states have done a great job of collaborating, and coming together, and have a realistic solution to good data management.

Our governors, our attorney generals, our congressional delegation, our state house, led by Senator Goldfinch, who you heard from a little while ago, and he actually already has a framework in place for the size and crew limits in the state, but they've all come together and said we need to have a thoughtful approach to state management. These EFPs do just that.

In what job can you take numbers 40 percent off, year after year, to your stakeholders and still be employed? You can't. Those science-based numbers are too far off. We don't know true recreational effort, which this will now tell us. We certainly don't know the dead discard number, and I'll agree with the previous presenter, who mentioned that, and the dead discard

numbers, and the science-based, and data standard collection shows that we have a 93 percent dead discard rate. That means that 475,000 of the 509,000 fish are dead on days we're not fishing for them. That is not a real number.

To go even further, and let's think about this from a commercial and a recreational side of things. Commercial folks are fishing every day to make a living, to catch fish to go put in the grocery stores and to sell at their markets. The recreational folks will not fish every single day. Right now, the recreational effort is what it is, and the pressure is what it is, because we have one or two days.

When we spread out, the studies show that folks are not going to go unless the weather is good, their life circumstances line up, and they have time to go on the weekend, and so this is actually going to give us a real estimate of catch data, and I would also say that, going off of a previous comment, this actually will give us an accountability tool for the recreational sector to keep up with.

As an industry group of twenty-eight boat makers and the three largest fishing tackle manufacturers in the world, we stand ready to message the importance of reporting and accurate science to our stakeholders, the anglers and boaters and fishermen all across the South Atlantic, and so today I ask that the South Atlantic Fishery Council support this, support the EFPs, and get back to using good science. Thank you.

MR. MCWATERS: Good afternoon, or good evening. I want to talk about first red snapper. I absolutely support the FWC's state management EFP proposal. That document is really well written, and, from my view, it hits the nail on the head on why it's the right thing to do. I mean, every reasonable person supports reasonable conservation and reasonable and fair harvest of our resources, and that document does a great job to get the data and go down that path, and so I commend C.J., Jessica, Kristin, and Luiz for putting it together, and I request that the council and NOAA support it and request the approval from Secretary Lutnick.

On the next topic, on black sea bass, Amendment 37, you know, I listened earlier to the one fish, two fish, three fish discussion, and, for what it's worth, my view is the lesser of the evils is a three-fish bag limit and the size limit of either twelve or thirteen inches, and, lastly, on citizen science, there was a discussion yesterday that Julia and Meg supported, and Andy had asked some questions, and there was some other discussion.

For what it's worth, I want to give my input, and so, for the last two years, I've been an active volunteer in the Release project, and I am very much interested in how the data is being used, and I plan to continue to support the program, and I agree with Dewey's comment yesterday that, while it's great to have the data, the important thing is to actually use the data properly, and so that's what is really driving participation, from my view, and so thanks to Meg and Julia for doing a great job, and they've been great to work with. Thank you.

MR. WILLINGHAM: Darrin Willingham, Jacksonville, Florida, Jacksonville Offshore Sport Fishing Club president. First, comments about the black sea bass, and I think the biggest thing is Florida is not North Carolina, and North Carolina is not Florida. These changes that the council is contemplating are hideous for us, trying to shut down our fishery during the months that we go

out and actually try to collect these fish, because we frankly don't have as much time, with fifty-eight-degree waters, as the North Carolina coast.

I would ask that the South Atlantic Council please pay attention to that and try not to close down our black sea bass fishery. I know that there are numbers that are shoved back and forth, and it's just -- It's frustrating. I hear comments about, well, let's leave the black sea bass at thirteen inches long, but I can tell you that I've caught so many twelve-and-a-half and twelve-and-a-quarter and twelve-and-three-quarter-inch sea bass that I wouldn't be digging through tons and tons of extra fish trying to get to them, and three black sea bass is a punch in the face. You know, five black sea bass is bad enough from seven.

Changing gears to red snapper and the exempted fishing permit, our fishing club members are strongly in favor of the South Atlantic Council accepting the exempted fishing permit. We applaud FWC, Governor DeSantis, and Congressman Rutherford for standing up for us. FWC fixed the red snapper problem in the Gulf of America with state management. They have reestablished trust and proven that state management of red snapper actually works.

