



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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Law Enforcement Committee Meeting Summary Joint Session with the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission LEC

May 5 - 6, 2026

ASMFC LEC Members: Scott Pearce, Chair, FL; Rob Beal, ME; Delayne Brown, NH; Jeff Mercer, RI; Keith Williams, CT; Sean Reilly, NY; Brian Scott, NJ; Nicholas Couch, DE; Doug Daniels, PA; David Bailey, MD; Matt Rogers, VA; Edward Mann, NC; Michael Paul Thomas, SC; David Brady, GA; Tom Bleifus, USCG; Paul Chapelle, USFWS; Wayne Hettenbach, USDOJ; Joseph Heckwolf, NOAA GC

ASMFC Staff: James Boyle and Kurt Blanchard

GSMFC LEC Members: Les Casterline, Chair, TX; Dean Aucoin, LA; Patrick Carron, MS; Jason Downey, AL

Other Participants: Douglas Ault, Bryan Landry, Edward Willis, Joshua Hudson, Scott Simpson, Jeffrey Turcotte, Victor Artrip and Savannah Lewis

The Law Enforcement Committee (LEC) conducted a hybrid meeting in a joint session with the Gulf State Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) LEC during the 2026 Spring meeting of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) in Arlington, Virginia. The chair welcomed a new member, Major Edward Mann of North Carolina, and recognized Major Jason Walker from North Carolina for his years of participation in the LEC. The committee discussed the following topics.

Species Discussion

Tautog Management Discussion - The committee reviewed the Tautog Management Board's intent to advance Addendum 1 to Amendment 1 of the Tautog Fishery Management Plan (FMP). Staff provided details about a proposal from the State of New York, which requested that the addendum includes an option to utilize an alternate tag type for commercially taken tautog. This request arose due to persistent concerns regarding damage to fish retained in New York's live market fishery.

The LEC continues to monitor this issue closely and is informed about the research and testing conducted by the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC) as they work to identify a suitable alternate tag option. At this stage, NYDEC has not finalized a specific alternate tag, though potential options are under consideration.

The LEC supports the commercial tagging program outlined in the FMP and is open to endorsing an alternative tag, provided it meets the established requirements of the program. The

committee requests the opportunity to review the proposed option in the draft addendum before the Board grants final approval.

Other Business

NOAA Joint Enforcement Agreement (JEA) Program Update - ASAC Bryan Landry from NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (NOAA) engaged the committee in a discussion concerning the status of the JEA program. He shared a positive update, reporting that NOAA funding for the program has been included in the Fiscal Year 2026 budget. This development is welcomed by the LEC as it supports the continuation and effectiveness of the JEA program.

The LEC reviewed its shared expectations and priorities regarding the JEA program. The committee reaffirmed the commitment of participating states to the program's objectives and collaborative enforcement efforts. Members expressed hope that NOAA will further enhance funding for the JEAs in the Fiscal Year 2027 budget, strengthening the partnership and advancing fisheries enforcement initiatives.

Guidelines for Resource Managers on the Enforcement of Fishery Management Measures - At the request of the GSMFC LEC, ASMFC staff delivered a comprehensive presentation focused on the development, history, and application of the guidelines document. Key points included the document's evolution, its practical use in fisheries enforcement, and how it addresses challenges faced by managers working to ensure compliance with regulatory frameworks.

NOAA Field Forensic Program - NOAA has initiated pilot testing of a newly developed rapid polymerase chain reaction (PCR) device. This technology allows officers to perform genetic analysis directly in the field, delivering immediate results and eliminating the need to send samples to external laboratories.

U.S. law prohibits the false labeling of imported seafood products. Despite this, visually identifying fish species during port inspections is often difficult, as physical characteristics alone may not be sufficient. In the past, NOAA officers collected genetic samples and sent them to forensic laboratories for confirmation, a process that could take weeks and potentially delay the movement of seafood through U.S. ports.

The introduction of rapid PCR technology provides enforcement personnel with the capability to swiftly identify fish species on-site. This advancement helps officers collect evidence and investigate seafood fraud more efficiently. By expediting the identification process, the device helps prevent illegal seafood products from entering the U.S. marketplace and strengthens the effectiveness of port inspection operations.

Court Authorized Surveillance – Sgt. Jeffrey Turcotte of the Maine Department of Marine Resources (MEDMR) conducted a presentation on best practices in the use of court authorized surveillance techniques. Sgt. Turcotte highlighted successful case prosecutions from the state of Maine and the processes used in supporting these cases. This presentation focused on the illegal deployment of traps in the lobster fishery.

