SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE

SSC Meeting

FINAL REPORT

October 21-23, 2025

Town & Country Inn

2008 Savannah Highway

Charleston, SC

VERSION
FINAL
11/10/25

CONTENTS

TABLES AND FIGURES

DOCUMENTS

*Indicates materials not available for briefing book at time of posting. These materials will be added to the recent materials section when available.

SAFMC PUBLIC COMMENT PROCESS

Written comment:

Written comment on SSC agenda topics was provided to the Committee through an online form, similar to all other Council briefing materials. Written comments could be submitted at this link. For this meeting, the deadline for submission of written comment was 10:00 a.m., October 23, 2025.

Verbal comment:

Two opportunities for comment on agenda items were provided at set times during SSC meetings. The first at the beginning of the meeting, and the second near the conclusion. Those wishing to comment could indicate such in the manner requested by the Chair, who then recognized individuals to provide comment.

An opportunity for comment on specific agenda items was also provided as each item came up for discussion. Comments were taken after all the initial presentations were given and questions from the SSC were answered, but before the SSC started making recommendations to address the action items.

Meeting Format:

This meeting was held in-person at the Town and Country Inn, Charleston, SC. Online registration for the meeting was provided at the Council's website: https://safmc.net/scientific-and-statistical-committee-meeting/

1. INTRODUCTIONS

1.1 Documents

Attachment 1a. October 2025 SSC Agenda Revised
Attachment 1b. May 2025 SSC Meeting Minutes

1.2 Action

- Introduction of new Committee members
- Review and approve revised agenda.
  - *Due to the Federal shut down the chair reviewed an adjusted agenda with the committee (see details under the individual agenda items).*
  - *The revised agenda was approved.*
- Approve minutes from the October meeting.
  - *The minutes were approved with one minor editorial correction.*

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

No written or verbal public comments were given.

3. COUNCIL FMP AMENDMENTS AND SEFSC UPDATES

3.1 Documents

Attachment 3. FMP Amendment Updates

3.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff; ~~Dr. Erik Williams, SEFSC~~

Due to the Federal shutdown, Dr. Williams was not available to give his presentation. Dr. Curtis provided an SEFSC update based on the information provided during the September SAFMC meeting.

3.3 Overview

The SSC will receive updates on ongoing fishery management plan amendments in progress or completed where SSC review was involved. The entire list of ongoing amendments is provided in Attachment 3, but the focus for this update will be on highlighted amendments. The goal for this agenda topic is to update the SSC on the current status of these amendments and potential future involvement in the development of these fishery management plan amendments with scientific input and recommendations as needed.

~~The Southeast Fishery Science Center (SEFSC) will provide a verbal update on the current capacity of the stock assessment enterprise and plans for upcoming stock assessments and strategies for increasing ABC advice throughput.~~

3.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

3.5 Action

- ~~Receive update from the Southeast Fishery Science Center on stock assessment capacity changes.~~

- Receive updates on recent Fishery Management Plan Amendments and Council actions.
- *SEFSC Updates from Council staff*
  - *Update based on discussion from the Council meeting – SEFSC assessment capacity likely to become more limited given recent reductions in available resources (financial & personnel). However, the SEFSC's intention is to still try to implement age-based assessment models for those stocks where this has traditionally been used and not scale back to simpler modeling frameworks.*
  - *The SEFSC reminded the Council & SSC that decisions still need to be made based on best available scientific information per National Standard guidance.*
- *Amendments*
  - *Snapper Grouper Amendment 61 (Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit Revision)*
    - *The amendment would remove 17 snapper grouper species from the fishery management unit and classify them as Ecosystem Component (EC) species.*
    - *Clarified that no SSC input is needed for this change, because it is strictly a management decision.*
    - *However, since the ABC control rule stock risk ratings table is based on a relative scale, the SSC would need to provide input if species are to be removed from the management unit, and how this would affect the ABC control rule.*
  - *Regulatory Amendment 56 – Black Sea Bass*
    - *A revised assessment is planned when the new MRIP estimates are available.*
    - *The SSC will review the TORs for this new assessment, likely during the April 2026 meeting.*

4. SEDAR PROCESS MODIFICATIONS

4.1 Documents

Attachment 4a. SEDAR Process Modifications Presentation

Attachment 4b. SEDAR Component Highlights
Attachment 4c. (Background) Feb2025 Steering Committee Summary
Attachment 4d. (Background) Aug2025 Steering Committee Summary
Attachment 4e. (Background) Update to proposed SEDAR process May 2025
Attachment 4f. (Background) Proposed modification to SEDAR SSC Oct 2024

4.2 Presentation

SEDAR Staff

4.3 Overview

The Committee will receive an update on the new modifications to the SEDAR process. The previous research track/operational assessment framework has struggled to achieve the desired goals of increased assessment throughput and improved efficiency for data provisioning and has resulted in overall decreases in productivity since its implementation. These new modifications aim to increase timeliness and throughput of fisheries management advice while considering static or potentially decreased capacity and resources in the future.

In this new approach, the SEDAR process will be limited to those assessments with sufficient new information to require external participation and/or review. Update assessments and interim assessment approaches will be conducted internally by the SEFSC and reviewed by the SSC. The SEFSC will take responsibility for the assessment component of the SEDAR process, while the data and review components remain unchanged. Within the new assessment phase, Cooperators (i.e. SAFMC) will appoint an 'Assessment Technical Team' with diverse scientific expertise and fishing experience to assist in assessment development. The composition of this assessment technical team will include SSC members, other assessment analysts, and fishery stakeholders as necessary to provide guidance in the development of the assessment. Final review of assessment products and recommended management decisions (i.e. OFL and ABC recommendations) will still be reviewed by the SSC in a public meeting.

Attachments 4a & 4b highlight the new SEDAR process modifications. Attachments 4c-4f are supplementary documents to provide additional background information as necessary. SSC members interested in participating in the Assessment Technical Team will have an opportunity to volunteer during this agenda item or later in the meeting during the recruitment for various SSC workgroups.

4.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

4.5 Action

- Receive update on the modifications to the SEDAR process, including the new roles of SSC members.