We have been talking about trust for years from our fishing club through this council, and I'm concerned -- We got to meet Ms. Annie Hawkins, Chief of Strategy for NOAA, today for the first time, and I know that she's relatively new to this NOAA process, but I also know that it's her job, as General Counsel, to try to fix some of the mess that they've gotten themselves into, and then, when she said that NOAA worked to prevent bottom closures, that's misleading at best, given the fact that NOAA Fisheries tried for six-plus months to force a three-month bottom fishing closure before the Trump administration's Secretary of Commerce, Howard Lutnick, refused to allow that attempted power move, and so that's what truly, truly stopped it.

As for Andy, and no disrespect, but you spoke about celebrating the ending of overfishing of our red snapper and the four lawsuits and the pending new research, but still tried to force a bottom closure of fifty-five species to protect one species. I think that the possibilities for the state-federal partnerships for management of red snapper is kind of too little too late. FWC has reestablished trust, and we think that's the direction to go. Thanks for your time.

MR. MCCLEES: So I'm from Resellers Reef in Orange Park, Florida, which is in between Jacksonville and St. Augustine in northeast Florida, and I'm just kind of speaking on especially red snapper and the economic impact it has on me as a tackle shop owner. Those two days we have every year, or a one-day season we had the year before, is incredible, the amount of people that show up to fish for one red snapper.

You know, we had record-breaking sales that month, for that one month, because of that one day, or those two days, and, aside from it being very dangerous, because you can't predict the weather -- I actually got stuck offshore one time, forty miles out, on a single-engine boat. My buddy got stuck overnight, and just a long story, but there's not enough personnel to -- You know, tow companies, the Coast Guard, everybody is tied up, you know, helping all these different situations going on. It's dangerous, but, aside from that, if we could have a larger season of some sort, it would really change the economic possibilities, which would be great. I see it firsthand and, you know, I just wanted to speak on that.

Really, in northeast Florida, my personal fishing experience, red snapper are so overabundant, and they've really become a nuisance species, and it might be off-putting to some people, but, I mean, they've got to eat. They've got to eat something, and they've got to be eating these other reef fish that we're trying to protect, and I just think they're just overrunning the reef, and so, anyway, that's all I've got. Thank you.

MS. ECKERT: Thank you. This is Anne Eckert. I'm in Jacksonville, Florida. I'm also on the board of the Jacksonville Offshore Sports Fishing Club and have been actively involved with the FWC and the EFP program over the past year. I'm an experienced angler, for well over forty years, and I fully support the state management proposal for the EFP. Along with Darrin, I also am concerned about lumping us in with North Carolina for the black sea bass, and I would hope there would be some reevaluation of that to take into consideration the differences between the Florida and the North Carolina coast.

MR. MELZ: My name is Stephen Melz, and I'm a commercial dungeness crab fisherman in California. I'm here because I want to share with the council how our fleet has directly benefited from the work that was done in the South Atlantic under the last Sustainable Seas Technology EFP.

I want to start by thanking the council for your continued support of the black sea on-demand gear EFP. Your support has made a real difference for fishermen across the country who are trying to keep working through whale-related closures. The Sustainable Seas EFP, along with the work and feedback from the fishers participating in it, was responsible for developing, testing, and refining the first version of the on-demand gear configuration that our dungeness crab fleet has now been --

MR. SMILLIE: Stephen, we seem to have lost you, lost your audio on our end. Okay. Stephen, we have lost your audio. If you could maybe check your internet connection, and it looks like you're offline, and may have lost service, and so, in the interest of time, we are going to skip over you and go to Ryan Halonen.

MR. HALONEN: My name is Ryan Halonen. Like Steve, I'm also in California. I'm with Subsea Sonics, a manufacturer of on-demand gear, and we support the new black sea bass EFP and its important goals of expanding testing under realistic fishing conditions, expanded areas, and additional gear configurations, and the development of data to support a realistic economic assessment of the use of on-demand gear for the fishery. You know, the original EFP was highly successful, with a strong level of participation, feedback, and commitment from the fishing community, and we feel this effort should be expanded on and the opportunities for these communities to continue.

