

# **SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL**

## **SEDAR COMMITTEE**

**The Beaufort Hotel  
Beaufort, North Carolina**

**December 7, 2023**

### **Transcript**

#### **SEDAR Committee**

Dr. Carolyn Belcher, Chair  
Trish Murphey, Vice Chair  
Mel Bell  
Tim Griner

Kerry Marhefka  
Jessica McCawley  
Andy Strelcheck

#### **Council Members**

Gary Borland  
Judy Helmey  
Tom Roller

Laurilee Thompson  
Spud Woodward  
Robert Spottswood Jr.

#### **Council Staff**

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Meisha Key  
Kelly Klasnick  
Dr. Julie Neer  
Ashley Oliver  
Michele Ritter  
Dr. Mike Schmidtke  
Suzanna Thomas  
Christina Wiegand  
Meg Withers

#### **Attendees and Invited Participants**

Rick DeVictor  
Monica Smit-Brunello  
Sonny Gwin  
Dominique  
Martha Guyas  
Jamal Ingram

Shep Grimes  
Dr. John Walter  
Michael McDermott  
Lazarra  
Miles Dover  
Tim Setwell

#### **Observers and Participants**

Other observers and participants attached.

The SEDAR Committee of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council convened The Beaufort Hotel, Beaufort, North Carolina, on Thursday, December 6, 2023, and was called to order by Chairman Carolyn Belcher.

DR. BELCHER: We're going to begin with the SEDAR Committee, with Chip, and so the first item on the agenda is the Approval of the Agenda. Are there any edits that anyone would like to see made to the agenda as it is currently published? Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Is the golden tile stock assessment discussion in here, because the steering committee talked about it, and I was just checking to see, because that was one of the other business items in Snapper Grouper, and maybe we can talk about it in SEDAR.

DR. COLLIER: Yes, I think we can talk about it under SEDAR, under the SEDAR schedule.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Any other edits to the agenda? Any exception to that one suggested edit? Okay. Seeing none, the agenda is good to go. The next item is the Approval of the Minutes from the September 2023 Meeting. Is there any changes that need to be made to the minutes, as published? Any exception to the minutes? Okay. Seeing none, the approval of the minutes also passes. The first item on the list is SEDAR Steering Committee Report. Chip, this is a presentation from you.

DR. COLLIER: What I will do for this is just go through the briefing book materials that were provided to the SEDAR Steering Committee and just give you an update. The report isn't finalized yet, and they're waiting on one more review, in order to finalize the report, and so what I will do is just go through the agenda, essentially.

The first one, the first item, is talking about the SEDAR projects. SEDAR staff provided what's going on with the projects, and, basically, everything is on schedule, with the exception of there's been a slight delay in SEDAR 82, where the review workshop was pushed back from October, and hopefully we're going to have it in March of 2024, and then the other one is SEDAR 86, looking at the lane, this stock assessment, to make it into a benchmark assessment, given that it's two different stocks. Following SEDAR guidance, that seems like it would make it into a benchmark assessment, instead of an operational assessment, and so that's going to be coming up on the schedule for you all to see when we get into that section.

Going into the assessment schedule, there was a lot of discussion on the FES pilot survey results, and how that could potentially impact stock assessments, and so there was a variety of conversations that were had at the table. They noted one of the biggest challenges is putting that -- The FES change in estimates into allocations, and getting that into management, and that's going to lead to some issues, and they also noted that, if a stock is very close to some of the status determination criteria, changes in estimates of catch could impact that, and one other item that they had mentioned is the ACLs and ACTs. They do require you to -- Although you can track landings in the same units, it's still requiring you to monitor the ACL and ACTs as hard values, and you can't necessarily do the trends, as MRIP was designed to do. If I'm misspeaking in any of these things, please, Carolyn and John, let me know, and you guys can speak up, since you were at the meeting as well.

Another item that was discussed was Atlantic cobia, and that was officially put on the schedule for SEDAR, and, if you remember back to September, when we were talking about this, taking cobia -- Once cobia officially got put on, that meant that red porgy was getting pushed out, and so we had to find another spot for red porgy.

In response to the potential bias in the FES, the South Atlantic representatives at the SEDAR Steering Committee made a series of recommendations, and I have them written down, so I don't forget them right now, and I will go through those very quickly for you. I know it's going to be a challenge to put all this math in your head, and so we'll visualize it in just a second.

The first one is to complete the SEDAR 82 gray triggerfish stock assessment as currently scheduled. It's to continue on with the SEDAR 82 research track assessment as planned, but to delay the operational assessment, and let me bring over the SEDAR planning grid, in order to help this. This is Attachment 1b in your document, and, if you look all the way to the left, that's going to be the South Atlantic stocks, and focusing in here on this section, and so, basically, we were planning on having an operational assessment for gray triggerfish in 2024, but, due to the recreational importance of gray triggerfish, it was recommended to move it down here to 2026.

Next up, the dolphin wahoo MSE, we originally had planned that for I believe 2026, and this was moved up to 2025, but there's considerable flexibility here. Basically, all we're doing is requesting a CIE review, and that can be put in place as the project comes closer to an end.

The gag grouper, which was expected to -- Or was requested to start in 2025, and that one is being moved down to 2026. Atlantic king mackerel, that too was expected to start in 2025, and it's being requested to move that one down to 2026. Red porgy, that's being -- As I had mentioned before, it was potentially a species in 2025, and that's being moved down to 2027. Greater amberjack, that was projected to start in 2026, and that one is being moved to 2027. The red grouper benchmark assessment, that's being placed in 2026, and white grunt is no longer on the planning schedule.

