Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

South Atlantic State/Federal Fisheries Management Board

May 5, 2015
11:15-12:00 p.m.
Alexandria, Virginia

Draft Agenda

The times listed are approximate; the order in which these items will be taken is subject to change; other items may be added as necessary.

1. Welcome/Call to Order (P. Geer) 11:15 a.m.

2. Board Consent 11:15 a.m.
   • Approval of Agenda
   • Approval of Proceedings from February 2015

3. Public Comment 11:20 a.m.

4. Report from the NOAA Southeast Regional Office on Draft Strategic Plan for FY2016–2020 (H. Blough) 11:30 a.m.

5. Other Business/Adjourn 12:00 p.m.

The meeting will be held at the Westin Hotel, 400 Courthouse Square, Alexandria, Virginia; 703.253.8600

Vision: Sustainably Managing Atlantic Coastal Fisheries
MEETING OVERVIEW

South Atlantic State/Federal Fisheries Management Board Meeting
Tuesday, May 5, 2015
11:15 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
Alexandria, Virginia

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<th>Chair: Pat Geer (GA)</th>
<th>Technical Committee Chairs</th>
<th>Law Enforcement Committee Rep:</th>
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<td>Assumed Chairmanship: 10/13</td>
<td>Atlantic Croaker: Chris McDonough (SC)</td>
<td>Doug Lewis (GA)</td>
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<td>Red Drum: Mike Murphy (FL)</td>
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<td>Vice Chair: Jim Estes (FL)</td>
<td>Advisory Panel Chair: Tom Powers (VA)</td>
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Voting Members:
NJ, DE, MD, PRFC, VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, NMFS, USFWS, SAFMC (12 votes)

2. Board Consent
   - Approval of Agenda
   - Approval of Proceedings from February 5, 2015

3. Public Comment – At the beginning of the meeting, public comment will be taken on items not on the agenda. Individuals that wish to speak at this time must sign-in at the beginning of the meeting. For agenda items that have already gone out for public hearing and/or have had a public comment period that has closed, the Board Chair may determine that additional public comment will not provide additional information. In this circumstance the Chair will not allow additional public comment on an issue. For agenda items that the public has not had a chance to provide input, the Board Chair may allow limited opportunity for comment. The Board Chair has the discretion to limit the number of speakers and/or the length of each comment.

4. Report from the NOAA Southeast Regional Office on Draft Strategic Plan for FY2016-2020 (11:30-11:55 a.m.)

   Background
   - Staff from the NOAA Southeast Regional Office requested to present their office’s draft strategic plan to the Board.
   - The public comment period on the draft strategic plan is open through July 11, 2015 (Briefing Materials)

   Presentations
   - SERO Draft Strategic Plan for FY2016-2020 by H. Blough

5. Other Business/Adjourn
DRAFT PROCEEDINGS OF THE

ATLANTIC STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION

SOUTH ATLANTIC STATE/FEDERAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT BOARD

The Westin Alexandria Hotel
Alexandria, Virginia
February 4, 2015

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the South Atlantic State/Federal Fisheries Management Board. The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.
Call to Order, Chairman Patrick Geer........................................................................................................1

Approval of Proceedings, August 2014 ........................................................................................................1

Approval of Agenda .............................................................................................................................................1

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2015 Black Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment ..........................................................................................1
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   Discussion of Next Steps for Management in Response to the Benchmark Assessment .......................11

Update on Southern Flounder Management .................................................................................................11

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Adjournment .....................................................................................................................................................15

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the South Atlantic State/Federal Fisheries
Management Board. The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.
INDEX OF MOTIONS

1. Approval of Agenda by Consent (Page 1).

2. Motion to approve proceedings of August, 2014 by Consent (Page 1).

3. Move to approve the Black Drum stock assessment and peer review report for management use (Page 10). Motion by Dr. Louis Daniel; second by Joe Grist. Motion carries (Page 10).

4. Adjourn by Consent (Page 15).

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ATTDNCE

Board Members

Adam Nowalsky, NJ, proxy for Asm. Andrzejczak (LA)  Robert Boyles, Jr., SC (AA)
Russ Allen, NJ, proxy for D. Chanda (AA)  Dr. Malcolm Rhodes, SC (GA)
Roy Miller, DE (GA)  Spud Woodward, GA (AA)
Tom O’Connell, MD (AA)  Jim Estes, FL, proxy for J. McCawley (AA)
Bill Goldsborough, MD (GA)  Martin Gary, PRFC
Joe Grist, VA, proxy for J. Bull (AA)  Wilson Laney, USFWS
Kyle Schick, VA, proxy for Sen. Stuart (LA)  Steve Meyers, NMFS
Louis Daniel, NC (AA)

(AA = Administrative Appointee; GA = Governor Appointee; LA = Legislative Appointee)

Ex-Officio Members

Staff

Bob Beal  Melissa Yuen
Kirby Rootes-Murdy  Toni Kerns
Jeff Kipp

Guests

Tom Fote, NJ (GA)

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the South Atlantic State/Federal Fisheries Management Board. The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.
The South Atlantic State/Federal Fisheries Management Board of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission convened in the Edison Ballroom of the Westin Hotel, Alexandria, Virginia, February 4, 2015, and was called to order at 1:30 o’clock p.m. by Chairman Patrick Geer.

**CALL TO ORDER**

CHAIRMAN PATRICK GEER: My name is Pat Geer and I am chairman of the South Atlantic Board.

**APPROVAL OF PROCEEDINGS**

CHAIRMAN GEER: I’m going to switch things around a little bit on the agenda. I want to approve the minutes from the August meeting. Any changes; any modifications? Hearing none; I will consider them approved.

**APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

CHAIRMAN GEER: We have a couple of changes to the agenda. There have been a few versions of it floating around; so I want to make sure we have things right. We’re not going to discuss the 2014 FMP Review and State Compliance Reports for spot, spotted seatrout, and Spanish mackerel just for time constraints.

We are going to add a brief discussion on the end about Spanish mackerel and changes related to Amendment 20B from the National Marine Fisheries Service and how this may impact us all. Kirby will do that. Those are the changes to the agenda. Do I see any additions to the agenda that aren’t listed or mentioned already? We will consider that approved.

**PUBLIC COMMENT**

CHAIRMAN GEER: Is there anybody from the general public who would like to make a statement? I don’t have anything from anybody. Seeing none; we will move on.

**2015 BLACK DRUM BENCHMARK STOCK ASSESSMENT**

CHAIRMAN GEER: The major topic for this meeting is to discuss the black drum benchmark stock assessment. We are going to start off with Jeff Kipp and then Dr. Cynthia Jones from Old Dominion will give the peer review from that.

MR. JEFF KIPP: To outline my presentation, I’m going to start by looking over the data that went into the assessment. Then I will move on to the methods that were used in the assessment, go over the reference points and the stock status, and I will wrap up with research recommendations. This figure shows the coast-wide harvest. As you can see, the harvest has been primarily from recreational fisheries.

Going to the commercial landings’ data, the data was obtained from archived U.S. Fish Commission Reports from 1887 to 1944; the National Marine Fisheries Service from 1945 to 1949; and was pulled from the ACCSP Data Warehouse from 1950 to 2012. The commercial landings by state; historically most of the black drum have been landed in Virginia and Florida.

Following some regulations implemented in the Florida in the 1980’s and the gill net ban in the 1990’s, most black drum recently have been landed in Virginia and North Carolina. The commercial landings’ size data, there is some size data available from Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina and the Southeast Fisheries Science Center Trip Interview Program.

Of note, only the North Carolina DMF Sampling Program has averaged more than 65 length samples a year, overall gears and month; so there is limited length data available from the commercial fisheries. The available length data does indicate primarily harvest of immature fish.

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in the South Atlantic and primarily mature in the Mid-Atlantic.

This table shows the coast-wide age samples from all the data sources that we have with length ends going down the table and year from 1985 to 2012 going across the table. Highlighted in red are year and size/bin combinations where there were less than five age samples. Highlighted in yellow are where there were to five to nine age samples; and highlighted in green are where there were more nine samples.

As you can, there has been limited age sampling especially for the larger, older fish, but there has been some increased sampling in the most recent years. Some caveats, biases and uncertainty to point out for the commercial landings; the historical landings especially from those old U.S. Fish Commission Reports are highly uncertain.

The NMFS landings that precede required trip ticket programs are likely underreported. There is limited gear information in early years; no reliable commercial discard data. There are some issues with species’ identification and reporting. For example, fish landed as drum and not identified to species’ level were not included in the landings’ data.

Also one other note; in Florida some black drum are possibly landed as miscellaneous or industrial fish; and those landings also were not included. This is the harvest estimates from MRFSS and MRIP. On the top figure are the harvest estimates in pounds; and on the bottom figure are harvests in numbers. You can see in the 2000’s there has been a noticeable increase in harvest.

These are proportional standard errors, which provide a measure of precision for the harvest estimates from the MRFSS and MRIP. PSEs greater than 50 indicate a very imprecise estimate. On this table you’ve got your years going down the table and states from the southernmost, Florida, up to the northernmost, New Jersey.

Going across the table you can see that precision generally decreases as you move up the coast. In the last column is the coast-wide PSEs for the coast-wide harvest estimates, which all are generally better than the state and year levels. These are the recreational harvest estimates by state. You can see that Florida has been a primary contributor to recreational harvest over most of the years.

Of note, in recent years there has been increased harvest in Mid-Atlantic states; notably, New Jersey. This is just another look broken down by region. Again, as I noted in the commercial landings’ data; also in the recreational data, most of the data indicates that there is a pretty clear break in the size structure of fish that are harvested and landed in the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic.

Historically most of the recreational harvest has been in the South Atlantic, but again a recent increase in the Mid-Atlantic states. This is the length data available from the MRFSS and MRIP. The top panel are the states in the South Atlantic; and on the lower panel are the states in the Mid-Atlantic. You’ve got years from 1981 to 2012 going down each panel and each wave estimate going across each panel from Wave 1 to Wave 6.

Cells that are highlighted in gray; there was no harvest estimate for that wave-and-year combination. Cells highlighted in red; there was less than ten length samples collected; and cells highlighted in green, there was at least ten length samples collected. As you can see, in Florida and North Carolina, notably, in more recent years there has been decent coverage based on these metrics; but the length sampling
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three from the Delaware Bay, one from Maryland coastal bays and one from Georgia.

We had five indices tracking primarily immature fish less than 600 millimeters in total length; one from North Carolina, one from South Carolina and then three from the Florida Seine Survey, three individual indices; and then one index tracking what we’ve seen in the entire exploitable stock, and that is in MRFSS and MRIP index.

This figure shows the young-of-year indices. Again, there three from the Delaware Bay, 30-foot and 16-foot trawl surveys and PSEG Seine Survey; one from the Maryland Coastal Bays and one from Georgia. This figure shows the indices tracking immature black drum with one South Carolina, one from North Carolina and three indices from Florida. This is the MRFSS and MRIP Index. You can see a generally increasing trend over the time series from 1982 to 2012.

We did some life history analysis to develop life history parameters for assessment methods used. This is just a table of the data sources that were used to develop those life history parameters; data from Delaware, the NEAMAP and ChesMMAP Surveys; Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina.

Some of the assessment methods that were used in the assessment; we did some trend analysis, per-recruit analysis and also looked at some catch-based methods, including the depletion-corrected average catch, what we call the Catch-MSY method, and depletion-based stock reduction analysis.

With the trend analysis we looked at associations between indices; and we also used the Mann-Kendall analysis to test for either increasing or decreasing trends in the indices. Also, those analyses suggested significant positive associations between indices from different surveys; most notably the young-of-year indices in the Mid-Atlantic. That suggested that these surveys are tracking abundance reliably.