MR. SMILLIE: Ryan, we appear to have lost you as well. I don't know if you guys are together, but we seem to have -- We seem to have internet on this side, and so we'll loop back around to you guys. It looks like both of you are actually offline now, and so, for the sake of time, we're going to move on.

MR. MOIR: Good evening, South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council members. My name is Jim Moir. I'm the Executive Director of the Indian Riverkeeper. My testimony today is about the Oculina Habitat of Particular Concern. I urge you to recommend no change, do not support

Amendment 11 or 12 to the Oculina Habitat of Particular Concern. There is no justified need for establishing a more lenient shrimp fishery access area along the northeastern edge of the Oculina Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern.

Not reinforcing protections for imperiled marine protected habitat is unethical. None of the issues raised in the letter of disapproval from the National Marine Fisheries Service disapproving of Amendment 10 have been adequately addressed. There are glaring inconsistencies with the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The goals and objectives of the fishery management plan have had serious deficiencies of analysis and specious claims made.

Bottom trawling is a wasteful and destructive fishing technique. It disturbs benthic habitat within its trawl track and leaves plumes of potentially suffocating sediment in the water column and dead bycatch in its wake. A bathymetric survey by the RV Nancy Foster does not support the creation of a shrimp fisheries access area. It confirmed the proximity of intact oculina coral pinnacles and confirmed the fine-grain sediment. It also confirmed the presence of a nepheloid layer, suggesting a cross-current that can suspend, can carry fine-grained sediment onto the reef.

The council has ignored data collected by pioneer researchers with firsthand knowledge and a heroic experience of conditions on the bottom along the reef tract. The analysis of temperature data suggesting rare upwellings is misleadingly interpreted. No ADCPs were deployed, and no plume sediment dispersal models for this area exist.

The 100-meter bathymetric contour boundary is appropriate. Your science supports this as the boundary. There have been no recent observer bycatch studies undertaken. We don't know what the effects of increased trawling will have on threatened species.

Executive Order 14276 refers to an economic protection from seafood importations. There are no rock shrimps imported. The tradition of this fishery only goes back fifty years, and, currently, there is a market overcapacity. 104 valid commercial vessel permits for rock shrimp are out there, and only 12 to 24 percent actively fish. This indicates rock shrimp are a niche or boat boutique market, to which increasing the supply would not enhance demand, and might negatively affect the price. Trawling activities in the proposed shrimp fishery access area have historically been low, and variable at best.

Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually on coral reef preservation and restoration. The oculina corals are unique and precious, possibly invaluable to research habitat. These corals provide -- They are essential and commercially important to fish species and during vulnerable portions of their life cycles. It is irreplaceable. The risk of further damage to an ancient treasure, versus the dubious reward of enabling a fishery that has been the nemesis to it to gain territory, is a poor formula. We must enhance the --

MS. MURPHEY: Jim, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to wrap it up, please.

MR. MOIR: Thank you.

MR. GRAVITZ: Good evening, council members. My name is Mike Gravitz. I'm the Senior Policy Fellow at the Marine Conservation Institute. You've heard from me many times before on this issue of protecting the oculina corals.

As one of the founders of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, the institute has special expertise, a long interest in numerous research publications about deep-sea corals like oculina around the world, and, consistent with this focus, we've been commenting on proposed amendments concerning oculina habitat since 2021.

We continue to oppose the creation of a shrimp fisheries access area within the northern area of the Oculina HAPC. The current buffer strip, which the proposals would turn into a shrimp fisheries access area, is critical, because it keeps shrimp nets, and some boats tow as many as five nets behind them, and sediment suspended by trawling away from the sensitive oculina coral reefs.

Sediment from bottom trawling can travel hundreds, and even thousands, of meters underwater, but your proposed SFAA is frequently closer to the corals than that, and the negative impacts of sedimentation on oculina and other corals, and the need for a large buffer distances to prevent this, are well documented in the council's own environmental assessment of the proposed amendments. The council's own Coral Advisory Panel recommended a thousand-meter buffer between shrimp trawling and the high relief corals, to prevent such harmful sedimentation and reduce the risk of nets colliding with coral reefs.

