

SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

SEDAR COMMITTEE

**Villas by the Sea Resort
Jekyll Island, Georgia**

March 5, 2024

Transcript

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Observers and Participants

Other observers and participants attached.

The SEDAR Committee of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council convened at The Villas by the Sea Resort, Jekyll Island, Georgia, on Tuesday, March 5, 2024, and was called to order by Chairman Carolyn Belcher.

DR. BELCHER: We are opening up the SEDAR Committee. The first item is the Adoption of the Agenda. Are there any suggested changes that need to be made to the agenda, as currently published? Okay. Any objections? Seeing none, the agenda passes, followed up by the minutes. Are there any suggestions, or edits, that need to be made to the minutes as currently published? Any objections to the minutes? Seeing none, the minutes carry. The first item is to look at the terms of reference for a few of our upcoming assessments, and I guess this is Chip.

DR. COLLIER: Thank you. I will start off with Attachment 1a, and this is going to be looking at a research track assessment for red snapper, SEDAR 90. Currently, this is listed as a research track assessment. There has been discussion of whether or not this should be changed from a research track assessment to a benchmark assessment, and that's what Attachment 1b is really talking about, and so we'll just go through this.

If you're looking at the research track, it's going to be very similar to a benchmark assessment, but the benchmark assessment will also have things for status determination criteria, as well as projections and looking at some diagnostics, and so, you know, that information will be added in, if that is the selected option by the committee and the council, in order to move forward with the next assessment for red snapper.

Let's dig into this, and the first one -- The way we start off all of these is with a data workshop, and we're going to be looking at the stock, and that is review life history information, and that's useful for the stock assessment model, and there are several pieces of information here. One of the new ones that it's talking about is exploring emerging technologies, including near-infrared spectrometry, and what that's doing is looking at ageing of red snapper, and that's been another method that's being used currently. It's typically not used for other species. They also have information on describing population and stock-specific growth, if that's warranted, and then evaluate the sources of uncertainty.

Going into the next one, providing measures of abundance, and, typically, we only have one real fishery-independent measure of abundance, and it's usually the SERFS survey, which is SEFIS and MARMAP combined. For this one, we potentially have other sources of information that could be available, and this includes the state data that's being collected through Florida, and it's also a South Carolina DNR juvenile survey, as well as information -- It's not necessarily going to be the survey, but it's going to be information that's in the survey, and so the SADL survey -- It won't have five years at this point, and so it won't have really a trend to go along with, but there are red snapper that are caught in some of these deep waters, and trying to figure out what's going on, and are those fish older, and are they larger than typically we see in other areas, and it would be important to understand the distribution of the red snapper.

Going into the next part, looking at commercial landings and statistics, looking at typical information that's collected for all species here, and nothing has really changed for this one. In Part D, this is looking at recreational landings, and we do have two different pieces that you all

haven't really seen in a terms of reference before, and one is to evaluate FISHstory, and so that is going to be looking at our citizen science project that's going back into the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, looking at the size distribution of red snapper, and potentially developing a CPUE of red snapper from that data. Then there is also the SEFHIER data, whether or not that should be considered.

In hindsight, looking into this, it might be interesting to also investigate the Florida State Reef Fish Survey, for some of their recreational data, and 90 percent of the recreational estimated catch of red snapper is from that state, and so getting some information from that survey might be useful, as well as there is a survey that's done during the mini-season by the State of Florida that has been used to estimate landings for the past few years, and maybe that should be added into this term of reference as well.

The next one is looking at discard mortality rates. It's a big issue for red snapper, given that most of the fish are going over as discards, and so getting more information in this. There's another citizen science project listed here, and the Release project is being listed, and it's collecting information on depth, as well as release treatment and several other factors, and so the next pieces are going into social and economic, and then we go into climate and ecosystem, and one of the important parts about Part G is there is a larval transport model that's been developed, specifically looking at red snapper and the connectivity between the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic region.

There's also a bullet to incorporate life history and abundance information for the South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Project. They are collecting all kinds of information in this, including age information that they're getting through epigenetic ageing of all the species, or all the individuals that are being collected, and so that's it for the data workshop. This will be the exact same, whether it's a research track or a benchmark assessment. With the exceptions of those additions that I had made, does the committee have any suggestions to incorporate into the terms of reference?

DR. BELCHER: Andy.

MR. STRELCHECK: Remind me of the timing of the data workshop. That will be 2025?

DR. COLLIER: Yes, and it's starting -- I am trying to think, and is it on the bottom of this? Here it is. The data evaluation workshop is going to be April 14 through 18, 2025. Some of the data scoping will occur before then, and so trying to get a little bit of information together prior to the full data workshop is always beneficial.