The only trend detected in any of the indices was in the MRFSS and MRIP Index; and that was an increasing trend. Of note, this contradicted other indices that were available and also contradicted the general understanding of somewhat a developing fishery over the time period of that MRFSS and MRIP Index.

For a per-recruit analysis, it is a per capita age-structured model that uses survivorship along with age schedules of size, weight, mortality, fecundity, maturity and harvest vulnerability. It estimates yield per recruit and spawning potential ratios over a range of exploitation rates and minimum size limits.

This was not endorsed by the stock assessment subcommittee due to the lack of information on selectivity in the fisheries and fishing mortality. Primary methods we looked at in the assessment were catch-based methods. These require removal history, which we had available. They do not require an index of abundance. There are some meta-analyses and data available to inform the required input parameters for these methods.

It is good practice to compare several of these methods. They are somewhat similar. We evaluated three methods; and as I mentioned, depletion-corrected average catch or DCAC; catch-MSY and depletion-based stock reduction analysis or DB-SRA. Some of advantages of these catch-based methods; performance of the methods relative to the data-rich methods has been evaluated and found fairly robust given the assumptions are correct.

These methods provide a good alternative to estimate reference points for data-poor stocks that lack information on size composition and
abundance but do have information on life history and removals. Some limitations; these methods were developed to estimate catch reference points and not necessarily to make stock status determination.

They are conditional on subjective depletion assumptions and they do not fit estimates to any abundance data. Uncertainty can be incorporated with these methods by specifying distributions for input parameters and data, running a number of model iterations with parameters drawn from those distributions and then calculating reference points from accepted iterations to develop probability distributions. Uncertainty can also be explored with sensitivity analyses.

Of the three catch-based methods, the stock assessment subcommittee and technical committee chose DB-SRA as the preferred method. This was based on several reasons. The DCAC does not incorporate a population dynamics model. It is just a slightly modified average catch; so the DB-SRA is slightly more complex than that DCAC method.

Catch-MSY is not robust for lightly exploited stocks. The life history and productivity parameters required for DB-SRA are better defined in meta-analyses that were available. DB-SRA was more robust in sensitivity analysis and projections. Some background on the DB-SRA method; the method essentially estimates what carrying capacity must be if a stock is at a recent biomass level given a time series of removals.

The observed time series of removals is assumed to start at unfished stock conditions. The biomass in that first year, which I mentioned, was 1900 is assumed equal to your carrying capacity. Select life history and stock condition parameters from distributions and project biomass forward with a production model and the removal history. Then you iteratively solve for the carrying capacity based on that assumed depletion in a current year.

These were the results of the DB-SRA base run. The overfishing limit or OFL; the median estimate was 4.12 million pounds; and for the maximum sustainable yield, the median estimate was 2.12 million pounds. You can see the distribution of those estimates in the figure below. These are the biomass estimates projected with the production model.

The biomass estimates are the black lines and the Bmsy reference point is the red lines with the solid lines being the median and the dashed lines being the inter-quartile range around the median estimate. You can see here biomass has been estimated to decline slightly and steadily but never falls below the Bmsy level. This is the exploitation estimated with DB-SRA.

The exploitation are the black lines and the exploitation at maximum sustainable yield are the red lines; again with the solid lines being the median estimate and the dashed lines being the inter-quartile range around those median estimates. You can see the only year that exploitation exceeded the exploitation at maximum sustainable yield was in 2008 when there was a big peak in harvest in recreational harvest.

At the recommendation of the peer review, we did some projections with this method. For this projection here we used the removals equal to average removals from 2010 to 2012, which was 1.56 million pounds, and projected that catch forward as the catch for the next 20 years. You can see that biomass remains steady over those two years in this projection.

Another projection was studying the removals projected forward equal to the DB-SRA median MSY estimate of 2.12 million pounds, which shows a slight decrease in biomass over the time series of the projection. We did some
sensitivity analysis looking at changes to the depletion parameters, input parameters and removals’ time series.

We found that it is sensitive to depletion assumptions; and based on the recommendation of the peer review panel for that depletion parameter that we used in this method, we assumed a broad uniform distribution to capture some of that uncertainty. This is a comparison of the sustainable yield estimates from each of the catch-based methods.

With the DCAC median, sustainable yield being the green line that is the lowest; the DB-SRA median MSY being the orange line; and the catch-MSY median MSY is the blue line; and the removals’ history is the black dotted line. Of note, the sustainable yield estimated DCAC is not equivalent to MSY. It is a slightly more precautionary yield estimate that is not likely to exceed MSY; so as expected, it is lower than the other methods.

The reference points from the DB-SRA; for a catch target, the median DB-SRA MSY estimate is recommended of 2.12 million pounds. For a catch threshold, the median DB-SRA OFL estimate of 4.21 million pounds is recommended. The OFL is a product of current biomass and maximum sustainable exploitation. It indicates a threshold for overfishing.

For stock status, the black drum stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. This is based on the results of the catch-based methods, the life history of the species and indices of abundance that were available. These are the research recommendations that the technical committee and stock assessment subcommittee came up with.

The high priority research recommendations are to age otoliths that have been collected and archived; collect information to characterize the size composition of fish discarded in recreational fisheries; collect information on the magnitude and sizes of commercial discards; increase biological sampling in commercial fisheries to better characterize the size and age composition of commercial fisheries by state and gear.

Increase biological sampling in recreational fisheries to better characterize the size and age composition by state and wave; obtain estimates of selectivity at age for commercial fisheries by gear, recreational harvest and recreational discards; continue all current fishery-independent surveys and collect biological samples for black drum on all surveys; develop a fishery-independent adult survey; consider longline and purse seine surveys; collect age samples especially in states where maximum size regulations preclude the collection of adequate adult ages.

Moderate research recommendations: conduct reproductive studies including age and size-specific fecundity; spawning frequencies; spawning behaviors by region; and movement and site fidelity of spawning adults; conduct a high reward tagging programs to improve return rate estimates; continue to expand current tagging programs and obtain mortality and growth information and movement at-size data.

Improve sampling of nighttime fisheries; conduct studies to estimate catch-and-release mortality in recreational fisheries; collect genetic material over a long time span to obtain information on movement and population structure and potentially estimate population size; obtain better estimates of harvest from the black drum recreational fishery, especially in states with short seasons. That concludes my presentation. If there are any questions, I’d be glad to take them.

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CHAIRMAN GEER: Are there any specific questions for Jeff at this time? All right, hearing none; I guess we will move on to the Peer Review Report. It is my honor to introduce Dr. Cynthia Jones from Old Dominion University; and she will give us the peer review.

PEER REVIEW PANEL REPORT

DR. CYNTHIA JONES: Jeff covered a great deal and so I can be brief. The information in the external peer review is available. The Peer Review Panel was held from November 11th through the 14th. The panel consisted of me as chair, Dr. Nelson, Dr. Jiao and Dr. Cope. All of those people have expertise in data-poor methods.

The stock assessment was accepted. The stock is not overfished and overfishing was not occurring in 2015. The panel found that the stock assessment was acceptable for management use. We also commended the stock assessment team on the true high quality of work that they did. Our first term of reference was to evaluate the thoroughness of data collection and the presentation and treatment of fishery-dependent and fishery-independent data in the assessment.

Our finding was that age could be adequately read from otolith annuli and that the size at age is reliable. However, the recreational catch data were obtained from MRFSS/ MRIP. The CPUE estimates were not consistent over time; and that is because of the infrequency of intercepts. This tends to be a seasonal fishery, a pulse fishery and in specific locations.

Because of that, MRFSS selects the most commonly used sites and so some of the black drum sites are included infrequently or with low probability. This is exacerbated by a short-season fishery and sporadic availability of intercepts due to the migratory behavior especially in the northern part of the range.

You saw that in Jeff’s presentation of the imprecision and the lack of data accumulation for the stock. Coverage of the commercial fishery’s landings came from disparate sources over the catch history with inconsistencies in coverage and gears. There is no fishery-independent surveys to monitor black drum.

Eight indices in total were used in the assessment and standardized either with the Delta Method in combination with the lognormal distribution or with a binomial JLM. The panel considered that a credible analysis of the available data. The second term of reference is that the methods and models used to estimate the population parameters and biological reference points included but not limited to evaluation of the choice and justification of the preferred model.

If multiple models were considered, evaluate the analyst’s explanation for any difference in the results and evaluate model parameterization and specification. The panel looked at the four models that were presented to us for candidate stock assessment. They rely only on catch and life history information; and those, as Jeff said, were the trends in per-recruit analysis, catch-MSY, DCAC and DB-SRA.

For the per-recruit analysis, it is an equilibrium approach; and the drawback to it was the lack of knowledge of selectivity, as Jeff has already said. The reference points were within the 95 percent credibility indices of the DB-SRA. The catch-MSY model used a Pella-Tomlinson Surplus Production Model; but when we asked the team to do further projections, it showed that that model in fact was unstable in projecting forward.

The Depletion-Corrected Average Catch does not use a model of population dynamics, which is preferred. It adjusts the average catch based on assumptions about depletions and is sensitive to that; and it only gives a static yield
calculation, which again is not preferable. The DB-SRA used a flexible production model with a Monte Carlos resampling of inputs.

It included uncertainty in the catch history, which is advisable. It was the most transparent of the models that presented to the panel. It also used the full time series of catches. However, it did have a high sensitive to the biomass assumptions. The panel felt this was the preferred model to use for the stock assessment.

We were asked to evaluate the diagnostics performed. For yield per recruit and SPR, there is no sensitivity diagnostic for the catch-MSY. It was robust across a wide range of R and K values, but it was relatively sensitive to the depletion in the terminal year. The sample retention for this method was also very low. Out of 10,000 sample inputs, only 5 percent were kept.

That tends to be a problem with the catch-MSY Model. The DCAC and DB-SRA included additional assumptions on K, on the ratio between biomass in the terminal year in K and M. The DB-SRA had a sample retention of 90 percent in comparison to the catch-MSY. Term of Reference 4 was to evaluate the methods used to characterize uncertainty; and the estimated parameters ensure that the implications of uncertainty in the technical conclusions were clearly stated.

Again, no estimates for uncertainty were done for the yield per recruit or SPR, spawning potential ratio. The catch-MSY, uncertainty for MSY and management quantities was done from Monte Carlos sampling of the prior distributions. That was chosen as a uniform prior. The DB-SRA used Monte Carlos in the input parameters, and that uncertainty was able to be perpetuated into the model-derived estimates.

Term of Reference 5; the panel was asked to recommend the best estimates stock biomass abundance and exploitation from the assessment for use in management; and if possible to specify alternative methods and measures. The panel concurred that the best model was the DB-SRA with using the least informative priors.

The population biomass was shown to be declining slowly with a steady increase in harvest; and the population was not experiencing overfishing. We were asked in Term of Reference 6 to evaluate the choice of reference points and the method used to estimate them and to recommend stock status determination from the assessment and if appropriate specify alternative methods and measures. The panel found and was unanimous in all our findings the reference point determined by yield per recruit, DCAC, DB-SRA and the Catch-MSY. The DB-SRA reference point was the MSY of 2.11 million pounds. Term of Reference 7 was review the research data collection and assessment methodology recommendations provided by the technical committee and make additional recommendations as warranted.

Clearly prioritize the activities needed to inform and maintain the current assessment and provide recommendations to improve the reliability of future assessments. The panel recommendations were specifically to develop a protocol to alert the stock assessment subcommittee to any major changes in harvest and F that could trigger a reassessment of the reference points similar to rumble strip’s approach developed by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council for data-poor stocks.

