



NOAA
FISHERIES

Southeast
**Equity and Environmental
Justice Implementation Plan**

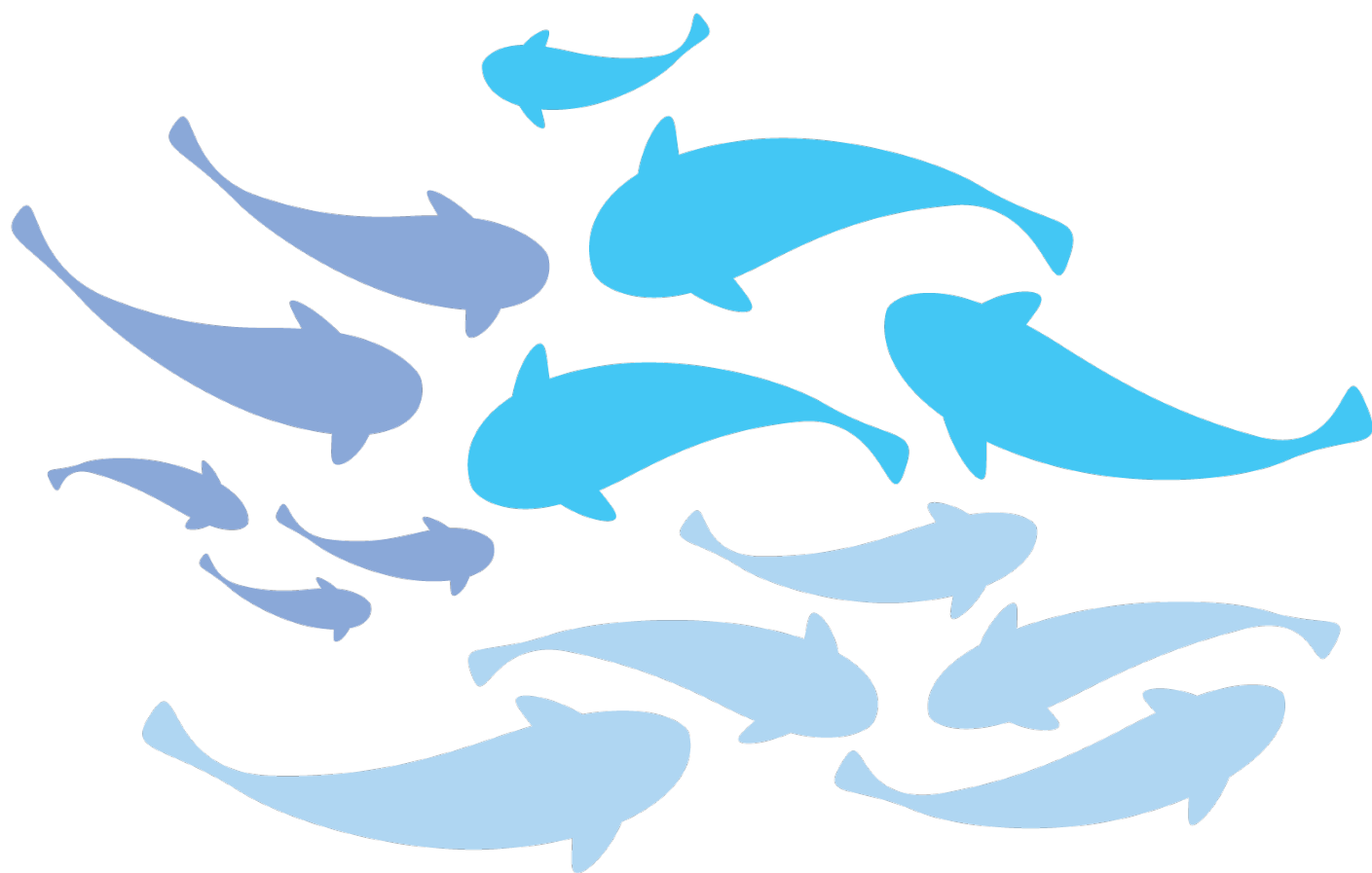


Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Executive Summary	3
List of Acronyms	5
Definitions	6
Introduction	7
NOAA Fisheries National EEJ Strategy	7
About This Plan	7
Public Engagement Strategy	8
Key Takeaways	8
NOAA Fisheries Planned Actions to Advance Equity and Environmental Justice in the Southeast	10
Objective 1 Research and Monitoring	10
Objective 2 Policy and Planning	14
Objective 3 Benefits	17
Objective 4 Outreach and Engagement	20
Objective 5 Inclusive Governance	23
Objective 6 Empowering Environment	26
Partnership	29

Executive Summary

NOAA Fisheries Southeast endeavors to equitably serve all people through the work we do to manage, conserve, and protect living marine resources and their habitats in the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean. The Southeast Equity and Environmental Justice (EEJ) Implementation Plan uses guidance set forth in NOAA Fisheries' national [Equity and Environmental Justice Strategy](#) to incorporate and prioritize EEJ into our ongoing and future activities. The plan is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees or agents, or any other person. The actions identified in the plan will be carried out to the extent authorized by and consistent with applicable law.

NOAA Fisheries Southeast includes 20,000 miles of tidal coastline found in the coastal states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the inland watersheds of Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. Our scientists and fishery managers use the best scientific information available to manage, conserve, and recover living marine resources in this area. Our public input processes are intended to provide full access to our decision-making structure. However, unintentional barriers prevent some voices from being heard and create voids in our understanding of the impacts of management and policy decisions. Challenges associated with identifying and contacting the diversity of people who are affected by our mission and activities contribute to the creation of underserved communities and diminish our ability to provide the best, most comprehensive public input and feedback processes possible.

To improve our equitable service delivery, we assembled a diverse team of professionals from the Southeast Regional Office and Southeast Fisheries Science Center to identify and engage with underserved persons and communities in the region. This was critical for initiating thoughts about a comprehensive, regional examination of underserved populations and communities, and provided essential context for the work. The team began by identifying mission-related services in the Southeast related to the core areas of Aquaculture, Fisheries, Habitat, Protected Resources, Conservation and Ecological Restoration, Grants, Science and Data Collection, and Wind Energy.

We considered the equity and inequity inherent in these areas through a lens of underserved communities, as defined by NOAA Fisheries' national EEJ Strategy. We connected with hundreds of underserved community members and liaisons from diverse ethnicities, cultures, genders and sexual orientations, ages, and manners of participation in regional marine fisheries and aquaculture. Contributors include knowledgeable individuals from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and from a variety of ethnic groups across the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic, including persons of Native American and Asian-American ancestry in the Gulf of Mexico, Gullah Geechee persons along portions of the South Atlantic, and those of varying African and Hispanic ancestry across the entire Southeast.

Through this intentional process of creating a listening space capable of transcending linguistic, economic, and geographic barriers, this engagement effort and implementation plan force deeper consideration of the human element in our mission-related work. Successfully addressing the equity barriers identified through this work is expected to benefit a broad array of people and communities throughout the region by better leveling the playing field at the regional, national, and international levels. In summary, this would be accomplished by:

- Improving our understanding of how historical processes have affected participation in our fisheries and mission-related work
- Further diversifying our communications and outreach platforms to more effectively meet communities where they are
- Identifying and employing new strategies to enable more meaningful and consistent opportunities for public engagement and participation in our work and decision processes
- Collaborating with the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic fishery management councils to understand and address complex equity issues in the Gulf of Mexico individual fishing quota (IFQ) and other limited access fisheries
- Developing and employing new partnerships and collaborative strategies in consultation with the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and Caribbean councils to address complex cross-jurisdictional challenges in the shrimp and other Southeast fisheries as these relate to seafood imports, loss of fishing infrastructure, and the impacts of coastal development and large-scale federal projects on living marine resources and habitats

While underserved communities across the Southeast responded very positively to this regional EEJ initiative, not everyone we heard from was equally supportive. Some expressed concern about the overall purpose of the effort and how it might impact them and the resources they rely on for their livelihoods. Because this is the first time we have undertaken a comprehensive and coordinated effort to identify and advance a common set of objectives around ensuring equitable service delivery, it is understandable that some people have questions as to what this all means. We believe the best way to fully consider and understand all points of view on this important topic is to promote open and honest discussion. This is an iterative process and we, too, are learning as we go. We look forward to the continued involvement of all interested persons and communities.