MR. STRELCHECK: Yes, and so the reason that I was asking, and it may be premature, and I know we'll be talking about the exempted fishing permits, and there may be information gleaned from those that could be shared as part of the data workshop, at that time, and I know, also, that we're looking at ramping-up some observer coverage in the South Atlantic, to help with estimation of discards, and I think you noted that there's a number of different kind of research studies going on with the State of Florida, that they've been provided funding for, and so making sure that those at least are considered, if datasets are available.

DR. BELCHER: Tim.

MR. GRINER: Thank you. Chip, we had talked about -- I guess it needs to be in the terms of reference, but will they be able to, on this assessment, look at the total landings, and then pull out each sector's discards, and does that have to go into the terms of reference to do the assessment that way?

DR. COLLIER: It doesn't necessarily have to be in the terms of reference, but it would be helpful to provide that guidance to the analysts, to make sure that they know that that is the council's desire, to see it that way.

MR. GRINER: I would really like to see it that way, and maybe we need to have some discussion on that, but I think it would be worthwhile to see that.

DR. BELCHER: Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: A couple of things to add here, and so it says, in there, State of Florida data surveys, and so I wanted to make sure that this specifically included the State Reef Fish Survey, and so it was unclear, to us, if this is like FIM indices, State Reef Fish Survey, or what, and then, also, in talking to FWRI, I was hoping that we could add a bullet, in the life history section, about requesting an evaluation of the best metric for spawning potential.

DR. COLLIER: That would be really good for a research track assessment, to investigate into that, and I think that would be good to put under the assessment side, in order to investigate there, and I did add the State Reef Fish Survey here, under the recreational catch statistics. In Bullet B, where we're talking about the State of Florida data surveys, we were not exactly certain all the names of the projects, and there's a lot of projects going on in Florida, and so we went with an all-encompassing term.

DR. BELCHER: Other comments? Okay. Back to you, Chip.

DR. COLLIER: Okay. Now we'll go into the assessment terms of reference, and this is where we will differ, or there will need to be a difference between a benchmark and a research track assessment. Currently, it is designed for a research track assessment, and that is what the SSC has reviewed. We do not have a terms of reference for an assessment workshop right now that the SSC has reviewed, and so what we're proposing, right now, is to bring it back to you all in June, if you choose to go with a benchmark approach.

With all assessment workshops, they document any changes in analyses following the data workshop, and they develop a population assessment. This one is a little bit different than typically. In that, they're going to have the South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Program data available for it, and so what this is trying to do is estimate total abundance of the population, and they're doing that through a couple of different ways. One of the newer techniques that they're using is called close-kin-mark-recapture, and so basically seeing who is out there, and how they're related, using a mark-recapture approach that is similar to freshwater fishing that uses tags, and so they see how many they've tagged, and then they go back and do the recapture simulations, and they figure out how many are likely to be in the population.

From that, they will also provide estimates of stock population parameters, and they will utilize available webinars to discuss the final CIE report for SARSRP, or the South Atlantic Research

Project, and they're going to be doing -- The CIE is the Center for Independent Experts, and they're typically the ones that review stock assessments for most of the stock assessments done in the South Atlantic, but this group is also going to be evaluating the survey, to make sure it's ready for use.

It was very valuable to have that CIE review for the Gulf of Mexico red snapper project, but it's also going to be very important here. There are slightly different techniques that are being used, and so getting a review on this data will be invaluable during the discussion of the stock assessment development. That's it for the assessment terms of reference for a research track assessment. Like Jessica said, if this goes -- We can add that in there, and you had mentioned evaluate the -- I added the evaluate best metric for spawning potential in there. Anything else?

DR. BELCHER: Amy.

MS. DUKES: Chip, you mentioned that moving from a research track to a benchmark would require some changes. Can you go over some of that additional information that's going to be necessary before a decision is made? I mean, ultimately, I think, personally, I would think that an operational track would be a much better utility of our time next year, as we go through this process, because you could take management action because of it. With the research track, you can't, and so what are we missing in this terms of reference, as far as terminal dates and things like that?

DR. COLLIER: We are missing the terminal dates, and we're also missing the benchmarks that would be coming from this, and so the request for development of the benchmarks, and we're also missing the projections, and so all of those would need to be added into these terms of reference, and we just did not have time to do it for the SSC meeting in February, and it came up pretty quick, and we just could not adjust on the fly, in order to get all that reviewed by the SSC. The SSC will be meeting in April, and we have it on the agenda to discuss this, if it is recommended as a benchmark assessment.

DR. BELCHER: Clay.

DR. PORCH: Thank you. You will notice that this is an extremely ambitious list of things to go through, and so a research track can more easily accommodate that, but, given the way we implemented research tracks hasn't really been as originally intended, and it's actually caused a lot of challenges, I think the trend will be to go towards benchmarks. Having said that, if we reframe this as a benchmark, it would have to be extremely flexible, in terms of the timing of it, and it wouldn't be the usual types of benchmarks that we're used to thinking about, because there's -- Some of these things will be the first time we've ever done it, period, you know, like incorporating the close-kin-mark-recapture estimates from the SARRP, and, you know, we don't know exactly how long that's going to take, and so just keep that in mind. We're not opposing the idea of going towards a benchmark, but this may be one that still has to have a pretty late sunset date.

