

**MENHADEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MINUTES
Tuesday, October 15, 2024
Gulf Shores, AL**

APPROVED BY:
Carey Gelpi
COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

Chairman **Mroch** called the meeting to order at 1:32 p.m. with the following in attendance:

Members

Jason Adriance, LDWF, New Orleans, LA
Sydney Alhale, NOAA Fisheries, Miami, FL
Carey Gelpi, TPWD, Port Arthur, TX
Trevor Moncrief (Proxy), MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Peter Himchak, Omega Protein, Little Egg Harbor Township, NJ
Francois Kuttel, Westbank Fishing, LLC, New Orleans, LA
Ben Landry, Menhaden Advisory Council for the Gulf of Mexico, Abbeville, LA
John Mareska, ADCNR/MRD, Dauphin Island, AL
Jason Walker, Daybrook Fisheries, Empire, LA

Others

(Chair) Ray Mroch (Proxy), NOAA Fisheries, Beaufort, NC
Matt Hill, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Amy Schueller, NOAA Fisheries, Beaufort, NC
Rebecca Hazelkorn, NOAA Fisheries, St. Petersburg, FL
Scott Raborn, LGL Ecological Research Associates, Inc., Bryan, TX
Calvin Chee, USM-GCRL, Ocean Springs, MS
Jason Saucier, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Patrick Banks, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Eric Lang, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Rick Burris, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Traci Floyd, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Chase Katechis, ADCNR/MRD, Dauphin Island, AL
Ryan Montegut, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Read Hendon, Ocean Springs, MS (Commissioner)
Shane Treadaway, Westbank Fishing, Empire, LA
David Cresson, CCA Louisiana, Baton Rouge, LA

Staff

David Donaldson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Steve VanderKooy, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Keith Wilson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Jeff Rester, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Gregg Bray, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Deanna Valentine, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Dalton Powell, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Michael Brochard, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS

Adoption of Agenda

Mroch reviewed the agenda. No changes were suggested, so the agenda was approved as written.

Approval of Minutes

Minutes from several virtual meetings related to the stock assessment, and MSC certification were reviewed and approved as written. *All minutes were approved unanimously on the following motions:*

1. *March 21, 2024 – Landry motioned to approve minutes as presented, and Alhale seconded.*
2. *June 18, 2024 – Adriance motioned to approve minutes as presented, and Gelpi seconded.*
3. *July 17, 2024 – Gelpi motioned to approve minutes as presented, and Landry seconded.*
4. *September 3, 2024 – Himchak motioned to approve minutes as presented, and Mareska seconded.*

Review of 2024 Gulf Menhaden Season

Alhale (NOAA) provided a review of the 2024 Gulf season to date. Through September, the landings were 335,551 metric tons, which is a decrease of 15% from 2023 and an 18% decrease on the 5-yr average. Fishing was slow the first two months due to windy conditions and fish primarily showing in the west. Landings began to approach normal in July, and August provided the most fish for the season so far. A total of 33 vessels participated in fishing in 2024: 27 steamers and six run boats. Daybrook added one vessel this season that transitions back and forth as a run boat for the purpose of the bycatch sampling. Effort through September was around 232,000 VTWs, which was a decrease from 2023 by 4.3%. NOAA anticipates the yearend to be 366,721 metric tons, which is still about a 15% reduction overall for 2024. The 2025 forecast calls for the catch to be about 382,402 mt.

Update on the Atlantic Menhaden Fishery

Alhale (NOAA) provided a short report on the 2024 Atlantic fishing season. One factory operated in Reedville with seven vessels and one bait boat landing for reduction. Through September, 85,000 metric tons had been landed, which was a 10% decrease from 2023 and a 12% reduction from the 5-yr average. The TAC on the Atlantic is 156,000 metric tons for reduction in 2024. The single and multi-species assessments have begun and will be presented to the ASMFC's Menhaden Board when complete.

