

**TECHNICAL COORDINATING COMMITTEE
MINUTES
Wednesday March 17, 2021
Webinar**

Chairman Darin Topping called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. The following members, staff, and others were present:

Members

Jason Froeba, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Dan Ellinor, FWC, Tallahassee, FL
Rick Burris, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Matt Hill, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Christopher Mace, TPWD, Rockport, TX
John Mareska, ADCNR/MRD, Dauphin Island, AL
Darin Topping, TPWD, Rockport, TX
Chris Denson, ADCNR/MRD, Gulf Shores, AL
Glenn Constant, USFWS, Baton Rouge, LA
Beverly Sauls, FWC/FWRI, St. Petersburg, FL
Patrick Banks, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Clay Porch, NOAA, Miami, FL

Staff

Charlie Robertson, GSMFC, Fisheries Restoration Coordinator, Ocean Springs, MS
James Ballard, GSMFC, Sport Fish/Aquatic Invasives Coordinator, Ocean Springs, MS
Donna Bellais, GSMFC, ComFIN Programmer, Ocean Springs, MS
Joe Ferrer, GSMFC, Systems Administrator, Ocean Springs, MS
Ali Wilhelm, GSMFC, Sport Fish/Aquatic Invasives Staff Assistant, Ocean Springs, MS
Jeff Rester, Habitat & SEAMAP Coordinator, Ocean Springs, MS
Dave Donaldson, GSMFC, Executive Director, Ocean Springs, MS
Steve VanderKooy, GSMFC, IJF/Aquaculture Coordinator, Ocean Springs, MS
Gregg Bray, GSMFC, FIN Data Program Manager, Ocean Springs, MS
Nancy Marcellus, GSMFC, Administrative Officer, Ocean Springs, MS
Debbie McIntyre, GSMFC, IJF Staff Assistant, Ocean Springs, MS
Deanna Valentine, GSMFC, FIN Scanning Specialist, Ocean Springs, MS

Others

Tershara Matthews, BOEM, New Orleans, LA
Jamie Reinhardt, NOAA, Silver Spring, MD
Andy Strelcheck, NOAA, St. Petersburg, FL
Jason Saucier, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Marcus Drymon, MSU, Biloxi, MS
Laura Picariello, TX Sea Grant, Corpus Christi, TX
Ashford Rosenberg, GoM Reef Fish Shareholder's Alliance, New Orleans, LA
Jill Hendon, USM/GCRL, Ocean Springs, MS
Trevor Moncrief, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Oscar Ayala, FWC/FWRI, St. Petersburg, FL

Alan Lowther, NOAA, Miami, FL
Jeremy Timbs, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Becky Allee, NOAA, Stennis Space Center, MS
Ed Swindell, GMFMC Member, Hammond, LA
Scott Bannon, ADCNR/MRD, Dauphin Island, AL
Mariana Steen, BOEM, New Orleans, LA
Jill Hendon, USM/GCRL, Ocean Springs, MS
Chad Hanson, The Pew Charitable Trusts
Lee Benaka, NOAA, Silver Spring, MD
Wade Hardy, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Jeff Pulver, NOAA, St. Petersburg, FL
Derek Orner, NMFS, Silver Spring, MD
Julien Lartigue, NOAA, Ocean Springs, MS
Jason Adriance, LDWF, New Orleans, LA
Amy Piko, NOAA, St. Petersburg, FL
Kevin Anson, ADCNR/MRD, Dauphin Island, AL
Lucas Pensinger, FWC/FWRI, St. Petersburg, FL
Jen Cudney, Public, Columbus, OH
Scott Friedman, Industrial Economics, Inc., Boston, MA
Jen Weaver, Research Planning, Inc.
Pam Latham, Research Planning, Inc., Tallahassee, FL
Greta Helmueller, Industrial Economics, Inc., Boston, MA
Angelina Guiducci, Public, Boston, MA
John Walter, NOAA

Adoption of Agenda

Patrick Banks moved and it was seconded by Dan Ellinor to adopt the agenda. Motion carried unanimously.

