

SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

SEDAR COMMITTEE

Webinar

September 15, 2020

TRANSCRIPT

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Rick DeVictor
Martha Guyas
Dr. Genny Nesslage
Monica Smith Brunello

Other observers/participants attached.

The SEDAR Committee of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council convened via webinar on Tuesday, September 15, 2020, and was called to order by Chairman Jessica McCawley.

MS. MCCAWLEY: We are going to move into the SEDAR Committee, and let me remind folks who is on this committee. It's myself, Mel, Bob Beal, Anna, Carolyn, Kyle, Roy, Tim, and Steve. All right. Our first order of business is Approval of the Agenda. Are there any modifications to this agenda? Any objection to approval of the agenda? Seeing none, the agenda stands approved.

The next order of business is Approval of the June 2020 Committee Minutes. Are there any changes or modifications to the June 2020 minutes? Any objection to approval of those minutes? The minutes are approved. Next up is the Update on the Research/Operational Assessment Process. Chip, is Julie going to give us that presentation?

DR. COLLIER: Yes. Julie Neer, a Program Manager for SEDAR, is going to give that presentation, and I'm going to put it up as a full PowerPoint, and so we're going to lose the hands raised, but, if anybody has any questions, just raise their hand, and I will let Julie know.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. Sounds great.

MS. NEER: Good afternoon, all. As Chip said, my name is Julie Neer, and I am the SEDAR Program Manager for the SEDAR Program based at the South Atlantic Council, which does all of the -- I shouldn't say all, but the bulk of the stock assessments that come to you for guidance in your management procedures.

What I'm going to talk about briefly today is this is a presentation that was given to both the Gulf and the South Atlantic SSCs. What happened was, at the May 2020 SEDAR Steering Committee, the Science Center went forward to make some clarifications on how the operational assessments have been conducted, and so we switched from the update, standard, benchmark assessment terminology about two years ago, and what we're using now is operational assessments and research tracks. I'm going to give you just a nugget of history of how we got to where we're at and then talk about why the Science Center felt we needed a bit of a clarification at the May meeting and how that's going to impact the way we move forward.

SEDAR, as most of you are aware, it is how we do the assessments. SEDAR has been around since 2002, and so we have a fairly good history, but I just wanted to take a brief moment to let you guys -- To kind of fill out what our main goals were, because I know we've had quite a bit of new members on the council since we've done any sort of presentation like this for a while, and so, while I have you, I'm going to grab you for a second and to give you a little history.

SEDAR's goals were to provide robust and transparent assessments, and that is the big goal, and that was why SEDAR was put together in the first place. We're big on having stakeholder involvement in the assessment process, and we're trying to produce reliable and scientifically-rigorous assessments.

For the full-blown research track, or previously known as benchmark assessments, we have an independent peer review of all the assessment products, and one of the other goals that we always strive for is for timely assessment products, trying to get the most current data in, if at all possible, but, as you will see, that's not always possible.

We strive for thorough documentations of methods and data, and so we want to make sure that it's written down what we decided on and why we decided it and what we ultimately used, and so there's a reproducibility of the assessments moving forward, for when we have to do them again or someone else needs to come in and wants to check our work, so to speak.

Then to provide appropriate consistency in the documentation and assessment approaches and treatment of uncertainties across assessments. SEDAR does -- It is the overarching program for the Gulf of Mexico Management Council, the South Atlantic, and the Caribbean. We also help out with both the Gulf and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commissions, as well as HMS, with regard to the shark assessments as well, and so have our fingers in many pies.

As I said, our three main goals are transparency, thoroughness, and timeliness. Unfortunately, it's pretty much impossible to get all three of those done at the exact same time. We usually can pick any two and do it fairly well, but one always seems to lag behind, and so, with regard to the research tracks, which I will address a little bit more, but those are the big, long, year to two-year processes that used to be called benchmarks.

Those really focus on being very thorough and incredibly transparent. There's a lot of documentation and a good deal of meetings and a lot of stakeholder involvement, and they're really looking at every -- Not every, but as much as we could possibly do that in the timeframe to try to look at all the questions that may arise throughout that process.

The second component that we have as a type of assessment is an operational assessment, and it is still thorough. They're built on a previous assessment, and we try and incorporate all the new data, so it's more timely, but they're done in a little bit faster of a fashion, so that the reason we get to be more timely is that we have to give up a little bit on that transparency, and we don't have quite as many open meetings, and we still have the documentation of the ultimate report for people, but we may not have as many meetings or as many levels of a place for people to insert their thoughts during the development of the assessment proper.

As I said, the research track is sort of the one that takes the most time, and it takes the most time because it's the step where we work on developing the tool. We try and flesh out the models and the methods and explore all the data and test hypotheses and look at new ideas about things, and it's also a method where we can implement new data methods or look at new data streams across stocks, between stocks, try and incorporate as much information as we have.

If there's new age studies, if there's a new survey, and this is where we want to absolutely incorporate everything, and it's sort of -- We always look at a research track as being everything is up for review. Everything is going to be looked at and determine whether it's useful and should or should not be included in the assessment moving forward.

Now, one of the keys about the research tracks is that they're quite lengthy, because they're really working on developing that tool, but they don't provide status or fishing level recommendations at the end, and so what that frees up is it allows us to not always be chasing and trying to add another year, and it gives you a little bit more flexibility in your timing, by allowing you to -- Knowing that the council is not waiting, and we have to have this done by April 1, so it can go to the council by June to provide the management advice, and it gives us a little bit of flexibility to

explore those hypotheses and really narrow down any of those uncertainties and questions that we might have.

Now, even though we have some flexibility in the timing, it's not open ended, and these things should not take five years, and they're not someone's PhD dissertation, and, at some point, you do have to say, all right, we're going to wrap it up for this time, but having that availability of -- Having that flexibility really frees up the data providers and the analysts to really look into those big questions that they've been trying to get at to help really nail down components of the assessment and the information that they want to provide for the councils.

The other main type of assessment is what we call the operational assessment. They are thorough, as I said, because they are built off of an accepted research track assessment, or a benchmark assessment, but what it does is it includes the most recent data, and so they're a bit more timely than the research tracks, because hopefully they're only one, or perhaps two, years behind in the terminal year of data that's included in the assessment.

They do provide management information that the councils need for the SSCs to set the fishing level recommendations and the councils to move forward with management. Status and fishing levels are provided as part of the output for operational assessments, and they are the default approach for a follow-up assessment, and so, essentially, if you've done a benchmark or a research track, the assumption is, when you do that assessment again, you'll be doing an operational assessment to update that data, and one big difference between the operational assessments and the research tracks is that, with the research track, we usually have an independent peer review, often conducted with members of the Center for Independent Experts, along with SSC members, who help do that review component before it goes to the SSC.

Within operational assessments, the SSC is itself the review body. The assumption is that it's being built off of a previously-approved assessment, and we're just adding more data, with perhaps a tweak here and there with regard to a new method or a new bit of data source that the SCC feels comfortable in reviewing and providing those fishing level recommendations to the councils.

The reason that the Southeast Fisheries Science Center brought this back to the Steering Committee in May is that the original intent, in their minds, of operational assessments are that they are in fact based off of previous benchmark or research track assessments that have already undergone peer review. They are tools that have been built and proven and used, and, therefore, we should be able to continue to use that tool.

Therefore, unless there is a justified reason for making changes to the model or the data, operational assessments should normally be limited to update the existing assessment framework with the most recent data and only making minor modifications to the framework and that supporting information.

The reason the Science Center brought this back up at the May meeting was because the Center did not anticipate having assessment panels for every operational assessment, and so they envisioned that some of the operational assessments would simply be that, pretty simply just adding a few more years of data, essentially turning the crank and coming out with the assessment models, but what was happening was that, increasingly, panels and in-person meetings were being requested by the cooperators, or the councils, in this case, at this point, and the Center noted that

these panels and workshops were resulting in that these operational assessments were taking much more time than they originally anticipated.