With any of these data-poor stocks, you are using methods that are not quite as sensitive as a full age-structured stock assessment; and so there is a real value in looking at each year’s update and seeing whether there is any change
that would tend to worry you, in which case it might be of value to trigger that as a rumble strip so that you go back and look at the assessment in more detail.

We felt it was important to increase the age sampling along the coast. The reason is that black drum is a very long-lived highly productive fish in the sense that it reproduces – it grows fast, it reproduces early and it has enormous reproductive capacity. That is good because when you deplete the stock, it means it can come back; but it also is telling you that this fish lives in a very uncertain world and needs full age structure in order to be able to maintain itself at sustainable levels.

The best way to determine whether it has full age structure is to have sufficient aging data that you can see any juvenescence that would occur in the stock; and so that’s what we’re asking for here. Increased age sampling along the coast, the juvenescence of the population is a good indicator of overfishing in this fishery, and the availability of age data is crucial to being alerted to such changes in age structure.

Indices such as the South Carolina Trammel Net Survey could be used directly in an extended version of DB-SRA. The implementation of xDB-SRA, which is another method, could instead specify stock status at an earlier time period and therefore allowing the most recent catches to inform population dynamics and thus stock status.

Term of Reference 8 was to recommend the timing of the next benchmark assessment and updates, if necessary, relative to the life history and current management of the species. Again, because the panel felt that because the black drum is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring; that it recommends that the next benchmark assessment take place in five years unless there is any indication with the rumble-strip methodology that you’ve begun juvenescing the population and it starts to be in trouble.

Overall the review panel found that the black drum are an infrequent catch in the recreational and commercial fisheries. Their rarity and migration history leads to a variable catch history. Again, in any of these data-poor methods, the driver of the value of the method is that you have a really solid catch history and that the catch is a major portion of the abundance of the stock.

Of the four data-poor models used, the DB-SRA proved to be the most reliable and provided stable estimates of biomass and MSY. Black drum is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. The median MSY was 2.11 million pounds with a median overfishing limit of 4.13 million pounds. Nevertheless, because of the life history characteristics, in managing this stock precaution should be used. Any questions?

I guess the other thing I’d like to say is I really do want to commend the stock assessment scientists. I’ve been at a lot of CIE reviews and this was just a wonderful set of presentations they made to us and showed enormously dedicated work on it and really high quality work.

CHAIRMAN GEER: Are there any questions for Dr. Jones? John.

MR. JOHN CLARK: Thank you for the great presentations. I was just curious. One of the last points you brought up, Dr. Jones, about looking at the change in the age structure as a warning; is the data sensitive enough that we – how much of a change would we have to see before we’d be thinking that there was a problem with the stock?

DR. JONES: Well, one of the reasons that one of the data recommendations from the panel was
that more age data be taken particularly for those older, larger fish was to establish a better basis for which to understand whether juvenescence was occurring. I know in the state of Virginia we routinely – even with small sample size, we are routinely seeing 60 year olds in the catches.

It would be nicer if we had more data coastwide so that could be assessed more readily. I would be able to then say to you, well, if I saw a truncation of 10 percent of the age distribution I’d begin to be concerned. I don’t think we can say that right now. Certainly, I would be concerned if I didn’t see 50 year olds. Those fish will go fast; the older ages will go quickly if you’re harvesting too heavily.

CHAIRMAN GEER: Any other questions? Louis.

DR. LOUIS B. DANIEL, III: Just a comment just to follow up on what Dr. Jones said as well as Jeff. I know the effort that went into this assessment. This was something that I really pushed for and I couldn’t have asked for a better result in terms of the quality of the work that was done. To Jeff and to everyone that was participating in this and the peer review panel; I feel good about this.

I concur with everything from the review panel and think we’ve probably done what we need to do in order to maintain this and keep an eye on the age structure. It is going to be hard to do and it is going to take a commitment from some of the states that actually see those larger, older fish, but take them in fishery-dependent sample so we don’t go out and kill a bunch of 50 or 60-year-old fish just to get their otoliths.

I think that would be a useful exercise if we can get some of the northern states interested and involved. I know the southern states are going to be collecting some of the otoliths from the smaller fish, which is what we generally see, and hopefully be ready for a benchmark in five years. Again, thank you very much both Jeff and Dr. Jones.

DR. JONES: Just to comment on aging this fish, if you can’t age this fish, you should be fired. (Laughter) It comes with numbers on its annuli; but you do have to count to 50.

CHAIRMAN GEER: Good point. Any other questions? Louis.

DR. DANIEL: Seeing no questions, I would make a motion that we accept the benchmark stock assessment and peer review report of management use. Is that what you were looking for, Mr. Chairman?

CHAIRMAN GEER: I believe it was in the hopper, yes. I guess we have to get it up there.

MR. JOE GRIST: I’ll go ahead and second it while we’re waiting.

CHAIRMAN GEER: The motion is move to approve the Black Drum Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report for management use. Motion by Dr. Daniel and seconded by Mr. Grist. Hearing no opposition to that and seeing a lot of hands going up, we will consider that motion carried.

I want to say again I appreciate the expertise and the thoroughness of Dr. Jones in her peer review and all the stock assessment biologists and technical committee members that worked on this. One of my staff worked pretty hard on this and he was in my office on a regular basis asking me questions about it. It was a very thorough job and it went very smoothly. I think we all greatly appreciate your expertise and your thoroughness on this.

DR. JONES: This is going to mark me as a nerd, but we had so much fun doing this stock assessment review.
CHAIRMAN GEER: Moving on; now we have to have a brief discussion on how we may use this information. We went through this a little bit with menhaden, but I think menhaden is a much different beast than black drum.

**DISCUSSION OF NEXT STEPS FOR MANAGEMENT IN RESPONSE TO THE BENCHMARK ASSESSMENT**

CHAIRMAN GEER: I want to open the floor and get suggestions and ideas on how we want to move forward with this. Louis.

DR. DANIEL: I waited for another hand to go up, Mr. Chairman, before I stuck it up again. I agree with the peer review panel’s advice to monitor the age structure. I think we took some good proactive measures early on to make sure that we had some measures in place to try to protect those older fish, to try to limit the harvest and to try to at least get some of our yield per recruit up in terms of harvesting so many juvenile fish at such small sizes. I think we’ve been successful in that. I would suggest that we continue monitoring the population and prepare for a five-year update and take no further action at this time.

CHAIRMAN GEER: Any other comments or suggestions? I don’t think we need a motion on that but just keep doing our jobs and doing it well. Everybody is in agreement with that; I see a lot of head-nodding. Okay, we will consider that we’re done with that and thank you very much for the presentations.

**UPDATE ON SOUTHERN FLOUNDER MANAGEMENT**

CHAIRMAN GEER: Dr. Daniel is going to come up here now and he is going to speak to us about southern flounder management in the southern states.

DR. DANIEL: The last time I did this I was on the technical committee. All right, the intent of this is really not to solicit any action. What I wanted to do is just to give you a brief history. It was four or five years ago – North Carolina does fishery management plans for various species – we attempted a stock assessment on kingfishes.

I believe we used northern kingfish as our indicator species of the complex. We did a stock assessment on that species. We sent it out for peer review and the peer review came back not usable for management purposes because these fish migrate into other jurisdictions; and we had modeled it as a closed population when indeed it was an open population.

The way we have managed southern flounder in North Carolina ever since the original fishery management plan in 2005 was a closed population. We did a North Carolina centric assessment and generated biological reference points and had reductions in harvest needed, et cetera. We actually had an update during the time series of the assessment.

We just recently did an update on our southern flounder assessment. Looking at some of the new information that has recently come out in Fishery Bulletin, it is suggesting that – I think it was a paper by Midway, Cadrin and Scharf looked at otolith microchemistry, tagging and genetic information and suggested that the population of southern flounder was an open population down to as far south as Florida.

This is a bunch of information on the actual background on southern flounder I don’t need to read to you. Currently they’re managed separately by each state. Once we got this information that our peer review was not accepted because, again, it is an open population as opposed to a closed population; that has created a real storm in North Carolina.

People wanted us to recover the stock; but now that we don’t know what the benchmarks are,
we don’t whether we’re overfished or overfishing; so how do you recover something if you don’t even know the most basic tenets of the population. I asked staff to start looking at what was going on in the southern states, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

We were able to see that we are seeing some declines across the board maybe with the exception of North Carolina recreational is going up. I think the reason you’re seeing that is because of the incidental take permit for the sea turtles. In North Carolina it has resulted in significant closures that I believe has left more fish in the water that are now available for recreational harvest.

I think there is a reason for that increase in landings in the North Carolina Sector; but for the most part a lot of the states are holding relatively steady or declining. If you look at the commercial fishery, which is primarily North Carolina and Florida, there is a pretty noticeable decline. Again, the evidence for significant stock mixing is there.

We continue to tag some of these fish but very little difference between fish in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Some of the tagging information, as you can see, sort of shows that from the circles where the fish were tagged and that general southward movement as far as Florida.

This report is available for you on the internet. Basically we’re seeing some long-term declines in North Carolina and our Pamlico Sound Survey. It does that there is some declines in the trammel net survey in South Carolina. In their electro-fishing survey you can see a pretty significant decline. I don’t want to speak for South Carolina, but this is the information that we have been able to gather.

Again, there is the North Carolina Survey, the South Carolina; and then the Georgia Trawl Survey, which we received from them is showing a decline. I guess that is the Bulldog Survey showing a decline in abundance.

The bottom line; this fish forms a single population. We’re seeing pretty significant fisheries in all the South Atlantic states; two with significant commercial fisheries; evidence for decline; and pretty much impossible for us to manage without a joint assessment, working together with all the South Atlantic states.

The beauty of southern flounder is that it is fairly regional. There is not a lot of overlap; and I’m not aware of – there may be one or two that have been collected in Virginia, but it is very, very rare to see a southern flounder north of North Carolina, really north of Hatteras; and they’re a different population in the Gulf.

We do have some mixing in the nearshore ocean between Gulf flounder and southern flounder; and I think that probably increases as you move south. I bring this up to the board because I brought up the issue with kingfishes. We talked about doing a kingfish assessment because they are so important to the South Atlantic.

We really didn’t have the data to do it; and we’ve really not done anything. With southern flounder, at North Carolina it is the number one flounder or the number one targeted species by recreational fishermen in our state. While we’ll talk a lot this afternoon about the recreational harvest of summer flounder, southern flounder is critically important I think to all the South Atlantic states.

I wanted to provide you with this information. I’m not asking for an ASMFC Southern Flounder Plan. I’m not asking for a technical committee to be developed. I just want to make sure that the southern states have this information, have an opportunity to go back and talk to your
technical people, and I think there are several options that we can consider in the future.

First we need to talk to Bob; but if there was significant interest from the South Atlantic Board to develop a Southern Flounder Plan, then that would be one option if we have the money and the staff to do so. After our executive committee meeting today, I don’t know that we will. The other option would be to just work together and do like we did in the historical MARFIN projects.

MARFIN loves to see interstate cooperation and so there may be an opportunity to generate some bread for the four states to work together to try to construct a meaningful, peer-reviewable stock assessment on southern flounder; and then maybe just by working together with the southern states we could manage this fishery or at least have the assessment we need in order to properly make management recommendations. That was the intent and purpose behind my presentation here and really it was for your information and knowing how important that species is to the South Atlantic Board.

CHAIRMAN GEER: Thank you, Louis. Robert, do have a question?