List of Acronyms

DIR	Directorate
EBFM	Ecosystem-Based Fishery Management
EEJ	Equity and Environmental Justice
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FTE	Full-Time Employee
GC	General Counsel, NOAA Fisheries
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
HCD	Habitat Conservation Division
HQ	Headquarters, NOAA Fisheries
HSI	Hispanic Serving Institution
IEA	Integrated Ecosystem Assessment
IUU	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated
IFQ	Individual Fishing Quota
MSA	Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act
NASEM	National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
NOAA Fisheries	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service
NOS	National Ocean Service
OMI	Operations, Management, and Information Services
PRD	Protected Resources Division
SEFSC	NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center
SERO	NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office
SFD	Sustainable Fisheries Division
SSRG	Social Science Research Group
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
STJ	St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
STT	St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands
STX	St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands
U.S. Caribbean	Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix
USVI	U.S. Virgin Islands

Definitions

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, tribal affiliation, religion, disability, or income during the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies, including but not limited to: equitable protection from environmental and health hazards; equitable access to a healthy, sustainable, and resilient environment in which to live, play, work, learn, grow, worship, and engage in cultural and subsistence practices; and equitable opportunity and access to decision-making processes for underserved communities.

Equity means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment.

Meaningful involvement means communities have an opportunity to participate in decisions about activities that may affect their environment and/or health; the communities' contribution will inform NOAA Fisheries decisions; community concerns will be considered in the decision-making process; and decision-makers will seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.

Underserved communities refers to communities that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life. These include geographic communities as well as populations sharing a particular characteristic, history, or identity. Adapting Executive Orders 13985 and 14091, these groups could include but are not limited to: women and girls; Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons¹, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural or urban areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality. Specific to the fisheries context, underserved groups within fishing communities may include, for example, subsistence fishery participants and their dependents, fishing vessel crews, and fish processor and distribution workers. Finally, territorial and commonwealth communities in American Samoa, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands may also be categorized as underserved. Underserved communities vary by region, and by the barriers they face. Furthermore, many of these community categories intersect. Hence identification of and meaningful involvement with underserved communities will be regionally specific and an ongoing process that will require long-term commitment.

¹ The U.S. Federal Government has specific guidelines for relationships with federally recognized tribes. Neither the NOAA Fisheries National Equity and Environmental Justice Strategy nor this plan revises or impacts that responsibility in any way. See [Executive Order 13175](#) (Consultation and Coordination With Indian Tribal Governments), which directs federal agencies to “have an accountable process to ensure meaningful and timely input by tribal officials in the development of regulatory policies that have tribal implications.” See also [NOAA Procedures for Government-to-Government Consultation with Federally Recognized Indian Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations](#), which guides NOAA Fisheries' work with federally recognized tribes.

Introduction

NOAA Fisheries Southeast comprises the Southeast Regional Office (SERO) and Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC). Together, we study, manage, conserve, and protect living marine resources of the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean and their habitats. Each of these geographic areas is home to diverse human communities with unique needs and challenges. We are committed to advancing equity and environmental justice (EEJ) within these communities by recognizing and addressing structural inequalities in how we carry out our science and management responsibilities across the region. This will require us to enhance our engagement and collaboration with the underserved communities impacted by the work we do, and to continue efforts to develop a workforce that is representative of the communities we serve.

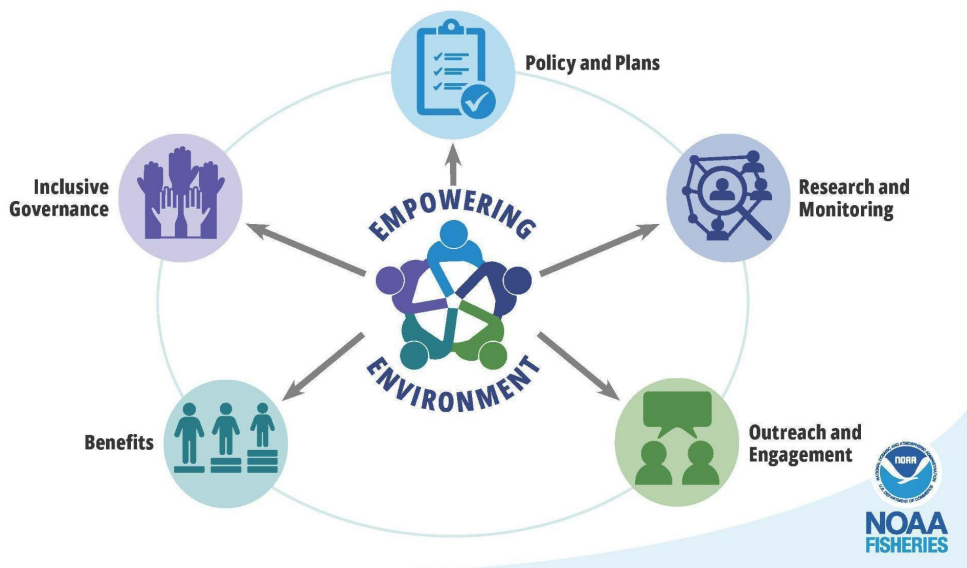
NOAA Fisheries National EEJ Strategy

In May 2023, NOAA Fisheries released the [National Equity and Environmental Justice \(EEJ\) Strategy](#) intended to guide the agency on serving all communities more equitably and effectively. The strategy directs each region and program office to develop implementation plans outlining the actions needed to advance EEJ in each jurisdiction.

The NOAA Fisheries EEJ Strategy identified three overarching goals for the agency:

1. Prioritize identification, equitable treatment, and meaningful involvement of underserved communities
2. Provide equitable delivery of services
3. Prioritize EEJ in our mission work with demonstrable progress.

To reach these goals, NOAA Fisheries identified six core areas for improvement.



About This Plan

NOAA Fisheries Southeast developed this Southeast EEJ Implementation Plan cooperatively with partners and other interested parties around the region. The plan represents our efforts to respond to key takeaways from that engagement effort, and reflects real-world insight into the experiences, needs, and interests of the underserved communities impacted by our work. This plan is a living document, to be reviewed and updated by the Southeast leadership team together with the Southeast Geographic Strategic Plan every 5 years, or sooner as needed. These planned, periodic reviews will enable us to adapt the plan in response to new information and shifting

environmental conditions over time so that we can effectively meet the needs of Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean communities.

The success of the plan itself will rely on our ongoing commitment to EEJ, demonstrated by real investments in the resources required to implement the full suite of actions herein, as well as a marked cultural change in the way we do business. We used varied approaches to engage staff at all levels of the SERO and SEFSC organizations in the plan's development. These included joint staff "All Hands" meetings and informational webinars; smaller division- or program-level meetings focused on learning about how we are already working to advance EEJ in the region and gaining feedback and perspective on new ideas considered for inclusion in the plan; and in-depth discussions of objectives, activities, and roles and responsibilities during annual meetings of the SERO and SEFSC senior leadership teams in 2023 and 2024. The plan represents a profound shift in how people and cultures are considered in marine research, conservation, and management—a change that will require meaningful and sustained engagement of regional staff, agency partners, and other affected interests across the region into the future.

Public Engagement Strategy

NOAA Fisheries Southeast used several different strategies to engage and include the public in developing this plan, including:

- 20 focus group meetings and related scoping work in numerous communities around the culturally diverse Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean
- A broader public request for information published in the Federal Register on July 21, 2023
- A virtual listening session conducted in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese on September 28, 2023
- Regular and ongoing work with the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and Caribbean fishery management councils to discuss public engagement strategies, identified barriers, and related options for addressing fishery-specific needs.

Through this work, we connected with hundreds of underserved community members and liaisons from diverse ethnicities, cultures, genders and sexual orientations, ages, and manners of participation in regional marine fisheries and aquaculture. Contributors to this engagement process include knowledgeable individuals from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), and from a variety of ethnic groups across the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic, including persons of Native American and Asian-American ancestry in the Gulf of Mexico, Gullah Geechee persons along portions of the South Atlantic, and persons of varying African and Hispanic ancestry across the entire Southeast region.