SSC Feedback:

- *SSC will have expanded input during model development*
    - *This input should be consistent. To aid in that, the SSC should request a brief "check-in" for each assessment during model development even if they are internal only (e.g., similar to update assessments in the past).*
    - *During SSC check-ins, the SEFSC should present all key decisions that have been made during model development (including decisions made with input from the Technical Team and those made independently by the analysts and SEFSC staff).*
- *A potential drawback is that, given the SA-SSC meeting schedule, SSC check-in process may slow throughput. However, webinar meetings can serve as SSC check-ins, with full assessment review and recommending catch-levels during in-person meetings.*
- *Composition of the Assessment Technical Team (ATT)?*
    - *Selection of SSC members and other technical experts is likely straightforward*
    - *Selection process for fishery stakeholders was less clear. The SSC recommends that the selection and recruitment process should expand in a systematic and deliberate manner beyond existing AP members and those who already participate in Council activities frequently. This will broaden and deepen the voices being included in the management process. As such, the SSC recommends reaching out to stakeholder with relevant expertise to yield fresh perspectives.*
    - *Several members expressed concerns about the workload that could be expected of the ATT. Advising on 3 – 4 assessments per year could be excessive. Perhaps form 2 standing ATTs, with each assigned to alternating assessments? Ultimately the SSC asked for more members to volunteer to provide an opportunity to spread out the workload (see also below under recommendations).*
- *The SSC asked how the scheduling of assessments will work in the new process.*
    - *The steering Committee negotiates which assessments can be completed and provides the timeline of work on these assessments.*
- *The SSC recommends that it needs to be made clear that SSC recommendations should be explored by the analyst but are not meant to be binding. In other words, if a recommendation does not work, it should be discarded, and justification be provided; analysts should not treat recommendations from SSC as a directive but as an alternative that should be further explored.*

  Potential for expanded input by SSC in early assessment development stages will be beneficial, but SSC input should also be expanded into an iterative process during the final review of the assessment.

  The SSC check-in combined with the ATT meetings provides a valuable feedback loop during the model development phase but the final review of the assessment still needs to be a more iterative process.

- *SSC is concerned that the check-in during the model development could be interpreted as the SSC signing off on the full assessment, rather than just the initial modeling decisions. Sometimes assessment results raise concerns that were not or could not have been foreseen at the outset of an assessment.*
- *The SSC expects that this Final Review may still include requests for additional analyses to aid in the OFL/ABC-setting process. If requests for additional analyses are not allowed during the final stage of the new process, then the SSC may be required to recommend an OFL/ABC based only on the provided assessment information and the review process is unnecessary. This may result in subsequent catch level advice that is more uncertain and therefore more conservative than if some limited level of review and revision is allowed.*

SSC recommendations to the new SEDAR process

- *The SSC requests that it should receive at least one brief check-in for every SEDAR designated assessment or internal-only assessment as defined within the ToRs before final model review by the SSC, whether there is an assessment technical team or not.*
- *Recommend holding a "kick-off meeting" with Assessment Technical Team, fishery stakeholders, and other subject matter experts before assessment development begins to help identify useful data and assessment approaches, especially when a data workshop or data scoping call is not scheduled. This approach has been used in Northeast assessments and has been very useful there.*
- *Ensure consistent nomenclature of different groups, stages, meetings, etc. and expectations and roles of SSC members, cooperators, analytical team at each stage. The SSC recommends that a table with this nomenclature should be developed.*
- *There needs to be flexibility during the review phase for potential model changes as opposed to a single, final review. If an official assessment revision request process is required (SSC-> Council-> Center), it may decrease throughput.*
- *The SSC recommends that if an Assessment Technical Team is formed then this team is updated/consulted during the process. Stakeholder representation needs to be sincere to ensure buy-in with the process and avoid further eroding of public trust. To address this, the SSC recommends that one or two follow-up meetings be held to inform the stakeholders of progress and provide an opportunity for additional feed-back. In addition, there is concern within the SSC that if ToRs are established prior to any stakeholder engagement, valuable industry / insider knowledge that would have shaped those ToRs will be lost in the process. The APs can offer this info, but other information may be available outside the AP.*
- *Plan to review this new process after a period of time (~5 years?) to evaluate successes, efficiencies, and recommended improvements. It is the SSC's intent to review the efficacy of the "check-in" step after a couple years of implementation.*
- *SSC requests Council staff provide a brief update of ongoing assessments during the quarterly SSC meetings.*

- *Given the new assessment process, consider holding 1-2 additional short SSC meetings (webinars) to allow for a more iterative process in assessment development and review where needed.*

SSC recommendations on composition of SEDAR Assessment Technical Team (ATT)

- *Although individuals with specialized biological expertise are typically members of a Topical Working Group or Data Workshop and the assessment mechanism to integrate new or updated biological information, SSC members or others with relevant biological expertise could be integrated into the ATT also.*
- *The SSC suggests appointing 7 or 8 members from SSC as a pool of ATT members with appointments of 4-5 members for a particular assessment as they come up, depending on availability, expertise, and scheduling.*
- *The SSC plans to revisit and reevaluate the ATT composition, workload, and other concerns after a period of time (1-2 years or 2+ assessments).*
- *Volunteers:*
    - *Jim Gartland*
    - *Genny Nesslage*
    - *Jie Cao*
    - *Steve Turner*
    - *CJ Schlick*
    - *Jennifer Sweeney-Tookes*
    - *Jeff Buckel*

5. SSC WORKGROUPS AND SEDAR PANELS

5.1 Documents

Attachment 5a. SSC Workgroup and SEDAR panel rosters
Attachment 5b. SEDAR 106: Gag Grouper Schedule

5.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff

5.3 Overview

Council staff will review the list of SSC workgroups and SEDAR panel membership and provide any updates from recent work accomplished by the workgroups or SEDAR panels. Numerous SSC workgroups and SEDAR panels that will need to be appointed later in the meeting agenda are indicated by the highlighted cells in attachment 5a. SSC members should consider interest in serving on these workgroups and/or SEDAR panels.