Approval of Minutes

John Mareska moved and it was seconded by Patrick Banks to approve the minutes as written for the October 14, 2020 meeting. Motion carried unanimously.

Overview of Renewable Wind Energy in the Gulf of Mexico

Tershara Matthews, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), presented general information on the current status of renewable wind energy in the Gulf of Mexico (GoM). She stated that BOEM published two studies in 2020, which kicked off interest for renewable wind energy in the GoM. Subsequently, a Task Force Request Letter was sent to BOEM by Louisiana Governor Edwards to establish a Task Force (TF). The TF was created and includes all Gulf states except Florida, which is already part of the Atlantic Task Force. The purpose of the TF is to serve as an information exchange to facilitate coordination and consultation related to renewable energy planning activities in the GoM. The TF will soon begin developing an agenda for the first task force meeting which will take place on June 15, 2021. After the kick-off meeting, a Call for Information (CFI) will be published on June 25, 2021, followed by a 45-day public comment period ending on August 11, 2021. The CFI will include western and central Gulf planning areas, which extend across TX, LA, MS, AL, and the FL panhandle. Next, BOEM will send an Area Identification memo to Task Force members, then distribute it to the public for comments. Members of the public will also be able to provide input on the public leasing notice,

proposed cell notice, and final cell notice. The next steps related to leasing processes in the GoM are analyzing wind energy areas (WEAs), drafting an area identification memo, determining location of WEAs, environmental assessment, identifying lease areas and publishing Proposed Sale Notice, and a lease sale to take place in 2022.

DWH Fish and Water Column Invertebrate Strategy Planning

Jamie Reinhardt presented information on the DWH strategic planning processes that will take place in 2021. Approximately \$320 million are available for future fish and water column invertebrates planning activities and restoration projects. This year, the DWH planning team intends to collect information from stakeholders, establish objective and prioritization processes, develop objectives and priorities, communicate, and implement restoration planning monitoring and evaluation. The Subcommittee engaged in an interactive discussion to provide feedback on restoration priorities across the Gulf. The TCC provided their input on priorities and scope of restoration projects for different regions of the Gulf. Some priorities discussed by the group included vulnerability of species, overfishing/overfished, data poor stocks, prioritizing regional and Gulf-wide restoration efforts, climate change, red tide, bycatch, and habitat loss. Any further comments from the Subcommittee can be sent to openocean.TIG@noaa.gov.

Results from the Great Red Snapper Count

Marcus Drymon updated the TCC on the results of the Great Red Snapper Count (GRSC). He explained the objective of this project was to estimate absolute abundance of age 2+ Red Snapper (*Lutjanus campechanus*) in the US Gulf of Mexico (GoM). Results of the effort were classified by habitat types and ecological regions, which were coincidentally very closely matched with state lines. Much of the data collected relied on visual counts, in addition to tagging and bioacoustics. Estimated number of age 2+ Red Snapper by state were 24.1 million for TX, 32.5 million for LA, 12.8 million for MS/AL, and 48.7 million for FL. The total abundance estimate for the GoM is 110 million fish, which is roughly three times higher than the biomass predicted by NOAA Fisheries. However, it is important to recognize these findings do not contradict NOAA's assessment, but, rather supplement it. The official project press release will go out on March 24, 2021 and the GRSC will be reviewed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council SSC March 30 – April 2, 2021.

Following his presentation, the TCC briefly discussed how the results of the GRSC will be incorporated into future stock assessments. **John Walter** followed up that the results of this study bring the scale up for future stock assessments and allows determination of a relative indices which means such a large-scale survey could be done on a less frequent basis to inform stock assessments. **Clay Porch** added that these surveys are very expensive for one year of data for one species and stakeholders need to keep this in mind if they want this type of information.

