

# Fisheries FOCUS

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## ASMFC Releases Atlantic Menhaden Draft Addendum II for Public Comment

**T**he Commission's Atlantic Menhaden Management Board approved Draft Addendum II to Amendment 3 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for public comment. The Draft Addendum considers options to reduce the Chesapeake Bay Reduction Fishery Cap (Bay Cap) by up to 50% and distribute the cap more evenly throughout the fishing season. The options aim to alleviate a concentration of effort that may be affecting other fisheries within the Bay and other potential ecological impacts.

The Draft Addendum was initiated in response to concerns regarding declining pound net harvest and catch per unit effort in the Bay in recent years, coinciding with an increase in the concentration of reduction harvest in the summer months, and the possible downstream effects on menhaden predators.

The Draft Addendum also includes



options that link the Bay Cap to the coastwide total allowable catch to maintain a more fixed proportion between the two, as well as options to distribute the Bay Cap into three quota periods to prevent a concentration of reduction harvest in the spring and summer of the fishing season.

The states from Maine through Virginia will be conducting public hearings from mid-September to early October.

The public is encouraged to submit comments at any time during the public comment period but no later than **11:59 PM (EST) on October 9, 2026**. You can access the Draft Addendum, public hearing schedule, and ways to comment on the **Atlantic Menhaden Draft Addendum II Action Tracker**.

For more information, please contact **James Boyle**, FMP Coordinator.

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## Upcoming Meetings

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**ACCSP Operations Committee and Advisory Panel Preliminary Ranking Exercise**
- September 9  
**Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass Technical Committee**
- September 10  
**ACCSP Operations Committee and Advisory Panel Preliminary Ranking Exercise**
- September 10  
**Atlantic Striped Bass Steering Committee for Work Group on Future Management**
- September 14–18  
**South Atlantic Fishery Management Council**
- September 15–17  
**New England Fishery Management Council**
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**Atlantic Herring Area 1A Days Out Meeting**
- September 22–23  
**ACCSP Operations and Advisory Panel Committees**
- September 22–25  
**Methods Workshop for Atlantic Cobia Stock Assessment**
- September 23–24  
**ASMFC/MAFMC Recreational Sector Separation Workshop**
- October 6–8  
**Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council**
- October 14–15  
**ACCSP Recreational Technical Committee and MRIP Wave Meeting**
- November 9–12  
**ASMFC 84th Annual Meeting**
- December 7–11  
**South Atlantic Fishery Management Council**
- December 14–17  
**Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council**

## Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission was formed by the 15 Atlantic coastal states in 1942 for the promotion and protection of coastal fishery resources. The Commission serves as the deliberative body of the Atlantic coastal states, coordinating the conservation and management of nearshore fishery resources, including marine, shell and diadromous species.

The 15 member states of the Commission are: Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

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**Tina L. Berger**, *Editor*  
*Director of Communications*  
**tberger@asmfc.org**

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Phone ..... (703) 842-0740  
Email ..... **info@asmfc.org**  
Online ..... **asmfc.org**

# Inshore Tidal Marshes & Estuarine Habitats Play Important Role for Popular South Atlantic Species



Photo (c) Ken Neill

**S**potted seatrout, commonly found from the Chesapeake Bay south to Florida, are a favorite among both commercial harvesters and recreational anglers in the Mid- and South Atlantic. These vibrant fish thrive in estuaries and coastal waters, migrating seasonally to spawn and enjoy different habitats throughout the year. Known for their strong fight and delicious taste, spotted seatrout support a bustling recreational fishery, particularly from North Carolina through Florida. While commercial catches have declined over the years due to increased regulations, recreational

fishing remains strong, with millions caught and many released to help sustain their populations.

Managed with size and bag limits, efforts are focused on protecting their habitats and ensuring that spotted seatrout continue to thrive for future generations of anglers.

## Atlantic Coastal Management

In 2011, the Sciaenids Board (formally the South Atlantic Board) approved the **Omnibus Amendment for Spot, Spotted Seatrout, and Spanish**

**Mackerel.** The Amendment updates all three species plans with requirements of the Commission's Interstate Fisheries Management Program Charter. Specific to spotted seatrout, the Amendment includes recommended measures to protect the spawning stock, as well as a required coastwide minimum size of 12".