During this process, there have been many discussions of whether bottom currents in the OHAPC sometimes run from east to west, thus capable of bringing sediment from trawling over the corals. Fishermen have said the currents do not run from east to west. Inversely, scientists who have studied the corals placed current meters at the bottom, who have been down in submersibles, and even literally walked on the bottom, and who have published peer-reviewed papers using data from current meters, all say that the currents do sometimes run from east to west, and that these east-to-west currents are not necessarily associated with the infrequent large upwellings that have been documented and discovered by ChatGPT by some of your staff.

The council could easily put an end to speculation about currents and upwellings by placing two or three acoustic Doppler current profilers, or ADCPs, next to the corals to directly measure current speed and direction, and they cost about \$15,000 to \$20,000 each, or you can rent them. There's a simple direct way to answer this key question, and why not take it, and surely the Southeast Fisheries Science Center may have this equipment, or could easily manage the research with rented or borrowed equipment.

To adapt and paraphrase badly a well-known statement from Dr. Martin Luther King, the arc of fishery management decision-making is long, but it bends towards following rigorous science, not pressure from self-interested parties or politics. We recommend that you follow this arc. The South Atlantic Council used to be known for its good work protecting deep-sea corals, and the council should protect its legacy, and not abandon it. Thank you.

MR. STEPHENS: My name is Nick Stephens. I'm the owner-operator of a headboat out of Ponce Inlet, Florida. I'm in full support of the EFP project. This project will help fill the need for better and more accurate data. I'm hopeful that the state management of red snapper and other species will fill the need for a faster, more accurate management strategy, and so we fully support the EFPs. Thank you.

MR. HORTON: Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the council. My name is Chris Horton, and I'm the Senior Director of Fisheries Policy for the Congressional Sportsman's Foundation. My comments will be brief, as I just want to express our sincere appreciation to the states for stepping up with a solution to really a decade-long rut that we've been stuck in relative to poor recreational data and poor access to a rapidly-growing red snapper population in the South Atlantic.

You know, back in 2017, when the Gulf red snapper season was expanded from three to thirty-nine days, you would have thought the sky was falling. Some of the NGOs were claiming that we would exceed the recreational ACL by as much as 600 percent, but that didn't happen. We documented what we all suspected, is that effort stayed roughly the same. It was just spread out across a much longer time.

You know, breaking that model of federal fisheries management in 2017 really was the catalyst that brought the states together and created the path to the highly successful state management model that we have there today. Andy and Bob is right, in that the Gulf states had already implemented their own data collection programs prior to the states joining -- To developing their EFPs.

In a number of ways, I would argue that the South Atlantic states are in a better position. They've already come together jointly to develop these EFPs, and their proposed state data collection programs are much more similar from the start than those in the Gulf.

You know, discard estimates is what is driving these short seasons. This is our opportunity to convert those discards to landings, with very low risk to the population's sustainability, and sometimes you just have to break the mold, the old mold, to build a better product moving forward. The return on investment from both a cultural and an economic perspective, far exceeds the risks here. We urge the council and NOAA to fully support the four states as they forge a better path for recreational fisheries management in the South Atlantic, and hopefully not just for red snapper, but for all recreational fisheries in the future. Thanks for your time.

MR. CROMWELL: This is Lawrence Cromwell. I'm just a citizen of Florida, Hobe Sound, Florida, and I'm basically against the proposed Coral and Shrimp Amendment 11 and 12, because I think it is irreparable damage to the reef, that cannot be replaced or duplicated anywhere else in the world.

I also think that this whole thing is something that maybe the shrimpers who want to do trawling may not want to win this particular issue, because they may wind up killing the shrimp with the amount of mud and silt released by the trawling method, and so they might wind up hurting themselves in the short time, and maybe even in the long run, more likely in the long run, but I feel that this is an amendment that does not need to go forward. Thank you very much.

