

**S-FFMC Menhaden Advisory Committee Minutes  
Webinar**

Tuesday, March 2, 2021

APPROVED BY:

  
COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

For Peter H.  
Virtual

**Chairman Himchak** called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. with the following in attendance via Webinar:

**Members**

Peter Himchak, Omega Protein, Tuckerton, NJ  
Jason Adriance, LDWF, New Orleans, LA  
Ben Landry, Menhaden Advisory Council for the Gulf of Mexico, Abbeville, LA  
Ray Mroch, NOAA Beaufort Lab, Beaufort, NC  
Trevor Moncrief, MDMR, Biloxi, MS  
Scott Herbert, Daybrook Fisheries, New Orleans, LA  
John Mareska, ADCNR/MRD, Dauphin Island, AL  
Francois Kuttel, Westbank Fishing, LLC, Empire, LA  
Chris Swanson, FWC, St. Petersburg, FL  
Carey Gelpi, TPWD, Port Arthur, TX

**Others**

Jason Saucier, MDMR, Biloxi, MS  
Ryan Bradley, MS Commercial Fisheries United, Biloxi, MS  
Joe Smith, Ex officio, NMFS Beaufort Lab  
David Cresson Exec Direct Coastal Conservation Louisiana  
Amy Schueller, NOAA Beaufort Lab, Beaufort, NC  
Benson Chiles, Chiles Consulting LLC, Atlantic Highlands, NJ  
Ed Swindell, Marine Process Services, Hammond, LA  
Marin Hawk, Marine Stewardship Council, Washington, D.C.  
Catherine Wilhelm, USM, Ocean Springs, MS  
Chad Hansen, PEW Charitable Trust, Crawfordville, FL  
Robert Leaf, USM GCRL, Ocean Springs, MS  
Chad Corville, Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, Lafayette, LA

**Staff**

David Donaldson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS  
Steve VanderKooy, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS  
Debbie McIntyre, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS

**Introductions**

**Himchak** welcomed everyone and **Donaldson** thanked the members for their participation on this committee. **VanderKooy** reminded everyone that the presentations from this meeting and the session to follow will be available on the GSMFC's homepage and YouTube channel at [Menhaden Advisory Committee - YouTube](#)

**Adoption of Agenda/Minutes**

**Himchak** reviewed the agenda and added Robert Leaf for an update on his project, SCMFIS. *The agenda*

was approved with changes, on motion by **Mroch** and second by **Adriance**.

The minutes from the last virtual meeting on September 24, 2020 were reviewed. **Landry** moved to accept the minutes and with a second by **Mroch**, the minutes were approved.

#### Election of Chair (deferred from Fall meeting)

**VanderKooy** explained the process of chair appointment rotation. Mississippi was next in rotation, and, **Moncrief**, proxy for Matt Hill, agreed to chair. **Mareska** made a motion which was seconded by **Adriance** and the motion passed. **Moncrief** will serve as chair for this year until the end of the October meeting 2021.

#### Review of 2020 Gulf Menhaden Season 2021 Forecast

**Mroch** provided a review of the 2020 Gulf fishing season. Nominal fishing effort has been in steady decline since the 1950s but the landings have generally remained between 400,000 and 600,000 mt since about 2000. In 2020, the three plants fished 33 vessels; 28 regular boats and 5 run boats. Last year's season was marked by an unprecedented hurricane season and of course the pandemic. The year 2020 started with a warm wet winter, wetter than average spring followed by six tropical systems which affected fishing in late July through September with September having the lowest monthly landings since 2008. As a result, there was a total of 265,200 vessel-ton-weeks in 2020 which was a decrease of 13.6% from 2019. The final landings were 413,855 mt which was a 15% decrease from 2019 and a 17% decrease from the 5-yr average. Due to ageing equipment failures, the Beaufort Lab has finally caught up on the 2018 and 2019 port sample ageing and has begun on the 2020 samples. They should have everything aged in time for the assessment coming up this summer. **Mroch** reviewed the 2020 forecast which was provided last spring and noted that the final landings were 4.6% lower than his original estimate but once truthed to the 2020 effort, the hindcast predicted landings should have been only 399,000 mt but the final landings were higher by 3.7% suggesting that fishing was better when the fleet could get out. **Mroch** forecasts that with similar effort and conditions in 2021 as 2020, the landings this coming season should be around 424,500 mt.