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## Cynoscion nebulosus

**Stock Status:** Unknown coastwide; local stocks assessed by the Southeast states.

**Taxonomy:** A member of the family Sciaenidae, which includes red drum, croaker & weakfish

**Common names:** spotted weakfish, speckled seatrout, gator trout, spotted squeteague

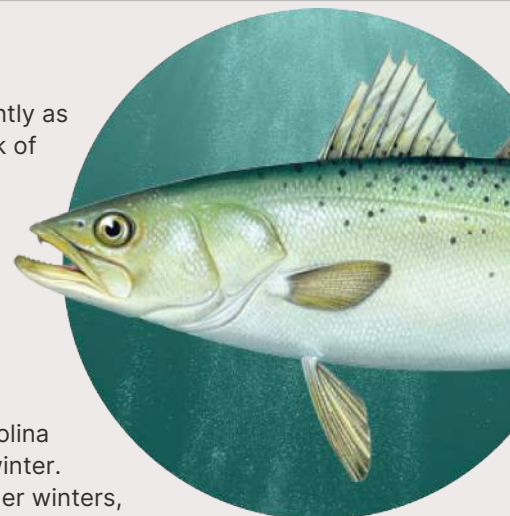
**Largest Recorded:** 17 pounds, 7 ounces

**Age & Length at Maturity:** 1 year; males at 10" and females at 11"



## Interesting Facts

- Females may spawn as frequently as every 2-4 days during the peak of their spawning season.
- Fish 10 pounds or larger are called "gator trout" and are considered a once in a lifetime catch for anglers.
- Spotted seatrout are sensitive to freezing temperatures and populations north of North Carolina tend to migrate south for the winter. Even with North Carolina's milder winters, a cold snap can cause a spotted seatrout kill.



In March 2017, a report on **Sciaenid Fish Habitat** was released including information on habitat for several species, including spotted seatrout. Specifically, the document includes habitat needs during all stages of their lives, their associated Essential Fish Habitats and Habitat Areas of Particular Concern, threats and uncertainties to their habitats, and recommendations for habitat management and research. This report is meant to be a resource when amending FMPs in the future for spotted seatrout and other sciaenids.

### Stock Status

Increased coastal development and the resulting loss of estuarine habitat, coupled with heavy fishing pressure, have affected spotted seatrout populations. The extent of anthropogenic effects is unclear. There is no coastwide stock assessment for the species and local assessments vary by state. Spotted seatrout are also susceptible to inshore calamities such as winter freezes, excessive fresh water, hurricanes, and red tide

conditions. Fortunately, seatrout have two life history traits that helps maintain population size – maturing quickly and the ability to reproduce prolifically. Compared to other marine game fish, spotted seatrout enjoy one of the longest spawning seasons.