MR. MCCAFFITY: My name is Chris McCaffity. I'm a commercial fisherman from Morehead City, North Carolina, and I wanted to talk about the exempted fishing permit for red snapper and ask that, if this is approved, or even if it is not, that the total allowable catch be split between the commercial and recreational sector before any dead discard deductions are taken off the top.

There seems to be some great discussion about, if it's true, how many recreational dead discards there are, or what the real number is, and so it has hurt the commercial fishery and the consumer of seafood, that gets left out of most of these discussions, for over a decade now, and so I would like to see where we split that TAC, the total allowable catch, ahead of time, and then manage it so that the season coincides with the grouper season to stay open the entire -- For that eight-month period anyway.

Another issue that is important, that really doesn't get much discussion, is lionfish. You know, the Caribbean fishermen have had great success targeting lionfish using pheromone baits and traps, with no other bycatch, and, with the on-demand buoy retrieval now for the traps, we could trap these fish and help control the population. We might not be able to wipe them out, but to control it would help a lot of the juvenile fish have a better chance of growing into catchable fish.

I would also, I guess real quick, like to talk about we should make fishing fun again, by focusing more on enhancement than enforcement, and I think we can do that through artificial reef programs, and also stocking. We can incubate fertilized eggs from local specimens at research hatcheries that already exist, turn them into production facilities that release the hatchlings to live wild and free, as natural selection and ensure survival of the fittest, and we can release these fish by the billions if we want to, and have hatchery-supported quotas, kind of like we do with trout in mountain streams, and they stock salmon on the west coast.

This is not rocket science. It's something that we could easily do with many species, such as black sea bass, cobia, triggerfish, and mahi-mahi would be a great one to do. If you stock those off of the North Carolina coast, by the time they make their way back around to us, they will be a keeper size, and so it would just be a great win-win for everybody. You're creating a commodity. You're helping the recreational sector. You're feeding more people, and you're generating new revenue that will help the economies, and so I know you all want to go. I'm just not going to take any more of your time. Thank you very much. I hope that you'll take my comments into consideration.

MR. SHAFFER: My name is Charles Shaffer. I am a third-generation headboat operator here in Port Canaveral. I am all in support of the EFP. I'm not going to really talk about that. I know everybody else has.

A couple of things I really want to talk about, and the gentleman right before me spoke about how we need to make this fun again. Well, you know what? He's absolutely right. The one thing no one does is trust. I mean, do a few things to earn our trust back. Nobody trusts. I mean, nobody -- We don't trust the system. You know what, and, you know, we can fix this together, and that's all I really want to say, is we all can fix this.

Another topic I would like to talk about is headboats have been reporting data for twenty years. We've been putting in trip tickets. What do we get out of the end of it? Nothing. They probably say our data is irrelevant, and I feel like the only thing you've really done to headboats is take away, and you've taken away from the commercial side of things. We just -- Like I said, we need to go back to trust, and I need to trust you. I think you need to do more in support of the headboat and commercial side of things.

The last thing I really want to talk about is, the last season for red snapper, I was struck and hit by a center console. I had anchor, and so literally the safety is key for myself, paying passengers, and, you know what, the other passengers as well, or I'm sorry. The center consoles, everybody that's out on the ocean, and you're making it very unsafe. I really support you taking headboats out of this home run derby-style fishing, and please give us our own season, to where my vessel can go out and be safe.

People who are running without running lights. It is a circus. It's a circus I don't even want to participate in. I earn my living on the water, just like a commercial fisherman earns their living on the water, and please don't make it a circus for us to survive. I am not at your job making it a circus for you, and so all I can say is please fight for me. Please fight for the headboats, and please fight for the commercial fishermen.

The recreational side of things, you know what? Everybody else has their own jobs, but, you know what? They can have their own season, and fish for these fish, but the thing is, for people that are literally earning their living, and paying their FEL bill, or whatever it is, please look out for us. Thank you very much.

MS. ANKER: I am from the Conservation Alliance of St. Lucie County, and my comments have to do with the Amendment 11 and 12, about the Oculina Habitat Area of Particular Concern and opening up the shrimp fishery access area.