Key Takeaways

Regional variation, historic and cultural diversity, and the many personal experiences and perspectives of the engaged individuals and communities led NOAA Fisheries Southeast to identify a wide range of topics and issues of varying scope and scale related to the equitable delivery of our services. Even so, key themes and commonalities emerged, the resolution of which is expected to benefit a broad array of people and communities throughout the region by better leveling the playing field at the regional, national, and international level. Common takeaways emphasized:

- The need to better understand the historical processes that have led to the underserved status of various populations around the Southeast, and how this has affected their participation in our fisheries and mission-related work
- Underserved communities' desire for more meaningful and consistent engagement in our mission-related work
- The importance of further diversifying our communications and outreach platforms to more effectively meet underserved communities where they are in terms of location, timing, education level, technological capabilities, culture, and language
- Underserved communities' perception that decision-makers do not understand, consider, or represent their perspectives and viewpoints, and that they do not have the information or support needed to effectively engage in the decisions that affect them

- Underserved communities' feeling of powerlessness to protect the resources they rely on from the adverse impacts of coastal development and large-scale infrastructure and energy projects
- The importance of timeliness:
 - Shrimp fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic say there will be no community left to save if market challenges related to seafood imports are not addressed immediately
 - Fishermen who participate in Gulf of Mexico individual fishing quota (IFQ) programs but do not hold IFQ shares say high lease prices are threatening their ability to remain profitable
 - Fishermen in fleets across the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean are seeing few new participants enter the fisheries due to the unaffordable costs of limited entry permits and other barriers to entry, including loss of access to vital infrastructure and working waterfronts as communities modernize
 - Many fishermen and owners of related support businesses report they cannot afford basic services and are experiencing mental health issues
- Interagency partnerships will be critical to effectively address complex cross-jurisdictional challenges related to seafood imports, loss of fishing infrastructure, and the impacts of coastal development and large-scale federal projects on the living marine resources and habitat they depend on.

While underserved communities across the Southeast responded very positively to our overall engagement effort, response to our public request for information revealed that some members of the public are concerned about NOAA Fisheries' attention to EEJ and how this might impact them and the resources they rely on for their livelihoods. While environmental justice is not a new topic for our agency, this is the first time we have undertaken a comprehensive and coordinated effort to identify and advance a common set of objectives. So it is no surprise that some people have questions, and probably some fear and uncertainty, about what this all means. We believe the best way to fully consider and understand all points of view on this important topic is to promote open and honest discussion. This is an iterative process and we, too, are learning as we go, with an ongoing commitment to seek public perspectives, insight, and feedback over time.

NOAA Fisheries Planned Actions to Advance Equity and Environmental Justice in the Southeast

The Southeast EEJ Implementation Plan outlines a suite of region-specific actions we believe are needed to successfully advance the agency's [National Equity and Environmental Justice \(EEJ\) Strategy](#). We separated the actions into two distinct groups based on resource needs: 1) immediate or near-term actions that we expect to accomplish with existing funding and 2) longer-term actions we believe are important to achieving agency EEJ objectives in the region, but that would require additional resources. The plan organizes this content under each core area and objective described in the national EEJ strategy.

Objective 1

Research and Monitoring

This national EEJ objective aims to identify underserved communities and their needs, conduct collaborative research, and assess impacts of management decisions. NOAA Fisheries Southeast continually strives to use the best available scientific information to improve our understanding of the nation's coastal and marine resources and the human communities that use such resources for commerce, food, recreation, and other purposes. A meaningful EEJ implementation plan for the Southeast must therefore use best-science strategies to identify the full range of underserved communities and persons in the region, along with their EEJ-related concerns, needs, and interests. As discussed in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report titled, "Assessing Equity in the Distribution of Fisheries Management Benefits," this task falls squarely within the social sciences, and calls for considerable resources, thorough planning, and regional expertise to assess the full range of benefits that ideally flow from fishery management decisions (NASEM 2024).²

Because NOAA Fisheries Southeast and our regional fishery management council partners fulfill essential research and monitoring requirements called for under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and other legislation, certain EEJ-related research and monitoring work is already being conducted in the region. For example, SERO and SEFSC social scientists regularly compile the best available information using social indicators data to examine regulatory change among fishing-oriented communities. Additional community-level research and data compilation are undertaken to examine the fishery-specific implications of natural disasters, shifting climatic conditions, and other forces of change. This work includes a variety of research efforts sponsored by NOAA Fisheries Southeast in recent years, including:

- Developing and using valid and reliable demographic, economic, and social indicators data, and internet-based sharing of such indicators with regional fishery analysts
- Developing and periodically updating Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean community profiles that describe basic, essential social, economic, and demographic aspects of localized involvement in marine fisheries
- Periodically performing territory-specific social and economic research with the full range of fishery participants around Puerto Rico and the USVI
- Conducting rapid response research with fishery participants affected by natural disasters around the Southeast, and analyzing the social and economic effects of such events
- Using English, Spanish, and Vietnamese surveys to collect data on and examine [pandemic impacts on marine fisheries](#)

² NASEM. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. Assessing Equity in the Distribution of Fisheries Management Benefits: Data and Information Availability. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27313>

- Organizing a Caribbean-specific strategic planning workshop that was partially supported and co-facilitated by members of the SEFSC Quality Management and Continuous Improvement Professional Specialty Group to improve fisheries and ecosystem data collection in the U.S. Caribbean through work with numerous partners who have regional expertise (discussed at length [here](#)).

By nature of its focus on change among broadly conceived coastal communities and island regions, much of the work above naturally addresses certain EEJ research and monitoring needs, an outcome that is being further advanced as our social scientists:

- Make economic and social indicators data increasingly available to Southeast fishery analysts
- Expand and modify the social indicators program to more effectively assess community engagement and reliance on marine fisheries around the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean
- Undertake analysis of prospective aquaculture and wind resource development in federal waters of the Southeast to improve understanding of the social and economic effects potentially resulting from such projects

Additional research and monitoring work is needed to inform and support our ability to fully address this and the other objectives described in this plan, as well as related regional fishery management council priorities. In response, we are prioritizing work on the following actions:

Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions to Identify Underserved Communities and Their Needs, Conduct Collaborative Research, and Assess Impacts of Management Decisions

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: SFD SEFSC: SFD; SSRG	Analyze factors that hold back underserved persons from entering federally managed fisheries.	Pilot barriers analysis is conducted for a select fishery or fisheries
SEFSC: SSRG SERO: SFD	Expand demographic data collection and undertake interview work to better define and thoroughly identify both place-based and non-place-based underserved communities in the coastal and island regions of the Southeast, and examine historical factors/processes that have led to status as underserved. Partner with the regional fishery management councils, and with other federal agencies, to explore new and different tools for identifying and better understanding underserved communities, and for examining vulnerabilities to sources of change among such communities. Use results from this work to inform definitions and principles of equity as these relate to human aspects of marine fisheries and fishery management in the Southeast and elsewhere in the nation.	Human capital/demographic data are obtained Demographic assessments are completed at local/regional levels Analysis of public input is completed at regional levels
SEFSC: SSRG SERO: SFD	Survey crew members in the South Atlantic and analyze the results of crew surveys in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic to improve understanding of EEJ-relevant aspects of fisheries in each sub-region.	Summary results are presented to councils Technical reports/publications are generated to inform fishery management process in the Gulf and South Atlantic