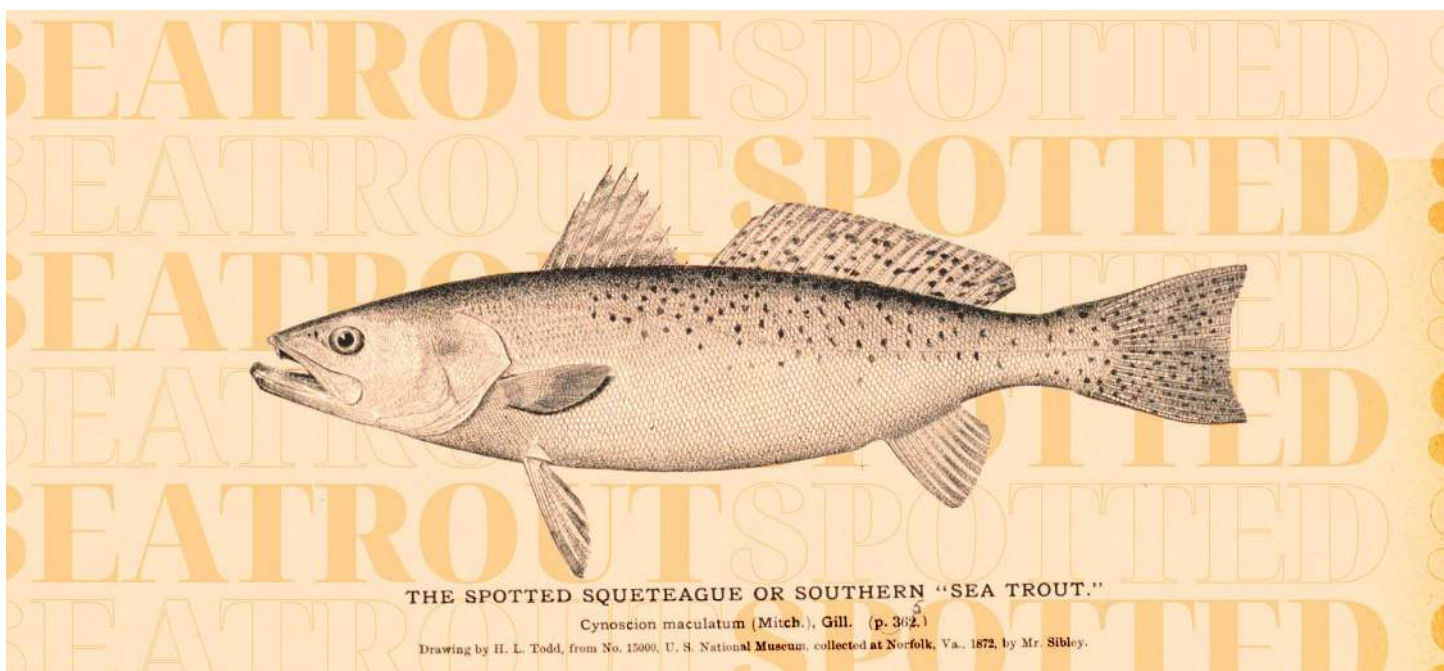
A coastwide stock assessment of spotted seatrout has not been conducted given the largely non-migratory nature of the species and the lack of data on migration where it does occur. Instead, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida have performed analyses on their respective local stocks. Recent assessments are putting more emphasis on the inclusion of incidental bycatch data, release mortality, and the size and age structure of releases. Stock assessments provide estimates of spawning potential ratio (SPR), which is a measure of the effect of fishing pressure on the relative abundance of the mature female portion of the population. A higher SPR means there is less fishing pressure on the spawning stock. The Commission's

Spotted Seatrout FMP recommends a goal of at least 20% SPR; South Carolina and Georgia have adopted this goal, and North Carolina and Florida have established a 30% and 35% SPR goal, respectively.

A **Florida statewide assessment** completed in 2025 found spotted seatrout were not overfished nor experiencing overfishing. An **assessment** completed for spotted seatrout in North Carolina and Virginia waters in 2022 indicated that overfishing was occurring but the stock was not overfished. South Carolina and Georgia are currently in the process of conducting an assessment of the spotted seatrout stocks in their state waters, which is estimated to be completed in early 2028.

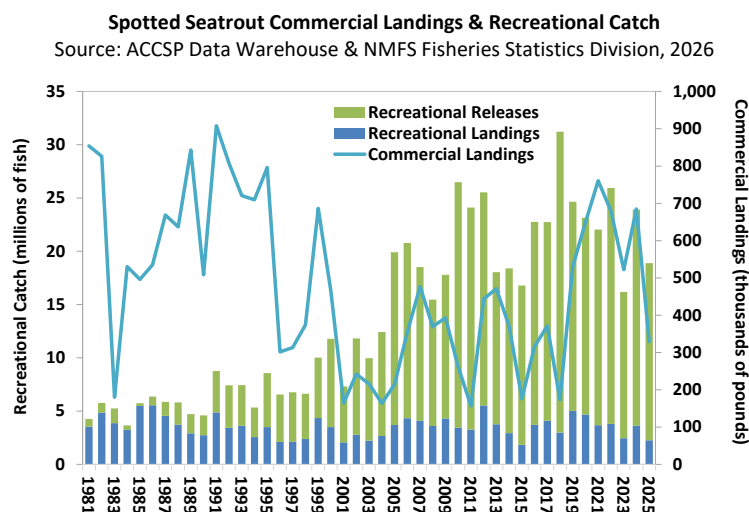
### Commercial & Recreational Fisheries

Historically, commercial landings along the Atlantic coast came from Florida's east coast and North Carolina, with Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia



