

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Outreach and Education Technical Committee

Meeting Summary

Tampa, Florida

November 13, 2024

The meeting of the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Outreach and Education Technical Committee (O&E) was convened at 8:30 AM, EST on November 13, 2024. Nick Haddad and Alexis Sabine, the newest members of the O&E were introduced and Rebecca Hillebrand, standing in for Danica Williams, was also introduced. The O&E elected Dylan Hubbard as its Chair and Eric Weather as its Vice Chair. The agenda for the meeting was adopted and the minutes from the December 19, 2023, meeting were approved as written.

Recreational Initiative

The O&E heard a presentation on the Council's progress on the Recreational Initiative and associated Public Engagement Plan from Andrew Loftus of Pelagic Strategies. The O&E was asked to discuss the value and potential mechanisms for separately engaging the federal for-hire component of the recreational sector. The O&E was also asked to provide recommendations for novel tactics and messaging for communicating outcomes of the effort to the fishing public.

A Committee member inquired about the process of selecting the Recreational Initiative working group. Council staff emphasized that the working group intentionally included individuals who had not previously been involved with the Council, aiming for fresh perspectives. In response to a question about the proportion of federal for-hire membership on the working group, Dr. Simmons clarified that the composition of the Working Group was reasonably representative of the recreational sector across the five Gulf states and was based on the pool of applicants which was greatest for private recreational anglers compared to federal for-hire captains. One member of the working group owns a federal permit and there is one who operates a state licensed charter.

Committee members expressed support for sending emails to applicants who were not selected for the working group, including tailored outreach to federal for-hire applicants, inviting them to participate through public input sessions, the online comment portal, or Council meetings. A Committee member observed that continuing to use the same engagement pathways would limit outreach to audiences that are already engaged. The Committee inquired as to whether Fish Rules or Fish Brain platforms could be used to disseminate messaging and staff indicated that it is working with the platform to secure the rights to send push notifications to users viewing federal regulations and content in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Committee recommended that a succinct one-page meeting summary be developed for public dissemination. Another member emphasized the need for making Council information easily shareable, noting that while many individuals are willing to help disseminate messages, they would be less likely to do so if the process required excessive effort. The Committee also committed to pushing content through its networks and suggested that the Council connect with Salt Strong, a membership-based fishing community and through Florida Friendly Anglers and Fishing Guide programs.

Concerns were raised by a Committee member about the representation from novice members of the Working Group during report-outs, as this might give the impression that the same familiar figures dominate the discussion. Council staff noted to the Committee that a private angler, new to the Council process is slated to deliver the report at the January 2025 Council meeting. Andy Loftus added that Working Group members who are new to the Council participation were active participants in breakout session. He also acknowledged that some new members found the formal setup, including microphones and the meeting structure, intimidating but are expected to acclimate soon.

Domestic Shrimp and Seafood Education

Dr. Freeman presented NMFS' recent efforts through the National Seafood Strategy and Shrimp Futures Program to address the promotion and the public awareness of U.S. domestic seafood. He then requested information on existing materials and organizations that are already engaged on these issues and asked the O&E to suggest appropriate mechanisms for the Council to promote awareness of the issue and educate the public.

The O&E recommended creating a page on the Council's website devoted to the issue. The page should include links to information from various other organizations' and should highlight state laws using a map tool like the one developed for the Fishing for Our Future webpage. The website should also feature a series of articles outlining the issue and highlighting fishermen. A Committee member suggested that one article should discuss the economic viability of the shrimp fishery despite its current challenges. Another O&E member suggested that Gary Graham, also a committee member, should be featured. The O&E also recommended that the webpage feature statistics on the volume of domestic landings and the economic impacts of domestic seafood.

A Committee member noted NOAA's initiatives on aquaculture and stated that he would provide website links on that topic. A Committee member stated that the Texas Department of Agriculture has a shrimp marketing campaign (<https://txgulfseafood.com/>), which may be expanding to include other seafood. The Committee member also noted that AgriLife Extension through Texas A&M University has a Path to Plate program (<https://pathtotheplate.tamu.edu/>), which focuses on oysters, shrimp, and blue crabs. Another Committee member commented that the Audubon Institute has a Gulf United for Lasting Fisheries (GULF) program (<https://audubonnatureinstitute.org/gulf/>), which includes outreach and education as well as a restaurant partnership program. A Committee

member suggested including the Fresh from Florida program (<https://www.followfreshfromflorida.com/>) on the list of existing materials.

Dr. Overton (Council representative) emphasized creation of a clearinghouse on these websites and other outlets that promote seafood. A Committee member recommended allowing for state input on individual state efforts that could be documented on the website. Another Committee member suggested inclusion of data comparing the volume of imported and domestic seafood, as well as data on the economic impacts of domestic seafood. A Committee member inquired if there are any efforts to monitor public sentiment of seafood in the media, particularly on farm-raised versus wild-caught seafood, and referenced shrimp in the movie *Forest Gump*. A Committee member acknowledged that sustainability of domestic seafood needs to be promoted and commented that the shrimp industry has done that well. He inquired how important seafood sustainability is to consumers before noting that the Southern Shrimp Alliance has hired a company to test shrimp products and determine if they are domestic or imports.