We've been commenting on these proposals for several years. In 2022, we helped organize a public comment response to the Amendment 10 proposal, which resulted in 32,200 comments. All except thirty were negative. From the July 28, 2022 letter to the council from Andrew Strelcheck, Regional Administrator from NOAA, he stated that the vast majority of comments opposed the proposed action, stating that it is not based on the best scientific information available and fails to minimize adverse fishing impacts on essential fish habitat.

In this letter, Mr. Strelcheck disapproved Amendment 10, citing the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, degradation of oculina coral habitats, including the harm directly or indirectly caused by sediment plumes and lack of documentation of the adverse effects on essential fish habitat.

It's our position that no rationale has been offered in the discussion of Amendment 11 and 12 that relieves the council of its duty to choose to uphold the continued protection of oculina coral reef as a habitat area of particular concern, and a marine protected area, which does not allow bottom-tending gear like trawling within its boundaries. We find that the council has not offered any robust, competent, scientific or economically-valid arguments that would withstand Mr. Strelcheck's objections.

In some areas, there have been no data at all, including biologist-observed bycatch and evaluation by the Coral Advisory Panel, which is a departure from the norm. The bottom line, as Mr. Strelcheck states, is bottom trawling is considered the most destructive fishing method. This gear type used to target shrimp species in the South Atlantic living on or just above the seafloor has been shown to severely impact coral ecosystems.

The alliance vigorously objects to this kind of strip mining of the sea, rendering any recovery practically impossible. Bottom trawlers of any sort should have no rights to decimate oculina coral habitat and essential fish habitat in protected areas. We call out the council for defending what is indefensible.

Take a look at the Harbor Branch video of shrimp bottom trawling over oculina reef. Then explain to future generations why you chose to kill, directly or indirectly, the oculina coral reef habitat, which supported over 2,000 species and important fisheries, such as grouper and snapper. Just say no. We urge you to deny the small rock shrimp industry the power to, in one pass, destroy centuries old delicate, but incredibly productive coral, which many fought long and hard to protect. Thank you.

MR. MELZ: Can we try this again?

MR. SMILLIE: We can try.

MR. MELZ: Okay. Let's give it a shot. I'll start all the way at the top. All right. Good afternoon. My name is Steve Melz, and I'm a commercial dungeness crab fisherman in California. I'm here because I want to share with the council how our fleet has directly benefited from the work that was done in the South Atlantic under the last Sustainable Seas Technology EFP.

I want to start by thanking the council of your continued support of the black sea bass on-demand gear EFP. Your support has made a real difference for fishermen across the country who are trying to keep working through these whale-related closures. The Sustainable Seas EFP, along with the work and feedback from the fishers participating in it, was responsible for developing, testing, and refining the first version of the on-demand gear --

MR. SMILLIE: All right. Stephen, I'm sorry we lost you again, and let's give Ryan a try here, and, Ryan, you're unmuted on our end. Hopefully you don't cut out as well.

MR. HALONEN: Thanks for the time, and the second chance, but I'm Ryan Halonen, and I'm with Subsea Sonics, a manufacturer of on-demand gear, and I just wanted to point out our support of the black sea bass EFP. You know, this black sea bass fishery is the first fishery where our gear was used in realistic conditions, and so it serves as a proving ground to other fisheries, which has now expanded to conservation efforts on almost every continent, you know, and it's unique, in the ropeless world, that it uses single traps, as opposed to a string of traps, or a trawl, you know, which creates challenges, both economic and from backup recovery standpoints.

You know, we've had tremendous success in the first EFP, and we would like to see it expanded, because it -- You know, not only does it keep the markets alive in the Southeast, but it keeps them, you know, strong and healthy, and it promotes conservation throughout the planet, really, and so thanks for your time.

MR. ANGERS: Thank you, Madam Chairman and members of the council. I'm Jeff Angers, the President of the Center for Sportfishing Policy, and I want to begin by acknowledging NOAA's new leadership team and thanking NOAA's Chief of Strategy, Annie Hawkins, for being in Kitty Hawk today to underscore that the South Atlantic red snapper fishery is a priority

for the administration. Their engagement matters, and I really liked Annie's message this morning. Closing the ocean is not the answer, and empowering the states is a proven success story.