accounting for a small portion of the total. From 1950 to 1976, commercial landings averaged 1.33 million pounds but have declined since then due to increased regulations.

Significant changes to regulations include the 1987 designation of spotted seatrout as a game fish in South Carolina, and the 1995 prohibition on the use of gillnets in Florida's coastal waters. From 2016 to 2025, commercial landings averaged approximately 500,000 pounds. Variability in annual harvest is typical and seems to parallel with the climatic conditions of the preceding winter and spring. In 2025, the commercial landings were estimated at 329,353 pounds, with the majority harvested in North Carolina (85%) and Virginia (14%).



The spotted seatrout fishery is largely recreational. Recreational catch (harvest and releases) has markedly increased from 1981 (4.3 million fish) to 31.2 million fish in 2018. In 2025, recreational catch was 18.8 million fish. Recreational harvest has varied without trend throughout the time series, with 2.2 million fish (3.5 million pounds) harvested in 2025. Numbers and proportions of fish released alive have increased throughout the time series due to size and bag limits, as well as the increasing use of catch and release practices. In 2025, 88% of recreationally-caught fish (16.6 million fish) were released.

**For more information,** please contact **Tracey Bauer**, FMP Coordinator.



Spotted seatrout swimming over submerged aquatic vegetation. Photo (c) Kent Smith, Florida FWCC

## Life History

On the Atlantic coast, spotted seatrout occur from Cape Cod, Massachusetts to the Florida Keys, but are most abundant from the Chesapeake Bay southward. They are found primarily in estuaries but may move into nearshore ocean waters during cold periods. In general, spotted seatrout appear to be non-migratory and spend their entire life within five to ten miles of their natal estuary, although fish from Chesapeake Bay have been known to migrate seasonally (south in the fall, north in the spring) to North Carolina waters.

From April to September, sexually mature females spawn around estuary inlets. Depending on the size of the female, spotted seatrout produce anywhere from 10,000 to millions of oceanic eggs. The most important nursery grounds for the young are small tidal marsh creeks and shallow grass beds, while larger juveniles are widely distributed in estuarine areas and along coastal beaches. The fry gather in schools during their first summer and tend to travel together until they are four or five years old. They mature at the age of one year, when males are about 10 inches long and females about 11 inches. At any given age, females are larger than males, and they also attain a greater maximum age and size. They may live as long as 18 years, but individuals over five years of age are rare.

Adults frequent grass beds, live oyster beds, creek mouths, drop-offs, and structures such as jetties, stumps, pilings, and wrecks, where they feed primarily on shrimp and fish. They are most abundant in depths of less than ten feet and prefer temperatures between 60 and 80° F. Water temperatures below 45° F appear to cause large-scale mortalities. They tolerate a range of salinities, but adults appear to be most numerous in waters with salinities approaching that of seawater.

# Atlantic Coast Fisheries Habitat Partnership Happenings

## ACFHP FY2026 Funding Available for Habitat Conservation Projects

The Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP) is requesting project applications for funding to restore and conserve habitat necessary to support coastal, estuarine dependent, and diadromous fish species. Federal funding, available through the **National Fish Habitat Partnership** (NFHP), program will be used to support the top ranked proposals.

**Available funding:** We anticipate funding to support 2-3 projects ranging from \$35,000 – \$100,000, although funds awarded per project are typically lower than \$100,000. This is a highly competitive process, with funding requests consistently exceeding available

funds. Successful proposals should demonstrate a minimum 1:1 non-federal match.