When we move from the standard and update and benchmark process of the three assessment types to the operational and research track approach, one of the values, or the expected outcomes, of that shift in the way we were conducting the assessments was that we would be able to get more done faster, increase our throughput, and it doesn't seem to be coming to fruition, based on how the councils were currently operating for operational assessments and having these assessment panels for every single operational assessment.

Given that, and the desire that everyone has across the board to get more assessments, to increase that throughput, get more scientific advice to the councils in a more timely fashion, so you guys can do your work, the Science Center has recommended that we stop having assessment panels for operational assessments, and so, instead of having a group of people that review every component of the assessment from start to finish for an operational assessment, the Center has recommended that we use something called topical working groups.

The focus of topical working groups are these specific groups that are assembled to look at specific topics for that assessment that are identified within the statements of work that you guys are going to see for the 2023 assessments in a bit, but the focus is that, instead of reviewing everything, focusing really in on those specific topics that are going to give -- Where we need the most advice from outside experts to help the Center produce that operational assessment.

The topical working groups are a new approach that was suggested in May, and we've been working -- SEDAR staff has been working with both Science Center staff as well as -- As I said, I've given presentations to both of the SSCs at this point, the South Atlantic and the Gulf SSCs, and trying to figure out how to operationalize -- Putting these topical working groups into practice and how we'll start using them going forward.

The topical working groups, as I said, were tasked to review and make recommendations on specific topics identified in the statements of work. Topical working groups are comprised of members of the SSC, stakeholders, and other technical experts that may have information to help us provide recommendations on that specific topic. They may meet via webinars or in-person workshops, depending on the topic and the depth of discussion that might need to be held, and the process of whether it should be an in-person or a workshop needs to be included in the statement of work.

Even though there are components of the topical working groups that will meet via webinars and/or in-person workshops, it may be needed to utilize a planning-team-style approach to facilitate some of these discussions. The topical working groups will meet in publicly-noticed webinars, similar to what we do now with the current assessment process, but it may be possible, at some times, where there needs to be additional research work, actual discussions on things, troubleshooting, model runs, that sort of thing, that might happen offline, but, ultimately, the discussions and decisions made by topical working groups will all happen on a publicly-noticed webinar, and so there's still going to be that component, where the public can listen in and the panel can be involved in discussions and asking questions as these recommendations are coming forward.

The topical working groups do just that. They ultimately come up and produce a recommendation, and, is typical with all SEDAR things, we want everything to be written down, so we can see it later, and so the topical working groups will be required to write a report of some fashion documenting their discussions and recommendations, and so, in addition to have these publicly-noticed webinars, where people can listen in to those discussions, we'll also have a written report of the outcome of those discussions, so that we'll have that for the record for the future.

The timing of the topical working groups will need to be set so that the topical working group's recommendations can be provided to analytic teams in a timely fashion to be incorporated in the assessment. What that means is that topical working groups may happen at various stages throughout that assessment process.

If it's a topical working group put together to say to look at the impact of red tide on yellowedge grouper, then clearly those discussions and the recommendations probably need to happen earlier on in the process, when we're talking about data incorporation and data development of things, to look at that, as opposed to, if there's a question on how we should interpret selectivity for this fishery, that topical working group perhaps might meet later in the process, after all the data has been delivered, but while the assessment is actually being developed, and so the timing of those topical working groups will have to be a bit flexible and depend on the specific operational assessment underway.

It was recommended by the Steering Committee that most of the topical working groups should be organized within the SEDAR process, given that the process already is set up to handle appointments from the cooperators and councils and noticing the meetings and webinars and that sort of stuff.

As I said, this initial presentation -- It was initially put together for the SSCs, and so I'm just going to go over this information briefly, because it does lead to you understanding the role of the SSC's recommendations to you and your ultimate recommendations to the SEDAR Steering Committee with regard to what you want to see in these operational assessments.

The SSC plays a very big role in providing guidance on the issues for consideration within the statements of work. If you recall, I said that the topical working groups are going to focus on a specific topic, or topics, that are identified in the statement of work, and so that component is really important, from the SSC standpoint, to make sure we're drilling down on the topics that we want to be discussed by the group. Additionally, the SSCs will participate in the topical working groups themselves, representing the scientific advice and the scientific body from the council, and, of course, as I said, they will review the assessment reports.

I just want to touch briefly about the roles of the statements of work and how the SSC, and ultimately the council, is involved in this step of the process, and so clear and detailed statements of work are required for all operational assessments. You can think of it -- Statements of work are incredibly important. What they do is they define the scopes of the assessment. They clarify the expectations for everyone, and they are critical for scheduling.

When we put together an assessment, we have to play for all of the SEDAR assessments throughout the Southeast region, and so, even though it might look like the South Atlantic only has one or two things to plan for, there might be three additional Gulf assessments, and two from

HMS, and one from the commissions, and all of that has to be put into one big schedule, and so we need to know what the expectations are for any given assessment, so we know what the workload will be when trying to plan out the overall project schedule for SEDAR within the Southeast.

I like to think of it as the statements of work really represent the first stage of the process, and they are essentially your proposal. Statements of work represent what you would like to see and incorporated in this assessment. Ultimately, you guys come down the line and you approve terms of reference for a specific assessment, and so the statements of work are sort of your proposal of what you would like to see, and your terms of reference are essentially your contract of what everyone agrees to.

As I said, providing guidance on what issues might be needed to hold a topical working group is an important component that the SSC needs to weigh-in on. The SSC needs to have information regarding what new information is available and should be considered, and they also provide suggestions on who might participate in said topical working group. Do we have the expertise within the Science Center and the SSC alone to populate these topical working groups, or perhaps they might need an outside expert, someone who is not on either of those bodies or a member of the AP, but you might think is critical, and the SSC could certainly recommend that that person or persons be included in consideration when making the appointments for these topical working groups.

One other thing that we do have the SSC to talk about is also, when you're developing your sort of statements of work, with regard to an assessment, there might be things that came up on the previous assessment that the SSC would like the Center to look at again, but it may not rise to the level of needing a topical working group to meet and convene and review and make recommendations. It might simply be that, yes, we would like you to additionally run a sensitivity on this topic, just to make sure that it gets put in the statement of work, put in the terms of reference, but it doesn't necessarily need a topical working group, and so, not only does the SSC weigh-in on what topics they think might be needing a topical working group, but they can also weigh-in on what topics they think don't need a topical working group, but still need to be considered in the assessment.

Just briefly, we've had some discussions about what should be included and what might need a topical working group, and there's not a clear definition of this would need one and this wouldn't, but things to think about when the SSC is reviewing and coming up with statements of work and making recommendations on what need a topical working group, and things that might be considered are is this a new dataset, or is there a new indices that is suddenly available that we didn't know about that some small university has been running for six years, and we should include it. Well, it needs to be vetted, and so this would be a way that they would say, yes, we should look at that and see if it's useful.

If there are new modeling techniques that perhaps have been used in other assessments, but haven't been used for the species specifically under consideration, that might be a valid example of something that you would want to have a topical working group to review, and, finally, there might have been further analysis that the SSC or the review panel had requested from the last assessment that we may want to circle back on and perhaps have to hold a topical working group to review that for the current assessment, or the upcoming assessment. Like I said, it's not a hard and defined

this would always generate a topical working group and this would never do one, but it's just kind of sort of a way to think about what sort of level we might need, and, again, it's going to be specific to any given assessment what topics might rise to meeting a topical working group.

Then, as I had said, the SSCs will, obviously, participate in the topical working groups, similar to how they have participated in the assessment panels previously, and, as I said, they will also be reviewing the assessment reports when they come to the SSC for SSC review and, ultimately, fishing level recommendations that come up to the council for use in management.

Next steps are -- I've sort of done most of these, but we have -- As I said, we've been meeting with -- We've met with both SSCs to get feedback, and Carrie Simmons at the Gulf Council had provided a similar summary of this presentation to the Gulf Council, and I heard some of their feedback and questions that they had about this new process, and now you guys are getting the presentation, and you now have the option to weigh-in as well.