Stock Assessment Report and Approval

Schueller (NOAA) presented the GDAR04 Stock Assessment report to the MAC. Nothing had changed since the July 17, 2024 webinar when the final results were reviewed. Schueller gave a quick overview and addressed questions. Himchak noted the recommendations regarding a future benchmark and asked if Schueller knew of any data that could justify moving us to another benchmark. Schueller responded that at this time, there didn't seem to be, but new research is underway that could contribute. Landry complimented the work being done by Schueller. Without any additional discussion, Moncrief moved to approve the stock assessment report for Gulf Menhaden as provided to the MAC and to send it to the State/Federal Fisheries Management Committee. Mareska seconded, and the motion was approved.

Report on Texas Cap for 2024

Gelpi (TPWD) provided an update to the MAC regarding the Texas Cap on menhaden removals. In 2023, the industry made about 25 sets in Texas waters in June and again in September. They harvested 2,150,000 fish or around 4% of the available cap based on the captain's estimates. In the past, NOAA would adjust the estimates based on the dockside pumpouts for the final determination, but with the new CDFR process, the estimates are still relatively close. Industry members acknowledged that since the closing of the Cameron plant, there hasn't been much pressure to fish in Texas waters, and they don't see that trend changing. TPWD will continue to monitor the removals, but there probably isn't a need to report on the cap annually unless fishing practices change.

DWH Restoration: Developing Methods to Observe Sea Turtle Interactions in the Gulf of Mexico Menhaden Fishery

Hazelkorn (NOAA) provided a summary of the observer project looking at sea turtle interactions with the menhaden fleet. The pilot project ran during the 2022 and 2023 fishing seasons, and sampling was facilitated by the industry. Approximately 1,700 and 3,160 sets in total were observed respectively representing about 10% of sets in 2022 and 20% in 2023. In the first year, a combination of human observers and cameras were utilized. They documented all animals that were released from the net at rollover, and release condition was based on the review of videos by the contractor and NOAA species experts. Due to issues with humans being able to watch the pumpouts and rollover from alternate platforms, the second year involved cameras that were better tested prior to the start of the 2023 season. The pilot project recorded a total of 31 sea turtles and 44 marine mammals documented in 28 and 27 sets, respectively; eight marine mammals were confirmed to have been released dead; and no turtles. The project team has finalized all documents which are publicly available on the Gulf Spill Restoration website.

Louisiana Purse Seine Bycatch Study

Raborn (LGL Ecological Research Associates, Inc.) updated the MAC on progress through September on the bycatch study in Louisiana waters. **Raborn** provided more details on the methods and number of sets the team has been able to observe so far. They expect to have final results by early 2025. **Raborn** commended the GSMFC for its organization of this study. He reported that the study design uses 'run boats' or 'tenders' to sample the fleet. What happens to bycatch is the same regardless of whether a set is pumped by a runboat or the steamer. Cameras were placed to record and monitor the entire pumping operation. Rollover bycatch was also captured by video as well as physically sampled. So far, every vessel in the fleet was sampled at least three times from a total of 304 sets as of August. They were continuing to sample through the end of the season and anticipate having a full report sometime after the first of the year. **Moncrief** commended the crew on this study and noted that several staff from MDMR were able to witness this work. **Raborn** noted LDWF staff had been able to make a site visit earlier in the season.

Results from Trophic Modeling of the Northern GOM and Implications for the Gulf Menhaden Stock

Chee (USM-GCRL) presented work he is conducting with Dr Robert Leaf to model trophic interactions in the northern Gulf specific to menhaden, which was published in September 2024. His analysis uses stable isotopes in the EcoDiet model to simultaneously evaluate stomach contents and Carbon/Nitrogen ratios (referred to as biotracers) to quantify the value of prey for a suite of predator diets. EcoDiet combines stomach contents and isotopes to link trophic probabilities and determine proportion of prey in the diet. The results validated previous findings that predatory fishes in nGOM are generalists and how menhaden make up a small proportion of their diets. This presents challenges to ecosystem assessment efforts since e-models try to relate abundance of forage fish back to biomass of a highly reliant predator, but in this system, there are no highly reliant predators.