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SEFSC: SSRG, EBFM	Work with the regional fishery management councils to encourage involvement of underserved communities in participatory research and citizen science designed to integrate local and traditional ecological knowledge and human values/preferences into the fishery management process (e.g., through use of the Gulf of Mexico Council’s Fisherman Feedback Tool, South Atlantic Council’s fishery performance reports, and other strategies).	New strategies to engage underserved communities in participatory research and citizen science initiatives are developed
SEFSC: SFD; SSRG SERO: SFD	Identify and analyze the interrelated social, cultural, and economic effects of management decisions that allocate or limit allocation of living marine resources among fishery participants in underserved communities, prioritizing the focus of this work in collaboration with the regional fishery management councils.	Fishery-specific allocation assessments and decisions consider impacts on underserved community participants
SEFSC: SFD; SSRG SERO: SFD	Interview IFQ participants, persons who aspire to attain shares, and program managers to identify IFQ-related challenges and possible solutions to such challenges.	Analysis of IFQ-related challenges is conducted for key IFQ programs Barriers analysis is integrated into 5-year program reviews
SEFSC: SFD; SSRG SERO: SFD	Conduct research and analysis with academic and other federal partners and regional fisheries management bodies to examine the extent and implications of seafood imports on fleets and fisheries in key fisheries in the Southeast region.	Assessments of the economic and social effects of seafood importation on key Southeast fisheries are produced, reviewed, and disseminated to Southeast fishery analysts and decision-makers

Additionally, we have identified further research and monitoring actions needed to effectively improve our service delivery to underserved communities across the region. We intend to prioritize this additional work as funding is identified in future years:

Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions to Identify Underserved Communities and Their Needs, Conduct Collaborative Research, and Assess Impacts of Management Decisions

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SEFSC: SSRG SERO: DIR	Conduct a situational analysis of marine aquaculture development in the U.S. Caribbean to identify forms of aquaculture that are best-suited to regional conditions and explore opportunities for more accessible pathways for authorizing small-scale or experimental projects.	Formal assessment of local capacity and limitations of scale in developing offshore aquaculture projects in the U.S. Caribbean is completed and communicated to local governments	Staff Time Funding, Travel Funding, Other
SERO: SFD SEFSC: EBFM (IEA); SSRG	Work with underserved fishery participants, NOAA Sea Grant, and state and territorial partners in disaster response agencies to identify core challenges and lessons learned from recent and historic disaster events, including effective recovery strategies; review and use this information to help improve and monitor disaster response efforts in the Southeast.	Experience-informed fishery-specific disaster guidance documents are produced, reviewed, and disseminated	Staff Time Funding, Translation Funding, Other

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SEFSC: SSRG	Conduct social science research to identify and examine factors that hinder the entry of underserved persons into aquaculture, and potential opportunities and challenges that aquaculture development may present for underserved communities around the Southeast.	Research and analysis of prospective federal waters aquaculture development around the Southeast completed, with specific focus on potential benefits and challenges for underserved communities	Staff Time Funding, Travel
SEFSC: SFD; SSRG SERO: SFD	Conduct an overall assessment of equity in domestic marine fisheries, with attention to equity from the bottom up—from the base of seafood consumers and anglers to regional commercial and recreational fisheries.	Assessment is produced, reviewed, and disseminated	Staff Time Funding, Travel
SERO: SFD SEFSC: SSRG	Research the importance of diversification of operations in federally managed fisheries (where diversification refers to involvement in multiple commercial fisheries, use of dual charter/commercial permits, and involvement in both state and federal fisheries); include this information in cumulative impact analyses where possible.	Report on operational diversification is generated and considered in cumulative impact analyses	Staff Time Funding, Travel
SEFSC: SSRG SERO: SFD	Research the social and economic impacts of fishery management measures relative to the projected impacts of such measures—with the dual intent of enabling better adaptation and avoiding any unintended consequences among underserved participants.	Technical report is developed to identify and examine empirical impacts in relation to those projected in select regional fishery amendments	Staff Time Funding, Travel
SEFSC: SSRG SERO: SFD	Analyze the social, cultural, and economic impacts of NOAA Fisheries services and management decisions (e.g., fisheries management, aquaculture, climate change, and habitat conservation) on underserved communities.	Number of reports or other documents that analyze social, cultural, and economic impacts to underserved communities	Staff Time Funding, Training
SEFSC: SSRG SERO: SFD	Examine barriers and inequities experienced by women involved in or seeking involvement in domestic marine fisheries, and identify potential means for mitigating such challenges and for monitoring mitigation outcomes.	Technical report is developed to examine barriers and challenges among women involved in or seeking involvement in domestic marine fisheries	Staff Time Funding, Travel Funding, Other
SEFSC: SSRG SERO: SFD	In collaboration with fishery participants, conduct in-depth social science research, analyze, and communicate the full range of challenges involved in commercial fishing as it is undertaken by the underserved in the Southeast.	Descriptive analysis of contemporary challenges associated with commercial fishing in the Southeast is disseminated to fishery analysts, decision-makers, and the general public	Staff Time Funding, Translation Funding, Other

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SEFSC: SFD; SSRG SERO: SFD	Undertake primary and secondary source research to identify, describe, and analyze "subsistence" or consumption-oriented use of federal fishery resources and related dimensions of fishing-oriented communities in each sub-region of the Southeast.	Technical report describing and analyzing subsistence or consumption- motivated pursuit and use of living marine resources in the Southeast is produced and disseminated	Staff Time Funding, Translation Funding, Other
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR	Examine current decision-making processes for both fisheries governance and NOAA Fisheries operations in order to assess equity, the nature and flow of benefits, and how such processes are structured and could potentially be improved.	Internal report is produced to examine procedural equity in fishery-specific decision-making processes and in relation to NOAA Fisheries operations	Staff Time

Objective 2

Policy and Planning

This national EEJ objective aims to ensure NOAA Fisheries’ policies promote equal opportunities for all and do not create unintended inequities or unequal burdens for underserved communities. NOAA Fisheries Southeast has undertaken a number of efforts to date to identify and address potential policy barriers to the equitable distribution of our benefits and services, including:

- Working with the Caribbean Fishery Management Council to implement island-based plans to guide fishery management across Puerto Rico, St. Thomas and St. John, and St. Croix. These plans account for differences between fishing sectors, available markets, and the social, culture, and economic nature and status of the fisheries and communities they represent
- Holding focus group meetings around the Gulf of Mexico to improve our understanding of individual fishing quota market barriers and potential remedies
- Providing technical assistance to fishery participants when rolling out new electronic reporting requirements
- Incorporating environmental justice considerations into most regional fishery management plans and regulatory amendments by providing social vulnerability measures and associated analysis

Additional policy work is needed to address substantial structural, complexity, and access barriers identified during our regional EEJ engagement work. These include challenges accessing opportunities, primarily due to language differences and complex systems and processes that are often difficult to navigate and require specialized knowledge; cultural factors that may unintentionally alienate certain groups; and existing policies that limit representation of underserved communities in fisheries and fishery management decision-making processes. In response, we are prioritizing work on the following actions:

Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions to Ensure that our Policies Promote Equal Opportunities for All and Do Not Create Unintended Inequities or Unequal Burdens for Underserved Communities

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR, SSRG	Collaborate with underserved communities to identify and incorporate community objectives into aquaculture grants and research opportunities and develop a list of best practices designed to help future projects grow at the appropriate scope and scale.	Underserved community objectives are identified and advanced in aquaculture grant opportunities and best practices guidance documents
SERO: Regional Climate Team SEFSC: Regional Climate Team	Incorporate national and regional EEJ goals, objectives, and actions, where applicable, into the next version of the Southeast Climate Regional Action Plan.	Number of regional climate actions that advance Southeast EEJ Implementation Plan objectives
SEFSC: DIR, SFD SERO: DIR. SFD	Work with the NOAA Fisheries observer program to determine if any policy changes (e.g., training, dress code or uniform, bilingual recruitment incentives) are appropriate to advance EEJ in the Southeast. Develop a one-pager that explains the purpose of the observer program, data confidentiality and sharing requirements, and how the data will be used for science or management.	<p>Learned information about relevant barriers and potential solutions is shared with Southeast observer program leadership and staff</p> <p>One-pager is developed to explain the purpose of the program and how observer data will be shared and used</p>
SEFSC: DIR SERO: DIR	Establish best practices for the development and use of fisherman surveys in the Southeast, including: a) use of plain language, b) making content as brief as possible, c) translating content to the appropriate primary languages, and d) consistently providing technical assistance to those taking the surveys.	Best practices are established
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR	<p>Collaborate with HQ to explore how the National Seafood Strategy can address trade and other market issues impacting fishery performance, including through development of local markets for domestic product and domestic seafood campaigns, improved and well-enforced seafood labeling practices, consumer education, and increased funding and enforcement to combat IUU seafood imports—especially during local harvest closures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage underserved communities in a shrimp fishery pilot program that works across federal agencies (e.g., International Trade Administration, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture, NOAA Seafood Inspection Program) to help achieve the short-, medium-, and long-term goals and objectives of the regional shrimp fisheries. Consider whether strategies employed by the Culebra Fishing Association pilot initiatives to reduce nutritional insecurity and make local seafood more accessible to underserved communities could be expanded to other communities/regions. Review Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations’ Voluntary Guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication and discuss with the Caribbean Council their potential for assisting small-scale fisheries in the U.S. Caribbean. 	<p>Number of issues affecting underserved communities addressed by the National Seafood Strategy</p> <p>Shrimp pilot program is developed and executed</p> <p>Culebra’s Fishing Association pilot initiatives and FAO guidelines are reviewed for broader applicability in collaboration with the Caribbean Fishery Management Council</p>