Those are all the items that changed, based on the SEDAR Steering Committee, and I'm going to go back to the committee report. Another item that was brought up was golden tilefish and blueline tilefish, potentially pausing assessments, and the reason that the agency was suggesting pausing these assessments is we have the South Atlantic Deepwater Longline Survey, and we had a workgroup that was in charge of developing a report on that project, and then they provided the report to the SSC to develop recommendations in regard to the South Atlantic Deepwater Longline Survey.

The recommendations from the SSC were not necessarily dictating what SEDAR should do, but what their recommendations were to basically not use this index -- Use it for an index of abundance until it had five years of data, and they also suggested not using the first year, which was 2020, due to the low sample size, the slightly different variation in data collection methods, and so that would mean the first assessment schedule that could potentially occur for these tilefish species would be 2026, and I think that's all I had for that topic.

Also, given the discussion with yellowtail snapper, including that into the SEDAR schedule, and I just talked with Julie Neer this morning, and there's indication that, if the yellowtail snapper is going to be incorporated into that, that's going to be done in the summer of 2024, with an

assessment potentially coming in the fall of 2024, and that would delay the hogfish assessment potentially into 2025, and 2025 is also when we're doing a lot of data provisioning for red snapper, and so hogfish might get pushed back until the summer of 2025. That one is still scheduling, and I'll keep you updated as that goes along. Any questions in regard to the schedule? We'll go into the schedule a little bit more as a specific topic, but just all this moving around, and I know it's a lot of moving around, and so you're going to be hearing it quite a bit.

DR. BELCHER: I've got Laurilee and then Jessica.

MS. THOMPSON: So, actually, I think, if I remember correctly, when I was reading the SSC report, it said don't use data from 2021, and so does that mean it's actually 2027, instead of 2026, before the data is usable? You know, the last time that we did a tilefish amendment, it took almost five years, and, you know, the fishermen waited forever, and, during that time that it got dragged out, over 300,000 pounds of fish was left on the table that should have -- You know, had it been on the right timeline, they would have been able to catch an extra 300,000 pounds of fish, and so I don't think it's fair to ask them to wait.

If they don't get the data until 2026, or 2027, and then we've got to wait for the SSC to look at it, and then it takes two years to get the amendment through, we're looking at 2030 before the next tilefish assessment gets done, and it's supposed to be done by mid-2024, and so we're asking those guys to wait six more years to get another increase in the amount of fish that they're allowed to catch, and so I object to pushing that assessment back. Thank you.

DR. BELCHER: John Walter.

DR. WALTER: I mean, I'm sensitive to that. The problem is that the key information that it's going to get is that SADL index, and running the whole assessment without that SADL index -- We don't know that the stock assessment is going to give an increase, or a decrease, and so it's just going to give updated information, and that information is going to be much more certain, if it's got the SADL index in it, than without an index, and I think that's the main rationale, right?

DR. BELCHER: As far as what was stated? Is that what you're asking me?

DR. WALTER: Well, isn't that the rationale for putting it off, to get the index in?

DR. COLLIER: That is correct, yes.

DR. BELCHER: Laurilee.

MS. THOMPSON: Well, they've been doing -- They did the last assessment without the SADL survey, and so why don't we run the assessment now, and then we can do another one when they get the SADL survey, but I don't think it's right to ask them to wait six more years, when they thought they were going to get an assessment next year.

DR. BELCHER: Further comment on that? I know that the hard part to is, you know, having heard that we don't need to be waiting on better data to move forward with certain things, where we've got concerns about what's going on with FES, and pushing a pause, but we've been told that we're kind of expected to move forward, and I think that's the harder part, is why can't we

continue on with what was recently done, and, if we can't improve on what's there, then why can't we continue with the continuity from the previous assessment.

DR. SCHMIDTKE: Just to clarify the SSC's report on the SADL survey, so the workgroup made the recommendations, and, yes, data from 2020, which is the first year of the survey, should definitely not be used for any index development. The data in 2021 should be viewed with some caution, as the sample was not yet collected with a fully random design, and then the data from 2022 onward can be fully considered, and so you could use the data from 2021, but just with some caution, because like the experimental design that they used for that particular year was not exactly the same as they had done from 2022 onward, but you could use the 2021 data. Thanks.

DR. BELCHER: Other comments or questions? Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: Well, I guess I just don't know how to leave this topic. I mean, do we say, hey, thanks for suggesting pushing it back, but that we don't agree, and, I mean, is that decision partly up to us? I just don't want to leave this hanging out there, I guess.

DR. BELCHER: I've got Tim and then Trish.

MR. GRINER: I kind of agree with Laurilee here. I mean, if you look at -- If you use that premise with the deepwater longline survey, it's more than just one species, right, and so does that -- Are you going to use that same caution, or some argument, with every assessment, or every species, that is in the longline survey?

DR. BELCHER: I've got Trish and then Laurilee.

MS. MURPHEY: I kind of agree with Laurilee. You know, why not use the current assessment? It apparently was good enough for management, you know, the last go-round, and so why not go ahead and, I guess, a turn-of-the-crank or whatever, and, you know, move forward with it, especially since -- I mean, it's not overfished, and overfishing is not occurring. You know, there's an expectation that this assessment be done, and I think it -- As Carolyn says, just because we haven't got the data now -- I mean, we constantly are being told that this is the data we've got, and so, you know, I think -- I'm all for getting better data, and, in the next go-round, it will have better data in it, but, right now, it has been good enough for management so far, and so I would also champion moving forward with the current assessment, and the current data.