Case Study – Operation Scaled Deception – Lt. Patrick Carron from the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources (MSDMR) offered a presentation on this enforcement action as it relates to the fraudulent use of trip tickets in their commercial fisheries. The presentation details a multi-year investigation into illegal finfish harvesting and trafficking between Mississippi and Alabama, focusing on Spotted Seatrout and Red Drum. The investigation began in 2018 when Alabama Marine Resources Division (ALMRD) noticed large quantities of Spotted Seatrout being sold in Alabama without proper reporting on Mississippi trip tickets. Mississippi has strict regulations, including a total allowable catch for Spotted Seatrout, which was exploited by commercial fishermen who sold unreported catches to a seafood dealer in Alabama.

In 2020, complaints arose about suspiciously high quantities of Red Drum being harvested and sold, leading to further investigations. Authorities discovered fraudulent reporting, hidden compartments in boats, and connections between Mississippi and Alabama fishermen. Cellular data and social media posts revealed that fishermen were laundering illegally harvested fish from Alabama on Mississippi trip tickets.

The investigation, dubbed "Operation Scaled Deception," involved collaboration between MSDMR, ALMRD, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). It identified forty-four participants in the scheme, resulting in eight convictions, \$21,446 in fines, and the lifetime forfeiture of gill net licenses for one dealer. The total amount of illegally harvested finfish was 101,673 pounds, with a retail value of \$1.53 million.

Key lessons learned include the need for better communication between agencies, the exploitation of regulatory differences between states, and the inadequacy of current fines to deter criminal activity.

Case Study – Operation Atlantis – Captain Scott Pearce from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) offered a presentation on the false tagging of seafood products. This presentation discussed illegal lobster importation, mislabeling practices, enforcement actions, violations, and legal proceedings related to Florida fisheries. The FWC and NOAA investigated Florida-based seafood companies for allegedly importing massive quantities of Caribbean lobster, mislabeling them as U.S. origin, and re-exporting to China. Inspections revealed violations such as improper reporting, lack of notification, and breaches of spiny lobster regulations. Federal charges including wire fraud and conspiracy were brought against two seafood dealers, highlighting concerns about reputational harm to American fishermen and insufficient government oversight.

The investigation began when officials noticed discrepancies in import documentation and shipping records, which prompted a series of inspections at warehouses and facilities. The companies failed to properly document the sources of their lobsters or notify authorities about incoming shipments, as required under both federal and state laws regulating seafood trade. These regulatory breaches included exporting lobsters that did not meet size requirements and failing to comply with conservation measures intended to protect the species. Prosecutors alleged that the deliberate mislabeling was intended to circumvent tariffs and trade

restrictions, contributing to unfair competition with legitimate U.S. producers. The probe aimed to determine how widespread this fraudulent practice had become within the industry and whether additional enforcement actions or regulatory reforms were needed to protect both marine resources and the integrity of American fisheries.

Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing Enforcement - Assistant Commander Game Warden Les Casterline of Texas Parks and Wildlife Division (TPWD) offered a presentation on his agency's effort in enforcement of IUU fishing. He discussed illegal fishing activities along the Texas/Mexico border, enforcement efforts, new initiatives to combat seafood fraud, and regulations for seafood import monitoring. The Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP) is designed to regulate the entry of seafood into the United States. This program tracks the journey of seafood products from the point of harvest all the way through to their arrival at U.S. borders. By monitoring this entire process, SIMP helps ensure that imported seafood meets legal requirements and maintains transparency throughout the supply chain. SIMP specifically targets thirteen priority species. Among these are red snapper, sharks, and blue crab. These species were selected due to their vulnerability to illegal fishing practices and the need for greater oversight in their trade.

To support lawful harvesting and production, the program requires comprehensive recordkeeping and data collection for each imported shipment. Importers must provide detailed documentation that demonstrates the seafood was harvested and produced in accordance with established laws and regulations. This information is then used to verify compliance and prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing from impacting U.S. markets.

These enforcement efforts have been in collaboration with partnered agencies, including TPWD, NOAA, Customs OFO, USFW, and the FDA.

A closed session was convened during our meeting to facilitate open discussion regarding new and emerging issues in law enforcement.

Each agency was given an opportunity to highlight its work and share updates on ongoing enforcement initiatives.