MR. ROBERT H. BOYLES, JR.: Not a question; just discussion. Louis, thank you for this, and it is fitting that we just reviewed and accepted the stock assessment on black drum. I believe it was you that brought that issue to us; so I appreciate your foresight and certainly appreciate your concerns here. I will tell you I agree.

I think there is some cause for us to be collectively concerned. We have been looking at flounder for a long time in South Carolina. I will say from a regulatory management perspective we don’t differentiate among the three species. A flounder is a flounder is a flounder. There are a lot of reasons for that.

Certainly, we can, with our trammel data and some other data sets, tease that out. We are concerned about what we’re seeing in terms of trends. We’re concerned about a lot of different things. I’m struck by the fact that what we see in our blue crab fishery; blue crab and flounder seem to share some similar recruitment dynamics.

We think there are some things that are not necessarily fishery related at this point. In South Carolina we have a very generous bag limit; but I would also be lying if I told you that there was not a lot of political interest in flounder. There is a lot of political interest in flounder. From a recreational perspective it is particularly challenging in that I think we’ve been able to convince a lot of our recreational anglers about the importance of catch-and-release fishing for species like spotted seatrout and red drum.

We have not been as successful in terms of cracking that nut with recreational use of flounder. I will conclude by saying I know our staff has been in touch with your staff, Louis, about sharing some data, recognizing that this is an open resource and a shared resource. We’re hoping that by cooperating we can get a better handle on a regional picture.

As I mentioned to you a few minutes ago, we have a lot of reasons to believe that particularly in the northern part of our state that we’re recruiting flounder from North Carolina. I think it is helpful to keep these lines of communication open, and I appreciate you bringing this to us.

DR. DANIEL: I’m glad to have been able to do it. I think what we’re seeing in North Carolina is very similar. If you will recall the MARFIN mullet result, Florida and North Carolina were
particularly happy because South Carolina and Georgia basically provided a sanctuary for the mullet in the winter after they spawned; and we really didn’t need to worry too much about flounder.

I think what is happening with flounder in the South Atlantic is that a lot of these fish that are coming out of the inlets in North Carolina are heading south and spawning. I think the fewer of those that come out of North Carolina and head south to spawn; that’s one of the reasons why I think you’re probably having some recruitment issues down there.

At the same time I think what is spawning off of South Carolina, a lot of it is recruiting into North Carolina and down the road. I think if we’re serious about managing southern flounder, we need to know what the status is, we need to know what the biomass triggers are, and we probably need to do something jointly either again through a gentleman’s agreement amongst the four states, which we’ve done before, or through a commission action. Thank you for the time, Mr. Chairman, to bring this up.

CHAIRMAN GEER: Louis, just one last thing; the Georgia data is from our Georgia DNR Trawl Survey and not UGa. Also, we’d be more than willing to share our data. Before we got your call from your staff asking for the information, Dave Whitaker and staff in South Carolina asked for it like three months before. We’re all kind of on the same page.

DR. DANIEL: Thank you so much; I appreciate the time.

**PRESENTATION ON AMENDMENT 20B FOR THE COASTAL PELAGIC SPECIES**

CHAIRMAN GEER: Okay, our last item on the agenda is Kirby is going to tell us about Amendment 20B for the coastal pelagic species. In the amendment there are some changes to Spanish mackerel and he is going to tell us about it.

MR. KIRBY ROOTES-MURDY: I’m going to just give you a brief presentation on Amendment 20B and what it entails. For today’s purposes, this is more for information. The board does not have to take action, but it may be useful for discussion and possible action down the road. In terms of background, in 2011 the Omnibus Amendment for spot, spotted seatrout and Spanish mackerel went through.

This set up a number of management measures coastwide for Spanish mackerel. Some of the key ones were a 12-inch fork length or 14-inch total length minimum size; seasonal changing of the days and seasonal trip limits and commercial quota decreases when in a given year the total ACL is exceeded and the stock is overfished.

In terms of additional commercial measures, it prohibited purse seines and drift gill nets south of Cape Lookout, North Carolina. In terms of the annual commercial quota, it set it at approximately 3.13 million pounds annually with an adjusted quota of about 2.88 million pounds in different scenarios.

Once approximately 75 percent of the quota was hit, then the trip limits were reduced by 1,500 pounds. In 2014 Amendment 20A went into effect, which also implemented changes to the sale of fish caught in tournaments. Fish that were counted against recreational bag limits in recreational tournaments were allowed to be sold for commercial use.

In 2012 the SEDAR 28 Spanish Mackerel Stock Assessment was completed using a statistical age model, the Beaufort Assessment Model; and in doing projected that the 2011 spawning stock biomass was approximately 10.71 million pounds, which was higher than the spawning stock MSY of 7.2 million pounds; and as such,
the resource was determined to be not overfished and overfishing was not occurring.

The implications of this also were linked to, as I mentioned before, the Omnibus Amendment, in that for subsequent years where commercial quota was exceeded as well as the recreational harvest limit were exceeded, there was no decrease in the following year’s quota or recreational harvest limit.

Amendment 20B was published on January 27th and becomes effective in law on March 1st. What it does is change the previous Atlantic Zone of the Spanish Mackerel Management Unit. There had been a Gulf Zone and an Atlantic Zone. What it does is subdivide the Atlantic Zone. The reason for doing so is that the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council had expressed concern that the commercial quota was being filled by fishermen in one state before fish were available to other fishermen in other states.

That quota is annually monitored by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center. What the new zones indicate are that the northern zone will extend from approximately the South Carolina/North Carolina Border up through approximately Block Island of Rhode Island and will have 19.9 percent of the coast-wide commercial quota, which is approximately 662,000 pounds.

For the southern zone, which will be from the North Carolina/South Carolina Border down through the Monroe/Miami-Dade County Line. Eighty percent of the coast-wide quota will be allotted to that, which was approximately 2.67 million pounds. While these quotas will be set to these different zones, quotas can be moved between zones in consultation with the states in each of the zones and transferring.

In the meantime, NOAA Fisheries will monitor the commercial quotas separately and close federal waters in each zone when respective quotas have been met or expected to be met. I have a graph up here to just kind of show a little bit where these lines will be drawn. It essentially bumps up the Atlantic Zone of the Spanish Mackerel Migratory Group to, as I said, that Rhode Island, approximately Block Island area, out to the EEZ; and then extends it down. There are no other elements to this I was going to present; but if there are any questions, please let me know.

MR. ADAM NOWALSKY: Kirby, are you able to comment on if those zones are somehow biology-driven based on results of tagging studies or something else that would indicate that they are somewhat separate stocks or is it just purely as a function of management use?

MR. ROOTES-MURDY: My understanding, in going through the document at this point, is that it is a function of where landings occur. The FMP Review for 2013 fishing year is yet to be completed; but in looking historically through landings, about 73 percent of the harvest has been in southern states such as Florida.

In 2012 approximately 70 percent of the harvest was in Florida and 26 percent of the harvest was in North Carolina. In going through and setting those zones, some of the reasoning behind it was the landings over the last decade or so indicated that landings have been dominated by a handful of states. My read of it is that there is an effort to divide those into different zones.

ADJOURNMENT

CHAIRMAN GEER: Any other questions or comments? Hearing none; that concludes our business unless anyone else has anything else. We are adjourned.

(Whereupon, the meeting was adjourned at 2:45 o’clock p.m., February 4, 2015.)
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<td>AQU</td>
<td>SERO Aquaculture Program</td>
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<td>COMMS</td>
<td>SERO Communications Staff</td>
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<td>Corps</td>
<td>U.S. Army Corps of Engineers</td>
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<td>Cooperative Research Program</td>
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<td>CWPPRA</td>
<td>Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act</td>
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<td>SERO Directorate</td>
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<td>Endangered Species Act</td>
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<td>FSSI</td>
<td>Fish Stock Sustainability Index</td>
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<td>FWC</td>
<td>Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>FWRI</td>
<td>FWC Fish and Wildlife Research Institute</td>
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<td>FY</td>
<td>Fiscal Year, October 1 through September 30</td>
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<td>GOMA</td>
<td>Gulf of Mexico Alliance</td>
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<td>GoMEC</td>
<td>SERO Gulf of Mexico Environmental Compliance Program</td>
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<td>HCD</td>
<td>SERO Habitat Conservation Division</td>
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<td>IOOS</td>
<td>Integrated Ocean Observing System</td>
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<td>MARFIN</td>
<td>Marine Fisheries Initiative</td>
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<td>MMPA</td>
<td>Marine Mammal Protection Act</td>
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<td>MSA</td>
<td>Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act</td>
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<td>NEPA</td>
<td>National Environmental Policy Act</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>NOAA AOML</td>
<td>NOAA Atlantic Oceanographic &amp; Meteorological Laboratory</td>
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<td>NOAA GC</td>
<td>NOAA Office of General Counsel</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
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<td>NOAA NOS</td>
<td>NOAA National Ocean Service</td>
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<td>NOAA OAR</td>
<td>NOAA Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research</td>
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<td>OMI</td>
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<td>PRD</td>
<td>SERO Protected Resources Division</td>
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<td>RESTORE Act</td>
<td>Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act</td>
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<td>Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership</td>
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<td>Saltonstall-Kennedy</td>
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<td>USF</td>
<td>University of South Florida</td>
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Glossary

Division
One of SERO's four divisions (i.e., Habitat Conservation; Operations, Management and Information; Protected Resources; Sustainable Fisheries)

Goal
Aspirational, qualitative statement of what the organization hopes to achieve to advance its mission and address relevant problems, needs, challenges, and opportunities

Implementation Strategies
Specific actions designed to achieve objectives

Annual Operating Plans
Detailed tasks, projects, actions that will be undertaken each year to support implementation strategies

NOAA Fisheries' Core Mandates
Defined in NOAA Fisheries' FY15 priorities document as: (1) Ensure the productivity and sustainability of fisheries and fishing communities through science-based decision-making and compliance with regulations, and (2) Recover and conserve protected resources through the use of sound natural and social sciences.

NOAA Fisheries' Priorities
Defined by annual priorities document (currently Fisheries Priorities and Annual Guidance for 2015)

Objectives
Achievable, quantitative actions designed to achieve goals

SERO/Organizational Priorities
Organizational priorities to be defined and reviewed annually and informed by NOAA Fisheries’ core mandates, using process described in Goal 1; Objective 1.1

Statutory Mandates
Legal requirements set forth in legislation (MSA, ESA, MMPA, etc.)

Program
A NOAA Fisheries HQ or regional program (i.e., Aquaculture; Gulf of Mexico Environmental Compliance; Habitat)
Conservation; Protected Resources; Sustainable Fisheries)
1.0 Executive Summary

As demand for NOAA Fisheries’ services grows, the agency is focusing limited federal budget resources to support two core mandates:

- Productivity and sustainability of fisheries and fishing communities.
- Recovery and conservation of protected resources.

The Southeast Regional Office’s (SERO) strategic planning initiative is one component of a national effort to ensure the agency’s regulatory and science programs are transparent and effectively aligned with those two core mandates.

SERO’s Strategic Plan (Plan) considers the agency’s core mandates in the context of current fiscal conditions. The Plan is not intended to capture everything the SERO organization will accomplish during Fiscal Years 2016-2020. Instead, it identifies new operational and programmatic strategies that are intended to help SERO accomplish its core mandates more effectively and efficiently, and better adapt and respond to changing priorities and fiscal conditions.