DR. BELCHER: Laurilee and then Jessica.

MS. THOMPSON: So there is another thing that I wasn't sure what it meant, but there is a statement that the commercial CPUE is not valid anymore, as a result of management, and why is that? My other comment is that, because golden tilefish is not overfished, or undergoing overfishing, it just seems like it just keeps getting pushed back, while we put out other fires on species that are -- You know, are overfished, or undergoing overfishing, and, while we're trying to work on that, we just keep pushing the golden tilefish assessment back, and that's what happened last time.

If it's not overfished, or undergoing overfishing, then they have an expectation of, you know, they followed all the rules, and they did everything right, and they went to a limited-access fishery, and

they've done everything the way they were supposed to do, and it just seems like they just keep getting kicked around, and, you know, they see the quota that they get in the Gulf, and they see the quota that they get in the Northeast, and they're like, what's wrong with the South Atlantic, and why don't we get fish like the other ones do?

DR. BELCHER: Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: So this assessment that we're talking about, or this change, waiting for the SADL Survey, would affect both blueline and golden tile, and are they in the same assessment, or separate assessments, and so can we still move forward with both blueline and golden tile, because we're having a lot of conversation about golden tile, but I don't necessarily want to delay on blueline either.

DR. BELCHER: Chip and then to John Walter.

DR. COLLIER: Yes, they're two separate assessments, and the Mid-Atlantic is definitely pushing that we need a blueline assessment, and just remember, with the blueline, we have a data-limited approach for landings north of Cape Hatteras, and then, in the South Atlantic, is a biomass dynamic model, is what is used for that.

DR. BELCHER: John Walter.

DR. WALTER: I believe the reason that just updating the assessment, and you said, well, it was good enough for management advice last time, and why not now, and the why not now reason is because of the South Carolina DNR vertical longline index. Now we don't have that, and so we've got multiple years of no index, and so we're going to basically be running an assessment with the landings, and age comp, no indices, and so it's like running a vessel with no steering, and then we could just wait a few years to get the SADL, and that's the reason why I think that the SEDAR committee, from a scientific standpoint, said, well, it would be nice to have that SADL, or not just nice, but essential.

I think what's going to come out of an assessment that doesn't have an index is something that is somewhat rudderless, which usually means greater uncertainty in the estimate, which means a greater buffer from what we could be -- From the overfishing limit. Now, that being said, the prioritization is, I think, the purview of this committee to recommend, but, scientifically, we're just saying what may happen in an assessment run without the index. Thanks.

DR. BELCHER: So, to that point, the one thing that I will kind of -- This is getting a little bit on the soapbox, but this is part of the problem with losing basic services, because now we're losing a survey that we're basically saying was part of the success of the last assessment, and so now we're stuck, because, if SADL hadn't happened, we would still be in that same boat, and so would we be stuck not moving forward?

I think this is where, again, we've got to go back and talk about what we do have for data, be able to do an assessment with what we have at hand, and do the best we can with it, as opposed to hoping we can fill the void that just happened to occur, but, again, it gets back to the tragedy of losing those basic services. We can't afford to lose these pieces. Other comments and questions? What's the pleasure of the group relative to guidance on the tilefishes? Chip.

DR. COLLIER: So, right now, the plan is to really look at the data that's available for these species, to see what kind of an assessment can be done, and whether or not we should move forward with it. I'm not certain if that data triage has basically been done, and, John, maybe you can speak to that, but the other thing to point out is it was the agency that said put a pause on this stock assessment, and it was not the SEDAR Steering Committee.

DR. WALTER: I think there is a two-step process here that's going to be followed to initially look at what data is available, to recommend either proceeding forward -- Well, one, you do that to recommend what flavor of assessment you will get, and I think there could be a recommendation, by the SEDAR panel, I guess, as to whether it should -- The appointed panel, as to whether it should continue on or not. If the fundamental data is lacking, then -- And we know it's going to be there in three years' time, then it's not the end of the world, and, granted, for the fishing community, who wants another assessment, and not that that assessment would necessarily say it's going to lead to an increase or not, and we can't say that at this point, but I think that there is going to be that initial data evaluation.

DR. COLLIER: Yes, and, to that point, there is the initial data evaluation, and that is a topical working group, mainly looking at some of the life history pieces, and also trying to estimate landings of -- Well, for both of them, they're looking at some of the life history, because it's very important, some of the life history parameters that are coming out of the SADL survey. Even though it doesn't have five years of data in it, you can still use some of the data being collected from the survey to inform maybe some of the growth curves, or maybe the natural mortality estimate, and so those pieces of information from the SADL survey can be used.

There was another point that I had for blueline tilefish, and it's completely gone on me, and there is new information for blueline tilefish north of Cape Hatteras, and there was that pilot study that was done, that was used to develop the break, and actually allocate between the two different areas, because, although we had a data-limited approach from Cape Hatteras north, we had management split at the North Carolina/Virginia border, and so it was a bit difficult in the management process, and so there's new information on the split there, and that could be useful for determining how much is allocated between the two different management units, or two different management areas.