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: SFD SEFSC: DIR; SSRG	Pursue a safe fishing zone designation by the International Maritime Organization for Lang Bank along the eastern side of St. Croix to prevent disruption of fishing activities by large vessels transiting the area.	NOAA’s National Ocean Service is consulted for input on how to apply for the designation Relevant paperwork is submitted and tracked to final decision
SERO: DIR; SFD	Engage the regional fishery management councils in identifying and addressing any barriers that may unintentionally lead to the systemic exclusion of underserved communities. Encourage the councils to continue their efforts to incorporate EEJ principles into operating procedures, codes of conduct, and daily practice by members, staff, and advisory panels to avoid unintentional barriers to equitable involvement in regional marine fisheries.	Regional fishery management council policies and protocols are reviewed and updated as appropriate to ensure harassment prevention, training, and codes of conduct are included
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR; SFD; SSRG	Identify and present to regional fishery management councils key barriers that can hinder underserved community access to Gulf of Mexico reef fish and South Atlantic snapper grouper fisheries (e.g., eligibility criteria, access to capital) and collaborate with the councils to explore and identify potential options for addressing identified barriers. Develop a plan, strategy, and schedule for addressing those items that NOAA Fisheries can address independently (e.g., communication, administrative, system, marketplace issues) and for working with the councils to identify options to address the remaining challenges. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prioritize NOAA Fisheries Southeast work on Gulf Council fishery management plan amendments designed to address identified barriers in the Gulf IFQ fisheries and increase IFQ marketplace transparency by creating an information message board that advertises people’s intent to sell shares or allocation, and providing information about the average price of shares, allocation, and ex-vessel values of landings, as appropriate. ● Work with the South Atlantic and Caribbean councils to proactively eliminate or minimize any barriers associated with the design of new limited access programs proposed by the councils for the commercial or for-hire fisheries. 	Information is shared with regional fishery management councils to communicate (a) factors that constrain access to permits and shares, and (b) strategies that could alleviate such constraints
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Work with NOAA General Counsel and NOAA Fisheries HQ offices to develop policy guidance addressing use of stipends, travel reimbursement, and liaison activities to support underserved community engagement objectives.	Policy guidance is developed

Additionally, we have identified further policy actions needed to ensure the equitable distribution of opportunities and services in the Southeast. We intend to prioritize this work in future years, based on available funding:

Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions to Ensure that our Policies Promote Equal Opportunities for All and Do Not Create Unintended Inequities or Unequal Burdens for Underserved Communities

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SERO: OMI	Simplify fishery permit application and renewal processes and provide easy-to-access technical support for use by applicants.	Fisherman feedback	Staff Time Funding, Translation
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: SSRG	Review and apply November 2022 White House guidance and implementation memo to develop a policy framework for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding local and traditional ecological knowledge. ● Growing and maintaining positive relationships needed to appropriately gather local and traditional ecological knowledge. ● Considering, including, and applying such knowledge when appropriate in fishery data collection, science, and management, and aquaculture planning and development; and incorporating ideas and lessons learned from other regions where applicable. 	Local and traditional ecological knowledge policy framework is established	Staff Time Funding, Travel

Objective 3

Benefits

This national objective aims to equitably distribute the benefits of our work; for example, by increasing underserved community access to current opportunities in the form of direct investments, grants, and decision support tools; by identifying new opportunities to deliver benefits to underserved communities; and by institutionalizing equity in these benefits over the long term. NOAA Fisheries Southeast manages several competitive grants programs each year; provides educational opportunities to preK-12 students, youth, and adults through formal and informal environmental stewardship programs; and provides other benefits to communities in the form of internships, cooperative and experimental fishery research opportunities, and conservation and recovery of threatened and endangered species, their habitat, and essential fish habitat. And we have been working to increase the benefits of this work to underserved communities in recent years. Specific examples include:

- Incorporating objectives and criteria into environmental education grants in the Gulf of Mexico that emphasize the importance of leading with equity, capacity building, and understanding and supporting the needs of underserved communities
- Engaging in outreach to local schools to encourage involvement and support science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs in underserved communities
- Expanding the reach of recruitment opportunities to underserved communities through a new communication network with minority-serving institutions
- Supporting paid aquaculture internship opportunities for students in underserved communities
- Partnering with non-governmental organizations to host family fishing events for economically disadvantaged students
- Securing an additional \$500,000 to improve the science informing fishery management in the U.S. Caribbean
- Proactively collaborating with U.S. Caribbean communities in the form of marine spatial planning workshops to minimize conflicts and identify opportunities to engage in offshore wind and aquaculture in the U.S. Caribbean
- Proposing a new approach to evaluating species recovery grants that was adopted at the national level and ensures fair representation and treatment of tribal projects

The feedback we received from our 2023 EEJ engagement efforts highlight the value of this work. We recognize that additional actions will be required to effectively ensure our benefits and services are equitably distributed now and into the future, consistent with this national objective. Key barriers include: cultural and language differences impeding access to information and opportunities; complex application systems that are often difficult to navigate and that require specialized knowledge; laws, regulations, and policies that require complex cross-jurisdictional communication and engagement; and gaps in our ability to effectively engage with communities on these issues. The information we learned from our public engagement efforts emphasizes the importance of creating more intentional, inclusive, and transparent approaches to addressing these barriers. In response, we have prioritized work on the following actions:

Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions to Distribute Benefits Equitably Among Communities by Increasing Access to Opportunities for Underserved Communities

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: ALL SEFSC: ALL	Track and report on the percentage of grants, experimental fishing permits, and other benefits and opportunities allocated to underserved communities.	Tracking and reporting mechanisms are developed Tracking and reporting mechanisms are used to analyze the allocation of resources to underserved communities
SERO: SFD; OMI SEFSC: SFD; OMI	Identify and address potential barriers and resulting inequities that underserved communities may face when accessing agency acquisition and financial assistance opportunities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work to incorporate EEJ considerations into best practices for designing competitive funding opportunities, recruiting applicants, reviewing applications, selecting recipients, etc. ● Provide ongoing technical support, including grant-writing seminars, for underserved persons and others pursuing NMFS opportunities. 	Number of grant/funding/contracting program selection criteria reviewed and modified Feedback on accessibility of benefits and services Technical support and grant-writing seminars are provided to underserved communities
SERO: DIR SEFSC: ALL	Work with minority-serving institutions (e.g., HBCUs, HSIs, etc.) to develop or support scholarship, internship, and mentorship opportunities for local residents to train and remain in/contribute to their communities; for example, Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education vocational fisheries track and Minorities in Aquaculture Internship Program.	Number of scholarship, internship, and mentorship opportunities provided to advance participation of youth in mission-related educational programs
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR; SSRG	Promote the consideration of underserved community needs in federal fishery disaster assistance allocations in collaboration with HQ, states/territories, and other partners. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Proactively work with fishing communities to identify priority needs. ● Communicate priority needs to FEMA, state, territory, and other federal partners. ● Explore options for incorporating underserved community objectives into spend plan guidance. ● Train staff working in state and territorial agencies in the use of the Community Social Vulnerability Indicators (CSVI) Toolbox and other tools that could be used to incorporate and consider community vulnerability information in response and relief efforts. 	New communication pathways are established to share information on underserved community needs Select state and territorial agency staff are trained in use of social vulnerability indicators
SERO: DIR; SFD	Collaborate with other federal agencies and state and local governments to explore and pursue opportunities to preserve existing infrastructure and identify suitable locations and funding	Grants/funding is identified and pursued to sustain, maintain,