Discussion: IJF Research Funding

Steve VanderKooy presented an overview of funding amounts from last year's IJF small grants and gave a preview of the upcoming year's funding amounts. He explained this is an annual funding source and projects are considered 1-year projects related to IJ species; however, projects may be continued in subsequent years. This funding opportunity allows states to determine priorities and data gaps as they relate to their respective goals. Total funding available for 2021 IJF research projects was \$1.4 million, which provided \$280,000 per state. Currently, there is a total of \$974,800 available for 2022 IJF research projects, which amounts to \$194,960 per state. Several states asked whether the funds could be extended past the December 31, 2021 expenditures deadline due to delays related to COVID-19 and

staffing. Steve explained these would be considered on a case-by-case basis, but should be justifiable.

Discussion/Approval: SEAMAP 2021-2025 Management Plan

Jeff Rester stated the SEAMAP 2021-2025 Management Plan was reviewed at the October 2020 TCC meeting at which time the TCC directed staff to take the Management Plan back to the Caribbean and South Atlantic SEAMAP components to remove appendices that were specific to their regions and bring it back to the TCC at the next meeting. Members were sent the amended version of the Management Plan via email several weeks before the March meeting for them to review the edits that had been made based on their direction. The TCC decided to proceed with the following action.

John Mareska moved and it was seconded by Chris Mace to approve the SEAMAP 2021-2025 Management Plan.

The SEAMAP 2021-2025 Management Plan will move to the full Commission for their approval at their earliest convenience.

Subcommittee Reports

Crab

Jason Saucier reported the primary focus of this session was to interact with the Diamondback Terrapin Work Group (DTWG) and share the status of research for crabs and terrapins. Members of the DTWG updated the Subcommittee on activities related to terrapins, while the Subcommittee members provided their own information related to crabbing efforts, bycatch, and TEDs. The two groups will try to meet again in the future.

Derelict crab trap recovery programs were also covered where representatives from each of the Gulf states discussed their respective programs and how they may have been affected as a result of COVID. Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas all held recent cleanups for crab traps, while Alabama has not yet held one and Florida has gone to an every-other-year schedule switching between east and west coasts. The Subcommittee will explore updating the 2001 White Paper on derelict traps to document how the various state programs have changed and where they are now.

Each state updated the Subcommittee on blue crab landings and regulatory changes in their state. Some saw declines in landings possibly due to COVID or other weather-related issues, while some experienced increases. FL remained stable, while AL, MS, LA, and TX saw declines in blue crab landings for the years data are currently available. TX has one regulatory proposal on the table this year for opening a previously closed area in Aransas Bay that would possibly allow pier-based crabbing, while in FL the FWC has been petitioned to implement statewide use of TEDs. FWC will conduct more studies and bring them back to the Commission.

Harriet Perry participated in the group and was recognized as our current selection from last year's Lyles-Simpson award. She asked about willingness to continue development of the indices of abundance for the states to keep an eye on trends. All reps indicated they could likely provide graphs for their respective states at the Fall meeting to allow the group to track trends moving forward.

Rick Burriss moved and it was seconded by Chris Mace to adopt the report. Motion carried unanimously.

Molluscan Shellfish

Steve VanderKooy reported that the Subcommittee heard two presentations on oyster restoration projects related to Pew Charitable Trusts. The first presentation was on an oyster inventory model that explored what tools currently exist to address oyster restoration needs in the Gulf, which includes a database of 35 existing oyster models. The second presentation described an inventory of oyster restoration projects in the Gulf with the intention to determine how successful these restoration projects were once completed and whether they'll be sustained by future funding.

The Subcommittee also discussed the current rules by state for importation of live shell for broodstock or seed in the region. There is concern that availability in some states may be limited due to strict rules on sourcing of broodstock and certification requirements.

Caitlin Young, RESTORE Science Program at NOAA, updated the Subcommittee on the ongoing process for NOAA Restore Letters of Intent (LOI), which several states have been included in. The goal is for the management and academic communities to work together. Applications are currently being reviewed and awards should be announced in early summer.