There is information that's available that could be useful maybe for management, and maybe not for a stock assessment, and there is no, necessarily, panel to really be looking into the stock assessments, whether or not they should go forward, and it is looking at pieces of data that would be available, mainly looking at the life history data.

Blueline tilefish, there is a request to look at recreational data, because data going into the recreational sector was done through a Delphi approach, and there were very few intercepts north of North Carolina to inform it, and so there was a lot of concern with the estimates of recreational catch.

DR. BELCHER: Trish.

MS. MURPHEY: So this is also, I guess, for you, John, and this is one of my brainstorms, but when did the old abundance index end? What year was that?

DR. WALTER: I will have to check on that and find out what year that was. I don't, off the top of my head, know.

MS. MURPHEY: Okay. Well, I guess where I was going was, if it ended say in 2020 --

DR. BELCHER: It didn't.

MS. MURPHEY: It didn't? It ended earlier than that? Well, my point was, if it had not -- If it had ended recently, and then we picked up the SADL, and, yes, I understand that don't use 2020, but just kind of thinking about how we reacted, and how things were done during COVID, when, you know, in 2020 -- That dataset, for 2020, for so many indices, you know, didn't -- That data point wasn't there, but a lot of assessments still went on with it, and, granted, I know that adds uncertainty, but I guess my point is can we -- Is there a way to assess the stock with the data we've got, understanding there may be a hole, but maybe some sort of way to standardize the old abundance with the SADL abundance, you know, to -- Again, I am just brainstorming, but we've been able -- I mean, that's science. Sometimes you just -- You end with gaps, you know, a year gap or something, in your data, but you've still got a time series, and so I just wonder if you could -- Is there a way to piece all of that together, so that you do have some sort of an index of abundance?

DR. BELCHER: So, according to the report that was in part of the last assessment, it was 2016 was the last year of the bottom longline survey for South Carolina. John.

MR. CARMICHAEL: Yes, you're definitely going to have a gap in there, and, you know, you think about this stock, and it's managed with a harvest level, and, if you've been catching that harvest level, and feed it that you've caught that harvest level for a number of years, and you don't have any other information to feed it that tells it what the stock has done, outside of what's being caught, then there's really not any information to tell it that maybe you're catching that harvest level from a bigger or smaller stock, and this is where the index comes in to be important.

I think, you know, one thought is you're meeting the limit, and that's what you feed the assessment, and it's likely just to continue the status quo out, even in the assessment, which is sort of management is going to do until we get the assessment, and so that's why there is certainly interest in getting this survey. There's a thought that you could just do the assessment, and it changes nothing, and, if you do this, and it delays getting to the assessment with the new SADL data, then that wouldn't be good, and so that's sort of how it's working out. As John has been said, there's just not the information in there to inform it, because we lost the survey, and there were issues with the ages.

Where we are now on it, as Chip said, is to try and, you know, do a bit of a data triage and then come back and say, okay, what can we do, and does it look like there's any value to doing this assessment, and that's a different thing than we've ever done, but maybe, if we try to be more resilient, and climate responsive, it might be something that we do more often with you guys on assessments, where we had a plan years ago to do a stock, and maybe we need to look at it some before we fully commit, and occasionally pivot, when we realize that, well, we don't have the information to address the issues that were important last time, and we don't expect a different outcome, and so maybe we -- You know, we hold off, and we do other things, and so that's sort of where we are. It's experimental, I guess, and we'll see where it's going to go.



Then, on blueline, you know, because we see that's tied up with the Mid-Atlantic, there was a discussion at the Northeast Region Coordinating Council, which is kind of similar to our SEDAR Steering Committee, and they handle the assessment priorities, and they came up with a task to ask that the Science Center, the Northeast Center people, get with the Southeast Center people and try to come up with some sort of plan for assessing the blueline tilefish stock, and to see what can be done, because they're very interested, as has been said, and they've been waiting for many years to get this blueline assessment for their area.

They're going to report back on that at their spring meeting, which will probably be April-ish, I think, of 2024, and so we'll know a little bit more about blueline at that point, and so, with these things that are in flux, you know, what our discussion was at the steering committee, from Carolyn and I, the council's perspective, was we kind of need to keep these things moving, and we need to have this discussion with you guys, and we said we need to talk to the Mid-Atlantic about blueline, for sure, which I was able to do at the NRCC, and so they're kind of in limbo, but we're hoping to get to them, I think is the best way to put it at this point.

DR. BELCHER: Other comments? Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: So, based on what John said, do we need to revisit this at a future SEDAR Committee meeting, after more of this information is obtained, or do we need to make a motion, or provide direction to you that are on the steering committee, and I guess I just -- I didn't want us to leave the discussion hanging.

DR. BELCHER: Understood. John.

MR. CARMICHAEL: I think we will. I think we'll report-out to you. I mean, based on the timing of the NRCC, we should have information on blueline say for June, and then, for golden, it will kind of depend on the timing of this triage, but I do think we would report-out to you as to what the best approach seems to be.

DR. BELCHER: All right. Chip.

DR. COLLIER: Just to build on that a little bit more, what the plan is -- The way I'm seeing the plan right now, in my head, is the topical working groups for golden tilefish would continue to occur, and they actually have recently had one, and continue to work on that, and then we'll come back to you guys, and I suggested to Myra that we have a SEDAR meeting in March, and so this might be the reason for having the SEDAR Committee meeting in March, just to bring it back to you guys when we have the information.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Anything further, or does that wrap it up? Okay, Jessica? Okay. All right. Chip.