The five strategic goals outlined in the Plan are designed to better position SERO to address the following key conservation and management challenges over the 5-year planning period:

- Increased demand for Endangered Species Act and Essential Fish Habitat consultations.
- Anticipated influx of large-scale Gulf of Mexico restoration projects funded by Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill settlement agreements and other legislation.
- Changing regulatory landscape and desire for increased economic opportunities.
- Elevated scrutiny of the science supporting conservation and management decisions.
- Expectation to provide additional services with less resources.

The five goals, each of which is of equal importance, aim to:

1. Improve SERO’s organizational effectiveness by better aligning SERO budget, people, and information management resources with regional priorities and NOAA Fisheries core mandates.
2. Promote economically vibrant fisheries and communities by better integrating SERO protected resources, habitat, fishery, and aquaculture programs to maximize the benefits of conservation and management initiatives.
3. Improve management of NOAA trust resources by acquiring and applying the best available science.
4. Leverage limited resources in support of organizational priorities by enhancing partnerships and communications.
5. Maximize the benefits of consultation resources by focusing Endangered Species Act and Essential Fish Habitat engagement on projects with the greatest potential conservation impacts.
Each goal encompasses specific objectives and implementation strategies which will be advanced through NOAA Fisheries’ annual operations plans to include key deliverables and milestones. SERO considers this Plan to be a living document and may add or modify objectives and/or strategies as new opportunities and emerging issues arise.

Section 2.0 of the Plan provides more information on the background and purpose of this planning initiative. Section 3.0 describes NOAA Fisheries and SERO’s mission and vision. Section 4.0 presents a summary overview of SERO’s organizational structure and programs, as well as current conservation and management challenges. Section 5.0 outlines the strategic goals, objectives and implementation strategies intended to address key challenges during the 5-year planning period. Section 6.0 includes several appendices with information on NOAA’s mission and vision, and Department of Commerce, NOAA and NOAA Fisheries planning documents (Appendix 6.1); SERO’s organizational structure, programs, and divisions (Appendix 6.2); key regional outreach and education mechanisms (Appendix 6.3); and regional partners (Appendix 6.4).
2.0 Background and Purpose

2.1 Background
Demand continues to increase for the vital services NOAA Fisheries provides the nation, including:
- Productive and sustainable fisheries.
- Safe and affordable sources of seafood.
- Recovery and conservation of protected resources.
- Healthy habitats that support healthy ecosystems.

As demand for these services grows, NOAA Fisheries has directed staff to focus limited federal budget resources to support two core mandates:
- Productivity and sustainability of fisheries and fishing communities.
- Recovery and conservation of protected resources.

All other NOAA Fisheries programs, projects, and investments (including science and technology, habitat conservation, enforcement, international affairs, and aquaculture) are to be designed and conducted in a manner that supports these core mandates and that, in the long run, makes ecosystems and communities more resilient.

Because marine and coastal species are part of healthy ecosystems, ecosystem resilience contributes to resilient communities. Specifically, our role in supporting vibrant ecosystems helps provide sustainable seafood for our nation, protect threatened and endangered species on their way to recovery, and ensure healthy habitat necessary to support these resources.

Habitat conservation and restoration remains fundamental to achieving our core mandates, maintaining ocean ecosystem stewardship, and supporting living marine resources. Lost or degraded habitat has direct biological, economic, and social consequences and can threaten the sustainability of fisheries and protected resources as well as the communities that rely on these resources.

2.2 Purpose
This strategic planning initiative is one component of a national effort to ensure NOAA Fisheries’ regional and headquarters regulatory and science programs are transparent and effectively aligned with the agency’s core mandates. NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office’s (SERO) Strategic Plan (Plan) considers the agency’s core mission functions in the context of current fiscal conditions. The Plan is not intended to capture everything the organization will accomplish during Fiscal Years (FY) 16-20. Instead, it identifies new operational and programmatic strategies that are intended to help SERO accomplish its core mandates more effectively and efficiently and provide SERO greater flexibility to adapt and respond to changing priorities and fiscal conditions.
The Plan is a living document to be reviewed and updated, as appropriate, on an annual basis. It will inform the development and execution of NOAA Fisheries’ Annual Operating Plans and associated milestones over the 5-year planning period. The Plan also will be used in communicating with employees, external partners, and the public about organizational strategies for achieving NOAA Fisheries core mandates, as well as related challenges and opportunities.

By promoting transparent, effective and efficient planning, management, and execution over the next five years, this effort also complements and strengthens NOAA and Department of Commerce implementation of the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act (2011).

3.0 Southeast Regional Office Mission and Vision

NOAA Fisheries’ mission is the stewardship of living marine resources through science-based conservation and management, and the protection and restoration of healthy ecosystems. To support this mission, SERO upholds the vision:

To achieve and maintain healthy ecosystems, sustainable living marine resources, and economically vibrant and resilient coastal communities in the southeastern United States (U.S.) and U.S. Caribbean through an empowered workforce, innovative solutions, management flexibility, adaptability, and science excellence.

Information on NOAA’s mission and vision, and the agency documents informing the Plan’s development is in Appendix 6.1.

4.0 Southeast Regional Office Overview

4.1 Role of Southeast Regional Office

SERO manages, conserves, and protects living marine resources and their habitats in the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean. Within this broad geographical area, the organization works with 17 states, commonwealths and territories; 2 interstate marine fisheries commissions; 3 regional fishery management councils; 4 Divisions and 8 Districts of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; and other federal partners, academics, non-governmental organizations, and regional partnerships to rebuild and sustain fisheries, recover protected species, and restore and enhance important marine, estuarine, and riverine habitats.

SERO is based in St. Petersburg, Florida, and is supported by 12 field offices from North Carolina through Texas and the U.S. Caribbean.
organization employs about 140 people, with an annual budget of about $50 million (2014).

### 4.2 Organizational Structure

Appendix 6.2 describes SERO’s organizational structure, programs, and divisions. Appendix 6.3 summarizes key regional outreach and education mechanisms. In summary, SERO is composed of the Directorate office and four divisions: (1) Habitat Conservation; (2) Operations, Management, and Information Services; (3) Protected Resources; and (4) Sustainable Fisheries.

The Directorate office houses the region’s Aquaculture and Gulf of Mexico Environmental Compliance (GoMEC) Programs.

- The Aquaculture program works to foster sustainable aquaculture to create employment and business opportunities in coastal communities, and increase the supply and diversification of seafood in harmony with NOAA Fisheries’ conservation and management mission.
- The GoMEC program is helping SERO to prepare for and manage the increasing Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) consultation workload associated with numerous, large-scale coastal restoration projects funded by the RESTORE Act and by Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Clean Water Act settlement agreements related to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

All other SERO programs are housed within the four divisions.

- Under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), Federal Power Act, and Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Habitat Conservation Division (HCD) engages with citizens, businesses, and state and federal agencies to consult on activities that may impact these important aquatic habitats to ensure a balanced approach to the development, use, and conservation of NOAA trust resources.
- The Operations, Management, and Information Services Division (OMI) provides SERO administrative, operational, and budget support, including facilities management, human resources management, grants and contracts management, and information management and record-keeping.
- Through implementation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and ESA, the Protected Resources Division (PRD) manages marine mammals, and endangered and threatened species to ensure the recovery and survival of protected marine species for future generations.
- Through implementation of the MSA, the Sustainable Fisheries Division (SFD) works with the South Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Fishery Management Councils to conserve and manage the largest recreational fisheries and the second largest (by volume) commercial fisheries in U.S. federal waters.
4.3 Key Issues
Key conservation and management issues in the Southeast Region are influenced by many diverse factors which are constantly evolving and are expected to change during the five years covered by this Plan. The following were identified as major issues to be addressed over the 5-year planning period:

- **Increasing Demand for ESA and EFH Consultations:** Increasing coastal development activities associated with growing coastal populations and economic recovery in the region is placing pressure on SERO-managed resources. Accordingly, demand has increased for consultation services under the authorities of the ESA, MSA, Federal Power Act, and Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act. SERO is struggling to keep up with the pace of these requests and to support national-level initiatives aimed at further streamlining federal permitting processes. Such processes include the Federal Infrastructure Permitting Program and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ (Corps) SMART planning process; the latter aims to complete feasibility studies in three years or less at a cost of not more than $3 million with the continued involvement of the Corps' District, Division, and Headquarters Offices.

- **Anticipated Influx of Large-Scale Gulf of Mexico Restoration Projects:** Numerous large coastal restoration projects in the Gulf of Mexico to be funded by the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States (RESTORE) Act, Natural Resource Damage Assessment, and Clean Water Act settlement agreements related to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill provide a unique opportunity to reverse decades of habitat degradation and boost recovery of commercially valuable species, protected species, and the habitats upon which they depend. Many additional restoration projects will be funded by the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act beginning in FY17. These efforts will require considerable coordination and resources to ensure the region is effectively engaged in project development and implementation and able to handle the associated ESA and EFH consultation workload. These activities will be critical to ensuring restoration projects are science-based and successful.

- **Changing Regulatory Landscape:** Southeast Region fisheries are transitioning from overfished to rebuilt status, creating expectations for increased fishing and business opportunities as well as the need to consider new tools and approaches to increase user benefits (e.g., increased quotas, increased fishing days, enhanced fishing opportunities, streamlined reporting processes, simplified regulations) while maintaining conservation gains and protections for marine
mammals and listed species. At the same time, the region faces large-scale habitat loss and degradation that threatens to compromise fishery and protected species recovery objectives.

- **Elevated Scrutiny of the Science Supporting Management Decisions:** Effectively executing NOAA Fisheries’ mission requires sound science. In recent years, the demand for more and better science has increased in response to new MSA requirements, marine mammal and fishery interactions, increased petitions to list species under the ESA, anticipated funding for major coastal restoration projects, climate change; and large-scale disasters (e.g., hurricanes and oil spills). Meeting this demand will require a more systematic and collaborative way of identifying and prioritizing science priorities and filling identified gaps.

- **Expectation to Provide Additional Services with Less Resources:** While federal budgets have been declining or flat in recent years, demand for SERO’s services continues to grow. This has created the need to be more effective and efficient through operational improvements, increase internal and external partnerships and collaborations, and make informed, strategic decisions about the most effective application of limited resources.

### 5.0 Regional Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

For the FY16-20 planning period, SERO has identified five strategic goals which are designed to better position the organization to address the issues identified in Section 4.2 and respond to emerging issues. Each goal is of equal importance. There is no significance to the order in which they are presented.

The five goals aim to:

1. Improve SERO’s organizational effectiveness by better aligning SERO budget, people, and information management resources with regional priorities and NOAA Fisheries core mandates.
2. Promote economically vibrant fisheries and communities by better integrating SERO protected resources, habitat, fishery, and aquaculture programs to maximize the benefits of conservation and management initiatives.
3. Improve management of NOAA trust resources by acquiring and applying the best available science.
4. Leverage limited resources in support of organizational priorities by enhancing partnerships and communications.
5. Maximize the benefits of consultation resources by focusing ESA and EFH engagement on projects with the greatest potential conservation impacts.
Each goal encompasses strategic objectives and implementation strategies which will be advanced through NOAA Fisheries’ annual operations plans to include key deliverables and milestones. SERO considers this strategic plan to be a living document and may add or modify objectives and/or strategies as new opportunities and emerging issues arise.