A Committee member noted a recent Louisiana law that requires labeling of domestic/imported seafood in restaurants. Dr. Freeman added that Alabama has a law that went into effect on October 1, 2024, that requires country of origin labeling of fish or shrimp for restaurants and grocery store delis. He noted that, even if consumers want to purchase domestic seafood, they may not have that information available. A Committee member recommended highlighting on the website which states are addressing seafood labeling through laws.

For-Hire Reporting Outreach

Council staff provided background on the outreach approaches that were deployed for the implementation of the initial Southeast For-hire Integrated Reporting Program (SEHFIER). For that outreach strategy, educational mailers and videos were distributed through the Council's regular outreach pathways and additional in-person meetings. Council staff requested the O&E provide feedback on outreach strategies and consideration of renaming the program as the Council develops a new for-hire data collection method for the for-hire industry.

The O&E was supportive of the outreach work that had been previously conducted by Council staff. However, members stated that the persistent outreach challenge for the first program was that program elements that were being required were not those envisioned by the Council and stakeholders. This underlying issue largely contributed to the struggles of gaining buy-in.

Several members stated that the Port Ambassador initiative, funded and coordinated by Ocean Conservancy during the original SEHFIER rollout, allowed local captains to hold educational session with program participants, and was a successful endeavor and recommended that approach be used again. A member recommended using QR codes and/or shortening webpage names to encourage sharing of web materials between

captains. Another member suggested including justification (i.e. why is this data being collected?) language in educational material to help provide context to program participants and encourage buy-in.

The O&E discussed potentially changing the name of the new program. Members acknowledged that the SEFHIER name has a negative connotation given its perception as a failure since being dissolved by court ruling. A member reported the SEFHIER name was unpopular in certain regions and suggested a name change. Other members stated that while the name had negative sentiment, it did also have recognition. Broadly, the O&E recommended adjusting the name slightly, such as SEFHIER 2.0. This would retain the recollection from industry but also illustrate the revisions made in the new iteration of the program.

Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management Outreach

Council staff provided an update on progress toward development of a Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP). Funding for completion of the FEP has been awarded to the Council through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds for advancing climate ready fisheries management. This funding includes approval to begin a pilot Red Tide Fishery Ecosystem Issue (FEI), and to hire a social scientist contractor to collaborate with the O&E to develop ecosystem-specific stakeholder engagement strategies. Staff provided an overview of the FEP and Red Tide FEI Communications Plan Outline, which was presented to the Council in January 2024. Staff requested feedback from the O&E on the value of pursuing Council or alternative funding to host a Red Tide Symposium, which was not supported through the IRA proposal process.

The O&E was broadly supportive of a Red Tide Symposium and suggested that gathering disparate managers from extra jurisdictional agencies, researchers, and stakeholders to discuss the state of red tide science and management is essential for a coordinated and comprehensive approach to understanding and managing the impacts of red tide. The O&E noted that at its core, the symposium would both inform and provide exposure and credibility for the Federal Fisheries Red Tide Report, the second product of the Red Tide FEI that was enthusiastically approved by the Council during its January 2024 meeting. The O&E discussed the value of a Red Tide Symposium for identifying gaps in research and the potential to extend red tide management focus beyond gag grouper and red grouper, which currently account for red tide mortality in stock assessment models. A committee member mentioned that there is a lot of red tide expertise concentrated in the region surrounding the Council office, which could greatly reduce the costs of a Red Tide Symposium hosted in the Tampa Bay area. Another committee member suggested that the 2025 Southwest Florida Climate Summit may be another opportunity to identify local expertise and interest in red tide and other climate and ecosystem issues.

Management Areas and Boundary Outreach

Management Area Map

Staff began by presenting a draft of a new Management Area Map tool to replace static .pdf images in regulations and asked for feedback from the Committee. Committee members suggested using different filters to allow users to differentiate areas by fishing sector, species complex, and regulation type (gear, species, or anchoring restrictions). A tutorial video at the start of the tool would be useful to help users interact with the tool more effectively. Other suggestions include making the polygons with associated information available for users to download in various formats and optimizing the tool for viewing on mobile devices. Staff also discussed its intention to integrate the new tool into Fish Rules, if possible. Staff noted that suggested improvements to the tool will be considered and may return to a future O&E meeting for additional feedback.