We've been meeting with the Science Center, key Science Center staff, to develop and operationalize how to put this into practice moving forward, and the goal is to start implementing these topical working groups with the 2022 assessments, and so things that were already approved and moving on are still having the assessment panels. Most of the assessments that are underway, or getting underway soon, are still going to have that old assessment panel approach, and we're transitioning into 2022, where we'll be switching to this approach of topical working groups moving forward, and, anytime you switch from one method to another, there is -- As you know, the devil is in the details, and that's why we're working on these things moving forward.

That's it, in a nutshell, and I'm sure there's lots of questions, and there were the last time, and I will do my best to answer what I can at this point, and some of it might be that we're not sure, but that's a good point, because we are still, as I said, working out how to implement this new approach. Thank you.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you, Julie. I certainly have some questions, and I don't know about others, and so, while we're waiting for people to get their hands raised, I am going to start with some of my questions. What differentiates the operational assessment from an interim assessment?

MS. NEER: An operational assessment is still -- I hate to use the term "full assessment", but, in an operational assessment, you're updating all the data, and so, in an operational assessment, you're updating catches, landings, probably life history, though that's always one of the ones that's up for grabs. If you just did the assessment two years ago, you may not redo the growth curve, but, essentially, you're updating all the information.

The interim assessments, as they are being currently put forward now, are basically going to be, most likely, updating one index and using that index as sort of a level to track how the population is moving, and so they're not going to be updating all the data, and they are updating one or two specific pieces of that data, and Erik might wish to chime in if I'm misspeaking, because I might be thinking more along the line of the approach the Gulf is doing, which is slightly different than the South Atlantic. That's my understanding, and so it's not -- An operational assessment is still all the data is being updated, whereas, an interim assessment, you're updating one or two pieces of the data.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Clay.

DR. PORCH: Thank you. Julie is right. In the Gulf of Mexico, we've had two interim assessments now, and one kind of like it with lane snapper, but we've done it for red grouper and just now with gray triggerfish, and then there will be one for red snapper. In the case of the gray trigger and red grouper, it is using one index of abundance, and we did some analyses to discern which index best tracked the fishable age classes of the stock, and then you just basically -- If the index goes up, you, in some proportion, increase the ABC. If the index goes down since the last time that we gave the ABC advice, then, in some proportion, you decrease the catch.

In the South Atlantic, we're still working on the best way to move forward. For some species, we may have an adequate index with the video trap survey, but we're still looking into that, and so we haven't actually implemented it yet, but that's something that, again, I'm keen to do, and we're having discussions with Erik and his crew about the best way to do that.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thanks, Clay. I guess some other questions that I have are I just feel like this process is involving fishermen less, and so I just felt, from the outset, that the SEDAR process was more about involving the fishermen and letting them be there at these separate workshops and providing additional data and input, and it just seems like we're really moving away from that, and that concerns me, and I don't know if someone wants to comment on that, and I'm just going to put that out there. Hands are going up, and so I'm going to go to Steve.

MR. POLAND: Thank you, Madam Chair. I hate to do this, but I was actually going to go back to the interim analysis topic real quick. I guess this is a question for Clay and Erik, and so where is the Science Center? Where are you guys at right now, as far as getting the interim analyses operational for some of the South Atlantic stocks? I mean, I understand it's probably a difficult question, but are we looking at the next year, or the next couple of years, or the next six months? I just kind of want a general kind of long-term trajectory on that.

DR. PORCH: I don't know if Erik wants to chime in, but I suspect we're probably around a year away. We need to do some analyses, and, essentially, the Gulf has been the proving ground for this type of approach, but partly because they have more survey indices of abundance. Erik agrees with me that it's about a year away.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. Dewey.

MR. HEMILRIGHT: Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. I agree with your comments, as far as the feeling, and it's not my feeling, but it's my thoughts that this will probably reduce fishermen's participation and involvement, and I understand that the reason for these faster tracks of assessment, of spitting stuff out, turn and burn, if I would use the words, to get it done, and definitely I have seen the advantage of in-person meetings in other SEDAR assessments that I have participated in, particularly to smoothhound, blueline tilefish, and sharks. Thank you.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Clay.

DR. PORCH: There's no question that fishermen's input is valuable, and we're looking to get that in a number of different ways, including stakeholder workshops that are outside the SEDAR process, but still working with the councils, but I wouldn't say we would be reducing input from

the fishermen. In fact, the research track should be heavily focused on getting input from the fishermen.

The operational assessments are what happen between the research tracks, and that shouldn't really -- The main things that would feed into it shouldn't change so much from one year to the next, and so the idea is, probably more like every five years or so, we would have a research track, where you're turning over every stone, or just about every stone, and we don't want to make it a dissertation, as Julie said, which, if you turned over everything you can imagine, then, yes, maybe you make it a five-year process, but it really shouldn't take more than a year or two, especially once we've had a first-time assessment.

The operational assessments follow exactly the same protocols as the previous benchmark or research track, and so it really doesn't need the additional peer review, and that's a big point here, and it also doesn't really need assessment panels to review every aspect of the assessment all over again, and the point of an operational is you have a peer-reviewed assessment, and you've agreed on all the data inputs that are going in, and now you're just going to, every few years, add a couple of years of data to it.

We just don't really need to keep reviewing it over and over again. If it rises to the level that there is really substantial problems with the assessment, some fundamentally new information that can't easily be accommodated in the operational track, then, yes, we would schedule another research track assessment, but, otherwise, as Julie said, operational should be pretty close to a strict update, following strict protocols.

There is room, in a statement of work, to -- If the SSC or others identify some key issues they think really need to be addressed, you can write those up in a statement of work, and then that's a negotiation between the group conducting the assessment, whether it's the Southeast Fisheries Science Center and others, a negotiation between us and those who are making the proposals, because somebody has to do the work, and, if we're doing the work, then we need to schedule accordingly, which is, as Julie said, why we need to produce these statements of work and agree to them a couple of years in advance.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thanks. Julie.

MS. NEER: I just wanted to briefly follow-up with what Clay said that I had meant to mention in my presentation, and that is that one of the questions that has come out is how many topical working groups might exist for any given operational assessment, and our thought process that's come out is probably maybe one to two, or maybe three, and so perhaps there's a data question and an assessment or modeling question, and you might have two separate topical working groups for a given assessment, because they are focusing on different topics, but, like Clay said, if you start having three, four, five things that you really feel need to be thoroughly investigated within that assessment, then, yes, most likely the recommendation should be that this should be now a research track, as opposed to try to fit it into that operational umbrella.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Mel.

MR. BELL: Yes, ma'am. To the publicly-open kind of thing, did you say that all of the topical working groups had to be noticed and all, and they were open for attendance, because that's a lot of noticing, I guess.

MS. NEER: Well, the thought would be that it depends on the topic and how many meetings they might have and what degree of public transparency needs to be in the actual discussions, as opposed to development of the information, and so let's say the topic is you're looking at some new growth information that became available, and that's what that topical working group is going to focus on. They would probably have a publicly-noticed data scoping webinar to talk about what new data is available and how they would like to see it analyzed and that information. That would be noticed.

Then the group would go away, and the people doing the work would do the work and work on these components, and all of that would happen just as it happens now, and the assessment -- Just as if you were in a data workshop and someone goes back to their hotel room and runs these models, and then, at some point in the future, they would come back and report back on a noticed webinar, saying I did your request, these are the options, these are the various growth models, and the group would make a recommendation, and that would be it, and so, for that topic, there might be say two noticed webinars, and so it's not every component of every single thing is going to be discussed, and it's specifically the topical working group topics, and, within that topic, you might have one to two webinars, or perhaps one public meeting, is how we're envisioning it.

MS. MCCAWLEY: I guess my concern is that the recommendations from the topical working group won't necessarily be incorporated in the assessment, even after all that work that's done by the topical working group. Clay.