ACFHP gives special consideration to projects with more than the minimum match. Projects that are approved but not selected due to limited funding availability will receive an endorsement letter. **Application deadline: Friday, September 25, 2026**

For complete information and guidelines please review the **funding instructions** or visit **FY27 ACFHP Funding Cycle**.

To view previously funded projects, visit **On the Ground Projects**. For additional information please contact **ACFHPinfo@asmfc.org**.

## Nominations for the 2026 Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award Now Open

ACFHP is seeking nominations for the 2026 Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award, recognizing individuals who have furthered the conservation, protection, restoration, and enhancement of habitat for native Atlantic coastal, estuarine-dependent, and diadromous fishes in a unique or extraordinary manner.

The award was established in memory of Dr. Melissa Laser who passed away unexpectedly on April 27, 2010. Melissa was a biologist with the Maine Department of Marine Resources where she worked tirelessly to protect, improve, and restore aquatic ecosystems in Maine and along the entire Atlantic coast.

For additional information on past recipients and submitting a 2026 nomination, please visit **Melissa Laser Fish Habitat Conservation Award – Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership**

The 2026 award will be presented at the Commission's **84th Annual Meeting** in Newport, RI this fall (November 9-12, 2026).

Please send nominations to **Simen Kaalstad**, ACFHP Director, by **Friday, September 18, 2026**.



Collaborative efforts in Worcester County, MD have restored over 100 acres of salt marsh on private lands in Maryland's Coastal Bays, establishing a model for future restoration. Photo (c) Sophia Seufert, USFWS

# Modernizing Fisheries Data: The Successful Rollout and Expansion of SAFIS eDR Redesign

The Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP) officially launched its highly anticipated SAFIS eDR (electronic dealer reporting) redesign on January 1, 2026.

Developed throughout 2025 in close coordination with ACCSP partners, this modernization effort marks a major leap forward in commercial landings data collection.

Throughout the development phase, partner agencies were kept thoroughly informed, maintaining a collaborative environment that ensured the system was tailored to real-world needs. Testing of the system was conducted by dealers in addition to partner agency staff, an approach that was instrumental in refining the user experience. While a transition of this scale naturally brought minor issues to address, the official rollout has been deemed a resounding success. The redesigned system ultimately delivers more consistent, higher-quality data through flexible user interfaces, establishing a highly expandable foundation for future fisheries science and management.

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## Key Highlights of the Redesign

The overhauled SAFIS eDR framework introduces critical structural improvements designed to optimize operations for dealers, vendors, and administrators alike:



Image (c) stockcake.com

- **Updated Online Interface:** Users benefit from a refreshed, modern online reporting tool that improves navigation and ease of use.
- **Streamlined Data Flow:** The system features consistent validations across all modes of entry, ensuring that data is checked uniformly whether entered manually, uploaded in bulk, or submitted by Application Programming Interface (API).
- **API Access:** The SAFIS API is now available to any approved software vendor or individual dealer, provided they obtain official submission agency pre-approval. This eliminates the need to manually export files by allowing custom software to transmit data directly.
- **Dynamic Partner Attributes:** The new architecture allows for the

dynamic and customized addition of reporting questions. Partner agencies can now tailor fields to gather specific information based on their localized regulations or the unique species purchased.

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## Post-Launch Enhancements

Following the January launch, development teams have continued to refine the system based on operational feedback. Recent enhancements have successfully targeted system visibility and administrative control:

- **Improved File Validation Transfer (FVT) Visibility:** Significant upgrades were made to the file upload interface, FVT, which processes bulk file uploads. Users

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a web-based dealer reporting application

now receive clearer, more actionable visibility into specific values that need revision or adjustment, facilitating troubleshooting and resubmission.

- **Advanced Administrative Control:** System administrators now have increased functionality to directly edit and unlock records, simplifying faster data corrections and smoother workflow management.

The project enabled ACCSP to modernize its data infrastructure and safely decommission unsupported legacy systems such as an older server and file upload software lacking validations. This transition to a centralized, secure platform improved data integrity and efficiency for end users and partner agency staff. By unifying data standards and providing flexible pathways for submission, the redesigned SAFIS eDR ensures that commercial fisheries data remains accurate, accessible, and ready to support sustainable science and management for years to come.