5.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

5.5 Action

- Receive updates on any recent workgroup and SEDAR panel business.
    - *See agenda item 15 for decisions on panel appointments.*

6. TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR 2026-2027 ASSESSMENTS

6.1 Documents

Attachment 6a. King Mackerel Terms of Reference
Attachment 6b. Spanish Mackerel Terms of Reference
Attachment 6c. (Background) Statement of Work Spanish Mackerel
Attachment 6d. Red Grouper Terms of Reference
Attachment 6e. Snowy Grouper Terms of Reference
Attachment 6f. (Background) Supplementary Assessment Information

6.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff

6.3 Overview

The SSC will review the Terms of Reference for the upcoming South Atlantic King Mackerel, Atlantic Spanish Mackerel, South Atlantic Red Grouper, and South Atlantic Snowy Grouper assessments. Comments and recommendations will be passed along to the Council before final approval in Dec 2025. Terms of Reference are drafted by SAFMC Staff using recommendations from the approved Statements of Work, SAFMC Research and Monitoring Plan, prior assessment panel recommendations, and SSC review of the prior stock assessment.

6.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

6.5 Action

- Review Terms of Reference for South Atlantic King Mackerel
    - *The SSC reviewed the TORs for South Atlantic King Mackerel and made several suggestions in an effort to align these TORs with the new SEDAR process.*
- Review Terms of Reference for Atlantic Spanish Mackerel
    - *The SSC reviewed the TORs for Atlantic Spanish Mackerel and made several suggestions in an effort to align these TORs with the new SEDAR process.*
- Review Terms of Reference for South Atlantic Red Grouper
    - *The SSC reviewed the TORs for South Atlantic Red Grouper and made several suggestions in an effort to align these TORs with the new*

SEDAR process. Given that the assessment is scheduled well in the future, the SSC decided to review these TORs again at a later meeting.

- Review Terms of Reference for South Atlantic Snowy Grouper
  - *The SSC reviewed the TORs for South Atlantic Snowy Grouper and made several suggestions in an effort to align these TORs with the new SEDAR process. Given that the assessment is scheduled well in the future, the SSC decided to review these TORs again at a later meeting.*

SSC Discussion:

- *The SSC recommends developing separate Terms of Reference templates for SEFSC-only assessments and those assessments following the SEDAR process.*
  - *An overview blueprint of the proposed assessment components for the next assessment is being developed by Council Staff.*

7. SEDAR 89 REVISED: SOUTH ATLANTIC TILEFISH

7.1 Documents

Attachment 7a. SEDAR 89 Tilefish (Revised) Stock Assessment Report
Attachment 7b. SEDAR 89 Tilefish (Revised) Presentation
Attachment 7c. (Background) Oct 2024 SSC Report Excerpt – Tilefish Review

7.2 Presentation

~~Dr. Matthew Vincent, SEFSC~~ Dr. Chip Collier, SAFMC Staff

Dr. Vincent was unable to provide an overview of the updated assessment, but the report and presentation slides were provided prior to the Federal shutdown. The SSC thanked Dr. Collier for his willingness to go through the assessment presentation slides.

7.3 Overview

The SEDAR 89: South Atlantic Tilefish stock assessment was reviewed by the SSC in October 2024 and catch levels were recommended to the Council during the December Council meeting. However, during amendment development it was discovered that commercial landings used in the assessment were much higher than quota monitoring estimates for 2018-2022, which affected the base model run and projection estimates. Revised commercial landings estimates were provided and the assessment model was re-analyzed with the corrected data. Only one other model parameter was changed from the original model run - F_{init} was modeled as a multiplier of the average of the first 3 years of fishing mortality and fixed at 1.0. The previous assessment used a fixed value of 0.01. All other data inputs and modeling parameters remained unchanged from SEDAR 89.

The SSC should review the revised stock assessment report and presentation (attachments 7a and 7b). The Committee should also review the background document (attachment 7c) that outlines

the discussions and recommendations made during the review of the original assessment during the Oct 2024 meeting, in order to focus on the changes made in the revised assessment model.

Revised projection scenarios include OFL projection results with the fishing mortality rate fixed at $F = F_{MSY}$ starting in 2026. The ABC Control Rule applied during the initial review remains unchanged and was specified at P* = 30%. ABC projection results with the fishing mortality rate fixed at F that provides P* = 30% is provided for years starting in 2026.

The SSC is asked to review, discuss, and provide feedback on the SEDAR 89 (revised): South Atlantic Tilefish model configurations, projections, and uncertainties, focusing on the changes made in the revised assessment model. If the assessment is determined to be suitable for providing management advice, the SSC will make new catch-level recommendations to the Council based on the revised assessment.

7.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

7.5 Action

The SSC decided that the provided information (updated Assessment Report and presentation slides) was sufficient to base adjusted fishing level recommendations on but also noted that there was no opportunity to ask the assessment scientist questions during this review.

The SSC focused its review on the impact of the corrected commercial landings, rather than re-review the entire assessment. Therefore, the SSC refers to the October 2024 SSC meeting report for other assessment review details and recommendations.

- **Review Revised Assessment**
  - Is the revised assessment consistent with BSIA guidance and practices?
    - *The SSC appreciates the corrections made to the commercial landings data stream and further investigation into the F_{init} parameter. They expressed some concern about whether other species have been similarly impacted. Council staff investigated potential issues with other assessments and did not find any other data discrepancies.*
    - *The SSC considers this revised assessment consistent with BSIA guidance and principles.*
  - Does the assessment provide a reliable, quantitative estimate of current stock status?
    - *Yes, given the uncertainties that the SSC discussed in its initial review of the assessment and given current discussions.*
  - Does the assessment provide reliable predictions of future conditions to support fishing level recommendations (i.e. projections)?

- *Considering that the assumptions used in the projections are appropriate, then the projections are likely reliable.*
- *Note that the terminal year of the assessment was 2022, and the further into the future, the more uncertain the projections become.*
- *The next assessment on this stock is scheduled for 2029. The SSC is concerned that this might be too long between assessments given large uncertainties in the assessment and projections.*

➢ **Identify, summarize, and discuss revised assessment uncertainties.**

- Change of F_{init} value
  - *The SSC supports the change made to the F_{init} value.*
  - *The new F_{init} values minimally affected output in the earlier years of the assessment and had even less or no impact in the more recent years.*

- Discuss the factors of this assessment that affect the reliability of estimates of stock status and fishing level recommendations.
  Note that most of the comments below are similar to the ones the SSC expressed in its October 2024 review, but the SSC felt that it was important to reiterate them.
  - *Choice of using a direct estimate of MSY in stock-recruit relationship over an MSY proxy. This uncertainty was identified in the original assessment and remains a concern in the revised assessment:*
    - *Poor fit of B-H spawner-recruit curve*
    - *Limited observed points along the curve at low spawning stock size.*
    - *Significant uncertainty in the steepness profiling.*
  - *Dome-shaped selectivity and selectivity block change in 2020 still a concern especially with lack of index.*
    - *It is imperative that the next assessment consider including the SADL survey data as an index.*
    - *Consider exploring development of a new fishery-dependent index (commercial longline index) using years since major changes in the fishery.*
  - *Given the paucity of fishery independent and fishery dependent data and use of dome-shaped selectivity in terminal block in this assessment, recommend regular monitoring of other sources of information on stock health and if the fishery isable to reach the ACL (see bullet list below).*
  - *The SSC expressed some concerns with the likelihood profile for the steepness parameter used in the B-H stock recruitment*

function. It was noted this concern has been expressed by the SSC for many assessments and is the reason for the formation of the MSY Proxy subgroup with the Gulf SSC.