DR. COLLIER: It should be smooth sailing from here. If you remember from September, we had talked about benchmark assessments coming back into the SEDAR process, or coming back for the National Marine Fisheries Service stock assessments, and they were always there for the Florida assessments, and so, when we're bringing these SEDAR assessments back, there were a few things that we've learned from the research track assessments, and one is that it was very

valuable to have a planning team, in order to set up these stock assessment projects, and so they would like to have those planning teams continue for the benchmark assessments.

The other one was to have a CIE review for the benchmark assessments, and the reasoning for that, from the SEDAR Steering Committee, was the -- If there's enough reason to go to a benchmark assessment, that means there is considerable changes going along with that assessment project, and, therefore, you should have that additional external review.

There was also -- They also talked about, like we mentioned here, data triage, and that could help right-sizing some of these stock assessments, and, when we're talking about right-sizing assessments, not all of them need an age-based assessment, and maybe we can get away with other approaches to assess some of these species, to make them a little bit more quicker to get through, and so doing that data triage can help indicate what's available for those.

There is some potential carryover in the SEDAR budget, and so some of the discussion on what to do with those carryover funds were to continue on with some of the 2024 projects, and the 2025, obviously, and consider a procedural workshop, either a data or assessment best practices, and, as I mentioned above, data triage.

Also, in Other Business, they were updated on the best scientific information available framework, the BSIA framework, and they noted that it had been presented both to the Gulf and the South Atlantic Scientific and Statistical Committees. Procedural Workshop 8 is still ongoing. They haven't had a chance to complete that, and one of the issues with that project is the person that was leading it changed positions, and they have not had a chance to really focus any time, when they changed over to a newer position.

The last thing that might actually be impacting us the most, as the SEDAR Committee, is the potential changing of timing for the SEDAR Steering Committee. There was an indication that the spring meeting, either in April or May, was being difficult to meet, and so they might have to have those meetings a little bit earlier, and, as I had mentioned in September, in order to meet some of the timelines that we have in the SEDAR process, we might have to change our meeting schedule to December, and so all of these SEDAR meetings are a little bit in flux right now, as things get set up for the SEDAR Steering Committee. Once they have a fixed schedule, we can adjust our committee schedule, in order to match that best. Any other questions in regard to the SEDAR Steering Committee?

All right. Then one of the big items is the benchmark assessment for SEDAR hogfish, or SEDAR 94, hogfish, and this is going to be both stocks that are in Florida, and so it's the east coast Florida and Florida Keys stock and then a separate stock, which is the west coast of Florida. The terms of reference are going to be very similar between the two. We had a planning team to develop these. As I had mentioned, the Gulf and South Atlantic Scientific and Statistical Committees have reviewed both of these -- Or they have reviewed these terms of reference, and their edits are currently included in these, and so, if there's anything that you all want to change, additions can be accepted. If we want to change anything dramatically, such as removing an item, that would have to go back to the SSCs and get their approval, in order to remove an item, and so that could drag on the process for the terms of reference. I'm not saying you can't do it, but it's just there is a cost to it.

I am not going to go through these line-by-line, in order to save some time, and, basically, in the data workshop, we have a stock structure, and unit stock definitions, and we're not expecting any big changes there, but we do need to review the data, to make sure it's there. We want the data to be reviewed through 2023 for the life history, and those are the parameters that are included. We need to look at characterizing the discard mortality rate, and that information is provided, and the terms of reference are provided for those. Provide the means of population abundance that are appropriate for the stock assessment, and that's basically looking at indices of abundance that could be useful for this.

Going on down, provide commercial statistics through 2023, both landings and discards, and then, when we get to 6, this one is a little bit different than how we typically do it in the South Atlantic region, and we do have information on evaluate the transition from MRIP-CHTS, or that Coastal Household Telephone Survey, to the MRIP- Fishery Effort Survey, and they also want the Andrews 2022 investigation into telescoping error reviewed during this process, and, the Andrews paper in 2022, that's the pilot study that everybody has been referring to this week.

There's also a term of reference to explore the State Reef Fish Survey data for the State of Florida, and there's also a terms of reference to look into the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting, and so the charter boat reporting. All of these are a little bit different than we typically have, but we're asking for all of these to be explored. It's not saying that all of these have to be used, but it's just exploring the data to see if there's anything useful in those data streams. We also have a term of reference regarding climate and ecosystem species interactions and habitat and episodic events, and that's it for the data workshop. If there's any questions on data workshop terms of reference, before I get into the assessment workshop. I am not seeing anybody raising their hand on that.

The assessment workshops, a typical approach for a benchmark assessment. Then review any changes in the data and sources from the data workshop, develop a population assessment, and one of the things that they're going to provide, in this benchmark assessment, is a continuity run from the SEDAR 37, as well as the SEDAR 37 update, and then the remainder of the items are just ways to characterize population abundance, as well as uncertainty, and the benchmarks.

All right. Going into the environmental covariates, if it can be possible to include those into the stock assessment, and also declarations of stock status relative to benchmarks and uncertainty. Getting down into 10, it's looking into the projections, and so there is some terms of reference relative to those. One of the items that we have listed, that's fairly new in these benchmark assessments, is to follow the catch level projections workshop for the Florida east coast stock only. It's not been adopted by the Gulf SSC, and so there's going to be different projection methodologies, potentially, between the two different areas, and also what information to include.

