The Committee had a difficult time selecting which species should be the Key Species. They felt all assessed species were key species depending on how a priority score could be developed. The first option would be to have all assessed species (not including White Grunt) assessed on a regular basis through the SEDAR process. The agency has indicated that this number of assessments is not possible. Past assessment throughput, whether pre-SEDAR, through SEDAR, or outside of SEDAR verifies that there simply are not adequate resources to assess all species managed by the SAFMC. Nor are there enough to assess all 55 snapper grouper species.

The Committee recommended developing a key stock list considering overfished or overfishing status, economic importance, number of trips, or other metrics. First scenarios were developed for the assessment schedule for stocks assessed by SEFSC through the SEDAR Process. All of the following information describes SEFSC assessments that would be conducted through SEDAR.

The SEFSC developed an assessment schedule scenario depending on the frequency of assessments with flexibility to address urgent needs. The schedule is based on assessing just over 2 stocks per year:

* 5-6 stocks could be assessed on a 3-year rotation
* 7-8 stocks could be assessed on a 4-year rotation
* 9-10 stocks could be assessed on a 5-year rotation

**Table 1** includes three scenarios starting with the NMFS’s Strawman of 14 stocks assessed every six years. Each species to be assessed is determined with a regular, recurring assessment schedule with 6 years between assessments (Tier 1 needs assessment most frequently). An interim evaluation would be conducted at the midpoint, after 3 years. The details of these interim approaches remain to be determined, in particular how much age information would be incorporated. Because the Committee and SSC indicated they would like to retain an open slot for unexpected circumstances or to assess other species with management issues, two example schedules were developed based on a five-year cycle for either 5 or 7 Ttier 1 stocks and an allowance for other assessments. The table is developed to display the minimum time to address all the stocks the Council and SSC have identified as potentially important through the SEDAR process. In the examples below, if the Council opts to have 5 species regularly updated for assessments (Tier 1 for most frequent), then the second and third assessment slots (in some years) have an open slot. It is estimated to take eight years to get through the suite of species. If seven species are selected for regular assessments, then it would take 10 years to get the 15 species recommended for stock through the assessments SEDAR Process.

The Committee could request an additional analysis for species in an open slot group before all get assessed. For example, an open slot could address Shadow Shark in Year 1 and maybe Year 7. This would result in more time to complete assessments for the 15 species the Committee has suggested for assessments.

**Table 1**. Number of stocks and timeline to complete assessments for species identified by Committee and SSC as species to be assessed through SEDAR Process. The five and seven tier 1 (T1 - most important) stocks scenarios assume there are 15 stocks the Council would include in the list for SEDAR Assessments. Tier 1 are species for stocks with the most regular updates and open slots (OS) are stocks that can be assessed as requested by Council.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | NMFS Strawman | Five T1 - Stocks | Seven T1 - Stocks |
| Year 1 | T1 -1 | T1 -7 |   | T1 -1 | OS |   | T1 -1 | T1 -6 |   |
| Year 2 | T1 -2 | T1 -8 | T1 -13 | T1 -2 | OS | OS | T1 -2 | OS | OS |
| Year 3 | T1 -3 | T1 -9 |   | T1 -3 | OS |   | T1 -3 | T1 -7 |   |
| Year 4 | T1 -4 | T1 -10 | T1 -14 | T1 -4 | OS | OS | T1 -4 | OS | OS |
| Year 5 | T1 -5 | T1 -11 |   | T1 -5 | OS |   | T1 -5 | OS |   |
| Year 6 | T1 -6 | T1 -12 |   | T1 -1 | OS |   | T1 -1 | T1 -6 |   |
| Year 7 |   |   |   | T1 -2 | OS | OS | T1 -2 | OS | OS |
| Year 8 |   |   |   | T1 -3 | OS |   | T1 -3 | T1 -7 |   |
| Year 9 |   |   |   |   |   |   | T1 -4 | OS |   |
| Year 10 |   |   |   |   |   |   | T1 -5 | OS |   |

Another approach the Committee could consider Tier 1 assessments done on a three-year cycle, while Tier 2 stocks are done on a five-year cycle. In **Table 2**, it would take approximately 11 years to get through the 15 assessments assuming the open slots address the other species only one time.

NMFS has indicated they could potentially conduct assessments outside of the SEDAR Process. However, this approach has not been described in great detail on how many or which species could be assessed.

**Table 2**. Number of stocks and timeline to complete assessments for species identified by Committee and SSC as species to be assessed through SEDAR Process. The three Tier 1 assessments done on a three-year cycle and two Tier 2 assessments done on five-year cycle. Tier 1 (T1) are species for stocks with the most regular updates, Tier 2 (T2) are species that need regular assessment updates, and open slots (OS) are stocks that can be assessed as requested by Council.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Year | Thee Tier 1 and Two Tier 2 Stocks |
| Year 1 | T1 -1 | T2 - 1 |   |
| Year 2 | T1 -2 | OS | OS |
| Year 3 | T1 -3 | OS |   |
| Year 4 | T1 -1 | T2 - 2 | OS |
| Year 5 | T1- 2 | OS |   |
| Year 6 | T1 -1 | T2 - 1 |   |
| Year 7 | T1 -2 | OS | OS |
| Year 8 | T1 -3 | OS |   |
| Year 9 | T1 -1 | T2 - 2 |   |
| Year 10 | T1 -2 | OS | OS |
| Year 11 | T1 -3 | OS |   |

**Selecting Stocks for Assessments Conducted by SEFSC through SEDAR**

Several metrics were considered and staff settled on a list of regularly assessed species that included 7 species. The first criterium is that the species has been assessed in the past. This indicated the Council recognized this was an important species in the past. Second is the frequency of previous assessments for a species. These species tended to have shorter times between assessments indicating the Council has been requesting these species on a regular basis. Reviewing the fishery performance report, the species considered for Tier 1 assessments all have some community importance.