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SEFSC: DIR; SFD	support for the development of more sustainable, resilient working waterfronts with icehouses, docks, and cold storage facilities. Locate new facilities in underserved communities where possible and consider incorporating community "evacuation or disaster centers" that can support critical infrastructure needs following disaster events. Work with the Department of Transportation to evaluate how 2024 revisions to the Port Infrastructure Development Program can support this work.	upgrade, or develop resilient working waterfronts
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: SSRG	Collaborate with NOAA Fisheries Finance Program to develop and distribute information in multiple languages about the various options available inside and outside NOAA and the Department of Commerce to assist underserved communities in accessing capital and other forms of assistance to enable them to successfully compete for limited access fishery and aquaculture opportunities and maintain profitable businesses (e.g., https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/bulletin/information-about-loan-opportunities-available-individual-fishing-quota-ifq , https://www.usgrants.org/business/fishing-companies).	Options for enabling access to capital and financial assistance are identified and communicated
SERO: PRD; HCD; SFD SEFSC: SSRG	Use ESA/EFH consultation responsibilities to promote the collection of data needed to monitor and address the impacts of major infrastructure projects on NOAA Fisheries trust resources, with the goal of increasing attention to those resources valued or relied on by underserved communities. Consider lessons learned from the blue justice movement for small-scale fisheries (see Farmery et al., 2021 ; Campbell et al., 2021), in relation to other blue economy sectors being developed in the U.S. Caribbean.	EFH Conservation Recommendations and ESA Terms and Conditions / Reasonable and Prudent Alternatives promote monitoring and mitigation of impacts to resources of known value to underserved communities
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR; SSRG	Collaborate across NOAA to promote the evaluation of natural resource injuries (including lost human use, as well as social, cultural, and economic benefits) borne by underserved communities, the equitable allocation of restoration projects for those injuries, and effective monitoring to inform needed adaptations.	Number of natural resource damage assessment cases that consider natural resource and human use losses borne by underserved communities and engagement in restoration planning
SERO: Wind Team SEFSC: Wind Team	Continue to work with federal partners to prioritize communication and collaboration with underserved communities directly affected by offshore wind energy projects to minimize navigational hazards and user conflicts.	Underserved community feedback on wind energy areas and leasing proposals

Additionally, we identified other actions we believe are needed to effectively address this core area, but would require additional resources. We intend to prioritize this work as funding is identified in future years:

Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions to Distribute Benefits Equitably Among Communities by Increasing Access to Opportunities for Underserved Communities

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	<p>Advance and improve territorial fisheries science and management by increasing funding for data collection, processing, and analysis. Prioritize the collection of data to support ecosystem-based management strategies, and enforcement in the region.</p> <p>Partner with territorial government agencies to invest in a permanent research and reporting process that periodically generates a full socio-economic analysis of fishing in the U.S. Caribbean, where such work: (a) builds upon historical baseline datasets, (b) fosters local trust in NOAA Fisheries and research in the region, and (c) involves local residents in the data collection process.</p>	<p>Percentage increase in funding for U.S. Caribbean fisheries data collection, science, and management</p> <p>Increased enforcement presence in the U.S. Caribbean</p> <p>Percentage increase in number of stocks for which status determinations can be made, including through use of indicator-based approaches</p>	<p>Staff Time</p> <p>Funding, Other</p>
SERO: SFD; OMI SEFSC: DIR; OMI; SSRG	<p>Collaborate with minority-serving institutions (e.g., HBCUs, HSIs, etc.), the aquaculture industry, fishermen, and other underserved community members to develop or support high school technical courses and other vocational training and technical assistance programs in fishing and marine aquaculture.</p>	<p>Number of vocational programs developed or supported that are accessible to underserved community members</p> <p>Rate of job placement</p>	<p>Staff Time</p> <p>Funding, Translation</p> <p>Funding, Other</p>

Objective 4

Outreach and Engagement

NOAA Fisheries’ National EEJ Strategy emphasizes the need to build strong and lasting relationships with underserved communities, and to determine the best approaches for ongoing engagement and sharing of vital information with all affected interests. While this guidance reflects approaches currently being used by NOAA Fisheries Southeast, our public engagement efforts underscored the importance of tailoring outreach and engagement work to better address specific community conditions, needs, and interests. As such, a wide range of potential actions have been identified to assist in diminishing existing barriers to two-way interaction with underserved communities.

Critical barriers in this case include factors that hinder communication between the agency and underserved persons, and limitations to access and inclusion in NOAA Fisheries programs and decision-making processes. Beyond basic language-related barriers, navigation of online resources can be a problem for many people due to a lack of familiarity with the process, as well as lack of access or capacity to use internet-based services. In addition, when searching for assistance, it is often the case that human resources are not readily available to assist those who have important questions and concerns.

NOAA Fisheries Southeast is working to further incorporate EEJ considerations into our outreach and engagement plans and processes to better address such barriers and related challenges. Examples of efforts we have undertaken to support this objective in recent years include:

- Designating tribal liaisons who work to build relationships with tribes and other underserved communities, and thereby improve communication and meaningful work with tribes across the region
- Translating select information products for use by those whose first language is Spanish or Vietnamese

- Opportunistically disseminating information about NOAA opportunities via community liaisons around the Southeast, where such opportunities include: Requests for Proposals, scholarships, employment possibilities, and others
- Instituting listening and Q&A sessions at regional fishery management council meetings to assist with accurate communication of any policy changes that may affect underserved persons or communities
- Funding an experience-based learning program titled Recreational Engagement and Ecological Learning Series (REELS) in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, that provides opportunities to form long-term linkages between staff working on habitat conservation activities (restoration, monitoring, and education) and a) local charter captains, b) students from underserved communities in St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes, and c) members of the Atakapas-Ishak/Chawasha Tribe of Grand Bayou, Louisiana.

Our public engagement efforts made clear the value of effective outreach and communication in achieving NOAA Fisheries’ goal of better serving people and communities across the Southeast. Through that work, we learned that more and better interaction can only improve delivery of government services to marginalized populations. In response, we have prioritized work on the following actions:

Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions to Build Relationships with Underserved Communities to Better Understand their Engagement Preferences, and Improve Information Sharing With All Communities

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Work with regional NOAA Sea Grant programs to identify and institutionalize new communication pathways with underserved communities.	NOAA Fisheries-Sea Grant conversations are organized and completed Related deliverables are developed, communicated to staff, and incorporated into regional outreach strategies
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Establish an approach to support routine translation services at SERO and the SEFSC for scientific, policy, and opportunity messaging. This should include use of the agency’s State Department contract, AI translation services, and potentially regional-scale contracts if and as funding is identified for that purpose.	Percentage increase in management, scientific, and opportunity messages that are communicated in languages other than English
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR; SSRG	Partner with identified underserved community members to develop culturally appropriate strategies for improving communication with underserved communities in a way that addresses the full range of barriers—including technological, language, and literacy limitations and issues—with prospective communication options, including electronic and paper mail-outs, text messaging, community newspapers, local television and radio stations, topic-specific calls and/or in-person discussions, podcasts, web and social media postings, and webinars. Consider developing tailored strategies for communicating about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The status, availability, and schedule for federal fishery disaster declarations and assistance and (to the extent possible), the effects of disaster events on underserved communities and infrastructure. • Prospective and actual regulatory changes. • Grants and other opportunities. 	Number of approaches employed to address identified barriers Number of information products that are designed and distributed for use by underserved persons Underserved community feedback on outreach efforts