DR. PORCH: To your last point, they would be incorporated if they can be. I mean, if it turns out that the topical working group says something that just can't physically be accomplished, then, no, they wouldn't be included, but, ideally, we'll have stock assessment folks working with them, and so whatever comes out of the group would be something that could actually be implemented, and I did want to reinforce Julie's point that these topical working groups need to be very focused, and it could be that they're focusing on a thing that requires fishermen's input, and we would invite a lot of fishermen to that.

The problem is now that you had what seemed like a focus group, and then the assessment panel is basically revisiting many, or all, aspects of the assessment, and you basically turned it into a benchmark again, and we didn't budget for that kind of time. If we wanted to go that route, then we would budget for it at the frontend, and we would just do fewer assessments, and so this is a way to try and balance the need to have really transparent, thorough research track assessments at the frontend, and then, in between those research tracks, we do these faster operational assessments, and, again, there is always the opportunity, if enough things arise, that we schedule another research track.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thanks, Clay. So then I'm trying to picture, in my mind -- I know you have a limited number of staff that would be doing this, and you guys are tasked with doing the Gulf, the South Atlantic, the Caribbean, and HMS, and so I guess my -- Are you envisioning that the people doing the operational assessments and sitting on the technical working groups are the same folks doing the interim assessments and the research tracks, and I'm just trying to imagine kind of

the throughput here, and is the amount of information -- Are we actually getting more throughput here with the process, or, because we're creating four or five different types, and now some of the folks that would have been involved in operational are now doing these interim, and we really don't get the increased throughput, and I'm just having trouble envisioning this.

DR. PORCH: Sure, and, actually, we're -- In a way, we're decreasing the number of assessment types, because we went from benchmark, update, and standard, and so now we're just going research track and operational. Interim analyses aren't really assessments, per se, and you're just updating your ABC advice based on the trends of an index, and, while doing the management strategy evaluation work to figure the best way to adjust the catches in response to the index may take some time, the interim analysis itself is a spreadsheet exercise. I mean, the equations are very simple, and I can -- If someone gives me the updated index of abundance, I can literally update the catch advice in minutes. It's just plugging stuff into a spreadsheet.

Now, there is various flavors of interim analyses that we're exploring, particularly in the South Atlantic, where, for some species, we don't have a reliable index of abundance, and so we might need to use updated age composition data, or something like that, which I think the council heard about some time ago from Erik's shop, and that is more time consuming, but it's still much less than even an operational assessment, and so I think, at the end, you will get more assessments. I can't imagine a scenario where you would end up getting fewer, with the same resources, than you were getting before.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thanks. I considered the interim really another assessment, just because we were getting some information that ultimately could lead to a new ABC, and so I guess I just considered that an assessment also. Then I'm trying to envision, in my mind, that table that I'm sure we're going to look at as part of the committee, that has the number of assessments out per year and the type and everything.

I guess, in your mind, Clay, how often would you do this research track? I mean, would you set a maximum, and like, okay, we're only going to allow three operational assessments, and then we're going to be required to do a new research track assessment? I'm just trying to figure out how you're thinking about this, and so are you thinking it's a timeframe? Like maybe we don't want to go more than ten years without completing an actual research track assessment on a species, and then we can do operational assessments in between.

DR. PORCH: It depends on the species and what new information comes down the pike. If nothing much changed, we can have a rather long interval between research tracks. I mean, I'm just throwing out a number of ten years, but that would be if there's no real new information, and no big fundamental changes in the fishery, and so nothing that we would have to need a peer review for, but, if there's some fundamentally new information that could inform the assessment, and it's not just a new survey, but something that is really radically different, like we got new information on environmental shifts, or incorporating environmental information directly in to the assessment, or we started moving to a multispecies-type analysis, something like that. Then that would beg a research track.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. Thank you. Mel.

MR. BELL: I am just trying to envision this, and I'm not trying to overly simplify it to be too mechanistic, but, I mean, you could kind of sit down and model through, in a way, what your capacity is for handling these sorts of things. I mean, I know it's not just Clay's staff involved, but, I mean, you could kind of figure out how many research tracks you could run or how many -
- Simultaneously in a year, how many different things you could do, realizing personnel limitations, and also relying on the other people that would be involved, and so that's what I was trying to -- I know, when we started down this road, years ago, it was kind of all about improving our throughput on stock assessments and being able to have the information we needed to make things happen.

You could kind of work through that in a model sort of form and figure out what your capacity, I guess, is, if you want to call it the assessment factory or something, and they may have already done that, in terms of figuring out what they can handle and what they could possibly do in a given year.

MS. MCCAWLEY: I guess a visual would just help me to visualize how all of that would work, and just a couple of examples, out for the next three or four years -- It would just help me visualize how the staff is going to be used and how many different items -- You know, one research track and three operational on the South Atlantic, or zero research tracks and three operational and five interim on the Gulf, and I'm just having trouble visualizing all of this happening at once and how many things could be happening simultaneously. Chip and then Steve.

DR. COLLIER: Thank you. When this idea of operational and research track assessments had come up, and then the further idea of interim analysis, I believe Erik and John Carmichael had put together a matrix, indicating that an assessment would be reviewed essentially every four years in the operational style, with an interim analysis occurring every two years, and then, as needed, it would be updated to a research track, and, since those research tracks can take so long, it wasn't envisioned that every other time you were going to get a research track, and it was based on the information that was available. We can put together a spreadsheet of something like that for you, just updating what they had done in the past.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. Steve and then Clay.

MR. POLAND: Thanks, Madam Chair. I was kind of going to say that same thing that Chip had said, as far as research track assessments, and I never envisioned them to be that you've got to do them at a drop-dead date, every five or four years or stuff, and it was just kind of let the advances in modeling or new information and that kind of stuff kind of drive those decisions, but I do see this new process as a pretty good compromise between our desire as fishery managers to have updated assessments for all of our species every single year, so we can make decisions to know what the best information available, versus the actual kind of physical time constraints and work constraints of getting these assessments in this world of limited resources.

I feel like the topical working groups is a good compromise to kind of, you know, keep that kind of foot on the gas for these operational assessments, but still have the opportunity to bring in new information as it arises. I mean, I think the red snapper one is a fairly good example, and I'm not going to say it's a great example, because I also understand all the baggage that can go on with red snapper, but the selectivity workgroup for that operational assessment I think is a good example of where we're turning the crank, so to speak, on the last assessment, but the Science Center and

the workgroup are looking at if and how and that new selectivity information on the trap survey can be incorporated in there.

As far as the interim analyses, like Clay said, if it's just as simple as just updating a spreadsheet, I don't see how that would take a lot of resources, from the resource time management perspective, but I am curious if, on the interim analysis process, it needs to be baked into the research track assessments. Let's say, for example, and I don't know what our next research track assessment is here in the South Atlantic off the top of my head, and I will use black sea bass.

MS. MCCAWLEY: White grunt? I don't know.

MR. POLAND: Then I'll use white grunt as an example.

MS. MCCAWLEY: I think it's triggerfish. I just threw out white grunt because it's on the list for a little bit later.

MR. POLAND: Let's say shadow shark. We're getting ready to do a research track on shadow shark, and, in that process, do we need to kind of be cognizant of the interim analysis and, by the end of that research track, identify what that one or two key abundance indices are going to be, or is that something that comes after the research track assessment is completed, and you just kind of let the research track assessment kind of run its course, and then, if there's an index of abundance that seems to really drive that model, is that the one that is selected, and does it require more action from either the SEDAR side of the house or the Science Center side or the council side?

MS. MCCAWLEY: Clay.

DR. PORCH: Two questions I think I got out of that, and one was yours, and, yes, we can certainly come up with a candidate timeline, or an example timeline, and we did that, actually, a while back, but we can revise that, as Chip described. To answer Steve's question, certainly part of the research track is to identify the most reliable indices, and I think we can do that also with the view of which one would be best for interim analyses, and, in fact, in some cases, we expect to do the interim analyses while the research track is going on, and so the interim analysis would be hinged off the previous operational assessment, so you can get advice while the research track is going on, since that can last a couple of years.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thanks, Clay. Julie.