Other information streams reviewed were landings provided in SEDAR Attachment 2, stock status from NMFS 2023 Stock Status Report to Congress, long-term index (above or below the mean or 1 in the index), and recent index (last two years relative to last five years). Ultimately staff felt like a SEDAR assessment slot might not be needed for overfished stocks. These stocks are required to have regular updates and could be done outside of SEDAR. Landings may not be a good indicator of overall importance because landings have been constrained for some species due to rebuilding. The index of abundance would be most useful to determine when to get a species in an open slot.

Staff recommend:

* Black Sea Bass
* Golden Tilefish
* King Mackerel
* Red Snapper
* Snowy Grouper
* Spanish Mackerel
* Vermilion Snapper

**Table 3**. Information considered to select species for regular assessments through the SEDAR Process. Species bolded are recommended for regular assessments through the SEDAR Process.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Species | Time Between Assessments | Overfished or Overfishing | Long Term Index  | Recent Index |
| ASMFC Atlantic Group Cobia | 5.5 |   |   |   |
| **Black Sea Bass** | **3.8** | **O\*** | **Below** | **Below** |
| Blueline Tilefish | 5.5 |   | N/A | N/A |
| Gag | 7 | OO | Below | Flat |
| **Golden Tilefish** | **5.25** |  | **N/A** | **N/A** |
| Gray Triggerfish\* | 8 |   | Below | Decreasing |
| Greater Amberjack | 11 |   | Above | Increasing |
| **King Mackerel** | **5.333333** |  | **N/A** | **N/A** |
| Red Grouper | 7 | O | Below | Decreasing |
| Red Porgy | 5.333333 | O | Below | Decreasing |
| **Red Snapper** | **4.25** | **OO** | **Above** | **Increasing** |
| Scamp |   | O\* | Below | Stable |
| **Snowy Grouper** | **7.5** | **OO** | **N/A** | **N/A** |
| **Spanish Mackerel** | **6.5** |  | **N/A** | **N/A** |
| **Vermilion Snapper** | **3.75** |  | **Below** | **Decreasing** |
| White Grunt |   |   | Below | Decreasing |

Table 3. Community dependence based on past fishery performance reports.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Species** | **FPR Year** | **Community Dependence** |
| Black Sea Bass | 2017 2022 | Dependance on Black Sea Bass for both the commercial and recreational sectors is influenced significantly by regulations and relative abundance of black sea bass in comparison to other targetable species. |
| Blueline Tilefish | 2019 2023 | Communities in the Outer Banks, North Carolina are very reliant on Blueline Tilefish, especially in the event dolphin are unavailable. |
| Gag | 2020 | Gag remains a prized catch in the South Atlantic but infrastructure challenges have made it hard to target grouper, generally. |
| Golden Tilefish | 2018 | Fishermen utilizing longline gear in Florida are very dependent on Golden Tilefish and they have few species they can switch to in the event of a decline. |
| Gray Triggerfish | 2021 | Gray Triggerfish are becoming increasingly important as they are sold easily for a good price and other species are becoming less accessible. |
| Greater Amberjack | 2018 | Greater Amberjack are important for all states and sectors in the South Atlantic because they are reliably caught and are part of the set of species that allow commercial and for-hire fishermen to make a trip. |
| King Mackerel | 2018 2019 | King mackerel are important to fishermen in North Carolina and Florida in all sectors, but they are being affected by loss of infrastructure and changes in species distribution. |
| Red Grouper | 2017 2023 | Red Grouper is not an important species due to lack of access and availability, but popularity of spearfishing for red grouper is increasing in Florida. |
| Red Porgy | 2018 | Communities are not dependent on Red Porgy alone, however they are a key part of a suite of species and losing them would be detrimental. |
| Red Snapper | 2020 | Red Snapper was historically an important species to communities and current restrictions have hurt local economies and have resulting in high frustrations. |
| Scamp | 2019 | Scamp receives a high price and is desirable for recreational anglers to catch but communities are not as dependent on them due to scarcity. |
| Snowy Grouper | N/A | *There is no completed Fishery Performance Report for Snowy Grouper.* |
| Spanish Mackerel | 2018 2021 | Spanish mackerel is a critical species for the commercial and for-hire sector in North Carolina and Florida and is becoming increasingly important in the Mid-Atlantic region. |
| Vermilion Snapper | 2017 | Vermilion Snapper are very important to commercial and recreational fisheries. Commercially price and demand are increasing and recreationally they are a substitute for red snapper and black sea bass when those species cannot be kept. |