

SEDAR Process Changes and Identifying Key Stocks
SEDAR Committee
December 2024

BACKGROUND AND PRODUCTIVITY CHALLENGES

The SEDAR Steering Committee is considering significant procedural changes to address long standing assessment scheduling challenges related to the lack of resources to address regional assessment needs. Meeting regional demands for stock assessments, while simultaneously ensuring those assessments are thorough, include timely information, and are developed through a transparent process with stakeholder involvement is no small feat. Addressing this challenge is not a new topic; workload issues have existed since the first SEDAR Steering Committee meeting in 2003.

The SEDAR program has undergone continual changes and process revisions during its history as the SEDAR Steering Committee grappled with the “four T’s”: Throughput, Thoroughness, Transparency and Timeliness. While many of the changes were minor tweaks made in response to issues as they arose, others greatly changed how the program operated. Some of the more noteworthy procedural changes implemented to balance throughput with process expectations include acknowledgement of “update” assessments in 2004, implementing the “benchmark, standard, and update” categories in 2011, and adopting the “Research Track” approach in 2018.

None of these changes have resolved the inherent contradiction of the four T’s, and in fact overall throughput has declined in recent years under the Research Track approach. On the other hand, the demand for scientific information has only increased since SEDAR began. One reason for increased demand is changes in the Magnuson Act, in particular the 2006 reauthorization and subsequent National Standard revisions, that increased expectations for robust information to support management, peer reviews of scientific information, required management to annual catch limits, and extensive consideration of uncertainty in stock assessments.

The initial SEDAR documentation stated “SEDAR produces better assessments, not necessarily faster assessments”. While that met the primary need in 2002, today, in 2024, there is a need for faster, or timelier, assessments. SEDAR was also not intended to be the sole source of assessment information. That began to shift over time as the MSA changed to require management supported by peer review science, but the various SEDAR process changes imposed over the years to increase throughput have not proven up to the task of fulfilling all the assessment needs of the three Councils that rely solely on SEDAR for their assessment needs. As noted, changes such as the Research Track have had the opposite effect and reduced overall productivity. One reason SEDAR procedural changes have not succeeded in increasing productivity or timeliness is the data bottleneck. Providing data for assessments, and in particular processing age samples, has been repeatedly cited as the primary impediment to increasing assessment throughput and timeliness (**Figure 1**). Another reason is the increasing complexity of analytical methods. Nonetheless, today there is a need for more assessment information to support science-based management that can adapt to a changing environment.