Each implementation strategy identifies the SERO program(s) or staff members with primary responsibility for its implementation. The lead program or staff is identified first. Successfully implementing many of these objectives and strategies also will require the cooperation and participation of our partners which are identified in Appendix 6.4.
Goal 1: Improve SERO’s organizational effectiveness by better aligning budget, personnel, and information resources with regional priorities and NOAA Fisheries’ core mandates

Goal 1 aims to advance organizational excellence by establishing a systematic process to identify and communicate annual priorities, as well as processes and mechanisms to align SERO resources in support of those priorities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective 1.1: Annually, identify and communicate existing and emerging SERO priorities.</th>
<th>Strategy 1.1.1: Establish systematic process to analyze the availability of existing budget, personnel, and information resources and identify gaps in resources relative to NOAA Fisheries’ statutory requirements and core mandates. (who: OMI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 1.1.2: Prioritize identified resource gaps. (who: DIR, OMI, HCD, PRD, SFD)</td>
<td>Strategy 1.1.3: Communicate gaps and annual organizational priorities, both within and outside the organization. (who: DIR, OMI, HCD, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1.2: Better align budget resources with organizational priorities.</td>
<td>Strategy 1.2.1: Explore flexibilities in the budget (i.e., Program, Project, and Activity [PPA]) structure when executing regional program budgets to achieve maximum program effectiveness within legal constraints. (who: OMI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 1.2.2: Explore mechanisms and establish processes if appropriate, to enable SERO to have more meaningful participation in the budget formulation process to generate support for organizational priorities in agency budget requests. (who: OMI, HCD, PRD, SFD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objective 1.3: Use retention, training, succession, and recruitment strategies to plan for employee growth in support of organizational priorities.</td>
<td>Strategy 1.3.1: Annually review and update the SERO strategic workforce plan to ensure it is consistent with organizational priorities identified in Objective 1.1, and communicate with staff about the plan. (who: OMI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 1.3.2: Implement a comprehensive regional training program to address multiple objectives, including developing skills for the occupational series identified in the SERO strategic workforce plan and cross-training staff to perform multiple functions. (who: OMI)</td>
<td>Strategy 1.3.3: Develop programmatic protocols and policies to prepare a SERO workforce response to large-scale disasters (e.g., oil spills, hurricanes). (who: DIR, AQU, COMMS, GoMEC, HCD, NEPA, OMI, PRD, SFD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy 1.3.4: Enhance labor-management relations through the SERO Labor-Management Council and</td>
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</table>
Workplace Improvement Committee. (who: DIR, OMI, SERO Bargaining Unit, SERO Workplace Improvement Committee)

Strategy 1.3.5: Seek maximum recognition for employee accomplishments through execution of regional and national awards policies (e.g., SERO Awards Policy, Employee of the Year, DOC Medal Awards, etc.). (who: DIR, OMI, HCD, PRD, SFD)

Strategy 1.3.6: Develop a regional succession plan to identify key positions that may be vacated within the next five years and strategies for transferring corporate knowledge (e.g., overlap backfills, mentoring and shadowing opportunities, scientific and administrative career ladder progressions). (who: OMI)

Strategy 1.3.7: Explore the potential of creating new Team Leader positions in the SERO organization, consistent with OPM standards, project lead opportunities, and increasing use of Acting designations when supervisors are absent to help distribute workload while enabling staff to develop skills for higher level supervision, management and leadership responsibilities. (who: DIR, OMI, HCD, PRD, SFD)

Strategy 1.3.8: Establish standardized processes for prioritizing recruitment actions consistent with SERO priorities, determining when and how to offer recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives, and evaluating career ladder promotions. (who: OMI)

Objective 1.4: Better utilize existing information management capabilities to meet business needs in support of organizational priorities.

Strategy 1.4.1: Establish a cross-divisional team to identify information management needs and opportunities. (who: OMI)

Strategy 1.4.2: Evaluate the potential applications of existing capabilities to meet the needs identified by the cross-divisional team. (who: OMI)

Strategy 1.4.3: Identify and prioritize information management gaps. (who: DIR, OMI, HCD, PRD, SFD)

Strategy 1.4.4: Broaden or modify the application of existing information management programs, where possible, to address priority gaps. (who: OMI)

Strategy 1.4.5: Evaluate the potential for using cloud-based services for public-facing software applications (e.g., Catch Shares and Permits Online systems) and for select internal applications (e.g., Permits Information Management System). (who: OMI)

Strategy 1.4.6: Evaluate the need for infrastructure changes or upgrades (i.e., network and telephone
services) to better support the needs of the SERO user community. (who: OMI)
**Goal 2:** Promote economically vibrant fisheries and communities by better integrating SERO protected resources, habitat, fishery, and aquaculture programs to maximize the benefits of conservation and management initiatives

Goal 2 promotes enhanced cross-program coordination to leverage resources in support of statutory mandates and organizational priorities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Objective 2.1:</strong> In collaboration with the regional fishery management councils, increase user benefits (e.g., increased quotas, increased fishing days, enhanced fishing opportunities, streamlined reporting processes, consistent state and federal regulations) in Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, or U.S. Caribbean fisheries while sustaining fish stocks, protected resources, and habitats.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.1.1:</strong> In collaboration with the regional fishery management councils, identify and prioritize fisheries with the potential to provide greater user benefits under an alternative management approach. (who: SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.1.2:</strong> Use NOAA Fisheries’ National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy and national and regional action agendas to help identify potential recreational fishing improvements and opportunities. (who: DIR, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.1.3:</strong> Coordinate with the SEFSC to ensure the most up-to-date information is provided to the regional fishery management councils to inform allocation decisions. (who: SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.1.4:</strong> Expand the use of electronic monitoring and/or electronic reporting (EM/ER) for federally-managed fisheries in the Southeast Region by implementing the SERO EM/ER plan. (who: SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.1.5:</strong> In collaboration with NOAA Fisheries’ Finance Program, develop an individual fishing quota finance program for entry level fishermen and fishermen who fish from small vessels. (who: SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.1.6:</strong> Explore and evaluate the potential for stock enhancement as a tool to increase fishing opportunities and recover protected species. (who: AQU, PRD, SFD)</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Objective 2.2:</strong> Demonstrate and increase the benefits of habitat conservation to NOAA Fisheries’ core mandates.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.2.1:</strong> Develop metrics, processes, programs, and visual aids to quantify and report the effectiveness of habitat conservation efforts (e.g., acres/linear feet of various habitat types protected). (who: HCD, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.2.2:</strong> Promote the development of tools that evaluate the ecosystem values of different habitats (e.g., Integrated Ecosystem Assessments, Habitat Equivalency Analyses, Uniform Mitigation Assessment Method) by submitting proposals, participating in workshops, and sponsoring workshops or research as resources permit. (who: GoMEC, HCD, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 2.3: Better integrate and inform consultation processes for managed fisheries.</td>
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</table>
| **Strategy 2.3.1:** Develop standardized criteria to use in identifying for more focused engagement those projects with high potential EFH impacts (e.g., diversions).  
(who: HCD, SFD) |
| **Strategy 2.3.2:** Discuss with regional fishery management councils the need for ESA/MSA Integration Agreements to better integrate fishery management planning processes with ESA Section 7 processes, consistent with the 2015 NOAA Fisheries Policy Directive.  
(who: PRD, SFD) |

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<tr>
<th>Objective 2.4: Maximize conservation gains when developing regulations to reduce bycatch of fish and/or protected species.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Strategy 2.4.1:** In collaboration with the regional fishery management councils, focus new standardized bycatch reporting program efforts and improvements on fisheries with bycatch across a range of species.  
(who: SFD) |
| **Strategy 2.4.2:** Communicate this multispecies bycatch reduction objective to regional fishery management councils, to SERO staff developing new bycatch regulations for protected species and marine mammals, and to SEFSC staff responsible for developing and monitoring fishing gear.  
(who: DIR, PRD, SFD) |
| **Strategy 2.4.3:** Emphasize this multispecies bycatch reduction objective in regional grant program priorities (e.g., MARFIN, CRP, S-K).  
(who: OMI, PRD, SFD) |

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<tr>
<th>Objective 2.5: Apply interagency and interdisciplinary approaches to new protected species conservation initiatives.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Strategy 2.5.1:** Finalize at least one new recovery plan for listed species using a recovery team that has interdisciplinary and interagency expertise to promote improved coordination and information exchange.  
(who: PRD) |
| **Strategy 2.5.2:** Work with federal partners to develop a collaborative agreement to more effectively use their authorities and programs under section 7(a)(1) of the ESA to advance recovery of listed species.  
(who: PRD) |
| **Strategy 2.5.3:** Work with federal, state, and regional partners to develop a collaborative agreement to more effectively use their authorities and programs under section 7(a)(1) of the ESA to advance recovery of listed species.  
(who: PRD) |
partners to develop initiatives and projects to recover marine mammal species effected by the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. (who: PRD)

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Objective 2.6:</strong> Provide opportunities to increase the supply and diversification of seafood through aquaculture in harmony with NOAA Fisheries conservation and management mission.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.6.1:</strong> Fully integrate a comprehensive Gulf of Mexico offshore aquaculture permit review system into the SERO organization. (who: AQU, GoMEC, HCD, NEPA, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.6.2:</strong> Develop and implement interagency guidance documents to promote timely and efficient marine aquaculture permitting processes in state and federal waters. (who: AQU, GoMEC, HCD, NEPA, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.6.3:</strong> Advance the National Shellfish Initiative by fostering regional efforts to advance shellfish aquaculture and restoration. (who: AQU)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy 2.6.4:</strong> Coordinate and communicate with aquaculture stakeholders and partners to identify industry trends, management, and science needs. (who: AQU)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Goal 3: Improve management of NOAA trust resources by acquiring and applying the best available science**

Goal 3 aims to improve the scientific basis for SERO’s conservation and management efforts by establishing a systematic process for collaboratively identifying and communicating SERO’s science priorities within the context of NOAA Fisheries’ core mandates.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Objective 3.1: Annually, and in conjunction with the SEFSC, identify the top five regional science priorities for each program area.</th>
<th>Strategy 3.1.1: Use established processes in the SERO/SEFSC operating agreement to identify joint SERO/SEFSC science priorities. (who: DIR, OMI)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 3.1.2: Incorporate input from existing priority-identification processes (e.g., National Habitat Assessment Workshop; recovery team recommendations; Take Reduction Team recommendations; Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review recommendations; regional fishery management council research recommendations; RESTORE Science Program). (who: DIR, AQU, GoMEC, HCD, OMI, PRD, SFD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy 3.1.3: Distribute a draft science priority list to the SEFSC and partners to gather feedback, and share the final science priority list with the SEFSC and partners for informational purposes. (who: DIR)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 3.2: Identify the capabilities of potential science providers to fulfill science needs.</strong></td>
<td>Strategy 3.2.1: Identify potential science providers to fulfill science needs (e.g., SEFSC, NOS, OAR, regional collaboration teams and alliances, RESTORE Science Program, NOAA Cooperative Institutes, NOAA regional IOOS partners). (who: AQU, GoMEC, HCD, OMI, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 3.2.2: Establish a process, schedule, and mechanism for determining which potential science providers have the capability and capacity to address priority science needs. (who: DIR, AQU, GoMEC, HCD, OMI, PRD, SFD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 3.3: Identify and address at least one priority science gap not addressed by potential science providers.</strong></td>
<td>Strategy 3.3.1: Conduct a gap analysis to identify SERO science priorities not met by science providers. (who: DIR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 3.3.2: Prioritize identified science gaps by program area, ranking higher needs that cross multiple program areas. (who: DIR, AQU, GoMEC, HCD, OMI, PRD, SFD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 3.3.3: Identify the highest priority gaps that can be addressed or closed by SERO. (who: AQU, HCD, OMI, PRD, SFD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy 3.3.4: Address or close gaps with available</td>
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</table>
| Objective 3.4: Make science available to SERO and partners. | Strategy 3.4.1: Establish SERO Reference Committee with representatives from each program to identify audiences, their needs and best tools for accessing, distributing, and sharing new data and information (e.g., SERO Intranet, EndNote, InPort). (who: DIR, OMI)  
Strategy 3.4.2: Develop and distribute guidance for accessing existing information sources (e.g., NOAA library services, SEFSC technical memoranda) and explore opportunities to expand access to journal articles through existing partnerships (e.g., Science Direct). (who: SERO Reference Committee)  
Strategy 3.4.3: Explore how to enhance use of resources available through local marine science institutions (e.g., USF, FWC, FWRI). (who: SERO Reference Committee)  
Strategy 3.4.4: Encourage publication of SERO staff analyses and collaborative scientific research. (who: SERO Supervisors)  
Strategy 3.4.5: Establish rollout strategies for staff analyses and collaborative scientific research when appropriate. (who: DIR) |
|---|---|
|  | Objective 3.5: Incorporate available ecosystem and climate change information into SERO products and analyses (e.g., protected species recovery plans, environmental review documents supporting fishery management actions) to better inform management of trust resources. | Strategy 3.5.1: Establish a SERO committee with representatives from each program to identify and consolidate available ecosystem-based management and climate change guidance into a regional guidance document to be used in preparing relevant SERO work products and analyses. (who: DIR, NEPA)  
Strategy 3.5.2: Explore the potential for developing ecosystem recovery plans (e.g., Southeast and Caribbean coral ecosystems). (who: PRD, HCD, SFD) |
Goal 4: Leverage limited resources in support of organizational priorities by enhancing partnerships and communications