Management Area Boundaries on Mapping Tools

Staff discussed the potential for adding management areas and boundaries to commercially available mapping tools and asked the Committee for guidance on how to accomplish this. Committee members emphasized how important it is to get management areas on commercially available mapping tools and suggested working with industry to make closed area polygons available for use with traditional GPS devices. It was noted that while displaying closed areas doesn't necessarily sell products, they do keep users from getting fisheries violations and this could be a good selling point. However, it was recognized that hosting regulatory areas could be a liability for companies as it can be a challenge to keep up with the regulations, so there must be an efficient way to communicate regulatory changes to industry, when appropriate. The O&E suggested that starting this discussion with representatives from the American Sportfishing Association would be a good place to start.

Recreational 20-Fathom Shallow Water Grouper Closure

Staff provided background on the current recreational 20-fathom shallow water grouper closure and asked the O&E for strategies to improve compliance. The O&E noted that this type of communication is best couched as a 'best fishing practices' discussion with spawning protection and discards in mind. One member suggested that communications could focus on the choice between compliance or a shortened season at the end of the year. It was noted that it's hard to outreach without a solid understanding of whether the closure is an effective means of protecting spawning fish, especially since the initial target species aren't relevant with gag season closed and the red grouper stock improving. Various members of the O&E indicated that people are broadly aware of the closure and indicated that you likely can't solve the issue with education alone.

2024 Communications Improvement Plan Progress and Analytics

Staff gave a [presentation](#) on the progress made on the [2024 Communications Improvement Plan](#) and the 2024 communication analytics. The O&E commended staff for covering so many angles. A member of the O&E indicated that the new calendar interface on the website homepage was a major improvement. A member of the O&E highlighted the

value of the blog articles, especially the ‘Meet the Council’ posts that humanize the Council members. The O&E discussed social media algorithms, particularly the recent trend in downweighing reels, although YouTube shorts continue to prioritize reels. The O&E inquired whether the Council had a marketing budget. It was noted that paid marketing opportunities were a good way to reach new audiences. A member of the O&E noted that it had a very successful partnership with *I Heart Media* radio outlet and another noted the value of paying for social media exposure.

Council Outreach Strategy

Council staff gave a brief overview of how public comment is collected and presented to the Council. Staff also presented the O&E with a potential new strategy that would allow commentors to leave comment via voicemail service that would directly transcribe comments. This would allow commentors to remain anonymous and would allow the Council to avoid retaining records of the voicemail’s that would be subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Members of the O&E expressed concern that written comment gets lost and that comments received through this new system would suffer the same issue. The O&E wondered how much staff time it would take to operationalize this new method and staff indicated that it would be dependent on the volume of comments received and suggested it may be an appropriate place to deploy artificial intelligence tools to improve workflow. Ultimately, the O&E recognized the importance of allowing fleets who wish to remain anonymous the opportunity to comment easily through a voicemail. The O&E recommended the Council pilot the anonymous voicemail box for 2025, while it finalizes work on Commercial Individual Fishing Quota Program amendments and re-evaluate the usefulness of the tool next year.

Council Staff gave a presentation on the feedback it receives on different types of content across different communications platforms. Council staff asked the O&E to evaluate the effectiveness of Council communications in an atmosphere of negativity and asked ideas on how to improve. The O&E noted that people will complain under all circumstances and that fishing communications coupled with federal government communications are particularly challenging atmospheres. One member shared an experience with dismantling a fishing forum due to overwhelming, off topic, negative engagements. The O&E discussed the option of not responding to comments but ultimately determined that this would result in multiple missed opportunities for education and amplification and may also result in enhancing the spread of misinformation. A member of the O&E also noted that the analytics prove that the negative comments are a small fraction of the engagement overall. Ultimately, the O&E recommended that the Council stay the course because there is value to being present in good times and in bad and emphasized that the biggest value lies in humanizing the Council.

2025 Communications Improvement Plan

Council staff summarized a list of items it plans to include in the 2025 Communications Improvement Plan based on items discussed during the meeting and including items leftover from 2024 that were not completed. Staff asked for additional suggestions on how

to improve Council communications in 2025. The O&E discussed the logistics of a port ambassador program to implement the new for-hire reporting program and suggested that it either needed funding or a partnership with external associations to host socials. The O&E also discussed the viability of relying on social media ambassadors to explain how to get involved in the Council system. The O&E cautioned that the message can't be controlled once you involve influencers. The O&E indicated that ambassadors/influencers wouldn't likely spread Council messages for free and staff indicated that it would need to carefully consider funding for an effort like this. The O&E recommended that the Marine Resource Education Program focus on inviting influencers to its program.

Public Comment

Sharon McBreen – Monterey Bay Aquarium

Seafood Watch is preparing an assessment of Gulf and South Atlantic species. Seafood Watch assesses ecological sustainability of wild caught and farm raised seafood to inform businesses and consumers to promote healthy oceans. Part of the assessment engages researchers, academics, and government agencies to review the assessment drafts that will then be open for a public comment period before being turned into the guides that classify species as green, yellow, or red.