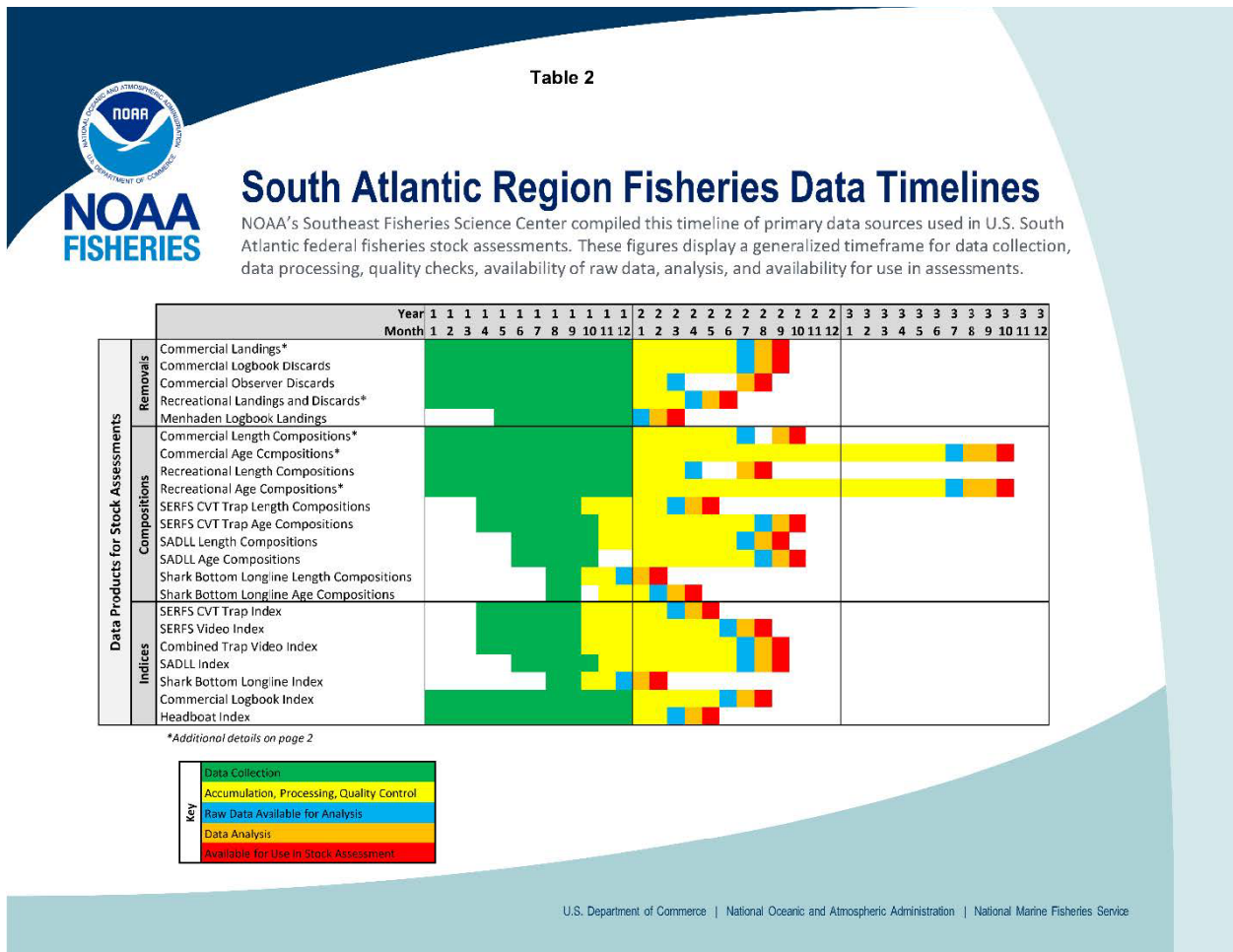


Figure 1. Timelines of when different data sources are available for use in stock assessments. Taken from SEFSC response to SAFMC request in July 2024 (Attachment 2b in SEDAR September 2024 Briefing Book).

PROPOSED SEDAR CHANGES

The SEFSC has proposed modifications to the SEDAR process to address throughput and timeliness, including an overarching goal to increase the net information available to support management (*SEDAR March 2024 A3*). Four key changes were proposed to improve SEDAR performance:

1. Eliminate the Research Track approach
2. Eliminate Assessment nomenclature and schedule “slots”
3. Identify and prioritize “Key Stocks”
4. Assess remaining stocks with less intensive approaches.

The Steering Committee discussed these proposed changes in March and July of 2024. In July of 2024 the Steering Committee supported eliminating the Research Track approach and shifting to identifying assessments simply as assessments without qualifying nomenclature such as “update” or “benchmark” for future scheduling. Dropping nomenclature would create what is analogous to an *a la carte* approach where project components (e.g., data workshop, peer review, working

groups) are incorporated based on project needs. The Council’s SSC raised some concerns that eliminating nomenclature could make it difficult to plan for a project and ensure that key components are ultimately included. Details of these changes remain to be worked out and, as with any significant procedural change, challenges are expected to arise during implementation.

“Key stocks” as used here would represent a small number of stocks that would be assessed on a regular basis through SEDAR. Since the late 2000’s the Council has developed its assessment priorities based on receiving 4 assessments per year. As assessment projects became longer, this was modified to having work done on 4 assessments per year. Overall, productivity has averaged 2 assessments per year (**Figure 2**). When presented to the SEDAR Steering Committee in July 2024, the throughput for South Atlantic was shown at two assessments per year, increasing to three in some years. Additional stocks could be assessed with the “less intensive approaches” as shown in #4, but at this point the SEDAR Steering Committee has had no discussion of this point and it seems likely that such approaches could not include any age information. While the Council has not objected to less data intensive approaches and simpler assessment models, decisions on such matters are really out of its hands. Model and data selection decisions are made by the analytical teams and to some extent SEDAR participants, and the information used to support fishing recommendations is under the purview of the SSC. Additionally, all steps must comply with BSIA practices and peer review standards of MSA. Meeting the goal of providing “net more information” will require data improvements and potential changes in the accepted level of information provided to support fishing level recommendations.