- *Recommendations for monitoring the stock until next assessment:*
  - *Recommend monitoring in the interim using the SADL data (CPUE, size, age, etc.), meeting commercial ACL, etc. as health check.*
  - *Investigate use of fishery-dependent indices of abundance for monitoring the health and trajectory of the stock in between assessments (particularly for Tilefish but can be considered for other stocks as well).*
  - *Monitor actual landings vs. projected landings from assessment.*

➢ **Provide OFL and ABC catch level recommendations**

- Apply the South Atlantic ABC-CR (complete)
  - Stock risk rating: High
  - Current biomass status: Moderate
  - P* = 30%
    - *The revised commercial landings data stream and F_{init} parameter did not result in changes in application of the ABC-CR. Note that there was some change in the current biomass status, but not enough to change the SSC's P* value determination and the result maintains P* of 30%.*

- Fill out Table 2: Catch level recommendations below.
  - *The SSC recommended adjusting Table 2 to make it clear that the 2023 to 2025 values were based on actual landings estimates, and the OFL and ABC recommendations are provided for 2026 and 2027. Note that given increasing uncertainty in the projections with time, the SSC typically does not provide ABC recommendations beyond 5 years after the terminal year of the assessment.*

Table 1. SEDAR 89 (revised) status indicators, benchmarks, and related quantities from model output in the stock assessment report.

Table 18. Estimated status indicators, benchmarks, and related quantities from the base run of the BAM, conditional on estimated current selectivities averaged across fleets. Also presented are median values and measures of precision (standard errors, SE) from the Monte Carlo/Bootstrap ensemble analysis. Rate estimates (F) are in units of y^{-1}; status indicators are dimensionless; biomass estimates are in units of thousands of pounds, as indicated; and recruits are in millions of age-1 fish. Spawning stock biomass (SSB) is measured as fecundity of mature females (trillion eggs). L_{current} is the average landings from 2020–2022.

Quantity	Units	Estimate	Median	SE
F_{MSY}	y^{-1}	0.20	0.21	0.06
$75\%F_{\text{MSY}}$	y^{-1}	0.15	0.16	0.05
B_{MSY}	1000 lb whole	6158.52	5856.66	997.99
SSB_{MSY}	Trillions of Eggs	515.42	485.07	1165.03
MSST	Trillions of Eggs	386.57	363.80	873.77
MSY	1000 lb gutted	523.31	521.82	66.82
$L_{75\%\text{MSY}}$	1000 lb gutted	502.45	501.52	67.16
L_{current}	1000 lb gutted	373.42	371.24	16.91
R_{MSY}	millions fish	0.05	0.04	0.01
$F_{2020-2022}/F_{\text{MSY}}$	—	0.72	0.71	0.31
$\text{SSB}_{2022}/\text{MSST}$	—	1.31	1.33	0.48
$\text{SSB}_{2022}/\text{SSB}_{\text{MSY}}$	—	0.98	1.00	0.36

Table 2. South Atlantic SSC Tilefish Catch Level Recommendations

Criteria	**Value**
Stock Risk Rating	High
Relative Stock Biomass Level	Moderate
P-Star	30%
SSC recommended P_{Rebuild}	N/A

CATCH LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Year	Observed Landings (lbs, gw)	Observed Landings (number)	Projected OFL recomm. (lbs, gw)	Projected OFL recomm. (number)	Projected ABC recomm. (lbs, gw)	Projected ABC recomm. (number)
2023	368,000	53,000	-----	-----	-----	-----
2024	376,000	55,000	-----	-----	-----	-----
2025	389,000	58,000	-----	-----	-----	-----
2026	-----	-----	**546,000**	**81,000**	**459,000**	**68,000**
2027	-----	-----	**540,000**	**80,000**	**465,000**	**69,000**

8. MRIP-FES REVISED SURVEY RESULTS AND CALIBRATION METHODS

8.1 Documents

Attachment 8. MRIP-FES Updates Presentation

8.2 Presentation

Dr. Katherine Papacostas, NOAA-OST (Recorded Presentation)

8.3 Overview

The NOAA Office of Science and Technology (OST) has concluded data collection and are wrapping up data analysis as part of a large-scale study conducted throughout 2024 to test improvements to the Fishing Effort Survey (based on results from prior studies). The preliminary study completed in 2023 indicated the order of fishing questions had an impact on the overall estimates of recreational effort, but further intensive study would be necessary to evaluate the impacts to each individual species and associated stock assessment. The more comprehensive study just completed has recently undergone a peer review process to help fine-tune the new methods for obtaining recreational catch and effort estimates and calibrate model development and implementation. The SSC will receive an update on the progress of the follow-up study, peer review process, and plans for calibration and integration.

Note: This will be a recorded presentation delivered by NOAA-OST during the September 2025 Mid-Atlantic SSC meeting.

8.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

8.5 Action

- Receive update on the revised methods for MRIP-FES estimates and timeline for calibrations for South Atlantic stock assessments.

Note that Dr. Papacostas was not available due to the Federal shut down and was also not able to answer any questions from the SSC. The SSC was provided with a recorded presentation that Dr. Papacostas recently gave to the Mid-Atlantic SSC.