Goal 4 aims to promote public stewardship of NOAA trust resources and increase capacity to achieve organizational priorities.

| Objective 4.1: Increase use of partnerships to help accomplish organizational priorities. | Strategy 4.1.1: Annually, identify for each program area, those activities required to advance organizational priorities that cannot be successfully accomplished without partnerships. (who: AQU, COMMS, GoMEC, HCD, NEPA, OMI, PRD, SFD) |
| Strategy 4.1.2: Develop a plan for building partnerships to accomplish each activity identified in Strategy 4.1.1. (who: AQU, COMMS, GoMEC, HCD, NEPA, OMI, PRD, SFD) |
| Strategy 4.1.3: Annually, review memoranda of understanding and other regional agreements to identify any adjustments that would streamline or enhance the collaboration process. (who: HCD, NEPA, OMI, PRD, SFD) |
| Strategy 4.1.4: Provide leadership and technical expertise to national and regional partnerships, NOAA regional collaboration teams, and regional ocean partnerships (e.g., GOMA, SARP, SECART, CWPPRA) to advance organizational priorities. (who: GoMEC, HCD, PRD, SFD) |

| Objective 4.2: Develop standardized key messages for use in communicating with constituents about SERO’s successes and challenges and enhance understanding of NOAA Fisheries’ mission. | Strategy 4.2.1: Identify and vet through a subset of the target audience short phrases and summaries to communicate the activities and values of SERO and its programs. (who: COMMS, AQU, GoMEC, HCD, OMI, PRD, SFD) |
| Strategy 4.2.2: Annually, identify and communicate the top 2-3 accomplishments of each program area to highlight organizational successes. (who: COMMS, AQU, GoMEC, HCD, OMI, PRD, SFD) |
| Strategy 4.2.3: Establish standardized processes or mechanisms to communicate external messages to staff (e.g., SERO Intranet, Google Drive), partners, and the general public. (who: COMMS) |
| Strategy 4.2.4: Offer at least one media or external...
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<tr>
<th><strong>Objective 4.3:</strong> Increase and enhance community involvement through coordinated SERO participation in education and outreach activities.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy 4.3.1: Identify at least 2 community activities/events in which each program will participate annually to build a dialogue between SERO and the community. (who: COMMS, AQU, GoMEC, HCD, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 4.3.2: Establish a team for each identified activity/event to coordinate organization, responsibilities, and expectations. (who: COMMS)</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Objective 4.4:</strong> Improve internal communication within the SERO organization.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy 4.4.1: Utilize the SERO Workplace Improvement process to help identify and resolve internal communication challenges. (who: COMMS, AQU, GoMEC, DIR, HCD, OMI, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy 4.4.2: Routinely update staff on implementation of the strategic plan and SERO priorities through All-Hands meetings and the SERO Intranet. (who: DIR, HCD, PRD, SFD)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Communication training session annually to train the SERO workforce in the effective delivery of external messages. (who: COMMS)
Goal 5: Maximize the benefits of consultation resources by focusing ESA and EFH engagement on projects with the greatest potential conservation impacts

Goal 5 focuses on streamlining ESA and EFH consultation processes to address workload challenges, improve customer service, and maximize the conservation benefits achieved with limited resources.

| Objective 5.1: Increase early engagement in projects with the greatest potential conservation impacts. | Strategy 5.1.1: On a monthly basis, identify new projects that are led by other federal agencies and that have EFH and protected resources interests. (who: GoMEC, HCD, NEPA, PRD) |
| | Strategy 5.1.2: Annually, recommend to SERO Directorate coordinated engagement in 2-3 projects identified in Strategy 5.1.1 that are determined to have the greatest potential conservation impact. (who: GoMEC, HCD, PRD) |
| | Strategy 5.1.3: Provide joint pre-consultation assistance for 100% of the projects identified in Strategy 5.1.2. (who: GoMEC, HCD, PRD) |

| Objective 5.2: Increase SERO’s level of post-consultation participation in projects with the greatest potential conservation impacts. | Strategy 5.2.1: Annually, recommend to SERO Directorate coordinated post-consultation participation in 1-2 projects identified in Strategy 5.1.1 that are determined to have the greatest potential conservation impact. (who: GoMEC, HCD, PRD) |
| | Strategy 5.2.2: Provide post-consultation assistance for at least 50% of the projects identified in Strategy 5.2.1. (who: HCD, PRD) |
| | Strategy 5.2.3: Document lessons learned in post-consultation implementation to improve future conservation advice. (who: GoMEC, HCD, PRD) |

| Objective 5.3: Reduce the processing time of Section 7 informal consultations. | Strategy 5.3.1: Annually, review and revise as needed the Southeast Region Section 7 Quality Assurance Plan. (who: GoMEC, PRD) |
| | Strategy 5.3.2: Annually, complete at least one programmatic Section 7 consultation. (who: GoMEC, PRD) |
| | Strategy 5.3.3: Within one month of each annual Section 7 program review and each quality assurance audit conducted with NOAA GC, develop written summary of corrective measures to be implemented. |
| Objective 5.4: Increase the efficiency of EFH consultations. | Strategy 5.4.1: Review and develop prioritized list of EFH findings requiring updates. (who: HCD) |
| - | Strategy 5.4.2: Annually, update at least one existing EFH finding. (who: HCD) |
| - | Strategy 5.4.3: Develop at least one new General Concurrence. (who: HCD) |

| Objective 5.5: Consolidate and update, as needed, ESA and EFH technical assistance and consultation guidance. | Strategy 5.5.1: Develop a Regional Compliance Guide for the Southeast Region to assist federal agencies and applicants in understanding ESA and EFH consultation processes and mandates, effects determinations, and Best Management Practices. (who: GoMEC, HCD, NEPA, PRD) |
| - | Strategy 5.5.2: Annually, develop at least one new or updated technical guidance document on mitigation approaches, monitoring, or adaptive management for specific projects or geographic areas (e.g., anadromous fishway prescriptions, coral mitigation). (who: GoMEC, HCD, PRD) |
| - | Strategy 5.5.3: Annually, conduct at least one training program for federal agencies on EFH determinations, appropriate effects determinations, and/or the use of programmatic consultations. (who: HCD, PRD) |
6.0 Appendices
Appendix 6.1: NOAA Mission, Vision, and Planning Documents

6.1.1. Mission and Vision

6.1.1.1. Overview
Through its long-standing mission of science, service, and stewardship, the NOAA generates tremendous value for the nation—and the world—by advancing our understanding of and ability to anticipate changes in the Earth’s environment, by improving society’s ability to make scientifically informed decisions, and by conserving and managing ocean and coastal resources. The mission and vision are articulated in NOAA’s Next Generation Strategic Plan (2010).

6.1.1.2. Mission
NOAA’s mission is one of science, service, and stewardship. The agency seeks to understand and predict changes in climate, weather, oceans and coasts; to share that knowledge and information with others; and to conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources.

NOAA’s mission is central to many of today’s greatest challenges.
- Climate change
- Severe weather
- Natural and human-induced disasters
- Declining biodiversity
- Ocean acidification
- Threatened or degraded ocean and coastal resources

These challenges convey a common message: human health, prosperity and well-being depend upon the health and resilience of coupled natural and social ecosystems. Managing this interdependence requires timely and usable information to make decisions and the science that underpins our knowledge of these systems. NOAA’s mission of science, service, and stewardship is directed to a vision of the future where societies and their ecosystems are healthy and resilient in the face of sudden or prolonged change.

NOAA Fisheries’ mission is the stewardship of living marine resources through science-based conservation and management, and the protection and restoration of healthy ecosystems.

6.1.1.3. Vision
NOAA’s Vision is resilient ecosystems, communities, and economies: healthy ecosystems, communities, and economies that are resilient in the face of change. Resilient ecosystems, communities, and economies can maintain and improve their health and vitality over time by anticipating, absorbing, and diffusing change. This vision of resilience guides NOAA
and its partners in a collective effort to reduce the vulnerability of communities and ecological systems in the short-term, while helping society to avoid or adapt to long-term environmental, social, and economic changes.

NOAA Fisheries’ vision is American people enjoying the riches and benefits of healthy and diverse marine ecosystems.

6.1.2. Strategic Goals and Objectives
There are several layers of Strategic Plans that currently guide NOAA Fisheries:

- Department of Commerce Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2014-2018 (2014) (DoCSP)
- NOAA’s Next – Generation Strategic Plan (2010) (NGSP)
  http://www.ppi.noaa.gov/ngsp/
- NOAA Annual Guidance Memorandum for fiscal year 2015
- NOAA Fisheries Priorities and Annual Guidance for fiscal year 2015

6.1.2.1. Department of Commerce Strategic Plan (2014)

NOAA is located within the Department of Commerce. The Department is comprised of 12 bureaus that work in five key areas:

- Trade and investment
- Innovation
- Environment
- Data
- Operational excellence

NOAA furthers the Department’s mission with strong stewardship of the ocean’s resources which contribute more than $250 billion annually to the Nation’s economy. (2014)

Specifically tied to the NOAA mission in the Department of Commerce Strategic Plan (2014) is the following goal, objective, and key strategies:

Strategic Goal 3:
*Ensure communities and businesses have the necessary information, products, and services to prepare for and prosper in a changing environment.*

Strategic Objective 3.4
*Foster healthy and sustainable marine resources, habitats, and ecosystems through improved management and partnerships (NOAA)*

Key Strategies for 3.4
• **Strengthen capabilities to assess and monitor fish and protected resources (NOAA)**

Ensuring sustainable populations of living marine resources is a key Departmental mandate. NOAA will increase the precision of stock assessments, performing more robust monitoring, and applying ecosystem-based management to ensure healthy, sustainable populations of living marine resources. NOAA will incorporate integrated biological, physical, and chemical data and ecosystem modeling into fish stock and protected species assessments. NOAA will also produce more advanced technologies for monitoring of living marine resources and ecosystems.

• **Improve recovery of listed species through innovative partnerships (NOAA)**

International, federal, state, local, tribal, and nongovernmental organizations play a role in conservation. NOAA will strengthen partnerships with these stakeholder groups to ensure greater collaboration toward the recovery and conservation of protected species in marine and coastal ecosystems. Greater collaboration will improve the development and implementation of effective recovery and conservation plans for marine mammals and endangered and threatened species.