**ACCSP is a cooperative state-federal program** focused on the design, implementation, and conduct of marine fisheries statistics data collection programs and their integration into a single system. For further information please visit [accsp.org](http://accsp.org).

# Fisheries Management Actions

## Atlantic Migratory Group



In August, the Commission's Coastal Pelagics Management Board approved a total harvest quota of 80,112

fish and status quo recreational management measures for the Atlantic migratory group of cobia for the 2027 fishing season. This total quota results in a coastwide recreational quota of 76,908 fish and commercial quota of 73,116 pounds for 2027.

The total quota level of 80,112 fish per year has been the same since 2020 and is based on the results of the **2020 benchmark stock assessment**. The Board has maintained this quota given the absence of updated stock projections and considering the recent underutilization of recreational quota.

A new Atlantic cobia stock assessment is currently underway and scheduled to be completed in mid-2027. The Board intends to use the new assessment to inform total harvest quotas and management measures for 2028 and beyond.

**For more information**, please contact **Emilie Franke**, FMP Coordinator.

## Scup

The Commission's Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board initiated an addendum to consider an option that allows for quota period overages (without paybacks) in years where the annual commercial scup quota is not exceeded. This change is intended to preserve the long-term sustainability of the scup stock while still allowing the full quota to be harvested each year.

This action seeks to provide complementary action to the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Commercial Scup Winter I Framework Adjustment which was approved for final action at the Council's August meeting.



The Board will consider approval of the draft addendum for public comment at the Commission's Annual Meeting in November.

**For more information**, please contact **Chelsea Tuohy**, FMP Coordinator.

# Special Recognition

## Caitlin Starks & Samara Nehemiah Receive Employee of the Quarter Awards

ASMFC staff are pleased to recognize Caitlin Starks, Senior Fishery Management Plan Coordinator, and Samara Nehemiah, Stock Assessment Scientist, as Employees of the Quarter for their exceptional leadership, collaboration, and commitment to advancing the Commission's mission.

Caitlin and Samara were selected for their outstanding efforts in planning, organizing, and executing the Horseshoe Crab



Stakeholder Engagement Workshop on Management in the Delaware Bay Region, held in January 2026, and the follow-up Horseshoe Crab Adaptive Resource Management (ARM) Framework Stakeholder Meeting in April 2026. Their combined efforts helped strengthen stakeholder engagement and supported continued improvements to the ARM Framework based on input received throughout the process.

Caitlin provided critical leadership in coordinating the many components of these complex stakeholder efforts. Her ability to establish clear objectives, manage competing priorities, and guide discussions among stakeholders with diverse perspectives helped create a productive and collaborative environment. Her professionalism and diplomacy were particularly valuable in navigating challenging conversations and fostering constructive outcomes.

Caitlin also demonstrated exceptional initiative in managing coordination with an external facilitator and ensuring project requirements were met. Her commitment to communication

and transparency was evident through her organization of three pre-workshop educational sessions, which helped prepare stakeholders to engage more effectively in discussions about Delaware Bay horseshoe crab management and the ARM Framework. She also kept the Horseshoe Crab Management Board informed of progress, challenges, and outcomes throughout the process.

Samara played an important role in supporting the planning and execution of the stakeholder engagement sessions and ARM Framework meeting. Drawing on her scientific expertise, she helped stakeholders better understand the population dynamics models that inform the ARM Framework and provided thoughtful responses to questions regarding horseshoe crab and red knot population trends.

Samara's collaborative approach, professionalism, and ability to foster productive interactions helped facilitate meaningful conversations among stakeholders with varying perspectives. Her ability to communicate complex scientific information clearly was an important contribution to the success of the engagement process.

As EOQ recipients, Caitlin and Samara received a cash award and a letter of appreciation to be placed in their personal records. In addition, their names have been added to the EOQ plaque displayed in the Commission's lobby.

Congratulations, Caitlin and Samara!