MS. NEER: Clay actually addressed what I was going to answer with regard to identifying key indices or sources for the next assessment.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Chip.

DR. COLLIER: Thank you. I didn't want to interrupt the conversation that you guys were having, but the SSC also discussed this at their last meeting, and it's provided as Attachment 2b, and I can go through some of the comments that they had provided for this operational assessment development, if you would like to hear some of those, and Genny Nesslage is also on, and, if I speak incorrectly, she can update us.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Yes, and that sounds great. I would like to hear those comments.

DR. COLLIER: Okay. On page 3 is where they start talking about the operational assessments, and the SSC expressed some concern with the proposed timing of the review and delivery of the 2023, and we had updated them that this was out of the norm, and the reason that the 2023 are a little bit odd is they had been pushed back from the original start dates of their assessments, and so their end date, I believe, is 2018, and that's the terminal year of data, I believe, for both of those assessments, and so there will be four years of data that's going to be gained in this 2023 assessment.

The problem that's coming up is that right now it's in the process of the stock assessment, and so the SSC doesn't know what issues are actually coming out of this one, and they're asking for additional time to provide recommendations on the statements of work, and they would like to provide these at the 2021 meeting. It's a little bit different than what we had done in the past for these statements of work, and they're supposed to be due to the Science Center by October 15, and that enables this whole planning schedule to be developed, and the negotiations between the Science Center and the councils, or the cooperators, can be done, in order to make sure that everybody can do these assessments and everybody is meeting the expectations.

They have requested that we hold off until the spring of 2021 for the tilefish and snowy grouper statements of work, if the Science Center would be amenable to that, just in this situation, because they're in the process of being assessed, and they're not aware of the issues that could be coming out of the assessment.

The other thing that they raised concern with is they wanted to make sure that the SSC wouldn't be overloaded with new assessments, or operational assessments, at any one meeting, and they recognized that different types of assessments, between research track and operational assessments and an update, and also an interim analysis, and any of those would take a different level of review, and, as different things are being put in, or different species are coming up, and the complexities, they just asked that that be considered.

This really came up because of the April 2021 meeting, and there is the possibility of reviewing four stock assessments at that meeting, which is a -- It's a pretty heavy lift, and there was some consideration of potentially having the review of snowy grouper outside of that assessment, just so we're not doing four at one meeting.

They also recommended establishing a process for the SSC workgroup to review the terms of reference for an assessment and to draft a P* recommendation prior to it coming to the full SSC for final review, and this would allow the analysts time to get the projections done, based on the most likely outcomes that the SSC could come up with to that workgroup approach.

For the topical working groups, they recognized that this could require knowledge of the operational assessment itself, and the SSC discussed who should be involved in drafting the statements of work, and they recommended including SSC members in the initial drafting of statements of work and the identification of the topical working groups, and we're going to be going through this in the second agenda item on this one, which is the statements of work. The SSC was kind enough to provide some recommendations, if there was not going to be additional time for review in that April 2021 meeting.

The SSC also discussed how new information may become available between the statement of work, when that has been approved, and then the assessment being done, and they recommend a clarification on how this new type of information would be incorporated into the statement of work, and what this is referring to is what we're going to be talking about, I guess, in Agenda Item 3, and we're going to be focusing on the 2024 assessments, or we're going to be talking about the 2023 assessments, and sorry about that, and there could be new information that is available between now and when the assessment gets started, and they wanted to be able to consider how this new information could get inserted into this process.

They also wanted to -- They also discussed guidance on a trigger for the topical working groups and what modifications to an existing assessment would constitute an operational assessment versus a research track, and they recommend developing examples, or rules-of-thumb, to determine what new information would trigger the formation of a topical working group, and they also recommended a rule-of-thumb for what would be considered an operational versus what would be considered a research track.

The final item that they had listed during this discussion is they had indicated the importance of identifying new literature and other research reports as they become available for managed species by the South Atlantic Council, and they recommend identifying a point person, or persons, to identify and distribute new information as it becomes available for species of concern. Genny, if you have anything else that you would like to comment, and I see Julie also has her hand raised.

MS. NEER: Genny can speak first, if she wants to address the SSC.

DR. NESSLAGE: I thought that was a great summary, Chip. Thank you. I am not sure that I have too much to add, unless there are comments or questions from the council.

MS. NEER: I just wanted to briefly address one of these bullets, with regard to what happens when we are talking about a statement of work for an assessment, and here we are talking about it in September of 2020, for an assessment that is in 2023, and that has come up in both SSCs, as well as the Gulf Council brought this up, and I just wanted to tell you how we've handled it in the past, and we envision handling it the same way that we handle it with all the SEDAR assessments.

SEDAR has always worked a year to two years out on anything, and we recognize that, when we come up with those terms of reference, or scopes of work, which is even a step earlier in the process that we're doing now, we don't always know what research is going to be available a year-and-a-half to two years from now, and the existing process is what we envision we will use with this new sort of terminology, and that is, if a new piece of information becomes available after the statement of work we've approved, or even after the terms of reference are approved, the cooperator, the council, can always write a member to the Science Center, indicating what the new information is and how they think that new information might be valuable to incorporate it, and the Center will then have to take into account what that new information is, where we are with regard to the overall assessment process, and, if we're just starting, we probably can fold it in.

If it's two weeks before the assessment report is going to the SSC, it's probably not going to go in in this current assessment, and so the current process is, if new information becomes available, the cooperators can always write a memo to the Science Center, saying this is new information that

we're aware of, and we would like it to be incorporated, and here's why we think it's valuable, and then the Center and the cooperators, the councils, can have that negotiation and determine if it's feasible to roll it in.

That's the process we've used for SEDAR from the beginning. SEDAR has always taken a stance that, if there's new information, we will do our darndest to get it in, and the Science Center has always supported us in that approach, and it is their intent to continue to try and allow the incorporation of that information if they fall within the structure and the timing of when that new information becomes available, and I just wanted to address that point, because it did come up in all three of these discussions. Thanks.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thanks, Julie. That was one of my concerns as well. Clay.

DR. PORCH: I don't want to give the impression that we can -- That we're never going to be willing to be flexible, ever. I mean, there will be times where we have latitude to be flexible, but I want to emphasize that assessments in the Southeast are very complicated affairs. We have more data streams than anywhere else, little pieces of data coming from a lot of different states and academic institutions, et cetera, and we have to stitch all of that together, and so it's a lot of work.

We anticipate, over the next couple of years, that we'll be able to streamline some of that, but still it's a lot of pieces of information to string together, and so, to me, if somebody wants to delay the statement of work, or when it's produced, then that's going to lead to a corresponding delay in when the assessment can be conducted. Now, a week here and there, or something like that, is not what we're worried about, but what we don't want to have happen is what used to be the case, and that is that, less than a year out sometimes, we were getting requests for major changes, and that means people have to restart the whole machine and recalculate things, and all of that kind of cascades through the system and makes things much, much harder, and it takes much longer, and that we really can't live with, if you want to have throughput.

I think it's really important to stick to the plan, and we produced the statements of work two years ahead of time, and that allows my staff to look at all the different pieces that are going to go into it and figure out basically how long it will take us to conduct the assessment, and then we can get back to you and figure out how many assessments we can actually do in a given year, but there is just a lot of variables to consider, and one of them is how complicated of an assessment you want us to conduct. You want to really make sure that that's clear, and so delaying the statement of work really generally is going to mean delaying the assessment.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thanks, Clay. Genny.

DR. NESSLAGE: Just to be clear, the SSC wasn't requesting that we delay the statements of work in general, but just for these two, and it makes absolutely no sense to plan for the next assessment when you're just about to deliver the most recent assessments, and you have no idea what's going to come out of these assessments, and that's what the SSC was concerned about. The statements of work that you're going to see in a moment could be completely useless come April, when we review the latest updates to the snowy grouper and golden tilefish, and so, in general, the timeline is fine, but, for these two species, it makes absolutely no sense. Thank you.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Yes, and I had that same concern. It is odd. Julie.