We have a list of F metrics, depending on the condition of the stock, in order to develop projections, and then we also have research recommendations and data collection for future stock assessments. Any concerns with the assessment report?

All right, and then the review workshop, and this has been consistent for a number of years now, the information to include in the review workshop. We did not change anything in this from the last benchmark assessment we had, and so I'm not going to go through all of these, and the council has reviewed these several times in the past. Any questions in regard to the review workshop?

With that, we will need a motion, in order to approve the terms of reference for SEDAR 94, and I have a draft motion on the board, if there's any discussion.

DR. BELCHER: Any questions, or discussion, for Chip relative to the TORs? Okay, and so the draft motion is up. Does somebody want to make that motion? Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: **Approve the SEDAR 94 terms of reference.**

DR. BELCHER: Do I have a second? Kerry. Any further discussion? **Does anyone object to the motion?** Okay. **Seeing none, that motion passes.**

DR. COLLIER: Going into Attachment 3, as I talked about earlier, during the committee report, there was some changes to the 2026 schedule, and the 2025 schedule, and we had turned in terms of reference for 2025 species, and some of those species were requested to move back, and we had also talked about -- In September of 2023, the SEDAR Committee here had talked about some species to submit for 2026 SEDAR schedule stock assessments, and, given the conflict between the two, we went ahead and submitted a couple of the 2025 stock assessments to 2026, and so, as we had mentioned, gag grouper was originally in 2025, and we moved that back into 2026, and snowy grouper was originally in 2026.

We submitted statements of work for a 2026 gag operational assessment and a 2026 snowy grouper operational assessment, as well as a 2026 king mackerel operational assessment, and this is basically tying a bow, because it was slightly different than what we talked about in the September SEDAR Committee, and I just wanted to make sure that everybody was aware of this change and if there were any concerns. You guys could yell at me for this, and we didn't have an opportunity to talk with you all between the SEDAR Steering Committee and when we had to turn in the statements of work.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Comments, and thoughts, from the group on what is currently on the schedule? Spud.

MR. WOODWARD: Just a curiosity question, and it looks like there is a lot of white showing in 2024, and, obviously, we had some issues with the last Spanish mackerel assessment, and I guess my question is, is there an opportunity to address some of the, and I don't want to call them deficiencies, that were not addressed, and I realize that's not going to answer the FES pilot study conundrum, but could we benefit from some additional attention to Spanish mackerel, during that time period, that might position us to be able to make a better decision? Could we maybe get an updated catch level specification, or is that just not realistic?

DR. COLLIER: I feel like that would be up to the Science Center, whether or not they could do any additional work in regard to the Spanish mackerel stock assessment.

DR. BELCHER: Andy.

MR. STRELCHECK: I may need some help, in terms of recollection of the SEDAR Steering Committee discussions, but, knowing that we were pushing some assessments, you know, down the page, because of FES, when Clay spoke about this, it sounded like the white space was not going to be unused, and that the Southeast Fisheries Science Center staff would focus on some

improvements, efficiencies, to the overall stock assessment enterprise, in terms of data enhancements, you know, being able to funnel data and indices and other things into the assessment process, and then we also have, obviously, the kind of overlay of MSEs that are happening at the same time that the center would be working on, but, in terms of Spanish mackerel, I can't answer that.

DR. BELCHER: Anything else? John Walter.

DR. WALTER: Thanks, Andy, for pointing that out. While it looks like a lot of white space, it is going to allow us to do some improvements, and I am checking on whether there's something about -- Clay might have mentioned something about Spanish mackerel, and I need to check back on that, and I don't know if anyone remembers whether we said there's anything -- Or whether that did get back in the queue, because I think that was originally what we stated, when we didn't follow-up on many of their recommendations, was that it could get back in the queue, but I don't think it has, and so maybe that's something that is missing. Thanks. I think it's 2028 that it's back in the queue, right?

DR. BELCHER: Spud.

MR. WOODWARD: I mean, it sounds like a no to me, and I just -- Because I think, when we revisit this framework amendment in the Full Council, it's probably going to help us maybe decide what we need to do, or do not need to do, with that framework amendment, and the other issues were brought up the other day, and now, you know, we've got FES uncertainty, and so we've just got to put some thought into what's the proper course of action with that framework amendment.

DR. BELCHER: Tom.

MR. ROLLER: I just want to say that I'm kind of with Spud on that one. I would just be curious if there's anything that can be done, and, if we can't get that answer by tomorrow, then, obviously, we're just going to have to discuss the framework a little bit further.

DR. BELCHER: All right. Chip.

DR. COLLIER: All right, and so, now that we're done with 2026, we're going on into planning for 2027, and staff went through a variety of species that are typically assessed, in order to figure out which species to put into the slots for 2027. If you look at the figure, you have to remember there's going to be a continuation of the red grouper benchmark assessment going into 2027, and so that leaves three potential slots for that time period, and staff are recommending the operational assessment for red snapper, and it's going to be the follow-up for the research track assessment, which is going to be including the South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Project.

There is also a recommendation to do a benchmark assessment for greater amberjack in 2027, and that one is going to be incorporating data from the Greater Amberjack Research Project, and so that information should be available, and then the final one is looking at red porgy. That species has been in a rebuilding plan since 2000, and the last stock assessment -- The terminal year for that was 2017, and so this should increase the information available for that stock quite a bit.