SSC Comments:

- *Commend MRIP for attempts in adjusting survey design in response to potential biases.*
- *The SSC asked if the report on interaction between MRIP partners was available yet?*
  - *The SSC was informed that this report has not yet been released, and release is likely delayed due to the Federal shutdown.*
- *The Peer Review Workshop results should be available soon.*

- *The SSC noted:*
    - *There will be anticipated regional/spatial differences in magnitude of effects.*
    - *The entire calibration is based on the one year of data from the survey comparisons, which increases uncertainty in using the calibration methodology for historical time series. SSC recommends propagating uncertainty in calibration estimates to any corrections made to past effort data.*
    - *Where possible, encourage multiple-year study for additional calibration and validation to address the uncertainties within the one-year study frame.*
        - *Consider use of a simulation study framework to better characterize uncertainty in revision updates and estimate the potential benefits of reduced calibration uncertainty to the fishery relative to the costs of collecting additional data.*
        - *Conduct follow-up study in a limited number of states to reduce costs. Consider comparing this data to the FL-FWC survey led by Chelsey Crandall.*
- *The SSC identified potential biases as:*
    - *Potential directional bias in telescoping error; assumption that catches were previously estimated high and revised estimates are closer to truth but there is no validation on what is "true." That is, the revised estimates could be biased low.*
    - *Another potential bias that was not addressed in the presentation is the potential difference in interview response between phone and written survey techniques.*
    - *The presentation indicates that this revised survey is more accurate. This seems to be based on cognitive interviews and the SSC would like to see more detail on how this verdict was reached.*
- *Relative to the transition from 2-month wave to 1-month in sampling design, the SSC asked:*
    - *Will there be sufficient sample size to provide reliable estimates and precision?*
- *The SSC noted that the shore mode estimates from Florida remain mostly unchanged between original and revised survey methods. Given the large increase in Florida shore mode estimates when going from the MRFSS to the MRIP methodologies, and as there were decreases in the estimates for most other regions between the previous MRIP FES and the revised MRIP FES methods, can NOAA-OST explain or speculate upon why the Florida estimates did not decrease much when going from the previous MRIP FES to the revised MRIP FES methods?*
- *The SSC also asked if it would get a chance to review calibration methodology for the SA region? And how soon in the future can we move beyond the calibrations?*
- *It was noted that new catch information will be incorporated as soon as survey can develop estimates, and calibration methods will still be necessary for developing historical catch time series for stock assessments.*

***SSC requested that**:*

- *It receives a presentation from NOAA-OST on the revised survey and statistical design, calibration methodology, and components contributing to uncertainty specific for the South Atlantic region, including the impact on the PSEs with revised survey structure.*
- *The SEP review the methodologies used in the development of the new survey, and how the determination of "more accurate" was reached.*

9. DOLPHINFISH MANAGEMENT STRATEGY EVALUATION (MSE) UPDATE

Due to the Federal shutdown, Dr. Peterson was not available to provide an update on this MSE, and this agenda item will be reconsidered for the next SSC meeting.

9.1 Documents

~~*Attachment 9. Dolphinfish MSE Presentation~~

9.2 Presentation

~~Dr. Cassidy Peterson, SEFSC; Tom Carruthers, Blue Matter Science~~

9.3 Overview

~~The purpose of the Dolphinfish Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) project is to develop an empirical management procedure for Dolphin in the US Atlantic that can be used to set catch levels along with additional management actions. This procedure will be simulation tested to be robust to uncertainty and incorporate stakeholder participation to ensure the management procedure meets stakeholder-defined objectives.~~

~~The SSC will receive an update to the Dolphin MSE and have the opportunity to provide feedback on the development of the operating model and its uncertainties, various performance metrics, and initial perspectives on select management procedures. They should also review the Terms of Reference for the review workshop of the Dolphin MSE and make recommendations to the Council for their Dec 2025 meeting.~~

9.4 Public Comment

9.5 Action

- ~~Receive update on ongoing progress to the Dolphinfish Management Strategy Evaluation project.~~
- ~~Provide feedback on the operating model, its uncertainties, and performance metrics.~~
- ~~Review Terms of Reference for review workshop.~~

- *The SSC will discuss whether it recommends having a SA-SSC member as part of the CIE review and/or chair during the WG appointments section and review the Terms of Reference for the CIE review at the April 2026 meeting.*

10. MSY PROXIES IN SOUTH ATLANTIC STOCK ASSESSMENTS

10.1 Documents

Attachment 10a. SEFSC Presentation
Attachment 10b. Draft Workplan for Joint MSY Workgroup

10.2 Presentation

~~Dr. Erik Williams, SEFSC;~~ Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff

Due to the Federal shutdown, Dr. Williams was not available to give his presentation, and the SSC limited the discussions to the joint MSY proxy workgroup.

10.3 Overview

The SAFMC has requested the SSC review scientific information and provide thorough rationale for using the recommended spawning potential ratio (SPR) proxies for maximum sustainable yield (MSY) in South Atlantic stocks as status determination criteria. For most current South Atlantic fishery management plans, the MSY proxy had historically been set at F30%SPR (Comprehensive Amendment, 1998), but recent technical guidance on National Standard 1 from NMFS has indicated that the SPR proxy should be re-evaluated with each new stock assessment as scientific information has evolved over time. The SEFSC will provide a presentation on SPR proxies that outlines various population dynamics, summary of existing research, and other factors that affect SPR decisions.

As part of this charge, the Council supported the formation of a joint SA/Gulf SSC workgroup to develop a Best Practices Guidance document with an associated decision matrix to recommend a standardized approach to the development of MSY proxy (i.e. SPR) values for completed and upcoming stock assessments for the Southeast region. The draft workplan is provided and SSC members should review this workplan and consider volunteering for the joint workgroup.

10.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

10.5 Action

- ~~Receive SEFSC presentation on MSY proxies in the South Atlantic.~~
- Review Draft Workplan and Schedule for the MSY proxies joint workgroup.
  - *The SSC accepted the draft workplan for the joint MSY proxies workgroup with no edits.*

- *The SSC asked for clarification as to who would chair this workgroup. The current plan is that one of the Council staff members will facilitate the discussions so that all SSC members can fully participate in the workgroup deliberations.*

➢ Populate workgroup.