MS. NEER: Clay might address this, and, yes, just so everyone knows what the general timing is, the request was that the statements of work, the first draft statements of work, come from the council to the Science Center by October 15. The Science Center has until February, and I think it's the 1st, but it could be February 15th, but by February, to provide the councils feedback on whether they can accommodate everything that the councils have requested in that statement of work, and, if there's any time -- If there is any differences between what the councils ask in October and what the Science Center tells us they can do in February, there's a little bit of time between the February feedback from the Science Center and the May Steering Committee meeting, when we have to finalize that schedule.

That time between that February and May is -- Like Clay said, that's the time for a little bit of negotiation. Maybe we can do this, but we can't do that. You asked for three things, and the Science Center can accommodate two, and which two do you prefer, and those kind of negotiations happen between the February and May, and so that's why the timing is set up the way it is, so that, in October, the Science Center has time for feedback, and then there's that time for that negotiation window.

I think the sticking point here is that I think what the South Atlantic SSC is requesting is that, if they get your -- If they don't get you, or if they get you updated statements of work in April, after they actually review the assessments, would that be enough time for the Center to review them and get feedback back to the South Atlantic Council in time for the May, or spring, Steering Committee meeting, I guess that is the sticking point for this particular timing, and whether that can be worked out are really discussions, I believe, between probably the Science Center and the council, but that's how the timing works, in general.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you. Clay.

DR. PORCH: Julie basically answered the point for me, but I will just elaborate a little bit. The reason why we need that advance warning is so that we can look and see how long it's going to take for these new things that are being asked, and then we'll go back and tell you what we can actually accomplish.

For instance, if there is a late change in the statement of work, we may take it back and say, look, we can do this, but we're going to have to push the assessment off, or we need to bump it for something else, and it's just that we have a limited pool of people working on it, and, in particular, when it comes to a lot of the folks that have to process the data, we're pretty limited.

They have this complicated matrix that they look at to figure out how all of the pieces are going to interact and who has got to do what piece, and, if we break that, then it can be like a domino effect, and you start breaking things all the way up and down the line, and a lot of assessments become late, and so we're really trying to get organized about this, so we can serve you're the best way we can, and it just really helps us to have clear statements of work in a couple of years in advance, but, like I said, if, as Julie described, somebody makes a few changes to the statement of work during the negotiation, and it's a few months late, it could be that we're able to accommodate it, and it could be that we'll say, well, we can do it, but we've got to move the assessment a little bit later.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. We've had a lot of good discussion here. Julie, what else do you need from the committee on this presentation, which was this clarification on the process for operational assessments? What is needed here?

MS. NEER: There's nothing directly needed, and it was more informational and to kind of hear your feedback and your concerns. This is, as I said, a new process that was just put forward in May, and we are working through trying to figure out how we're going to start implementing the use of these topical working groups, and some of the components that you raised as issues, or concerns, were similar to some of the other ones that some of the other councils and SSCs have raised as well, and so you're all kind of thinking the same thing, which is helpful for us as we try and move forward and design how we're going to start implementing these.

As I said, they're going to begin in the 2022 assessments, is the first time you'll start seeing information, which is why these things that you're going to see are kind of important, and, with the 2022 assessments, implementing using topical working groups, and so I'm sure there will be additional discussion as we start implementing them, and it was mainly more information and feedback, and, if you have any additional components or questions, anyone can always certainly reach out to me, and we'll continue to provide you updates, as needed, as the process evolves.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you, Julie, and thank you, Clay. Any more questions or comments or concerns about that update on the operational assessments? Clay.

DR. PORCH: Thank you. Just one point of clarification. Even though the assessments in 2021 will have assessment panels in name, they are still going to focus more on the topics that are identified in the statements of work, and they are not supposed to be reinventing the entire assessment, or it's just not an operational assessment, and we didn't budget for a complete re-review of all those assessments, and so I think I just want to make sure that folks understand that. They will function a lot like topical working groups, in the sense that they are focused on the items in the statement of work. Otherwise, we would have to slow down the whole process, because we haven't budgeted for that, and, if anything, we're in a more challenging state now, with COVID-19.

MS. MCCAWLEY: John.

MR. CARMICHAEL: Thank you. I wanted to follow-up on the timing of the statement of work. I think, if I'm correct, Chip, it's snowy and tilefish, and snowy we thought we would get in October, and we're going to get it a little later, but we do hope to be able to get that and get it to the council for the March meeting, and so perhaps, in that one, the SSC can review the statement of work when they review that assessment, and the council could have it in March, and that wouldn't give us much lead time to the Center, but it would be before the Steering Committee meeting.

Then tilefish, I think, is potentially the other one, and so maybe, for that one, we just give a general statement of work at this point and then recognize that we can refine it once we know more and we find out, really, better where tilefish fits into the schedule, because I think the Steering Committee was kind of in a snowy grouper/tilefish situation for late 2023 anyway, and that's the other point, is that these are starting in late 2023, and so we will have some opportunities to refine them, as Clay suggested.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you. All right. Chip, are you ready to move to the statement of work approval?

DR. COLLIER: Yes, I think so, and so I will pull those up. The first one we're talking about, as John had indicated, is snowy grouper, and this statement of work is going to be an update operational assessment, or is going to be an operational assessment from the SEDAR 36 update. The terminal year for this assessment was 2018, for the prior year assessment was 2018, and so we're going to be adding four years of new data, and the terminal year will be 2022, and then the suggestion is to apply the current BAM configuration for this model.

Council staff, working with Southeast Fisheries Science Center staff, kind of developed an initial idea of a statement of work, and you can see what we had originally put together here, and what we had indicated was include any new and updated information on life history, discard mortality, and steepness, and then there was some suggestion of separating the landings and discards into different data streams, due to the potential change in discard mortality, and the reason that that's included in there is because, currently, discard mortality is assumed to be 100 percent for released fish, and, therefore, there is no difference between a landed fish and a discarded fish, as far as mortality is concerned.

However, if there is a slightly different change in the discard mortality estimate, then we might need to change out these data streams, and we might want to consider some selectivity changes, because of the seasonal recreational fishery, the low bag limit, and then the potential survivorship of some released fish.

An additional topical working group that was considered by staff was looking at the potential for snowy grouper moving northward of the South Atlantic region, and, similar to blueline tilefish, how can we incorporate some of those landings into the newest assessment, and, now, this might not be needed quite yet, and, in a review of some of the landings data, it's not indicated that there was a big jump in snowy grouper landings north of North Carolina, or even in the Cape Hatteras area, and so this topical working group may not be needed.

To build on this, the SSC did review these, and they provided some recommendations, and those recommendations are provided in the late materials, and I will pull those up right now, if you give me just a second. What they had recommended was incorporating the South Carolina DNR vertical longline as well as the deepwater longline survey, and some of the major reasons for this is they wanted to be able to include some information on potential new survey data, as well as be able to use this information for life history.

Then they also wanted some different working groups to be considered, and so they added Topical Working Group 2 and 3 for this, and Topical Working Group 2 would be looking at the utility of data collected from the expanded short bottom longline survey, as well as the South Atlantic deep longline survey. Then the second one was to examine age and size dependency with spawning frequency and spawning season duration. That was some of the discussion, or some of the suggestions, added by the SSC.

If the council would like to consider either one of these, on how they would like to proceed forward, as far as a statement of work, or this one could potentially be the one that is requested to

come in a little bit later, if the SSC has a review of the snowy grouper assessment a little bit earlier than the April meeting, and potentially we could bring this to the council in March. That way, you guys could do a final statement of work review.

I will note that the Science Center did come to this last SSC meeting, because they wanted to discuss a change in the natural mortality for snowy grouper, and they have found some examples of snowy grouper that are much longer-lived than was previously observed, and they wanted to incorporate that new natural mortality in the assessment that is currently ongoing, and so that's going to result in significant changes in the perception of the stock. Genny, if you want to talk about that a little bit more, I will let you expound on what you guys discussed quite a bit.