We also provide information on other species that may be, or that could be, put in those slots, or could be considered for those slots, and we had vermilion snapper as a consideration, and vermilion snapper did have an interim assessment, or interim approach, presented to the SSC, just in October, and, unfortunately, they did not recommend using that to base ABCs off of. One of the concerns was the index of abundance was not fit very well by the assessment, and, therefore, going forward with an index of abundance that wasn't fit very well may not be the best approach for that species.

They were -- They did still encourage the interim approach, but making sure that the index that's being used to predict future catches, or change catch levels for ABCs, to make sure that they are matched pretty well in the stock assessment.

Spanish mackerel is another one that was considered, and the group can talk about this, and there is also scamp and yellowmouth grouper, and that was completed in SEDAR 68, and then the other species that was mentioned, or considered by the staff, was wreckfish, and that was last assessed, I believe, in 2012, with data through 2010, and then there was issues with the data as well, due to confidentiality. There is a potential for something like wreckfish to go through a management strategy evaluation, given its international nature, much like dolphin, to see what's happening with dolphinfish, and maybe we can use a similar approach for wreckfish.

DR. BELCHER: Laurilee.

MS. THOMPSON: Should we stick blueline tilefish, and golden tilefish, in, and at least have a placeholder, in case they actually are ready to do something by 2027?

DR. COLLIER: So I'm looking through this, and the one species that I could see moving down the list would be red pogy. That stock assessment is getting a little bit old, and it's an overfished species, and, if we move that in there -- We could only put one in there, which is very unfortunate. It is a tight schedule to put all these species in there that we want to put in there.

DR. BELCHER: So I see a lot of pondering. Kerry.

MS. MARHEFKA: I am way out of my wheelhouse, but, as I'm thinking this through, I'm like we have, you know, golden tile and blueline tile, with the potential of not having the updated SADL, and then we also have red pogy, which we all sort of assume is having some sort of bigger issue than fishing, whether it's a regime shift or something like that, and are we going to have any new information on that? I don't know.

DR. BELCHER: So I'm going to ask a question of John Walter, and I don't know that it's necessarily answerable, but so we talked about the fact that the tilefish issue -- That they're not overfished or undergoing overfishing, and we don't have access to the survey. If this had been a species that was overfished, or undergoing overfishing, and this same issue had occurred with the loss of an index, would we be punting on doing an assessment, or would we have to do something different to assess for what our status is?

I'm just trying to think in the sense of, if some of the reason why people are willing to kind of push it down is because there's really not a problem with the stock, other than it's a dated assessment, and I'm not -- I'm just filling in the words, and please don't beat me for that, but, if we were on -

- If the shoe were on the other foot, would we be doing something different, if the stock status was different?

DR. WALTER: From a science perspective, it's agnostic on the status, and it's more of a management decision and whether you would desire information that might be more pressing, depending on stock status, but, scientifically, we assess according to the schedule that's determined, and what we're saying is that, when -- If we don't have the data, that it's not going to be as well determined, but the status is kind of -- It's not the determinant on the prioritization of it, from a scientific standpoint.

DR. BELCHER: I guess maybe that's not the best way that I could ask the question, and I guess the thing is that we've lost an index, right, and it would have been the determination before, and part of the reason that we're saying that we're not as willing to move forward is because we've lost this portion of it, but, if you were in a situation where management says we need to assess where we are, and this assessment is missing this part, what would have been the scientific advice at that point? So like I'm saying, if we were telling you that we need to assess it, because we have this information, and we need to know where we are with rebuilding, and whatever the associated management concern is, and what would have been the science body's approach to that assessment in the loss of an index? What guidance would you give? Does that make sense, what I'm trying to ask?

DR. WALTER: So if the council says we have a real concern about this stock, for whatever reason, what would we do, and we would say, well, if that's the priority, we'll try to do an assessment, but we'll come back to you and say we're missing ingredients A, B, C, and D in the casserole, and so it's not going to taste as good, and, when you miss things, you're going to get greater uncertainty in what the outcome is, versus waiting three years to actually get that key ingredient in it.

Then I would say, well, what is the real concern here on wanting to get it, and it sounds like the concern is that it's not going to give an updated catch limit, that the catch limit is going to be static, and, right now, the fishery wants an updated catch limit, and the fishery -- You know, I don't know whether there's an assumption that it's going to go up or down, but, as John well characterized, without that index, which is really the barometer of how the stock is doing, given that the catches have been constant, it's going to probably simply say that catches stay constant, because there's nothing else to tell it that the stock is doing better or worse without an index. There's some signal in the age comp, but that index is really the barometer.

DR. BELCHER: Chip.

DR. COLLIER: I know, in the South Atlantic, we typically stick with a fishery-independent index, but there's a longline fishery for golden tilefish that's pretty -- I mean, it's a small group. It's a dedicated group, and we know who they are, and it's not really changing over, and they're limited in the amount of -- I can't imagine that they're changing the amount of gear from year to year, and it seems like you could make an index of abundance from that fishery-dependent data. It's not the best source. Sometimes, when you're making a casserole, you can't use the best ingredients, but you use what you have, and so that might be an option there, but, for blueline tilefish, I think it's a very different situation. I think blueline tilefish, with that data-limited approach, with the new information that's available from the Mid-Atlantic, I think we need to work as best we can to get that one to continue forward.

DR. BELCHER: Thank you, Chip. John.