- *The following SSC members volunteered for the workgroup:*
  - *Kai Lorenzen, Alexei Sharov, Jie Cao*

11. BLACK SEA BASS GENETICS AND STOCK STRUCTURE

11.1 Documents

Attachment 11a. Black Sea Bass Genetics Report
*Attachment 11b. Black Sea Bass Genetics Presentation

11.2 Presentation

Dr. Rich Harrington and Dr. Tracey Smart, SC-DNR

11.3 Overview

Black Sea Bass has historically been managed as two stocks along the east coast of the United States, with a genetically and life history defined divide at Cape Hatteras, NC. This divide in stock structure has previously been supported by life history, morphometric, and genetic studies. Given recent changes in population dynamics of Black Sea Bass in both the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic regions this study was designed to re-assess the genetic structure of Black Sea Bass along the U.S. Atlantic coast from Florida to Maine using contemporary samples and a nuclear genetic panel. Partner surveys provided genetic materials along the coast in 2024 that enabled the determination of the recent genetic structure following and during observed changes in distribution, stock size, and regional conditions.

11.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

11.5 Action

➢ Review the Black Sea Bass East Coast Genetics Structure Summary Report.

- *The influence of selecting location prior on overall Structure analysis may be having a significant influence on the result. Recommend running analysis without selecting location prior for comparison.*
  - *Analysis was run and did not affect the overall result.*
- *The analysis favored K=2 based on the consistent patterns in the structure plots between north and south regions, change in log-likelihood values, and the variability around the log-likelihood values, even though the highest likelihood was at K=1 (Fig. 3-6).*

- *Vecchio et al 2025 shows a shift in center of abundance northward within the South Atlantic region. This genetic analysis provides evidence that this shift in center of abundance is confined to the South Atlantic region. Has a presence-absence analysis been run to determine if BSB are occurring less frequently from historically populated locations? See S73 working paper for information on this analysis.*
- *Directionality not inferred from migration rate in this study. Previous studies did indicate directionality and source-to-destination migration. This could provide some information on a potential transition zone.*
- *Effective population size shows a similar estimate with wide-ranging uncertainty bounds (upper bound: infinity), but there are known limitations with effective population size estimates for marine species.*
- *Would mitochondrial markers used in previous studies show similar patterns and results as the microsatellites used in this study with this spatial dataset? Would more fine-scale genetic markers (SNPs) or analysis (CKMR) provide different results?*
  - *Typically, SNP markers are more informative with adaptive markers. Likely with neutral markers as used in this study (i.e. microsatellites) results would be similar.*
  - *This would need a much larger dataset and wider spatial coverage (more statistical power) for a CKMR approach.*
- *Fst indicates a highly significant difference (p=0.001) between north and south regions (i.e. high allele segregation). Pairwise comparisons of Fst estimates between smaller geographic regions were only significant (significant p values ranged from 0.002 to 0.042) for regions that were on opposite sides of the NC-VA border while none of the pairwise Fst contrasts within the northern or southern regions were significant.*
- *How would the survey sampling time throughout the year (i.e. spring/fall sampling vs. summer/winter sampling) when fish are known to move vs. being stationary affect the analysis and groupings.*
  - *Likely limited as evidenced by similar genotypes with slight variation regionally.*
  - *Size composition across regional surveys is similar (with the exception the SEAMAP trawl and ChesMAP survey).*

➢ Evaluate conclusions and implications for the next Black Sea Bass stock assessment.

- *The SSC agrees with the conclusions of the genetic study that supports separate genetic stocks between the South Atlantic and Mid-Atl/New-England delineated at the NC-VA line.*

- *New data from this study continues to support 2 genetic stocks. Patterns of allele frequency shifts are consistent with previous studies with a transition zone occurring near the NC-VA border.*
- *High genetic variability exists within both northern and southern stocks, which can mask the stock differences, but the genetic analysis still detects sufficient divergence to manage the stocks separately. Thus, these two stocks should be better able to cope with environmental changes relative to stocks with low genetic diversity.*

- *Project results provide support for two genetic stocks of Black Sea Bass with weak, but stable genetic differentiation between the southern and northern populations and a transition occurring near the North Carolina-Virginia border. The weak differentiation is likely due to effective migration (i.e., gene flow between populations).*
- *Rate of exchange (gene flow) seems stable over time based on the three recent genetic studies.*
- *The SSC noted the magnitude of new studies in the Mid-Atlantic/ New England region over the last several decades (emerging fishery from data-limited to more data-rich over this time period).*
- *If genetic differentiation is weak or non-existent, it does not necessarily mean stock should be treated as single stock. Other sources of life history information will be influential as well. Population genetics, life history, and movement studies have been considered during previous Stock ID workshops, and combination of evidence led to the decision to support two separate stocks between the South Atlantic and Mid Atlantic/New England.*
    - *A movement study by the Buckel lab using 1000s of dart-tagged Black Sea Bass in the South Atlantic, indicated high site fidelity with no recaptures north of the VA-NC line. Tagging studies by SCDNR indicated similar results.*
    - *VAST analysis completed as part of the recent assessment for the northern stock showed a northward shift in center of gravity in the southern component of the northern stock, which is consistent with the conclusion of the two separate stocks as indicated by the genetics.*

12. WRECKFISH MANAGEMENT PROCEDURE UPDATE

12.1 Documents

Attachment 12a. Wreckfish Preliminary Stock Assessment Report
*Attachment 12b. Wreckfish Stock Assessment and MSE Presentation
Attachment 12c. (Background) Wreckfish 2014 Stock Assessment Report
Attachment 12d. (Background) SSC Report 2014 Wreckfish Review

12.2 Presentation

Dr. Jeremy Collie and Dr. Josh Nowlis, Lynker

12.3 Overview

The Council has contracted with Lynker to develop a management procedure for the Wreckfish fishery. This project will apply an adaptive management technique called Adaptive Implementable Management (AIM) to guide a stakeholder-driven management development process for the South Atlantic Wreckfish fishery. During this process, contractors will work directly with managers and stakeholders to develop management recommendations more robust to future uncertainty. Stakeholder engagement is being prioritized throughout the AIM process, with interviews and stakeholder workshops planned throughout the project period. The resulting management recommendations will be provided to the Council for their consideration and action.

As part of the Management Procedure framework, an updated stock assessment model is being developed to inform the management procedures. The last stock assessment for Wreckfish was completed in 2014 with a terminal year of 2010 (attachment 12c) and reviewed by the SSC in April 2014 (attachment 12d). The primary assessment tool was a statistical age/length model, with a dynamic production model used as a secondary tool. The current assessment will provide an update with 13 years of additional data.

The SSC should review the preliminary stock assessment report and evaluate the proposed assessment methodologies, data inputs, identify potential modeling uncertainties, and provide guidance to model development. The SSC will continue to be involved in the development of this management procedure as it progresses.