**Mroch** anticipates that port sampling will be smoother this year despite continuing limitations on travel. There will be a new sampler for Abbeville but they will move to electronic training as **Mroch** will not be allowed to travel to the Gulf on his normal supply run again. In fact, NOAA has cancelled travel for the rest of the year. The Beaufort lab has purchased and received the electronic measuring boards and tablets for the port samplers but training on the equipment will have to be done via webinar/videoconferencing. The new boards should improve the precision and reduce potential errors with paper recording and key entry of the port sample data.

**Landry** inquired about the inaccuracy of the forecast from last season and how it may affect the 2021 forecast. **Mroch** said that weather is not taken into consideration when the forecast is made and the estimate by the hurricane center is not available before the March meeting. Other groups do forecast but **Mroch** said that he did not think he could use that to influence the forecast for the year. **Landry** asked if **Mroch** could add a column in the age comp table to include age-3 fish in the landings. **Mroch** will do so. **Himchak** asked about the 80% confidence interval provided in **Mroch**'s presentation related to the 2021 forecast. **Mroch** explained that the interval represents the residuals around our observed values which the model is estimating and comparing the estimate to the observed. It is based on all the forecasts and the actual landings back to the 1970s.

**Leaf** suggested that maybe a better effort estimation, which could be provided by the industry, could help with forecasting. **Schueller** noted that the point estimate in the forecast has historically been within about 5% and accounting for potential weather may not improve the point estimate itself. What is the industry looking for as far as accuracy if 5% is not close enough? **Landry** responded that with a 20% confidence interval on either side of the estimate, the forecast says to him that this could be the worst fishing year ever or best ever. In terms of accuracy, it is just a luck of the draw according to weather. Prior to the season, the industry could reach out to **Mroch** and indicate if they thought they might be planning to fish more or less in the coming season which would allow the forecast to be more precise.

**Mroch** will work on a more precise report. **Kuttel** suggested looking at vessel ton weeks in January and February. **Smith** stated that 12-15 years ago industry asked that they look at a different unit than vessel ton weeks. They did look at other options at the time, three different units. There was not much difference than vessel ton weeks. Other labs have looked at other options as well. There is a paper out there including an analysis. Perhaps in one of the assessments. '05 maybe? **VanderKooy** also suggested a matrix indicating forecast keeping in mind weather forecast. **Smith** suggested that the history of the forecast was based on work done by Vaughan and Hanson back in the 1980s. **Smith** could provide that publication if anyone was interested. **VanderKooy** would then distribute to the MAC.

#### **Update on the Atlantic Menhaden Fishery**

In the Atlantic, **Mroch** reported that there was one factory on the Atlantic Coast at Reedville. The Atlantic TAC was raised 216,000 mt which left 152,000 mt roughly for reduction but the fleet only landed 124,600 mt in 2020 which was a decrease of 17% from the previous year and over 10% decrease from the five-year average. Omega Protein operated 10 vessels and one Virginia snapper boat did unload at Omega. Additionally, one VA snapper boat and two purse boats landed menhaden as bait. 2020 was the fifth year in a row of large menhaden landings in Northeast so an 'episodic event' was declared for bait and NY, NJ, RI, MA, and ME all participated. The east coast saw a lot of 'near miss' tropical systems in 2020 which resulted in lower effort generally. Port samples from the east coast were still being caught up due to the equipment failures the Beaufort Lab had experienced prior to the pandemic but they are getting the ages finished. Based on the 2014 benchmark assessment, the coastwide TAC has been increasing almost annually. The AMMB voted to reduce the TAC by 10% for 2021 and 2022 after completion of the 2019 benchmark which includes both a single species and multi-species assessment. That leaves 136,000 mt available for reduction in 2021.

#### **Updated Indices of Abundance (IOA) from Louisiana fishery-independent sampling**

**Adriance** explained that LA does not do a forecast anymore. **Adriance** provided the updated IOA for menhaden in LA waters, sampling locations for seine, trawl, and gillnet were displayed and catch in each for 2020. In general, the IOA remain stable if not slightly increasing with the gillnet index increasing substantially. **Landry** asked if **Adriance** sees any alarming trends currently. **Adriance** responded that no, nothing that he sees. **Mareska** asked if the increasing gillnet index is due to the continuing decrease of coast and increasing open water. Louisiana's coastal land loss is definitely a problem and it may be possible that as the coast opens up menhaden may stay inshore longer before heading offshore, however there is no data to point to this as being the case yet and as such that it is reflected in the gillnet index.