DR. WALTER: Chip is right, and we'll work on that longline index, but, last time, it was actually not recommended for inclusion, and so -- I think the reasons were probably well founded, and so I can't guarantee that, despite our best efforts to turn it into an index, that it's going to be something that would be accepted, and so I think that's part of that initial data triage, is do we have an index that's going to pass muster from fishery-dependent sources, or is there something that -- Because they are very hard to turn into an index that you can put into an assessment, and generally we try to avoid -- We prioritize using the fishery-independent ones, when available, but beggars can't be choosers, and so --

DR. BELCHER: Kerry.

MS. MARHEFKA: I guess what I'm hearing is maybe we don't make this discussion right now, and we wait for that data triage and come back in and make that decision in March, and does that make sense? Does that mess anything up, if we don't make that decision right now?

DR. COLLIER: Yes, I think we can wait until March, because I don't have to have statements of work to the SSC until April, and so we can hold off until then. That should work, but -- Actually, sorry, and I didn't think about the SEDAR Steering Committee. We do have to provide recommendations to the SEDAR Steering Committee prior to, or at, the February meeting, and so you guys would not get the potential chance to talk about that beforehand.

DR. BELCHER: Andy.

MR. STRELCHECK: I mean, to that point, because I just weighed-in yesterday on the timing of that meeting, and it looks like we're probably not going to meet until March, or early April, late March or early April.

DR. COLLIER: All right, and so we'll bring it back to you in March, hopefully. Fingers crossed.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. What more can we do to help you with this?

DR. COLLIER: Based on what we had provided, I had developed some draft language, and this is just more direction to staff than a motion or anything, and so what I had there was develop statements of work for red porgy to be considered for the 2027 SEDAR project schedule, and then continue one with the follow-up operational assessment for red snapper, and then start the greater amberjack benchmark assessment, which is going to be incorporating the information from the Greater Amberjack Research Project.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Anyone, as far as supporting that for going forward? Okay. Any other further direction to staff? Laurilee.

MS. THOMPSON: I just have a question, and so it seems like the -- You know, the science folks don't -- They have some kind of problem with working with the commercial fishermen, that you're going to have twenty-one boats out there setting longline gear after January 15, and then you've got also the hook-and-liners working, and is it -- I am trying to understand why there is this



hesitance to work with the commercial guys, and is it because they try to catch the biggest fish, and you're not getting enough little fish mixed, or what -- I mean, to me, it would make sense that you could -- We would even be glad to take measurements for you, when these fish come to the dock, and, if you wanted little fish -- Tilefish is -- It's easy to target a certain size. I mean, you just fish in shallower water if you little ones, and you go out deeper if you want big ones, and maybe -- You know, maybe there would be -- Since they're going to be out there setting gear anyway, why could you not use the commercial catch, you know, to try to get your information from that, and why does it seem like you guys are hesitant to use what we bring to the dock?

DR. WALTER: Well, first of all, we have no problem with working with commercial fishermen, and, actually, we welcome it. SADL is a cooperative survey with commercial fishermen. Do we use what you bring to the dock? Absolutely, and that's the material that goes into the ageing data, and so we take the otoliths, and the biological material, and the lengths. The challenge being can we turn the logbook reports into a catch rate index, and that's the challenge, which is, when you go fishing for profit, you go to where the fish are, and we need to know what -- We need to design a scientific survey, ideally, which is what SADL does, which has a random stratified design, and so you're fishing where the fish are, but also, importantly, where the fish aren't.

To take the commercial fishery data, and turn it into an index, it often requires a lot of assumptions, or a lot of processing, because you have to know what one fisherman did that was different than another to be able to say, well, you know, one guy just catches better, because he's a better fisherman, and knows how to set the gear, versus the other. Does it mean there's more fish in that place, or is fisherman better, and that's the kind of things that you have to do with that kind of data, and our challenge was, I think, when we worked with that dataset before, we weren't able to effectively account for those changes in what we call catchability, which is some people are better than others, or some people use gear that's different than others, and so that means that we couldn't use it as an index.

Now, the other, I think, factor was the fishery had undergone a lot of changes, in terms of -- I think the fleet changed dynamics a bit, but those were kind of several years ago, and so I think, here, we can take another look at it, to see whether the fishery has stabilized and whether we can actually make a defensible index from that, and so, you know, we say we'll try, and we've got really no problem with working with the fishermen and trying to develop fishery-dependent indices, and we've done that in the past, but we have tried to prioritize surveys now, moving forward, when we have them.

DR. BELCHER: Further discussion? Okay. Chip, are you good? All right. Is there any other business for the SEDAR Committee at this time? Okay. Seeing none, we'll adjourn this committee.

(Whereupon, the meeting adjourned on December 7, 2023.)

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Certified By: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Transcribed By  
Amanda Thomas  
February 8, 2024

Dec. 7, 2023

SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL  
2023 COMMITTEE MEMBERS continued

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Dec. 7, 2023

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SEDAR Committee

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Dec. 7, 2023

SEDAR Committee

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2023 - 2024 COUNCIL MEMBERS continued

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Dec. 7, 2023  
SEDAR Committee

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## Attendee Report: SAFMC December 2023 Council Meeting (12/4/23 - 12/8/23)

Report Generated:

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### Webinar ID

379-228-259

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### Duration

9 hours 41 minutes

### # Registered

227

### # Attended

131

## Staff Details

### Attended

Yes Interest Rating Not applicable for staff Last Name Council First Name South Atlantic Email Address administrator@safmc.net

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