My home is in the Gulf of America region, and I can report firsthand that state management works. I want to share a quick personal story. I was told, in 2017, that my three kids and I would be allowed to fish for red snapper in the Gulf for only three days. I was really unhappy. Thanks to state management, fast-forward eight years to this year, and our 2025 state season in federal waters ran from May 1 to November 15, roughly 200 days. Noteworthy for all of you today, my kids and I actually snapper fished this year three days. We picked three glorious, safe days on the Gulf of America to embark on great and successful trips. State management works.

CSP fully supports the South Atlantic states in their efforts to take control of their red snapper seasons, data collection, and management. It was wonderful to hear all the states' presentations this morning on their EFP submissions tailored to their individual states. It is clear there is broad alignment from governors, attorney generals, state legislators, congressional delegations, and NOAA leadership, all recognizing the need for a better path forward.

The most important people in the room, the key leaders here, are the state directors, who are blazing the trail out from under bureaucratic federal mismanagement of this otherwise abundant fishery. Chair Trish Murphey pegged it in her remarks this morning. Under federal management currently, we have a fishery with a 509,000-fish ACL, and only 34,000 fish available for harvest. When 93 percent of a public resource is unavailable to the public, we have a failure of federal management. We offer kudos and thanks to all the South Atlantic state fisheries directors, Jessica, Carolyn and Doug, Amy and Blaik, Trish and Cat, and America's anglers say thank you, too. I appreciate the chance to give comment today. Thank you, all.

(Whereupon, the public comment session was adjourned.)

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PC Wed 12/10/25

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✓ Jessica	McCawley		Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
✓ Robert	Beal		Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
✓ Carolyn	Belcher		GA DNR Coastal Resources Division
✓ Gary	Bortland		
✓ Amy	Dukes		SC DNR Marine Resources Division
✓ Judy	Helmey		
✓ Francis (Dewey)	Hemilright		
✓ James	Hull	Jr.	
✓ Kerry	Marhefka		
Tom	Pease		Seventh Coast Guard District
✓ Charlie	Phillips		
✓ Tom	Roller		
Robert	Spottswood	Jr.	
✓ Andy	Strelcheck		NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region
Deirdre	Warner-Kramer		Office of Marine Conservation OES / OMC
TBD	TBD		U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Representative

Shep Grimes

Re DeVictor

Dr. Marcel Reichert

Sonny Gwinn

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PC Wed 12/10/25

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Attendee Report: December 2025 Council Meeting

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Attended

Yes

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Not applicable for staff

Attendee Details

Last Name

Aman

Amendola

Angers

Anker

Atkinson

Aukeman

Bailey

Bajema

Baker

Barbieri

Barger

Barile

Barrows

Batsavage

Beal

Bernier

Bianchi

Binion-Rock

Blough

Blum

Boots

Borland

Brannon

Brouwer

Brown

Bublely

Bunting

Byrd

Cheshire

Coleman

First Name

Kevin

Kim

Jeff

Shari

Seth

Trip

Adam

Jordan

Scott

Luiz

Jeff

Peter

Katline

Chris

Bob

Quinn

Alan

Samantha

Heather

Catherine

Benjamin

Gary

Gettys

Myra

Hunter

Walter

Matthew

Julia

Rob

Heather

Crandall	Chelsey
Cromwell	Lawrence
Crosson	Scott
Curtis	Judd
DeVictor	Richard
Degan	Jacqui
DiJohnson	Alex
Dover	Miles
Drexler	Michael
Dubniczki	Hayden
Dukes	Amy
Dunn	Russell
Dyar	Ben
Eckert	Anne
Farrell	Delaney
Fields-Rivera	Kayla
Flowers	Henry
Floyd	Brad
Foss	Kristin
Geeslin	Dakus
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Gialanella	Tiffany
Glaser	Danica
Goldfinch	Stephen
Gore	Karla
Gravitz	Michael
Gray	Alisha
Griffin	Aimee
Griner	Tim
Guyas	Martha
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Hadley	John
Hale	Robert
Hallas	sara
Halonen	Ryan
Harrell	Ryan
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Hart	Hannah
Haymans	Doug
Helies	Frank
Helmey	Judy
Hildreth	Delaine
Horton	Chris
Howington	Kathleen