### GDAR Gulf Menhaden Stock Assessment Update

**VanderKooy** provided the timeline that he and **Schueller** have come up with for the assessment update this summer. It begins with the states getting their data by June 1 to **Schueller**. Once the data is cleaned up a bit, we will schedule a few conference calls to go over the updated data and prepare for a base run of the assessment. It is hoped that the assessment will be ready for an in-person MAC meeting in October. **Landry** asked who else will populate assessment team. It will be the state reps, **Mroch** and **Schueller** and likely **Leaf** although an ASPIC model run will not probably take place. **Swanson** asked if O'Hop was on that team. O'Hop was because he was the Florida rep and Behzad had been before that so **Swanson** would be on the team by default. **VanderKooy** reminded that the assessment should have a 2020 terminal year so the states FID will need to be completed by the June deadline. The port samples should be completed by that time. **VanderKooy** asked about the state representatives' ability to meet the deadline.

**Mareska** stated that Alabama has gill net ageing info that can be used. **Schueller** is willing to discuss this since we used them in the sensitivity run. **Leaf** had provided that data from LA, MS, and AL the last time. This will be an update not a benchmark. **Moncrief** stated that they are not doing ageing in MS.

**Schueller** stated that all the FID from the states should be submitted exactly as it was last time if at all possible. This will simplify the process.

**VanderKooy** said that he would like to have an actual meeting in October if at all possible.

### Reference Points, Harvest Control Rule (HCR) Development, and Marine Stewardship Certification of Gulf Menhaden

**VanderKooy** referred back to the previous HCR work that had been done by Doug Butterworth and others and the stakeholder input meetings the Commission held working to develop a HCR. Since the pandemic, that effort has not moved forward much. He also pointed out that Dave Chagaris and company are doing some work that we may or may not be able to use in the assessment from their ecosystem modeling. **Schueller** will touch base with Chagaris to see if there has been any progress and anything to potentially include.

**Himchak** provided a little more info on the HCR. He explained that the Year one Client Action Plan is due April 22nd for the Gulf MSC certification. **Himchak** has had to reconstruct the meetings and documents that go back through January of 2019 which started with the first stakeholder meeting in January 2019. The MAC held a conference call in January of 2020 to proposed projects for IJF funding and requested prioritizing a digital data portal to operationalize Butterworth's algorithm. **Leaf** had provided a full proposal to develop that. Then the money went directly to the states from the Commission and the opportunity was lost for that particular data portal that was essential to moving forward with the HCR work that was started by Butterworth. We now have to figure out some kind of funding mechanism now to move forward but that has brought the process to a halt. **Himchak** noted concern that the states seemed to view the MSC certification as a 'marketing tool' and not applicable for management. He suggests a conference call with the states to address the importance of the portal project and find a way to fund it. **VanderKooy** explained that the way the IJF funds are allocated now, the state agencies can determine what their priority needs are in their own state. They could still fund the project but it would be up to the industry to petition them and show them the value of the portal for management. The issue with the term 'marketing tool' is that MSC must be convinced that a fishery is sustainable and the states

know that it is currently. Therefore, certification is not really needed other than to allow sale of product to buyers wanting the MSC proof. That is why the agencies have not seen a need to make changes in the current management and continue to operate as status quo.

#### **Update on NOAA Bycatch Steering Committee**

**Kuttel** discussed the *Developing Methods to Observe Sea Turtle Interactions in the Gulf of Mexico Menhaden Purse Seine Fishery* project. He stated that there have been five meetings of the steering committee so far. The committee is still trying to settle on how they are going to observe the boats' activity efficiently. At this point, the committee will take two or three NOAA reps out on an alternative platform so that they can view fishing activities for a week or so to determine the best way to locate cameras to observe pumping activities as well as at the potential use of drones. NOAA is working through some regulations and policies that they have to see when they would be able to travel if they get an alternative platform and whether they would be able to move from that alternative platform onto the steamers or purse boats to make direct observations. **Kuttel** has offered an ex-Coast Guard boat, owned by West Bank Fishing, to be used to start as the alternative platform.

#### **Other Business**

##### **SCEMFIS Funded Project**

**Leaf** reported that they have received money from SCEMFIS to use the archived mark/recapture data they have digitized from work done by Dean Ahrenholz to estimate Gulf Menhaden total mortality rates for the stock from 1977-1987. Preliminary work will be available and a report will be available for the April SCEMFIS meeting. This is one of the high priorities from the last assessment.

**VanderKooy** reminded that the next meeting of the MAC should be in Florida this coming October if everyone is able to travel. We will provide details later this summer once we know the COVID situation.

**Landry** noted that it was a real pleasure having **Smith** on the webinar and nice to hear from him again. It was agreed by all that it was great to see him and hoped he continues to do well in his retirement.

With no other business, the webinar adjourned at 10:55 a.m., on *motion by **Adriance** and second by **Mroch***.