DR. BELCHER: Other comments or questions for Chip, relative to the TORs? Chip.

DR. COLLIER: Just to build on what Clay said, I'm not advocating for one way or the other, but, as Andy had mentioned, there is a lot of information being collected on red snapper right now that

might not be available in April of 2025, but could be available later. Because it is a research track, trying to get everything set up for unknown data sources could be an extreme struggle, because you don't know exactly what's coming in from these data projects that haven't been completed, but there could be new information that's coming in that could inform an operational assessment that would not be available for a benchmark assessment.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Other comments, or discussion, on the TORs? Chip.

DR. COLLIER: All right. We'll go down to the review workshop. The review workshop is generally comprised of SSC members, as well as members from the Center for Independent Experts, and this is a typical terms of reference for a research track assessment. Once again, it's not looking at whether or not the stock is overfished or overfishing, and it's not looking at the projections, and so those would need to be added in for a benchmark assessment, but these are standard boilerplate language that we've always used for review workshops.

DR. BELCHER: Comments? Clay.

DR. PORCH: I wonder if we need to consider some minor modifications to the language here, in light of what happened with the Gulf red snapper review, where they actually kind of railed against the whole research track, and didn't want to be constrained by the way we had framed it, which was really a model-building exercise, you know, conceptually, what datasets are the most appropriate, what model structure, but they wanted the detailed diagnostics that you get with model-based inferences, and that requires having the latest, greatest, most up-to-date dataset, which we didn't provide for Gulf of Mexico red snapper, because that's not what was intended, and so we might need to be more clear here that, if this remains a research track, the data that go into this model are preliminary, and so they wouldn't be suitable for the kind of diagnostics that a lot of assessment scientists have come to expect. Otherwise, we're setting them up to say, hey, you didn't provide all this information, and so we can't evaluate it, because they're thinking about it the wrong way.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Other comments? Chip.

DR. COLLIER: I guess that's it for the terms of reference, but the real discussion is going to be whether or not it's a benchmark or a research track assessment, and so I will drop that to the committee and let you all enjoy.

DR. BELCHER: So I will throw the first question out there, and it's, again, back to the procedures of making sure the nuances are understood, and, basically, the research track is looking at the data, and, as Clay was just saying, it's a model-development exercise, and there's no management that comes out of that, and so we have to go to the next level step, which would then be to do the operational, to get our management advice, and so it adds another layer, and time window, that kind of pushes our advice further away, where, hypothetically, the benchmark would give us management advice as soon as it gets completed, correct? Jessica, and then I have Trish.

MS. MCCAWLEY: I guess my question is are there really any downsides with going with the benchmark approach, as long as -- To me, as long as the benchmark would be able to bring in all these new data streams, have the same type of discussion, if there's any special working groups needed, all of that, as long as all of that would still occur in the benchmark, with I would say the

same diligence as what was used in the research track, and I think I'm okay with it, but that's why I'm asking some questions about it, because maybe I'm being too ambitious for a benchmark, and I don't know.

DR. BELCHER: I kind of feel the same way you do, because I think I go back, and, again, the old guard, and that was the research track, prior to the research track. Trish.

MS. MURPHEY: I was just going to say, after listening -- You know, I listened to that discussion of the SSC, and they kind of had the same comments, is that either -- Both the benchmark and the research track, they're all going to be reviewed, and all the methods are going to be looked at just the same, and it does add a time layer, and they talked about the time layer of, you know, going to the operational, that they did kind of think it may take the same amount of time, and that may be getting at what Clay was saying, that needing the flexibility to look at stuff, but, you know, they actually supported doing a benchmark, and, you know, this is -- This species is such a hot topic that, to delay getting a stock status -- To me, I would just -- I support going forward with a benchmark, and, like I said, the SSC seemed to support that, and, to me, the research track is not going to give you a stock status, and that's what we need, and so I support doing a benchmark as well.

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

MR. GRINER: I agree with Trish. I think that's the real takeaway from this, is getting that stock status, and so I definitely think a benchmark is the way to go.

DR. BELCHER: Amy.

MS. DUKES: I'm just curious as to if the terms of reference aren't approved here, because do switch from a research to a benchmark, and it's got to go back to the SSC in April, and come back to this council in June, and how much do you think that this may change the timeline that's already been provided, and do you think that that timeline could still be truncated down to still hit that data evaluation workshop of April of 2025?