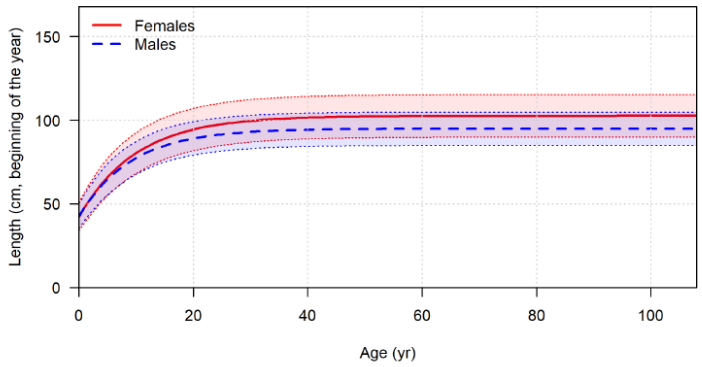
12.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

12.5 Action

- Evaluate the proposed assessment methodology and data inputs.
  - *Length composition data shows relatively narrow distribution of older fish.*

- *Recruitment of wreckfish is likely coming from immigration from outside the fished area in the U.S. (other regions of the Atlantic).*
- *Smaller adults (juveniles) are likely outside the range of fished U.S. waters.*
- *Has the project team considered a DBSRA modeling approach due to low variability in size? (see growth curve figure from slide 14 from the A12b presentation below)*



- *Some SSC members were wondering about including temperature as covariate in a GAM model?*
  - *Because wreckfish are a deep-dwelling species, likely low variability in temperature. Resolution in data may not be compatible between fishing areas and temperature modeling grids.*
- *There is limited age-length composition data available from fishery-dependent data, which is also limited through time.*
  - *Potential age composition data may be available from SCDNR Tip data collection since the 1980s.*
  - *Age data does not necessarily need to be throughout the entire time series but would need to be representative of catch in subsampled years.*
- *Is there any data available to inform selectivity?*
- *There seems to be a differing pattern in CPUE between previous assessment and current estimate using a GAM modeling approach during the initial few years, which can be highly informative for data-limited modeling approaches. Thus, the SSC recommends that the analyst reach out to previous assessment analysts to gather more information on assumptions, modeling approach, and index development used in previous assessment.*
- *Some SSC members asked if management actions accounted for in the CPUE index development? E.g., has the fishery been meeting their ACL in certain years? The SSC noted that there is Council*

documentation that found several instances of this, with fishermen explaining to the Council that choosing not to fish ITQ shares was both helping the fishery stocks and adding value to their personal shares over the long run (SAFMC 1994a, 13; SAFMC 1994b,1995, 7 in Yandle and Crosson (2015). This publication also indicated that it was unlikely that ACL was being reached during the 1991-2008 and 2009-2024 time frames. However, note that this documentation does not provide information for recent years, that is, post the previous assessment.

- *While the annual mean individual weight of wreckfish landed has remained relative stable from 1991 - 2024, the annual variability in these mean individual weights increased appreciably beginning in 2009.*
- *The SSC discussed effort and CPUE. As there is no fishery independent data for estimating (relative) population abundance, the fishery dependent index is likely critical for an assessment. The committee wondered if three different variables measuring effort (lines + hooks per line + hours fished) show any individual variation or trends? Are there other metrics for fishing effort that are more appropriate or suitable (e.g., days fished, etc.)?*
- *The SSC noted that individual vessel (or individual captain) effects as model covariate might be more informative for this fishery. Does fishing effort change per vessel, or through time?*
- *There may have been technological changes through time (navigation technology, gear changes). This information could be useful in informing catchability and selectivity. Given that this fishery spanned the time period for LORAN to GPS to GPS with chart plotters there has definitely been a change in the technology that likely impacted catchabilitiy.*
- *Simulation testing can perhaps be used to estimate how much fishing pressure would need to be applied to result in observed changes in mean weight or size composition and other consequences. However, the fact the recruitment may come from areas outside the US fished area may complicate such simulation.*
- *The SSC recommended including information gleaned from logbooks of shareholders to address the questions and topics described above. The MSE team mentioned that this is planned in the stakeholder engagement phase.*

- Identify model uncertainties and provide feedback for model development.
  - *The MSE process is not yet developed enough for the SSC to comment on this phase.*

13. SNAPPER GROUPER MANAGEMENT STRATEGY EVALUATION UPDATE

13.1 Documents

Attachment 13. Snapper Grouper MSE Update Presentation

13.2 Presentation

Dr. Chip Collier, SAFMC Staff; Dr. Adrian Hordyk, Blue Matter Science

13.3 Overview

The Council has started a management strategy evaluation (MSE) for the snapper grouper fishery focusing on strategies to reduce the number of released fish to improve yield throughout the fishery. The management strategy will also consider the need for fishery access and resource use while preventing overfishing and rebuilding overfished stocks. The MSE is part of the Council's approach to address the overfishing of snapper grouper species while considering access, yield, and sustainability of species in the snapper grouper complex. Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) is a method for evaluating the performance of alternative management approaches and identifying the mode of management that is most likely to meet the various management objectives of a fishery. The MSE process is designed to support evidence-based decision-making in the face of uncertainty on the status and dynamics of a fishery system.

Council and Blue Matter Staff will provide an overview of the Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation, which is being designed to compare different management scenarios to reduce the number of discards in the recreational fishery. Staff will summarize the previous modeling framework developed by Blue Matter Science, including 132 management scenarios previously evaluated across species (Red Snapper, Gag, Black Sea Bass) and spatial zones. It highlights key results from trade-off analyses comparing spawning biomass, landings, and discard outcomes across management options such as status quo, full retention, and spatial closures. Staff will describe changes to the modeling framework, management objectives, incorporating stakeholder input, and expanding species. The SSC is requested to provide feedback on modeling approaches, diagnostic outputs, and evaluation metrics to guide the next phase of MSE development.

13.4 Public Comment

There were no public comments.

13.5 Action

- Use of Assessment Inputs:
  - Are there any concerns with using outputs from past SEDAR assessments or the rapid conditioning model (for unassessed species)

to parameterize the MSE? Are there specific diagnostics or validation steps the SSC would like to see applied to ensure model credibility and consistency across species?