DR. NESSLAGE: Regarding the changes to the assessment, you want me to review our recommendations on that, Chip? Sorry, but I'm unclear on what you --

DR. COLLIER: I was more thinking about the natural mortality, but, if you want to go over these potential changes, you can go over those as well. I will leave it up to you.

DR. NESSLAGE: Sorry, but you were talking about our recommendations regarding the changes they'll be making to this assessment to the natural mortality, correct?

DR. COLLIER: Correct, and I will pull that up in the --

DR. NESSLAGE: I just wanted to make sure we're -- Because we're kind of talking about two different things here, the 2023 statement of work versus what's going on with the current assessment, right?

DR. COLLIER: Yes, and so this section, Section 4 of your report.

DR. NESSLAGE: Just so everyone is clear, these are our recommendations for moving forward with the ongoing assessment, and, given that there was new information in the new data stream, the updated data stream, about the maximum age of snowy grouper, and the SSC recommended using a new methodology, or I guess a new approach, that would use the Hewitt and Hoenig-based point estimate, with a maximum age of fifty-six years, for generating the M at-age vector for the base run for the new assessment, as opposed to the older, shorter younger max age in the assessment.

Then, when incorporating uncertainty in the overall assessment, we recommended that uncertainty in M span the two different maximum ages explored, and so some folks -- We discussed, at length, whether the max age should be fifty-six or eighty, and so we thought that incorporating the two different resulting Ms, based on whether the max age was fifty-six or eighty, be incorporated into the estimates of uncertainty, and so that resulted in a range of 0.05 to 0.12. That would allow us to get a better idea of what the impact, potentially, of exploring a higher max age might be on this estimate, and does that get at what you were hoping me to summarize there, Chip?

DR. COLLIER: Yes, and that's just a bit of background on what's going on in the current assessment, and so, in the review of the statements of work, and this is Action Item V that was included, they had provided recommendations for just a sub-group of the SSC to review these and

provide comments, and those comments are basically what we have provided in that late material, and I believe it's Attachment 2c and 2d. 2c would be the snowy grouper one.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Chip, I am confused here. I guess my question is are we approving the statement of work, as modified, to be the one that's in the late materials, or are we suggesting that we hold off on any approval of the statement of work until the council's March meeting, so that the SSC can look at this assessment and make any new recommendations, et cetera, and then we approve the statement of work in March, and so I'm unclear.

DR. COLLIER: We wanted to give you guys the opportunity to choose the direction you wanted to go, and so we provided some statements of work, just in case you wanted to get it done at this meeting, because we were uncertain if that was going to occur, and, therefore, we have these statements of work available to you, if you did not want to wait until the assessment had been reviewed for snowy grouper. Given the uncertainty, we provided you options for both.

MS. MCCAWLEY: All right. Thank you for that. Just my take on this, and I don't know how other committee members feel, but I just would prefer to not approve these until after the SSC has had a chance to really dive into the results of these assessments, and it just feels a little bit backwards to approve it now, before they have actually seen the results of the current assessment, and that's just me, but I don't know how other committee members feel, but, just me, I would rather not approve these today, and I would rather approve them in March, but I am looking to see what other folks think. Steve, I know you're our SSC rep. Do you have any thoughts here? Carolyn.

DR. BELCHER: I agree with you, Jessica. I think it's a little bit ahead of it.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Steve.

MR. POLAND: I agree, and I think Genny even mentioned, back under our previous agenda item, concern of looking at statements of work before you get results from the assessment, but I think she was referring to the research track and not the operational, but, yes, it probably would be better to hold off until March on this.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. Dewey.

MR. HEMILRIGHT: I've just got to ask a clarification question. On the bottom there, Topic 1, what would be the methods to estimate landings of snowy grouper north of the South Atlantic region? What would they use to estimate that, the methods? Thank you.

DR. COLLIER: Dewey, in response to that one, the method that was used for blueline tilefish, and you were there at that stock assessment, and I believe they used the Delphi approach, in which Eddie Loftus had interviewed a few fishermen and tried to estimate the landings based on some of these interviews with fishermen, and do it relative to their catch levels as well, and maybe Tony has some information on it. I see his hand is raised.

MR. HEMILRIGHT: So you're talking about doing a Delphi process for snowy grouper?

DR. COLLIER: That would be for catches north of Cape Hatteras, yes. For south of Cape Hatteras, we would use our traditional data collection techniques, because, if you look at the newspapers, there is world-record catches of snowy grouper that have been caught since 2012, I believe, up there off of the Norfolk Canyon area.

MR. HEMILRIGHT: Yes, and I understand that completely, and I've seen a lot of different things, but applying a Delphin process for snowy grouper is a lot more rarity than blueline tilefish, but I will speaking to you. Thank you.

DR. COLLIER: After I had created these statements of work, I talked with a couple of captains up there in the Virginia area, and they indicated that the catches of snowy grouper is much less than blueline tilefish, and, also, the recreational catch of snowy grouper, compared to the commercial catch, is much less than it is with blueline tilefish. Blueline tilefish is much closer to a 50/50 split, whereas snowy grouper is almost all commercial landings, and so that little bit of landings up there might not be necessary.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Tony.

MR. DILERNIA: Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. Yes, I can see Dewey scratching his head. Even though we're a few hundred miles apart, I could see my friend there scratching his head, and I completely agree with him. While we may see blueline tiles coming more and more in the Mid, snowy grouper -- That's like a huh, what, what's that, and we don't see those at all, really. It's very, very, very few. I don't think I have ever heard of one being landed north of Delaware, and so, while I can see something with the bluelines, when it comes to the snowy groupers, no, not yet. Thank you.

MS. MCCAWLEY: All right. I am going to try to get us back on track here, and so what I think I'm hearing from committee members is we don't want to approve this statement of work, both of these, today, and that, instead, we would come back and look at these in March of 2021. Do you need a motion to that effect, Chip, or is this discussion good enough?

DR. COLLIER: Before we go there, I see that Julie Neer has her hand raised.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. Julie.

MS. NEER: I just wanted to clarify that we believe we're going to get the snowy grouper assessment in November, and perhaps be able to have a special SSC meeting to review it and bring this to you in March, and that is not the case for tilefish. Tilefish is not scheduled to be reviewed until April of 2021, which means that you would not review it until June, and the Steering Committee meets in May, and so I just wanted you to be aware that you could probably still get a set of statement of work to the Science Center for possible inclusion for the May discussion, the Steering Committee discussions in May, and that may not be the case for tilefish, and I just wanted you to know that before you move forward, and just so it's in your thoughts.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you. I am good with postponing snowy. I guess let's have a discussion about the other statement of work and figure out what we want to do based on that timing. Are there thoughts on that?

DR. COLLIER: I will pull up that statement of work for tilefish. This is the initial proposal that council staff put together, and it's going to be updating the SEDAR 66 assessment, which had a previous terminal year of 2018 and a next terminal year of 2022, and so it would be adding four additional years of data, and it would be using the BAM configuration, and this would include an update on life history information, discard mortality, and steepness.

One of the requests that we had suggested for this model was to incorporate some hermaphroditism. It was identified in the Lombardi-Carlson PhD, and, this one, we did not recommend a topical working group, but I will jump over to the SSC's recommendation, but I see John Carmichael's hand is up right now, and so he can talk while I pull up the other one.

MR. CARMICHAEL: We'll multitask. Jessica, maybe one way to go, and it will be interesting to see what Clay thinks of this, is we could approve the snowy in March, as we said, and I think, at that time, submit to the Science Center, potentially, a draft on tilefish, and what we just saw from Chip is pretty straightforward, and we would at least be letting the Science Center know the additional data years that would be included, and that's a big part of the analysis, and then it would be at our risk that, if there became some more complex issue to be addressed in tilefish, that that may then affect the timing of that assessment and when it could be done, and the risk to us would be that it may get bumped back a little bit, perhaps, which I think we could certainly work that out by say the fall 2021 meeting. To me, that seems like a pretty reasonable compromise, given the bind we're in with these stocks and not wanting to approve them without having even seen the current assessments.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Yes, and let's do what John just said. Clay.