DR. COLLIER: I don't think -- Like I said, no matter what, the terms of reference were pretty similar for a data workshop, whether it's a research track or a benchmark, and so I feel like all of that will be possible to do. The big concern is, when you're coming back for the operational assessment, you potentially could incorporate some of the new projects that are getting funded this year, or are ongoing this year, and they might not be ready for that April 2025, and so that's -- To me, that's the only pitfall, but it's not guaranteed that those data projects could be incorporated into an operational assessment, because they might not have a slot for it, and it might be a lot of new information.

You know, you're only supposed to have minor modifications from the research track to the operational, and so the added time might not be worth it, and then you also have to think about public perception. Let's say the stock assessment indicates that the population is doing very well, and, obviously, the public is going to want that to be used for management immediately, and this is a very hot-button issue, and so delaying the time between when they get some available information on a stock to when it is actually implemented is significantly different between a research track the first time and a follow-up operational and then a benchmark.

DR. BELCHER: I will make the statement, and I own that it's out of context, but, in listening to the SSC's talks, back when we were talking about the MRIP issues, we were told we shouldn't be waiting on perfect data, or new data, and that it's all relative to the timing that we have, and so, I mean, again, I'm not saying -- I'm not advocating one way or another, but I do want to throw that out there, that there is that holding off, in the hopes that you're going to get something that may inform, but we don't know what it will or won't do. Andy.

MR. STRELCHECK: I would love for Clay to weigh-in. I mean, I'm certainly supportive of moving forward with a benchmark. I think, given the challenges we've seen in the Gulf with the research track assessment process, and I'm not sure there's much downside to skipping that, but I want to acknowledge, right, that the benchmark I think will have its added challenges, because we are dealing with so many potential new data streams, and information, and it's going to have been vetted and evaluated by the scientists, and so that will be something I think the SEDAR Steering Committee is going to want to look at carefully, in terms of timing of the assessment and how much time might need to be taken for a benchmark that may be outside the bounds of kind of a normal benchmark process to incorporate that information.

The other component to this, right, is that, in talking with Will Patterson, my understanding is the South Atlantic research study won't be available, I guess in final form, until August of 2025, although it might be available a little bit sooner than that, and so is there limitations to going and proceeding with a data workshop in advance of that data being finalized? I don't know, or if that's something that can come along later and keep the process moving, and I just wanted to note that.

DR. COLLIER: I pulled up the proposed timeline for this project, and I will highlight this area here, where they're talking about webinars for the South Atlantic Research Project, and it's recognized that it's a little bit data, and it's a little bit assessment, and so there's going to be a special webinar on how to incorporate this, and recognizing that it is likely to be a challenge. Right now, there's only two webinars, and that could be expanded. In talking with the analysts for this project, that was one of the things that they pointed out very explicitly, is do not expect this to go at the same timeframe as a normal benchmark assessment. Expect delays, and we are working through it, but, yes, we -- I definitely recognize that there is going to be delays for this.

DR. BELCHER: So maybe that's the better conversation to have, because it seems like, even with what we have out there for the red snapper innovation projects, the IRA discussions with observers, and you're looking at two years. I mean, that's at least what the forecast is, and so we're not even talking about things really being done until 2026, early, and, I mean, it's a thought. I mean, don't shoot the messenger. Clay.

DR. PORCH: Just to be clear, from the center's perspective, the research track is going away, and we just couldn't get it implemented the way it was originally intended, and just people aren't used to thinking that way, and so I expect, during the SEDAR Steering Committee meeting, the upcoming meeting, that it will be -- That program will be sunsetted, more or less. Originally, it was intended to be just kind of almost in the background, but we just couldn't do it, and so we support the idea of moving towards a benchmark, but, as I said, and for all the reasons that have been mentioned, it probably won't be -- It won't end much earlier than the research track, in tandem with an operational assessment, simply because the work still has to be done. I mean, look at the huge list of things on there.

I don't have a problem with it starting on schedule, because that list is so long, and there are certainly things in there that we can evaluate, get started on evaluating, even well before the South Atlantic red snapper count is completed, and so it makes sense to go ahead and get rolling on that and then pick up with webinars for the red snapper count information, and so the short answer is, yes, we support moving to a benchmark, but recognize that it will end pretty close to the same timeframe, because we're waiting for datasets to come in, and an enormous number of analyses. Thanks.

DR. BELCHER: Andy.

MR. STRELCHECK: I guess the other thing I will note is I've seen it now enough throughout my career, and everyone wants their piece of data incorporated, or considered, for the stock assessment, and I think that's the downside here, is that we are going to be in this period where there's going to be still some data that's going to be collected and coming in, and there's going to have to be some key decisions made, in terms of whether that gets integrated into the assessment or not, and at what point is there kind of a cutoff that data shouldn't be incorporated, or considered, and, you know, oftentimes, that data doesn't necessarily have a huge influence on the assessment, but there are certainly datasets that are going to be more critical than others.