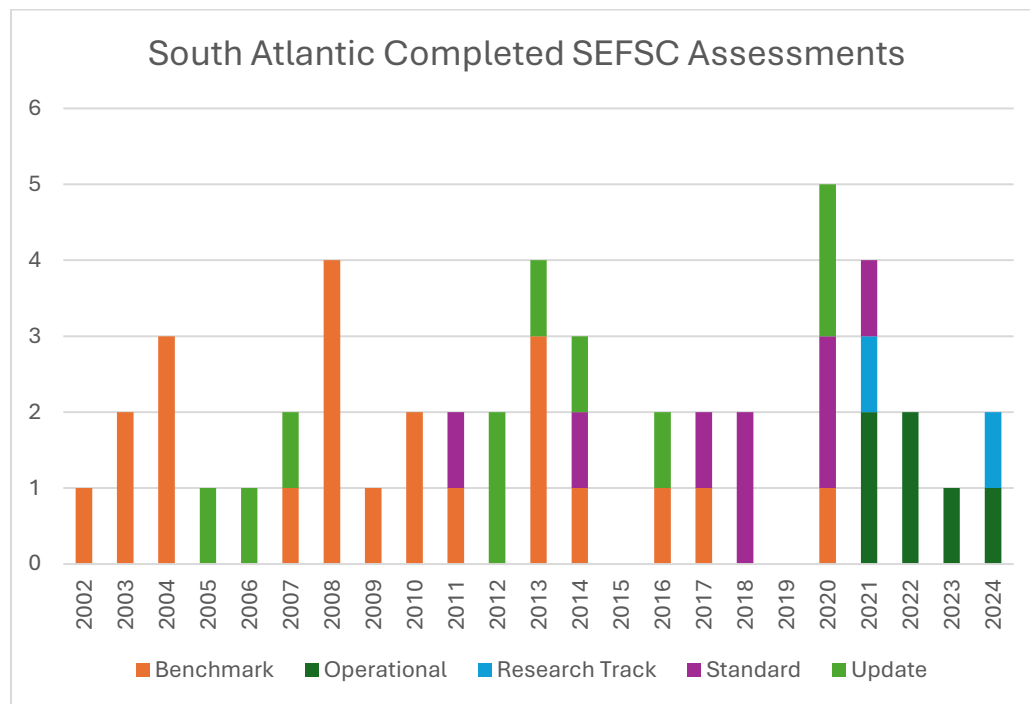


Figure 2. Stock assessment productivity for SEFSC led assessments by assessment type, based on the year of dissemination from 2002 – 2024. Assessments conducted by FWC or not reaching or passing SEDAR peer review are not included.

POINTS RAISED IN PREVIOUS COMMITTEE DISCUSSION AND SSC REVIEW

The Committee suggested that a slot remain open for emerging issues to be addressed, and non-key stocks should be built into the SEDAR schedule. Climate change may exacerbate issues for some stocks and an open slot is needed to address these issues. The SSC in their review agreed with having a slot open. Both the Committee and SSC also recognized the need to address the non-key stocks and try to build them into the current schedule. The Committee recommended having data available if there is time to do an assessment for the data limited stocks.

Potential Impact

Having a slot open for emerging issues or data limited species will reduce the number of key stocks. There are currently 15 key stocks to be assessed by the SEFSC (including Gray Triggerfish). The SSC recommended adding White Grunt to the list. Having the open slot will likely mean only 10 to 12 stocks could be included as key stocks with six years between assessments with update models included between assessments.

The Committee also pointed out that there should be some flexibility in assessment approaches. Simpler approaches may be useful for giving more timely catch advice. The update model proposed by the SEFSC may be useful for giving catch advice between assessments and could provide more robust information than some of the non-aged based assessment approaches. Considerable uncertainty remains about the update model process and the approach has not been accepted for any stock in the South Atlantic region. A better understanding of the update model between assessments is needed (health check vs change in catch level recommendation; information included in the model; and analytical approach) and may vary between stocks. The SSC indicated that data provisioning stills remain an impediment to providing timely assessments.

Potential Impact

The SAFMC Control Rule may need to be revised to better address uncertainty associated with different assessment approaches.

More frequent assessments will require getting catch level recommendations incorporated into management more quickly.

The SSC also recommended:

- Keep the Scope of Work prior to drafting the Terms of Reference.
- Ensure progress in efficiency of data procurement is maintained.
- Leverage state partners where possible to expand capacity.
- Consider if stocks with similar life histories could be assessed as a complex, reducing number of “slots” (e.g. Scamp/Yellowmouth).
- Stock assessments completed by FWRI should be included in the planning phase to better address SSC’s workload.

The SSC further pointed out that standardization is used to increase efficiency. Removing nomenclature may result in decreased efficiency due to increased ambiguity and debates over the details of a given assessment project. The ambiguity may be reduced by having clearly laid out process guidelines that include how to modify or add components if requested after the terms of reference have been agreed upon, how the approval for a change would occur, what happens if not approved, clear authority for deciding project components and defined roles for SEDAR partners, and a timeline for when different types of changes could occur.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Provide guidance on which process best suites the SAFMC for discussion at the SEDAR Steering Committee Meeting in February 2025