Hull	Jimmy
Iberle	Allie
Isbell	James
Iverson	Kim
Karnauskas	Mandy
Kent	Russell
Keppler	Blaik
Kersting	Anne
Klasnick	01Kelly
Klibansky	Nikolai
Klibansky	Lara
Knowlton	Kathy
Laird	Skylar
Larkin	Michael
Law	Alexander
Lazarre	Dominique
Leavel	Lillie Callaway
Levy	Mara
Locke	Charles
MCGOVERN	Jack
Macek	Amanda
Mackesey	Brendan
Malinowski	Richard
Mallory	Ryan
Marhefka	Kerry
Markwith	Anne
Masi	Michelle
Matter	Vivian
McCaffity	Chris
McClair	Genine
McGuigan	Charles
McMullen	Ryan
McWaters	Mark
Mcclees	Matthew
Meehan	Sean
Mehta	Nikhil
Melz	Stephen
Merck	Nicole
Miranda	David
Moir	James
Murphey	Trish
Nejjari	Amber
Newman	Thomas
Nuttall	Matthew

ODEN	JEFF
Oliver	Ashley
Ott	Emily
Owens	Marina
P	Jeff
Pace	Sara
Package-Ward	Christina
Padgett	Kathryn
Palmrose	Kristin
Perkinson	Matt
Phillips	Charlie
Pineiro Soler	Eugenio
Porch	Clay
Ramsay	Chloe
Rathke	David
Records	David
Reichert	Marcel
Reynolds	Kris
Rodgers	Phil
Rodriguez	Jessica
Roller	Tom
Runde	Brendan
Rutherford	John
S	Emma
Sawicki	Kim
Schlick	CJ
Schliewe	Stacy
Schmidtke	Michael
Sedberry	George
Seward	McLean
Silvas	Rachael
Smart	Tracey
Smillie	Nick
Smit-Brunello	Monica
Smith	Brad
Solinger	Laura
Somereve	Jake
Spurgin	Kali
Stasser	Katie
Stemle	Adam
Stephen	Jessica
Stephens	Haley
Sweetman	CJ
Takade-Heumacher	Helen

Treece	Andrea
Trnka	Maureen
Turley	Brendan
Vara	Mary
Vecchio	Julie
Venker	Ted
Waldo	Jennifer
Walia	Matt
Walsh	Mick
Walsh	Jason
Walter	John
Wamer	David
Welch	Rob
Westwood	William
Whitten	Meredith
Williams	Erik
Willingham	Darrin
Wilms	Olivia
Withers	Meg
Woodward	Spud
bonura	Vincent
collier	chip
cox	Jack
curtis	Joe
gloeckner	david
gwin	earl sonny
huber	Jeanette
monk	Melissa
moss	david
peters	sophonda
sandorf	scott
shaffer	charles
thomas	suz
vincent	matthew
young	Jerome
zales	bob
Addis	Dustin
Aines	Alex
Allen	Shanae
Auster	Peter
Baertlein	Heather
Banks	Kesley
Bogdan	Jennifer
Brewster-Geisz	Karyl

Bruger	Catherine
Cermak	Bridget
Chandler	Alexander
Cody	Richard
Cushner	Sascha
DeFilippi Simpson	Julie
Dunn	Courtney
Franke	Emilie
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Herrick	Daniel
Heyman	William
Hollensead	Lisa
Humphreys	Aaron
Judy	Gabrielle
Keener	Paula
Kolmos	Kevin
Laird	Skylar
Lee	Jennifer
Matzen	Eric
McIntosh	Kevin
McManus	Brian
Miele	Valentina
Muffley	Brandon
Neer	Julie
OCain	Elijah
P	Jeff
P	Jeff
Papacostas	Katherine
Porter	Mark
Reed	John
Rettig	Adam
Ricken	Joshua
Rothschild	Molly
Salmon	Brandi
Scheffel	Trevor
Seeley	Matthew
Seeley	Matthew
Soltanoff	Carrie
Stein	Max
Stewart	Mark
Warren	Camilla
White	Geoff
Williams	Travis
Wilson	Jackie

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