I just wanted to make that note, because I'm fearful that, as we proceed over the next couple of years, there's going to be all this data that's going to continue to be collected, and the desire is to throw it into the assessment, which then slows down the assessment process, and it can be time-consuming at that stage in that process.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Other comments or conversation? Circling back around, it sounds like that we're in support of this being a benchmark, and not a research track, with the understanding that there is some flexibility that may be needed relative to timing. Other things we need to be considering? We have a motion, a suggested motion, and does somebody want to make the motion? Trish.

MS. MURPHEY: **I move to change SEDAR 90 to a benchmark assessment.**

DR. BELCHER: Do I have a second? Kerry. Any further discussion? **Any opposition?** Okay. **Seeing none, the motion carries.**

DR. COLLIER: All right, and so the plan, moving forward, is we'll come back to you all in June to talk about the terms of reference for a benchmark assessment. We'll also be coming with some potential -- With another closed session for potential participants. The participants that we had requested were for a research track assessment, and so, with a research track assessment, there's a group called an assessment development team. They're typically involved in the project from the data workshop and the assessment workshop, just to provide some continuity between the two different workshops. That team will be going away, and we've already requested -- When they had raised their hands to be involved in the project, we kind of identified where they would be split into if we developed a benchmark assessment.

The next one is 1c that we'll be going into, and this is the yellowtail snapper assessment, operational assessment, and it's SEDAR 96. If you just scroll down to page 2, if you remember

back to -- I guess it was September that we talked about an operational assessment for yellowtail snapper, and what this is going to be doing is an operational assessment evaluating the Florida State Reef Fish Survey to provide information on recreational landings and consider its use for assessments.

Then, in 2, it's just the normal update the parameter estimates and the variance, and then the different catch level recommendations on how to determine stock status for overfishing, and then requested projections, and so this is a typical operational assessment, where we generally try to have only one topic that we're looking at, and we've identified the issue with potential recreational bias estimates, and so the State Reef Fish Survey is a potential supplement, or a replacement, for MRIP in this situation, and the reason for this is the State Reef Fish Survey covers a large portion of where the yellowtail landings are occurring, in the state of Florida, and there is very little yellowtail landings outside of Florida.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Comments from anyone? I have one question, just because of where we were with the changes to the SPR, and is that something that the SSC -- Is the language something that should be changed, because, where we have MSY as yield at FMSY or proxy, which is still the 30 percent SPR, and is that something we should request a discussion about? Again, we had that change, and so is it worth it to get into that discussion, or not?

DR. COLLIER: I am trying to balance it in my head, because we're dealing with two different councils here, and two different SSCs. I can see the benefit of having the discussion, but adding that into the terms of reference could be a little bit more challenging.

DR. BELCHER: I forgot the dual component of that. Andy.

MR. STRELCHECK: Can you clarify -- I don't recall the change you're speaking about, and was it a higher SPR benchmark that was being considered?

DR. BELCHER: The suggestion had been made to change to an SPR 40, and is that correct, and I can't remember, off the top of my head, which assessment, but it was something that went to the SSC, and we discussed it. Was it scamp?

MR. STRELCHECK: I was going to say that's been suggested for grouper species, and it wasn't for snapper.

DR. BELCHER: I just didn't know, because it had been a discussion outside of the science part of it, and was there other advice, relative to other species, that we should be considering, whether or not the proxy is still the acceptable proxy, and that's it.

MR. STRELCHECK: Gotcha.

DR. BELCHER: Other comments or questions? Okay, Chip.

DR. COLLIER: Here's another potential draft motion.

DR. BELCHER: Okay. Do I have anybody who wants to make that motion, or is there further discussion about the TORs? Seeing that we haven't really had any heavy discussion, it seems like

everybody would accept them moving forward, and so do I have someone who wants to make that motion? Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: **Approve SEDAR 96 terms of reference.**

DR. BELCHER: Do I have a second? Tim. Any further discussion? **Any opposition? Seeing none, that motion carries.** Tim.

MR. GRINER: Just to clarify something for me, going back to that 30 percent SPR, and the 40, when we were doing that with the scamp, and just so that I'm clear, that 40 was the result of the actual life history of the fish, and is that correct?

DR. COLLIER: Yes, and so scamp are protogynous hermaphrodites, which means that they change from female to male as they get older, and there's some indication that it could be social cues as well, and so that puts them into a different kind of reproductive pattern, and so there's some belief that those protogynous hermaphrodites need a little bit more protection, and so reducing the landings a little bit can help to protect them a little bit better, keeping more of the spawning stock out there.

MR. GRINER: Thank you, Chip.

DR. BELCHER: Clay.

DR. PORCH: I would just say that 40 percent actually applies to a number of species, and it's sort of the latest research suggests that that's a better proxy for MSY, for a lot of reef fish, and I wouldn't necessarily say yellowtail, but maybe some of the other groupers and snappers, and it might be more appropriate, but that's the prevailing wisdom.