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: ALL SEFSC: ALL	Identify or establish division-specific points of contact to support the review of information and outreach products for use of plain language. Develop new strategies (e.g., executive summaries, FAQs) to support the communication of results from stock assessments and other technical information to the public.	Plain language is incorporated into appropriate agency information products Underserved community feedback on readability and understandability of communications
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR; Comms; SSRG	Work with NOAA and other partners to explore the potential for providing space and technical support to underserved people and communities who wish to participate in virtual or in-person meetings but who face barriers to access.	Number of partnerships identified that could be used for this purpose
SEFSC: DIR; SFD; SSRG	Develop plain language outreach materials in English and other regionally important languages to describe why fisherman survey research is needed to accomplish our mission, how the work is conducted, and how the information will be used; include such materials with each new survey package.	Survey research is consistently preceded by explanation of its need, intent, basic approach, and potential outcomes Fisherman feedback on effectiveness of the strategy

Additionally, we have identified other actions we believe are needed to effectively support this objective, but that would require additional resources to undertake in full. We intend to prioritize this work as funding is identified in future years:

Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions to Build Relationships with Underserved Communities to Better Understand their Engagement Preferences, and Improve Information Sharing With All Communities

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Prioritize translation needs during fiscal year activity and budget planning and develop and track spend plans for allocated resources.	Percentage increase in management, scientific, and opportunity messages that are communicated in languages other than English	Staff Time Funding, Translation Funding, Other
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Work with underserved communities to establish a system of community liaisons, using the support of NOAA Sea Grant and other trusted and knowledgeable partners to enable a strategic and cost-effective approach to outreach.	Community liaison plan is established in collaboration with key representatives of underserved communities in each sub-region	Staff Time and Travel Funding, Other

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: SSRG	Work with regional fishery management councils to develop strategies to enable more frequent and meaningful outreach and interaction with women, including fishery participants, and women who are members of ethnic minority groups, who identify as LGBTQ+, who are partners of commercial fishermen, and/or who are members of other underserved populations.	Number of strategies that are designed, employed, and afforded feedback opportunities to enable more frequent and meaningful outreach and interaction with women Percentage increase of women with sustained engagement in mission-related activities	Staff Time and Travel Funding, Translation

Objective 5 Inclusive Governance

NOAA Fisheries National EEJ Strategy emphasizes the importance of meaningfully involving underserved communities in the decisions that affect them by ensuring broad and diverse participation on advisory bodies and in decision processes, and in programs that call for cooperative management, co-stewardship of marine resources, and community empowerment. Our public engagement efforts highlighted several barriers related to this objective, many of which are highlighted in NASEM 2024. These include a lack of awareness of who our underserved communities are and how they are impacted by the work we do, which makes it challenging to ensure these communities are adequately represented in relevant decision processes; factors related to cost, language differences, geographic locations, and differing cultures that limit underserved communities’ ability to access decision processes; and institutional barriers that may benefit certain groups or individuals while marginalizing others. Acknowledging these processes and how they are shaping current approaches to management and governance will provide important context for better understanding the ways in which certain EEJ policies are received (NASEM 2024).

The Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and Caribbean fishery management councils are doing remarkable work to address common access barriers to engagement in fishery management decision-making. Examples include:

- Inviting virtual participation in council, committee, and advisory panel meetings, including the opportunity to provide public testimony in a virtual format
- Recording meetings for those who are unable to join at the scheduled time
- Enabling electronic voting opportunities
- Strategically selecting public hearing venues to accommodate participation by fishing communities, often in community centers commonly visited by the target audiences
- Creating video messaging to communicate proposed regulatory changes, stock assessment results, fishery closure information, and other relevant information
- Organizing meetings to provide opportunities for council members to have productive dialogues with underserved fishery participants, and to build relationships and increase knowledge of the fishery management process with and among such persons
- Implementing website widgets (such as screen reader compatibility) to facilitate use by individuals with disabilities
- Providing real-time translation and interpretation services in the U.S. Caribbean and more limited topic-specific translations in other sub-regions
- Involving the public in scientific research through citizen science initiatives

- Expertly using blogs, Facebook, and other social media tools to reach youth and others who are not accessible through traditional communication methods.

NOAA Fisheries Southeast has also been working to address barriers to inclusive governance in recent years, including:

- Supporting and participating in the Southeast Marine Resources Education Program (MREP) created by fishermen for fishermen to improve understanding of and engagement in the federal fishery science and management process through informal, hands-on educational experience
- Collaborating with the Caribbean Fishery Management Council and Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources to establish the Education Program for Recreational Saltwater Anglers in Puerto Rico, which educates local recreational fishermen on fishery laws and regulations, the fishery management process, best practices for catch-and-release fishing, and more
- Collecting local and traditional ecological knowledge through work with fishery participants around the Gulf and South Atlantic
- Hosting a 2024 strategic planning science workshop in the U.S. Caribbean to engage locals in identifying ecosystem data goals and other high-priority objectives
- Engaging U.S. Caribbean communities in the listing process for queen conch through accessible informational meetings and public hearings

Despite these achievements, additional work is needed to more fully engage underserved people and communities in the decisions that affect them. As such, we intend to prioritize the following actions:

Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions to Enable Meaningful Involvement of Underserved Communities in Decision Making Processes

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR	Work with the regional fishery management councils on strategies to increase engagement of persons from underserved communities in public meetings and input processes, and on council advisory bodies.	Number of new strategies used to engage underserved community members
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR	Collaborate with HQ to develop regional rollout strategies designed to notify underserved communities and other affected interests when NOAA Fisheries seeks nominations from state governors for council appointments, and communicate information about pending openings and the appointments process.	Regional rollout strategies developed Number of communications about upcoming appointment opportunities and process
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Encourage the regional fishery management councils to consider how their Outreach and Education Committees/Advisory Panels or new Ad Hoc EEJ Advisory Panels could be used to support implementation of the Southeast EEJ Implementation Plan and advise on other EEJ issues related to council activities.	The potential use of Committees and Advisory Panels to advise on and advance EEJ issues are considered by the Councils

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR	Collaborate with the regional fishery management councils to explore ways to ensure welcoming/safe agency and council meeting environments through the use of ground rules, facilitators, or other approaches that prioritize inclusion, equality, and the value of diverse perspectives. Promptly and directly address harmful or threatening communications or harassment that limits interest or engagement in council or agency activities.	Number of strategies or approaches implemented to ensure inclusion and equality Demonstrated commitment to addressing harmful or intimidating communications Underserved community feedback on these efforts
SEFSC: DIR SERO: ALL	Assess the current level and type of participation of underserved persons on other (non-regional fishery management council) advisory bodies in the Southeast in order to identify any issues that may prevent participation and co-develop strategies to increase participation by such persons moving forward.	Extent to which engagement of underserved community members is expanded beyond baseline
SERO: SFD	Collaborate with state representatives on the regional fishery management councils and with Council Outreach and Education Committees/Advisory Panels to develop or further distribute existing educational materials (e.g., brochures, videos) designed to help fishermen better understand a) the authorities, roles and responsibilities of federal versus state fishery agencies, councils, and commissions and b) who to contact for information and support on local and regional issues and opportunities.	Number of educational materials co-developed and distributed to increase fisherman capacity to engage in fishery management decision processes Underserved community feedback on educational materials
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Encourage the Southeast Marine Resources Education Program to consider strategies for increasing underserved community participation in the program with the goal of supporting regional efforts to address the educational barriers that hinder our ability to advance our inclusive governance objective.	Accessibility of MREP to underserved communities is considered and discussed
SEFSC: DIR	Work with council staff and the councils' Scientific and Statistical Committees to enable Advisory Panels to inform the identification of scientific research priorities each budget cycle, and consider ways to enable fishermen to contribute to or participate in funded research through competitive grants, Exempted Fishing Permits, and other mechanisms where possible.	Council Advisory Panels are enabled to identify pertinent science priorities Increase in number of Advisory Panel members/fishermen participating in research projects
SERO: PRD	Engage underserved people and communities prior to ESA listings and development of recovery plans, status reviews, or critical habitat designations by hosting accessible informational meetings and public hearings or other mechanisms.	Number of ESA actions preceded by accessible informational meetings and public hearings Underserved community feedback on those efforts