• **Enhance place-based conservation (NOAA)**

Through its coastal management and place-based conservation programs, NOAA will expand protections at current sites, add protections at new sites, and work with public and private partners. This place-based approach will preserve the economic and environmental benefits of these special places to local communities. NOAA will implement efforts such as the Habitat Blueprint framework, which employs partnerships to improve habitat conditions for fisheries, and coastal and marine life, to achieve economic, cultural, and environmental benefits.

**6.1.2.2. NOAA’s Next Generation Strategic Plan (NGSP)**

The Next Generation Strategic Plan (2010) (NGSP) conveys NOAA’s mission and future vision, as well as the road map for achieving the vision as laid out through the long term goals, and objectives. With the release in 2010 of the Plan and Executive Summary and in the 2013 Addendum, Dr. Kathy Sullivan, Acting Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, called on NOAA to focus on the following areas:

- **Climate:** Through collaborative strategies, continue to advance the observations, modeling, and research necessary to understand climate change and its impacts; and transition mature climate science into regular, reliable, and relevant information services.
- **Weather:** NOAA will build a “Weather-ready” nation by preserving and improving its ability to provide timely and accurate forecasts and warnings for the protection of life and property through science,
technology, infrastructure improvements, and collaborative efforts with partners.

- **Oceans:** NOAA will advance our efforts to ensure the long-term sustainability of marine fisheries and recovery of protected species and their habitats.
- **Coasts:** NOAA will deliver integrated data, information, products, and services needed to support resilient coastal communities and economies.
- **Science and Technology:** NOAA will focus on developing systems-level understanding of ecosystems and phenomena—across missions and disciplines—with the goal of increasing the resilience of ecosystems, economies, and communities.
- **Engagement:** NOAA will expand efforts to listen and respond to our customers' and stakeholders' concerns and better relate NOAA mission responsibilities and activities to those concerns.
- **Organization and Administration:** NOAA will further capitalize on recent initiatives to cut costs and improve effectiveness.

As one of five line offices in NOAA, NOAA Fisheries' mission is most closely tied to the objectives for the Healthy Oceans goal:

**Healthy Oceans:** *Marine fisheries, habitats, and biodiversity sustained within healthy and productive ecosystems*

Healthy Ocean's goal is to ensure that ocean, estuarine, and related ecosystems- and the NOAA trust resources that inhabit them- are resilient and sustainable in the face of increasing threats and changing conditions. A sound understanding of these ecosystems, communication of this knowledge to decision makers and stakeholders, and the capacity and resources to support key NOAA programs are critical to fulfilling this goal (Draft Goal Implementation Plan, 2012).

The **Strategic objectives** of this Goal are:

- Improved understanding of ecosystems to inform resource management decisions.
- Recovered and healthy marine and coastal species.
- Healthy habitats that sustain resilient and thriving marine resources and communities.
- Sustainable fisheries and safe seafood for healthy populations and vibrant communities.

### 6.1.2.3. NOAA Annual Guidance Memorandum for FY 2015

The purpose of the Annual Guidance Memorandum (AGM) is to focus the agency’s corporate attention on near-term execution challenges and a balanced implementation of NOAA’s strategy across mission areas given our mandates, stakeholder priorities, and the fiscal outlook. The AGM for FY15 outlines four priority areas. NOAA Fisheries’ work primarily supports
two of these priorities: “provide information and services to make communities more resilient,” and “achieve organizational excellence.”

Within these priorities, NOAA Fisheries-led Focus Areas for FY15 are:
- Implement the next generation stock assessment framework for NOAA-managed fish stocks and promote advancements in monitoring and data collection activities.
- Make measurable progress on recovering protected species.

6.1.2.4. NOAA Fisheries Priorities and Annual Guidance for 2015
This document provides guidance to all NOAA Fisheries employees in executing our mission responsibilities by establishing a framework for development of FY15 priority milestones. These priorities consider the core mission functions in context of current fiscal conditions. For FY2015 the focus remains on the two core mandates:
- Ensure the productivity and sustainability of fisheries and fishing communities through science-based decision-making and compliance with regulations.
- Recover and conserve protected resources through the use of sound natural and social sciences.

All other NOAA Fisheries programs, projects, and investments (including science and technology, habitat conservation, enforcement, international affairs, and aquaculture) should be designed and conducted in a manner that supports these two core mandates and in the long run makes communities more resilient.
Appendix 6.2: Southeast Regional Office Organizational Structure

**SERO Directorate**
The SERO Directorate includes the Regional Administrator and Deputy Regional Administrator, as well as staff overseeing regional communications, outreach, and education, NEPA compliance, and the Aquaculture and GoMEC programs.

The region’s Aquaculture Program works with agency staff, partners, and industry to foster sustainable aquaculture that will create employment and business opportunities in coastal communities, and provide safe, sustainable seafood, while maintaining healthy and productive marine populations, species, and ecosystems, consistent with the NOAA and Department of Commerce national aquaculture policies.

Recently established in 2013, the region’s GoMEC program is responsible for helping SERO to prepare for, coordinate and manage the increasing ESA and EFH consultation workload associated with numerous, large-scale coastal restoration projects funded by the RESTORE Act and by Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Clean Water Act settlement agreements related to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. These include projects funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation through the Gulf Environmental Benefits Fund. Many additional restoration projects will be funded by the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act, beginning in FY17. The program provides intra-NOAA coordination, as well as improved engagement and consultation processes across multiple federal, state, and local jurisdictions throughout the Gulf, ensuring more effective and efficient environmental compliance, better tracking of cumulative and synergistic effects of individual restoration actions, and a more comprehensive approach to Gulf ecosystem restoration.

All other SERO programs are managed under four divisions:
1. Habitat Conservation
2. Operations, Management and Information Services
3. Protected Resources
4. Sustainable Fisheries

**Habitat Conservation Division**
The health and extent of coastal and marine habitats are fundamental to the economic viability of commercial and recreational fisheries; coastal community resiliency; and regional commerce, tourism, and energy sectors. Under the auspices of the MSA, Federal Power Act, and Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, SERO’s HCD engages with citizens, businesses, and state and federal agencies to consult on activities that may impact these important aquatic habitats to ensure a balanced approach to the development, use, and conservation of NOAA trust resources. HCD supports the agency’s core missions of sustaining fisheries and recovering protected species through activities such as restoring fish passage and opening rivers for migrating fish, rebuilding coastal wetlands,
promoting the use of living shorelines, and encouraging the beneficial use of dredged sediments to restore coastal habitats.

**Operations, Management, and Information Services Division**
SERO’s OMI provides support for strategic and annual operations planning; budget formulation and execution; grants management; contracts management; human resources management (including Equal Employment Opportunity and diversity); information management and record-keeping; information technology, e-mail, and telecommunications systems. OMI issues Federal Fishing Permits and provides support for environmental compliance, safety, security, and facilities management. OMI conducts analyses and advises the Regional Administrator regarding operational issues, workforce plans, performance management, and awards. Other major functions include procurement, payments, publication services, government vehicles, travel, mail, and all other administrative services in support of SERO employees.

**Sustainable Fisheries Division**
Under the authority of the MSA, SERO’s SFD works with the South Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Fishery Management Councils to conserve and manage the largest recreational fisheries and the second largest (by volume) commercial fisheries in U.S. federal waters. SFD’s goal is to increase long-term economic and social benefits to the nation from living marine resources. With partners, and through 19 fishery management plans, SFD manages hundreds of fish and invertebrate species, ranging from diverse, relatively sedentary and vulnerable coral reef fish, like the popular snappers and groupers, to wide ranging pelagic species, like mackerel and mahi mahi (dolphin). These species support over 84,000 commercial fishermen and others employed in related industries, as well as more than 10 million recreational anglers.

**Protected Resources Division**
Through implementation of the MMPA and ESA, SERO's PRD manages marine mammals, and endangered and threatened species, including but not limited to corals, sea turtles, sawfish, sturgeon, right whales, bottlenose dolphins and many other species of concern. PRD is made up of four branches: Marine Mammal, Species Conservation, Sea Turtles and Fisheries, and Interagency Cooperation. Through policy, management, and public outreach, PRD strives to ensure the recovery and survival of protected marine species for future generations.
Appendix 6.3: Regional Outreach and Education

SERO is committed to providing information about its activities and about the ocean in a clear and timely manner. Through its stakeholder engagement, we strive to:

- Provide clear and accessible information about regulatory requirements established by SERO.
- Improve and increase dialogue and feedback mechanisms among the general public, stakeholders, and SERO.
- Improve customer service and stakeholder satisfaction with agency interactions.
- Increase public and internal knowledge of NOAA Fisheries programs and messages.
- Improve collaboration and teamwork among NOAA Fisheries workforce, Councils, and other partner organizations.
- Integrate regional communications program with NOAA Fisheries national communication campaigns as appropriate.

SERO, in partnership with other NOAA offices, provides information to the public and stakeholders through a variety of channels. Information about our programs, regional activities, conservation messages, regulatory requirements and updates, and living marine resources is available through:

- Reports to the regional fishery management councils and interstate marine fisheries commissions about our activities.
- SERO web site with information on specific regulations and requirements and matters of general interest.
- Person to person communications from SERO staff and port agents.
- Public hearings on proposed regulations.
- "Town hall" style meetings on select topics.
- Letters to fishing permit holders.
- Press releases, media stories, social media, and other creative media interactions (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, iPhone on-camera interviews, etc.).
- Federal Register notices informing of regulations.
- Fishery Bulletins.
- Announcement of regulations through Vessel Monitoring Systems.
- Announcements through text alert system.
- NOAA Weather Radio and U.S. Coast Guard bulletins.
- Fact sheets and educational materials (pamphlets, cards, compliance guides, kids’ activity guides, etc.).
- Presentations to school groups or participation in formal or informal education events (e.g. science fair judging, Skype sessions between scientists and students, career day presentations, presentations at continuing education venues and colleges, participation in the annual St. Petersburg Science Festival and Right Whale Festival, Marine Resources Education Program, etc.).
Support of K-12 environmental education through the Gulf of Mexico Bay-Watershed Education and Training Program.

Presentations at professional conferences.

Public and community events, workshops, and messaging (e.g. boat and fishing shows; banners, signs, and billboards; meetings of fishermen, etc.).

SERO Brown Bag Lecture Series.

Ways a member of the public can provide information to SERO include:

- Commenting during public sessions at regional fishery management council meetings.
- Participating in teleconferences to update stakeholders on management issues (e.g., recreational fishing for red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico).
- Commenting during SERO public hearings, town halls, or public educational events.
- Tweeting a question via @NOAAFish_SERO.
- Writing a letter to SERO at any time.
- Calling SERO staff at any time during working hours.
- Responding in writing to a solicitation for information in a Federal Register notice.
- Sending an email to relevant staff or to SERO feedback email address found on our website or in announcements seeking comments.
- Asking for an appointment to meet a staff member.
- Visiting any port agent office.
Appendix 6.4: Regional Partners

Aquaculture industry
Commercial fishing industry
Conservation groups
Educational institutions
Interstate marine fisheries commissions
Local communities, city and town governments
NOAA Fisheries Headquarters
NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center
NOAA Office of General Counsel
Non-Governmental Organizations
Other NOAA Line Offices, including National Ocean Service, Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (including Sea Grant) and National Weather Service
Recreational fishing interests
Regional fishery management councils
Regional ocean partnership programs
State agencies
Take Reduction Teams