DR. BELCHER: Thanks, Clay. Chip.

DR. COLLIER: All right. We're going to move on to the next one, which is an update on SEDAR and Florida SEDAR projects.

DR. BELCHER: Chip, can I interrupt, just quick? I noticed that I skipped the update on the tilefish, and so could we circle back and grab that, before I forget about it again?

DR. COLLIER: Sorry about that, and I probably skipped that. Blueline tilefish and golden tilefish, or tilefish, there was a request to potentially delay these assessments, and the council had indicated that they wanted more information on this. The information will be developed as they're beginning the projects, and there's just not information for blueline and golden tilefish right now. I will say that the golden tilefish topical working group has met, actually, and is working on completing their workgroup report, looking at some of the life history parameters for golden tilefish and some other pieces that were requested of the topical working group.

Blueline tilefish is starting later on in the year, and so we can provide you more of an update, as that one is getting closer, on the available data that will be ready to go, and we can also give you - - Probably, in June, we could give you an update on golden tilefish, as that assessment is getting started a little bit earlier.

DR. BELCHER: Any questions for Chip on that? Okay. Next item.

DR. COLLIER: All right, and so the ongoing projects that we have right now are mutton snapper, and this one got delayed a little bit, because they were trying to incorporate the State Reef Survey as the recreational estimate, and the reason for the delay is they want to do some calibration between the State Reef Fish Survey and MRIP, and they needed the South Atlantic data for three years in order to do some of that calibration. That's going to help it go backwards in time, and so they're hoping to have information for all the way through 2023, and so the assessment got delayed until September of 2024, in order to add that calibration into the assessment.

SEDAR 86, red grouper, that is being changed, and that's going to be a benchmark assessment. This was originally planned as an operational assessment. However, there is indication that there could be two stocks of red grouper on the Atlantic coast, and, due to the nature of the two stocks, it was recommended to change this to a benchmark assessment, to thoroughly evaluate the data and where to parse it out into different pieces.

The South Atlantic gray triggerfish research track assessment is ongoing, and, actually, next week, we have our review workshop for this project, and so that's -- The completed report will be available in May of 2024, and it's likely to be reviewed by the SSC either in -- Either in a summer webinar meeting or hold off until October of 2024. If you look at the SEDAR schedule, that is available in Attachment 4, you will see that the operational assessment for this one is quite a bit away, and the reason for the delay between the research assessment and the operational assessment is because of the potential issue with recreational biased data, where there was indication of an up to 40 percent difference between -- Or up to a 40 percent bias, due to the order of questions being asked, and so it was recommended to hold off on the operational assessment until we get the recreational data stream available for this species.

Red snapper research track, we just talked about that. Where it says "research track", that's going to change to a benchmark, and we just talked about the Atlantic tilefish operational assessment. The SEDAR staff are also working on an Atlantic drum benchmark, and they're just organizing the review workshop for ASMFC, and, if you remember, back a while ago, when all this State Reef Fish Survey stuff was coming in, the unfortunate species for this about delayed was hogfish, and so this stock assessment has been delayed a little bit, and it was originally slated to begin in 2024, and it's now being delayed until 2025, potentially late in 2025.

SEDAR 95, the Atlantic cobia benchmark, that's being done for ASMFC, and they've taken over management of Atlantic cobia north of Florida, and so that's going to be done through SEDAR, and then the recently added SEDAR 96 yellowtail operational assessment, in order to look at the recreational estimates from the Florida State Reef Fish Survey, and there is no action required for this. This is just updates.

DR. BELCHER: Any questions for Chip relative to the updates? Okay. Back to you, sir.

DR. COLLIER: All right, and so part of the process that we have for research track and operational assessments is that we develop statements of work for each assessment a couple of years in advance, and so these were the original statements of work that were provided to the Southeast Fisheries Science Center for the 2026 species. We have snowy grouper, gag grouper, and king

mackerel as the requested species to be evaluated. We do not have a statement of work for red grouper, and that's being requested for 2026, and benchmark assessments do not require the statement of work, but we will develop a terms of reference for that.

I'm not really going to go through these statements of work, and you guys have all seen them, and this is more or less to complete the circle, let you know what we have supplied in -- I can't remember when we gave -- I believe we gave these to the center in October, or August, and I can't remember the date that we had provided, but it's basically a minimal number of workshops for this, and I believe there's only one group that is requesting a topical working group, and that would be looking at the low recruitment, and that's for gag grouper.

Gag grouper has had a series of bad-recruitment years, and there was some indication, through some of our citizen science work, that there could be some good recruitment out there, but the -- There still is a topical working group that's being requested of this. The National SSC is going to be looking at a low-recruitment -- Or addressing some of these questions in their upcoming August workshop, and so they might be able to provide some guidance, and the SSC is also wanting to work on this low-recruitment issue.