Additionally, we have identified a wider range of actions needed to effectively address barriers to inclusive governance in the Southeast. We intend to prioritize this work as funding is identified in future years:

Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions to Enable Meaningful Involvement of Underserved Communities in Decision Making Processes

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR; SSRG; SFD	Explore the potential to leverage the skills and relationships of community liaisons to gather and report input from rural and other underserved communities that would otherwise face access barriers.	Discussions are organized with community liaisons to explore the feasibility of this outreach strategy	Staff Time Funding, Other
SERO: DIR; OMI; SFD SEFSC: DIR; OMI; SFD; SSRG	Consider targeted/special competitive grants and pilot projects as ways to involve underserved fishery participants in regional research and monitoring activities.	Number of grants and pilot projects available to underserved fishery participants	Staff Time Funding, Other
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR	Fund the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic fishery management councils to provide real-time translation of meetings (or components thereof, as appropriate) so that persons whose first language is not English can easily understand and contribute to the discussion, and/or make council meeting recordings available in appropriate primary languages for those who do not have time or capability to listen to the meetings in real time.	Number or percentage of meetings for which real-time language translation is provided	Staff time Funding, Translation Funding, Other

Objective 6 Empowering Environment

NOAA Fisheries National EEJ Strategy recognizes the agency’s EEJ objectives cannot be achieved without the institutional support, including training and resources, needed to implement multiple EEJ approaches at every level. As noted in the Introduction, the success of this plan will rely on significant investments in the resources required to do the work, as well as a marked cultural change in the way we do business. While the implementation of the priorities identified herein will require an “all hands on deck” philosophy, NASEM (2024) notes that “significant investments in capacity in the non-economic social sciences within NMFS” will be needed to acquire and analyze the data needed to assess equity (NASEM 2024) and to achieve equity in federally managed fisheries (NASEM 2024, Recommendation 3-3). While that barrier requires considerable resources to overcome, it represents a fundamental step toward addressing the many challenges that presently limit our EEJ abilities across the region.

Despite these capacity limitations, NOAA Fisheries Southeast has been working to create an empowering environment within our organizations by:

- Identifying EEJ as an organizational priority
- Employing internship recruitment policies that encourage the participation of under-represented minorities, and hiring policies that encourage diverse candidates
- Collaborating with federal partners to share information and leverage resources where possible
- Investing significant staff time and resources in the collaborative development of this plan. That work involved:
 - Staff participation on the national NOAA Fisheries EEJ Working Group and Executive Committee
 - EEJ-specific work and collaboration with regional fishery management council social scientists and EEJ representatives

- Identification of and relationship building with underserved community representatives
- Engagement with underserved persons to gather their perspectives
- Planning and conduct of focus group meetings, scoping activities, and the agency’s first-ever multilingual webinar
- Numerous presentations, updates, and information gathering activities with regional fishery management councils and other partners
- The summary and analysis of the information learned through this effort in the form of this implementation plan

To further empower the achievement of our EEJ objectives, NOAA Fisheries Southeast has prioritized work on the following actions:

Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions to Provide the Institutional Support Needed to Implement Multiple EEJ Approaches within NOAA Fisheries Southeast

Who	Immediate or Near-Term (Funded) Actions	Metrics
SERO: ALL SEFSC: ALL	Integrate immediate near-term Southeast EEJ Implementation Plan Action Items into organizational priorities through annual planning processes.	Number of divisions with EEJ activities and milestones Percentage of EEJ activities and milestones accomplished
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Develop a strategy for pursuing the funding needed to address longer-term unfunded Southeast EEJ Implementation Plan Action Items, including through support to the regional fishery management councils, state fishery agencies, and Sea Grant as applicable.	Strategy developed Number of proposals submitted
SERO: ALL SEFSC: ALL	Establish sub-regional teams of NOAA Fisheries and council staff members to support implementation of the EEJ plan.	Teams are established to support implementation of the EEJ Plan in each of the three sub-regions
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR; SSRG; SFD	Work with HQ to train regional NOAA Fisheries and council staff and members on regional EEJ objectives to build a shared understanding and increase our collective capacity to succeed.	Number of EEJ training sessions convened Number of staff members trained
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Build relationships with minority-serving institutions (e.g., HBCUs, HSIs, etc.) to identify and address hidden biases and barriers to entry of underserved persons into ocean-related careers via the STEM pipeline.	Number of partnerships created with minority-serving institutions
SERO: DIR, OMI SEFSC: DIR; OMI; SSRG	Identify scholarship, internship, and mentorship programs that can be used to recruit underserved community members, along with sources that are readily accessible to underserved communities; draft targeted language for use in opportunity announcements.	Number of opportunities established and advertised to underserved communities
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Organize (or participate in) regional EEJ workshops and conversations with federal, state, and local partners to share pertinent information, including lessons learned, and to leverage resources.	Number of strategic partner workshops organized and/or attended

While we expect this suite of immediate and near-term actions to substantially improve regional capabilities, capacity limitations in the form of staff time and expertise will continue to present the greatest barrier to our long-term success. As such, we also intend to pursue funding to support these additional actions that we believe are needed to effectively support the EEJ empowerment objective over time:

Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions to Provide the Institutional Support Needed to Implement Multiple EEJ Approaches within NOAA Fisheries Southeast

Who	Longer-Term (Unfunded) Actions Dependent on Additional Resources	Metrics	Resources Needed
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Hire FTE EEJ Coordinators at SERO and the SEFSC to support community identification, outreach, and engagement functions as well as implementation of our regional EEJ plan.	FTE EEJ Coordinators are hired at SERO and the SEFSC	Funding, FTE
SERO: DIR; SFD SEFSC: DIR, SSRG	Prioritize hiring additional FTE anthropologists or other non-economic social scientists in SERO and SEFSC staffing plans.	Number of FTE anthropologists or other non-economic social scientists hired in the Southeast	Funding, FTE
SERO: DIR; SFD	Prioritize hiring additional FTE biologists in SERO’s Sustainable Fisheries Division’s Caribbean Branch and consider locating the position(s) in the islands.	Number of additional FTE biologists hired to contribute to the SFD mission in the Caribbean	Funding, FTE
SERO: ALL SEFSC: ALL	Require staff who produce or review NOAA Fisheries communication outputs to take plain language training (and annual refresher courses); purchase and make available for use editing software.	Periodic communications training requirements for staff whose responsibilities involve oral or written interaction with the public	Funding, Training
SERO: ALL SEFSC: DIR; SSRG	Identify points of contact who can provide technical assistance to underserved community members and liaisons who wish to apply for grants and other funding opportunities.	Number of contacts identified for this purpose	Staff Time Funding, Translation
SERO: DIR SEFSC: DIR	Identify or establish one or more multilingual liaisons at SERO and the SEFSC who are responsible for responding to questions about mission-related activities (e.g., fishery and protected species regulations, permits and permit applications, observers, surveys, grants and other opportunities, contact information for other relevant line offices or partners) with the goal of providing one-stop-shop service.	One or more one-stop-shop multilingual liaisons are identified or established for this purpose Underserved community feedback on one-stop-shop efforts	Staff Time Funding, Translation Funding, Other
SERO: SFD SEFSC: DIR; SSRG; SFD	Provide facilitation training to port agents and other staff who interact directly with the public that is specifically focused on interfacing with underserved communities.	Facilitation training requirements are established for port agents and others who interact with fishery participants and other members of the public on a regular basis Number of staff members trained	Staff Time Funding, Translation Funding, Training
SERO: OMI SEFSC: OMI	Train grant reviewers on how to avoid or diminish the types of bias that may disadvantage underserved communities during the review process	Unconscious bias or related training requirements are established for grant reviewers	Staff Time Funding, Training

Partnership

The scope of NOAA Fisheries' EEJ mission in the Southeast region is such that other government agencies and a wide range of non-governmental organizations will be needed to assist the agency as it works to incorporate EEJ principles into its missions and programs in the years to come. The Southeast EEJ team involved in development of this implementation plan identified many prospective partners during the course of its engagement work around the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and U.S. Caribbean during 2023. Would you like to partner with us on this effort? If so, please email us at nmfs.ser.EEJ@noaa.gov.