Forecasting Fisheries: Working to Improve the Gulf Menhaden Annual Forecast

Mroch (NOAA) provided a presentation from his doctoral dissertation. The Gulf Menhaden Forecast from NOAA first began in 1973 and is published annually. One of his objectives is to explore other models to improve the season forecasts. After testing several, **Mroch** found an economics model that is typically used to estimate how changes on input affect production, efficiency of a process, and trade-offs. **Mroch** stated that the Cobb-Douglas model seems to have the most promise and was able to predict the landings using menhaden biomass, fleet effort, Peruvian anchovy landings, and the cost of marine diesel fuel. **Mroch** would continue to update the committee as he moved forward and could potentially use this model in future NOAA forecasts.

Review of Port Sample Acquisition and Processing in 2024

VanderKooy said the GSMFC has historically paid for the contractual port samplers over the past 25 years. NOAA is no longer supporting the port sampling, so it has fallen on the Commission's IJF program to continue. We are on track to get much closer to the target sampling of 300 per plant because of the sampling of run boats. There is currently no Abbeville sampler due to an issue with the use of lab space at the Univ of Louisiana-Lafayette. All Abbeville samples from this season will be being handled by the Empire and Moss Point samplers as a result. The backlog will be completed by early 2025 in advance of next season. **VanderKooy's** goal is to identify a student and get back on campus in Lafayette to process the Abbeville samples, next year.

Electronic CDFR Reporting Update

VanderKooy reported that the electronic reporting was going well. The entire Gulf fleet is now providing the traditional Captain's Daily Fishing Reports (CDFRs) using a reporting app. The data is much cleaner with less errors as compared to the old paper forms. The software is being improved, and outputs may be customized to fit needs of the industry, NOAA, and the Commission. **Kuttel** at Daybrook was credited for taking the initiative a few years ago to begin professionalizing the CDFR reporting. As a result, the Commission was able to migrate the software over the entire fleet. **Kuttel** pointed out that the industry is able to make real-time corrections, which contributes to the much-improved data. Once the season is complete, **VanderKooy** will download the complete database and begin a review before providing a full update in March 2025.

VanderKooy noted that the Commission was getting a very different set of fields with the new output files. However, it will be relatively easy to merge the old with the new to create a complete time-series. There are a few inputs no longer as useful, which were included because they were on the old paper forms. Those have been evaluated and can be eliminated if no longer needed. **Kuttel** requested input from the MAC to get a consensus of opinion on the final outputs and program any changes during the off season. This should include filtering options by state or any other options necessary for management.

Marine Stewardship Certification of Gulf Menhaden Update

Himchak gave a short background on the last MSC certification in 2019. Out of the 28 criteria for scoring, there were six marked conditional. The information that the MAC was able to put together for the fourth and final surveillance audit was critical. As a result, the industry is confident that five of the six scores have been corrected. The last condition will hopefully be resolved once the bycatch study is finished. The industry is pursuing another five-year certification and believes nearly everything need for another certification is complete. The expectation is that the next application should go smoothly. **Himchak** thanked the MAC and everyone who contributed during the audit.

Discussion of Standard Operating Procedures for the Menhaden Advisory Committee

The SOPs for the MAC have not been updated since 1992. Because the outdated SOPs did not reflect the current committee, **VanderKooy** provided some edits in red text to bring the SOPs up to match most of the Commission's other subcommittees. Edits were sent to the MAC back in early August, and a few comments were received. After some discussion, the committee agreed that the materials needed to be reviewed in more detail and suggested a webinar for discussion and any edits be held later in the year with approval at a spring meeting, or the Commission's next Annual Meeting. The SOPs were tabled to allow everyone to provide additional review. **VanderKooy** will revisit this later.

Election of Officers

Mroch opened the floor to nominations for Chair. **VanderKooy** reminded that the chair rotates to an

industry member next. ***Kuttel** nominated **Landry** for Chair, which was seconded by **Gelpi**. **Landry** was approved as Chair.*

Mroch opened the floor to nominations for Vice Chair of the Subcommittee which based on rotation, would be a state member. ***Moncrief** nominated **Gelpi** to Vice Chair, and **Adriance** seconded the nomination and the committee approved **Gelpi** as Vice Chair.*

Other Business

Himchak requested at the next meeting a presentation from Dr. Justine Whitaker (Nicholls State University) on her project cataloging gut contents of predators in Louisiana using barcoding to identify the presence of various prey organisms. That presentation will need to be confirmed for 2025.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:53 p.m.