Then, finally, we are going to have a seminar series on this as well, and Kyle Shertzer is going to give a presentation on the low recruitment for several of the snapper grouper species that we have in the South Atlantic.

The follow-up to our statements of work, here is the response from the Science Center on this, and there's not really too much in there. It's saying that, you know, they recognize there is some valuable information here, and they're not recommending any changes, necessarily, to the statement of work. The one thing I do want to point out is, under Item 2, where king mackerel is moving from a Stock Synthesis model to a BAM model, and so the Beaufort Assessment model, and that means is that, basically, the Beaufort team is going to be bringing in king mackerel into the group that they assess. Previously, this was done through the -- I can't remember the name of the slot, but we had it labeled as the CMP slot, and so that slot is basically being removed and being added into the Beaufort team.

DR. BELCHER: Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: So why can't we still use the Stock Synthesis model? Why does it have to be converted to the BAM?

DR. BELCHER: Clay.

DR. PORCH: Part of it is because your SSC is used to using BAM, and looking at the multi-model inferences and the MCBE stuff, and so they like that way of characterizing the uncertainty, but, also, if the Beaufort staff take it over, their expertise is with using BAM. They're basically the same equations, but it's just BAM does some things a little bit differently, in particular how it characterizes uncertainty.

DR. BELCHER: A follow-up, Jessica? No? Trish.

MS. MURPHEY: So this is an operational, and so, if they're switching, does it need to go to at least a benchmark? I mean, even if there are some differences, and, I mean, is that something to - I don't know, and I guess that -- I'm not sure what that does to the timeline, but, I mean, it seems like switching models is kind of a big deal.

DR. COLLIER: So one of the things that the SEDAR Steering Committee might be talking about is removing the monikers of what the stock assessments are, and so we might just be calling it a stock assessment, as opposed to a benchmark or an operational or an update, whatever title we might want to give to it, and one of the potential things that could be requested is to have a bridging exercise between the BAM model and a Stock Synthesis model, and that might not necessarily -- Because, if we call it a benchmark, that also invokes a CIE review, and it might not need a CIE review for a change between Stock Synthesis and BAM. We just need to confirm that the two models are seeing the same thing.

DR. BELCHER: So it is a continuity then? Would a continuity be done in that situation?

DR. COLLIER: In that situation, it might take a little bit more time, in order to develop that, and so it wouldn't be a normal operational assessment, where we're expecting it to be done rapidly, and this could be maybe a topical working group at the assessment level, but it is going to take more time, because they would basically be developing two different models.

DR. BELCHER: Tim.

MR. GRINER: So maybe I missed that, Chip, and so are they doing Stock Synthesis and BAM?

DR. COLLIER: So what they could do is basically start developing this new project with all the new information. However, truncate it back to the previous information, and so all the information that went into Stock Synthesis, and they would not necessarily update that, but they would make sure the BAM would configure to the same approach.

DR. BELCHER: So, Clay, can I ask a question, and, if it's obvious, I apologize, but, just with the conversations that we were having within the SSC group about the impacts of the MRIP changes, the Item B, where it says we're expecting gag grouper and king mackerel to be impacted by the FES, and it may be necessary to reconsider these assessments, and the SSC was kind of cautioning us that we shouldn't be sitting and waiting, and this is a pilot study, and so are you guys getting different guidance in conversation with the Office of Science and Technology? I mean, just something so that we can kind of reconcile the different approaches with this.

DR. PORCH: No, we're not getting different guidance, and the guidance remains the same. As long as you're assessing and monitoring using the same scale, it's going to have the same effect, and so, you know, we've never said that you have to postpone because of the FES change, because it's going to be something that is a consistent effect back in time, and so, again, as long as you're monitoring and assessing in the same currency, it doesn't really matter, for this exercise.

I think the broader concern is, if we were to move forward as the council recommended, and delay some of these assessments, and then conduct them using the revised FES numbers, then a whole bunch of them are going to pile up in that 2026 and 2027 timeframe, and we don't have the resources to do them all, and so we have to figure out how we can stagger them, how we can

schedule them, to get them done, and I think that's one of the main points here, is we're going to have to work with council staff to figure out how we can schedule all of these assessments, and maybe some of them don't need to be run through SEDAR, if we're just changing the scale of the recreational catches.

DR. BELCHER: Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: A couple of things here, because, I mean, I feel like triggerfish, red grouper, snowy, black grouper, hogfish, all of these would be impacted, yet the letter is just speaking specifically to gag and king mackerel, and one of the sentences in there says that it may be necessary to reconsider whether these assessments should continue, and so I guess I'm -- Does this mean we're reordering the schedule, or does it mean we're not doing gag and king mackerel? I'm just having trouble understanding what it means and then how that affects other species, because we did have this discussion, a few meetings ago, about how the MRIP numbers would affect various species in the upcoming stock assessment, and so I just have some questions here, and I guess I'm a little confused about what's happening next.

