

Southeast Local Landscape

The Southeast Region spans a geographic area from Texas to North Carolina, including the U.S. Caribbean. We work with many partners, including but not limited to 17 coastal and inland states, two territories, 3 fishery management councils, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, 9 Army Corps of Engineers districts, 3 U.S. Coast Guard districts, and 3 Environmental Protection Agency regions.

Our region contains the largest recreational fisheries and the second largest (by volume) commercial fisheries in U.S. waters. We also co-developed and support the nation's first coordinated federal interagency permitting process to promote the growth of marine aquaculture in the Gulf of Mexico. Together with our regional fishery management councils and intergovernmental organizations, we manage over 210 fish stocks/complexes which generated over \$24 billion in sales and supported 259,000+ jobs in 2016. Our region covers over 3,200 miles of coastline, including over 29,000 miles of tidal shoreline and the largest wetland acreage (31.3 million acres) and coral reef track in the contiguous U.S. We are responsible for conserving and/or restoring over 90 marine mammal stocks and 40 threatened or endangered species. And we consult on a myriad of infrastructure and coastal development activities that may impact these important aquatic species and habitats to ensure a balanced approach to the development, use, and conservation of NOAA trust resources.

The Southeast is the most critical region in the country for energy production, military readiness, and water-borne commerce. The Gulf of Mexico's Central and Western Planning areas, offshore Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, account for about 97% of all oil and gas produced in the Outer Continental Shelf. Waters off the Southeast contain 5 out of the 10 U.S. military's highly strategic over-water and in-water operating areas (OPAREA) and 2 out of 3 medium strategic importance OPAREAs. Six of the top ten ports by tonnage are in the Southeast, reflecting the region's critical importance to the Nation's energy production and agricultural exports.

The broad geographic area we work in, and the great number of different partners we coordinate with, necessitates a diverse and agile workforce that can address evolving mission needs and operations. This plan is tightly focused on addressing our highest priorities and is informed by our local landscape.

Some of the *Issues we face*:

- Estuarine habitat loss due to subsidence, sea-level rise, and coastal development
- Shifting species distributions due to climate change
- Loss of corals due to increasing nutrient loads, ocean temperatures and acidification
- Allocation of federally managed fisheries among recreational and commercial fishermen
- Overcapitalized commercial fisheries and open-access recreational fisheries
- Increasing population growth and coastal development, which is increasing interactions both with managed and protected species and their habitats
- Shared international boundaries and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing effects on the management of transboundary and highly migratory stocks
- Uncertainty in fish stock status due to inadequate data, including a high degree of uncertainty about the level of recreational catch
- Lack of timely data collection and scientific information for informing management of federally managed species and HMS stocks, particularly in the Caribbean
- Large-scale ecosystem impacts to protected species and fisheries associated with red tide, hypoxia, oil spills, invasive species, and freshwater runoff

- A national seafood trade deficit of \$14 billion dollars

Some of the *Challenges* we must address:

- Maintaining and improving data collection, surveys, and population assessments for marine resource management and conservation, including Council managed species, protected species, and highly migratory species.
- Modernizing fishery information collection systems to support better and more timely science for fisheries management.
- Creation and fragmentation of data collection systems (e.g., state and federal surveys) and integration/calibration of those surveys with NOAA surveys for use in stock assessments and resource management.
- Reducing bycatch and discards of non-target species while supporting commercial, recreational, and international fisheries.
- Reducing or preventing take of protected species associated with coastal development, oil and gas, and maritime industries.
- Increasing stock assessment throughput to provide management advice for a large number of managed species.
- Increasing regulatory efficiency and reducing regulatory burdens while conserving protected species and maintaining sustainable fisheries.
- Increasing U.S. seafood production and reducing the seafood trade deficit, including expanding sustainable offshore aquaculture.
- Optimizing Gulf restoration funds for restoring injury from oil spill while achieving synergistic benefits for fisheries science and management.
- Operating across a broad geographic area of jurisdiction, which requires enhanced coordination and alignment of staffing and resources to meet our mission, especially as species ranges shift.
- Coordinating internally, and across diverse agencies and jurisdictions, to address major factors impacting natural resources
- Effectively implementing ecosystem-based fisheries management.

Some of the *Risks* we foresee:

- Aging infrastructure for many of our science laboratories.
- Increasing operational costs, stable or decreasing funding levels, and reduced vessel availability to maintain adequate survey and data collection levels, resulting in less robust stock assessments and greater management uncertainty.
- A workload in excess of available resources, which will require a priority-based approach and result in some work not being addressed.
- Loss of institutional knowledge due to retirements (~1/2 of SEFSC and 1/3 of SERO workforce eligible to retire in next 5 years), which will make succession planning critical.