The Subcommittee continued discussions on how landings are reported differently by state to the ISSC and NOAA for aquaculture product vs. traditional harvested oysters. The group considered ways to standardize reporting. This may be a topic that requires further discussion by the Subcommittee.

The state reps provided overviews of their on- and off-bottom efforts by state since the last meeting. A question came up regarding how recommendations are determined for opening/closing oyster reefs in each state. LA conducts a dive survey in July as a water bottom assessment and uses the Soniat shell budget model to make recommendations for oyster management. FL traditionally utilizes dive transects in the Apalachicola area but since this area is now closed, testing will be done elsewhere. The sampling methods in AL are concentrated on areas where there is a high enough density of oysters to include in the harvest estimate using quadrat dive surveys mostly. They are testing the use of a grid system to leave oysters where overharvesting may have occurred. MS is doing reef assessments similar to the other states and make recommendations to their commission to open or close harvesting. TX has a regular monitoring program that looks at the percent of undersized oysters and marketable oysters and utilize a traffic light system. A predetermined control rule is used to make recommendations. They are also exploring the potential of using the Soniat shell budget model.

LA stated they had been approached about the potential of using oyster reefs to determine water quality carbon credits. TX indicated they have had inquiries related to this topic and other members were aware of this system in Maryland, but not in the Gulf. **Bill Walton** may have some information on this subject, which he will pass along, and this subject may be a good topic for discussion at future meetings.

Christina Mohrman, Gulf of Mexico Alliance, gave a brief overview of the Oyster Management Data Workshop. The workshop explored oyster-related datasets, prioritized data for inclusion in the Gulf of Mexico Open Data Platform (GOMOD), and will continue developing an oyster management community of practice for the Gulf region.

The group also participated in an afternoon session, moderated by **Bill Walton** from the Auburn Shellfish Lab, which focused on oyster hatcheries across the Gulf. A broad range of hatchery-related topics were discussed, including problems with oyster seed production, how problems were overcome,

and future production in the upcoming year. The Subcommittee plans to continue hatchery discussions in the future through the MSSC.

John Mareska moved and it was seconded by Chris Mace to adopt the report. Motion carried unanimously.

SEAMAP

Jeff Rester explained the Subcommittee discussed the future of the Vertical Longline Survey and whether the data produced from the survey remains relevant to current fisheries management. With decreases in funding, SEAMAP will not be able to continue to sample at current levels. Additionally, the majority of the data produced from the survey is centered around Red Snapper; however, the Red Snapper stock assessments do not utilize this data in their analysis. Changes should be considered, such as to survey design or to start habitat mapping. SEAMAP does not plan to change the Vertical Line Survey this year, but would like to continue to discuss these issues and analyze the data to determine the best path forward.

Since SEAMAP did not conduct their normal surveys last year, there are unused FY2020 funds that must be spend by the end of the year. The Subcommittee discussed plans to spend the remaining funds, such as equipment purchases, paying for ship time, habitat mapping, comparative studies, and vessel repairs and upgrades.

All SEAMAP partners intend to participate in all SEAMAP surveys this year with COVID protocols remaining in place onboard all SEAMAP vessels. The Subcommittee recommended that all work groups get together to review the operations manual and protocols before sampling this year.

Jason Froeba moved and it was seconded by Dan Ellinor to adopt the report. Motion carried unanimously.

State/Federal Reports

Darin Topping stated all state reports have been received with the exception of FL. **Dan Ellinor** stated FL would submit their state report after the meeting.

Chris Mace moved and it was seconded by John Mareska to approve state and federal reports that have been submitted as written and leave FL state report approval via email. Motion carried unanimously.

Other Business

Darin Topping reminded everyone the FIN (Data Management) Subcommittee chose not to meet virtually but planned to meet in-person later this summer. **Gregg Bray** explained the Subcommittee members decided the virtual meeting setting was not conducive for the complicated discussions they needed to have and they would try and meet this summer regardless of the meeting setting.

There being no further business, John Mareska moved and it was seconded by Dan Ellinor to adjourn the meeting at 11:20 a.m. Motion carried unanimously.