DR. BELCHER: That was kind of where I was going too with that, and I guess, from what I took away from what Clay's statements were a few minutes ago, is some of this is helping them prioritize it, so that, if you are looking at where they are in the current order, gag and king could kind of bump back, because of the concerns, and the ones that are less impacted maybe to the top of the list, but within that same -- I guess it's just that idea of what are some of the logic you would use as to how you could order them within the year, and is that correct, Clay, or is that the intent with that statement?

DR. PORCH: Yes, that is the intent, and they certainly are two of the stocks that are more impacted by the recreational fishing issue, and, given the council's concern with that, it makes sense that, if we're going to be consistent, you could postpone those, and move some others up, but we need to work through that whole schedule.

DR. BELCHER: Jessica.

MS. MCCAWLEY: So then would that schedule then go back to the SEDAR Steering Committee to discuss, and then come back to the council? I just can't remember how this works, like when the council weighs-in on the schedule and all.

DR. COLLIER: We'll be looking at the schedule in the next item, the next agenda item, and so we'll look at that, and you all can provide recommendations to the SEDAR Steering Committee, and then they'll make final decisions for that.

DR. BELCHER: Other questions from folks, or comments? Okay. All right, and so I guess moving on to 2027.

DR. COLLIER: Yes, and so Attachment 4 is the SEDAR schedule for 2027, and I will just scroll down to my version of the SEDAR schedule, and I eliminate the Caribbean, and I also eliminate the Gulf of Mexico from this, and I incorporate FWC, and I do have that slot for CMP, although that is going to be moved. You can see everything is getting jammed up in 2026, where we have gag grouper starting late in the year, and we have an operational for gray triggerfish, and we do

have snowy grouper starting early in the year. King mackerel, it's slated as early in the year, but that could be moved to whatever timeframe is available to be done.

It is a very heavy lift, and you all just made the motion of a red snapper operational assessment, or to change the research track to a benchmark assessment, and so I have -- In 2027, I have what's circled as an operational assessment for red snapper, and that will go away, but, as Clay indicated, it might take this entire time in order to do a red snapper, given all the data, new data, that's going to be incorporated into the stock assessment. If it doesn't, that is a potential slot for black sea bass, for a South Atlantic black sea bass update assessment, and you all will be getting information on this in the next -- Or at the Snapper Grouper Committee, and this might be a good time period in order to have another assessment, operational assessment, for black sea bass.

Then you can the other species that we have potentially incorporated in there, an operational assessment for red porgy, and that species is overfished and overfishing, and management action has already been taken for it, and so getting a next assessment for that one could be extremely beneficial. You can see the rationale, staff rationale, on why we recommended the four species in 2027, the greater amberjack, the red porgy, red snapper currently as an operational, and then the change to black sea bass, if it is changed to a benchmark. With this, this is -- You all can provide guidance to Carolyn and John, who sit on the SEDAR Steering Committee, on what projects to move forward with for 2027.

DR. BELCHER: Clay, I had a question too, just as -- We know -- You mentioned, in December, or John Walter did, that there's three new stock assessment positions, and how are those going to be figuring into the workload in the future?

DR. PORCH: Three new ones, or backfills, but I think there's a new one for the new Caribbean Branch, but, again, the problem, right now for us, has actually not been the assessment positions, and it's been in the data provision and coordinating all the states and everything else that's going on there, and we're still grappling with that, but that's the main problem, but we should have enough assessment leads to carry this kind of workload, or close to it, give or take an assessment.

The problem, right now, again, is managing the data provision, and we are in the process of hiring some folks to help us with the automation, and that's been challenging, getting the IT professionals to do the software development, because, again, that's been the bottleneck, is trying to coral all the information from all the various sources, and the assessments in the Southeast do use more sources of data, and have more data partners, than anywhere else in the country, and that's been an ongoing challenge that I admit we haven't quite mastered, but we're making progress now, but, again, I think the -- It's not so much the assessment lead issue, and it's the data provision.

DR. BELCHER: Thanks for the clarification. Other questions, or comments, at this time, relative to the 2027? If you have thoughts, as Chip said, come and chat with us, and we'll talk about it at the steering committee in a month. Okay.

At this point, we are done with the open part of the committee, and so I'm going to ask that we take five minutes, or, actually, we'll go ahead and be nice, and I will do ten. We can throw in a biological on top of that, but come back at 11:10, and we'll go into the closed session to discuss appointments and the management plan working group. We won't come back, once we're done with the closed session, and we'll go to lunch, and we'll break until 1:30, unless something crazy

happens, and we get derailed in a long time slot, and then we'll re-announce. I'm just having to caveat it.

(Whereupon, the meeting went into closed session on March 5, 2024.)

- - -

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April 24, 2024

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Attendee Report: SAFMC March 2024 Council Meeting (3/5/24)

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