DR. PORCH: I think that's a fair approach, and it's kind of consistent with what I was saying before. If we can accommodate it, we will. If it turns out to be something that is maybe a little more complicated than we bargained for or scheduled for, then we'll come back with what we think we can do and when.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. I like that approach. Chip, are you good with that?

DR. COLLIER: As I was multitasking, my ears apparently went out, and so can you repeat the plan forward? It sounded like we were going to hold off until March of 2021 for snowy grouper, and we were going to do the same thing for tilefish as well?

MS. MCCAWLEY: Yes, that's my understanding of what John was suggesting.

DR. COLLIER: That sounds good.

MS. MCCAWLEY: All right. So then --

DR. COLLIER: That takes us to the third agenda item, which was going to be Steering Committee guidance, and the reason that this is coming to you guys today is we need to start planning for the -- The Steering Committee needs to start planning for 2024, and so Attachment 3 has the planning grid for the Steering Committee. You can see everything that's going on right now, and this is the current planning grid, with things that have been approved and then things that are kind of in the hopper.

You can see we have a gray triggerfish research track assessment that will be done in 2024, and then, also, beginning in 2023 will be a white grunt research track assessment, and that is taking up two blocks, and that's because white grunt appears to have multiple stocks, based on some of the literature searches that we've seen, and so that's going to be taking up two analysts, and so what we need to do is fill in those other two 2024 items. Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Two things. One, I would love to know when we're going to do red snapper again. We need to put that on the list for one of the future assessments, and I just couldn't remember if we've had that conversation. Then can someone remind me why we chose white grunt, and I see that Julie has her hand up.

MS. NEER: I just wanted to clarify a bit what we would like from this. We just want to have sort of a list of species, in order of priority, from you, and research track versus operational and what your thoughts would be initially on the type of assessment you would like to see for any of the species you are listing, and so don't necessarily focus on let's figure out how to fill something in that little box under Analyst 1 for 2024. Just think of the species you would like to see in your general order and assessment type.

With regard to white grunt, I can tell you what I know, and that is that, since I started, white grunt has been on the list, and it continually gets punted by a higher-priority species. The squeaky wheel comes up every time, and that might still be the case, but that's why it's on there, is it has been on the schedule for quite some time, and the Center has indicated that they think it's one that they would feel that we should also be looking at, and so that's where it came from. It's been on the schedule since I believe 2005, and it's never been assessed.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Go ahead, Clay.

DR. PORCH: I do want to support doing the white grunt assessment. Certainly, in south Florida, it's one of the few species where there's a whole lot left, and so it would be interesting to see what the trends have been for that stock, but I also wanted to point out that, as far as red snapper goes, there has been \$1.5 million appropriated, and now run through Sea Grant, to run a survey intended to get the absolute abundance of red snapper, and that could start as early as 2021, and maybe we'll get a second year, to go into 2022, and that potentially could be much like the Great Red Snapper Count in the Gulf, in that it would give us an absolute estimate of the total number of red snapper. After that is complete, it would make sense to schedule a research track.

MS. MCCAWLEY: That sounds great, and I would love to put red snapper on our list and let the Steering Committee figure out where to place it, based on what we'll call the Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count. Steve.

MR. POLAND: I just feel like I've got to ask, and is there any way that can pop Spanish mackerel up just a little bit, and I see that there's a little white space above it. I feel like I've got to advocate for it.

MS. NEER: I can tell you that I am working on the 2022 schedule right now. SEDAR and the Science Center have a scheduling call to look at 2022 next Tuesday, and, just because there's a

little white box on this calendar, it doesn't mean that there's actually time in the schedule, but we'll hopefully have more guidance by Tuesday.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you. What else, committee members? Are there other species that you would like to see? Clay.

DR. PORCH: I just wanted to comment on what Julie said, and that white box doesn't mean that we're able to do it. Remember there is a couple of drivers in here, and one are the number of assessment team leads, but a bigger bottleneck right now is our ability to process all the little pieces of data that go into the stock assessment, and so that call that Julie is referring to is one of the times where we sit down and look at the entire team that has to get involved in these stock assessments and figure out what we can do when, and so, yes, I just wanted to reinforce what Julie said, that we can't -- Just because you see a white space, it doesn't mean that we can push something up into it.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Thank you. Steve.

MR. POLAND: I understand all that, but I just wanted to reiterate again my desire to see Spanish completed as soon as possible.

DR. COLLIER: Jessica, I don't know if this will help with some of the conversations, but I did also put together a list of assessed species, through the SEDAR process, and when they were last completed, and so you can see that -- Also, when the next assessment is being conducted. That's going to be in Table 2 of Attachment 3.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Yes, that is helpful, and so are there thoughts from the committee? I mentioned already that I would like to see red snapper, the next red snapper assessment, get on the list somewhere. What else, folks?

DR. COLLIER: You wanted that as a research track?

MS. MCCAWLEY: I believe so, but I guess the Steering Committee can talk about that, whenever that upcoming meeting is, because, if we need to incorporate the Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count, then, yes, that probably needs to be a research track. Other thoughts from the committee on other species?

DR. COLLIER: One thing that I do notice is we have a research track assessment being conducted for gray triggerfish. However, there is not an operational assessment that follows it. The research track assessment would not be providing management recommendations, and so that might be a species to consider for an operational assessment.

MS. MCCAWLEY: That sounds great. Julie.

MS. NEER: I was going to say that that just didn't make it onto the planning grid yet, but, yes, there is always an operational immediately following a research track, to provide that management advice.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Steve.

MR. POLAND: I guess, to your point, Jessica, about getting the red snapper research track on there, about the only thing that could be bumped down, really, is probably that white grunt one.

MS. MCCAWLEY: I think the Steering Committee can discuss that, about where to put the red snapper research track in when they would anticipate this red snapper count being completed, and so I think that we have some direction on there, and then that could be discussed at that upcoming Steering Committee meeting. John.

MR. CARMICHAEL: I concur with Jessica on the red snapper, and I think we need to coordinate that with that research grant, and we'll be involved in that. Myra is our representative on the steering committee for that, and so we'll be able to keep tabs on it. As far as another stock to suggest, I think potentially red porgy, and it was a 2017 terminal year, due to dealing with that MRIP data and everything, and, with all that has happened, and we're facing some pretty strict management, and so, to me, of the things we've done recently, that one sort of rises to that top for that far-off next possible slot.

MS. MCCAWLEY: That's a great point. Mel.

MR. BELL: That's a good point that John made, and I was just asking about white grunt again, and I know you mentioned maybe moving it, but, I mean, Clay brought up a good point, and it just kind of keeps getting pushed and pushed and pushed and pushed, and it is -- We have never assessed it, I guess, and so is that still holding in place there, or were you looking at sliding maybe red porgy into that? I mean, I would be fine with leaving white grunt on there, myself.

MS. MCCAWLEY: I think that white grunt stays on there, and we're just adding some additional species, and then how these puzzle pieces work out, for the timing and all that, will be discussed at the Steering Committee.

MR. BELL: Okay. Good. Well, I would definitely leave it on.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. Chip and John, do you think that this is enough direction here?

MR. CARMICHAEL: I think it's enough. I think it informs us for the Steering Committee, and hopefully we do get white grunt started, twenty years after it first made its way into a Steering Committee discussion.

DR. COLLIER: It was on the original list, John?

MR. CARMICHAEL: It was on like the first list, once a formal steering committee had been formed, yes.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Okay. We have provided some direction for the upcoming Steering Committee meeting. Chip, what am I forgetting? Are we down to Other Business for the SEDAR Committee?

DR. COLLIER: We are.

MS. MCCAWLEY: All right. Is there any other business to come before the SEDAR Committee? I don't see any hands, and we'll go ahead and adjourn the SEDAR Committee.

(Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on September 15, 2020.)

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November 5, 2020

SAFMC September Council Meeting

Attendee Report: (9/14/20 - 9/17/20)

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