- *The most recent SEDAR assessment outputs (from BAM models) are being used to condition the models in the MSE and likely represent the best input data available despite the various uncertainties identified within the models during review.*
- *Given uncertainties associated with the use of Rapid Conditioning Models (RCMs) for stocks without accepted SEDAR assessments, perhaps conduct a sensitivity analysis that compares outputs from operating models based on SEDAR assessments and RCMs for a few species with SEDAR assessments. Such a comparison could provide insights into the impact of relying on RCMs for those species without a SEDAR assessment (e.g., possible increased uncertainty, directional bias, etc.).*
- *Performing a comparison of the Rapid Conditioning Model (RCM) with the SEDAR assessment model could help validate the outputs used from the assessment model for the MSE. Note this would only be possible for species with a completed SEDAR stock assessment.*
    - *Generate plots that compare key model outputs across any alternative models explored to show impacts of multiple runs with data and/or assumptions and provided diagnostics to evaluate and compare different model runs.*
- *The assessment team noted that for unassessed species (those without a SEDAR assessment), a "data workshop" for 5-6 unassessed species will be held to obtain data inputs to configure the rapid conditioning models.*
- *The SSC noted that the public or Council members might have concerns about the data used for these unassessed species, but this is unfortunately the best option that can be utilized at the present moment.*

➢ Aggregate Bag Limit Analysis:

- Given the complexity of modeling multi-species aggregate bag limits, can the SSC suggest examples or analytical approaches from other regions or fisheries that could inform the development of this management scenario?
    - *Staff clarified that this aggregate bag limit is meant to be in addition to existing regulations.*

- *The SSC suggested using an "envelope" approach to explore the boundaries of how the multi-species aggregate bag limit may be realized. For instance, run one modeling scenario where anglers retain the mix of species that they catch up to the specified bag limit, only discarding undersized fish ("ideal" scenario). Run a second modeling scenario where anglers only keep species A up to the multi-species bag limit, discarding all others until the ACL for A is reached, and then only retain B until the ACL is reached (discarding all others), and so through the species until all ACLs have been reached in succession. This scenario represents anglers "high-grading" to only retain the most desirable species that is able to be harvested. Together, these two scenarios likely provide the bounds on what could occur in the fishery if the multi-species bag limit is implemented, recognizing that what would actually occur is probably somewhere in between.*
- *The SSC also recommended investigating a compliance rate of zero regarding bag limit: If species A meets bag limit, will fishing for species B cease? What are impacts if/when fishing for other species continues once aggregate bag limit has been met.*
- *Studies from SEP members have looked at angler response and behavior in aggregate bag limits from Florida EFP studies. This information could potentially be used to compare quantitative model runs and modeling outputs.*

➢ Compliance and Behavior Modeling:
  - Incorporating "mandatory stopping" provisions will require assumptions about angler behavior and compliance. Are there comparable management strategies or empirical data sources the SSC recommends drawing upon to develop realistic compliance scenarios for robustness testing?
    - *See SSC comments above.*

➢ Spatial Structure in Scenarios:
  - The Council has requested that spatial dynamics be incorporated into the aggregate bag limit scenario. What level of spatial resolution or population structure does the SSC view as most appropriate to balance realism with model tractability?
    - *An update of this spatial model is in process, and new spatial data will be available soon.*

14. ADDITIONAL MODEL RUNS, SENSITIVITIES, AND CATCH LEVELS

No additional model runs were requested.

15. SSC WORKGROUP AND SEDAR PANELS

15.1 Documents

Attachment 5a. SSC Workgroup and SEDAR panel rosters
Attachment 5b. SEDAR 106: Gag Grouper Schedule

15.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff

15.3 Overview

Council staff will review the list of SSC workgroups and SEDAR panel membership and provide any updates from recent work accomplished by the workgroups or SEDAR panels. Numerous SSC workgroups and SEDAR panels that will need to be appointed later in the meeting agenda are indicated by the highlighted cells in attachment 5a. SSC members should consider interest in serving on these workgroups and/or SEDAR panels.

15.4 Public Comment

15.5 Action

- Populate forthcoming workgroups and SEDAR panels.
- Workgroups:
  - South Atlantic MSY Proxies
    - *Maintain old MSY proxies WG for now, determine objective for this WG (MSY proxy, P* determination)*
  - Joint SA/Gulf MSY Proxies
    - *Volunteers: Kai Lorenzen, Alexei Sharov, Jie Cao*
  - Section 7 Consultation - Protected Species Biological Opinion
    - *Volunteer: Jared Flowers*
  - Greater Amberjack Independent Estimate Project
    - *Volunteers: Luiz Barbieri (Chair), Marcel Reichert, Steve Turner*
  - South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Project
    - *Volunteers: Marcel Reichert (Chair), Luiz Barbieri*

- SEDAR Panels
  - S90: South Atlantic Red Snapper Review Panel
    - *Volunteers: Genny Nesslage (Chair, unless schedule conflict), Marcel Reichert (Backup Chair), Chris Dumas, Alexei Sharov.*
  - S106: Gag Grouper Topical Working Group (Reproductive Dynamics)
    - *Volunteers: Wally Bubley, Fred Scharf, Luiz Barbieri*
  - Spanish Mackerel Data Workshop (webinar)
    - *Volunteers: Jim Gartland, Jared Flowers, Jeff Buckel*

16. OTHER BUSINESS

- *The SSC requested that Council staff check on scheduling of SSC meetings across regions to avoid overlap of meeting dates if possible.*

17. PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments.

18. CONSENSUS STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee reviewed the draft report, final consensus statements, and finalized recommendations.

The final SSC report was provided to Council staff on Monday November 10, 2025 for inclusion in the briefing book of the December 2025 Council meeting.

19. NEXT MEETINGS

19.1 Scientific and Statistical Committee Meetings

- Webinar (Jan/Feb): TBD
- SEP: April 13-14, 2026 in Charleston, SC
- SSC: April 14-16, 2026 in Charleston, SC
- Webinar (Jul/Aug): TBD
- October 20-22, 2026 in Charleston, SC

19.2 South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meetings

- December 8-12, 2025 in Kitty Hawk, NC
- March 2-6, 2026 in Jekyll Island, GA

- June 8-12, 2026 in St. Augustine, FL
- September 14-18, 2026 in Charleston, SC

ADJOURNED AT 11:28 am on Thursday October 23, 2025.