

Meeting Summary

Recreational Initiative Virtual Public Input Session January 16, 2025

The Gulf Council convened a virtual Public Input Session from 6-9 pm ET on Thursday, January 16, 2025, to discuss the major discussion points and outcomes of the Recreational Initiative's [second Working Group meeting](#). The meeting, held in New Orleans, LA on January 8-9, 2025, had the following purpose:

- Ensure collective understanding of stock status and management measures/history for each of the Recreational Initiative's five focal species (red snapper, gag grouper, red grouper, gray triggerfish, and greater amberjack).
- *Review the status of Federally managed species* in the Gulf of Mexico that are highly sought after by recreational anglers, including recreational sources of directed and bycatch mortality.
- *Review and assess recreational management measures*, including how management measures have changed over time.
- Assess the performance and efficacy of *recreational accountability measures* and recommended improvements.

After an introduction to the session by Gulf Council Public Information Officer Emily Muehlstein, consultants Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus presented a summary of Working Group Meeting 2.

The Council then opened the floor to members of the public to hear their views on the meeting's outcomes. Their input is summarized below.

Sources of Angler Dissatisfaction

Participants expressed significant frustration with several management decisions and outcomes related to the five focal species. A recurring theme was the perceived disconnect between recreational data collection methods and the experiences of anglers on the water. Many felt that current data systems do not accurately reflect stock conditions, with some pointing out discrepancies between reported stock health and their observations. Concerns were also raised about the reliability of data used in stock assessments, particularly regarding discard mortality. Anglers noted that they often release fish without witnessing mortality, yet discard mortality estimates appear to disproportionately affect stock assessments.

Another major source of dissatisfaction stemmed from the lag between science and management. Anglers highlighted that decisions are often based on outdated data, with terminal data years for stock assessments lagging behind management based on those assessments by several years. Participants emphasized that the reluctance to develop a robust recreational data collection program, despite existing frameworks, contributes to inefficiencies in addressing these issues.

The absence of timely, granular data also limits the potential for more adaptive strategies, such as split seasons (i.e., multiple fishery openings in a single calendar year), which were described as challenging to implement effectively without improvements in data collection. Short seasons and the resulting discards were cited as a significant source of dissatisfaction. Participants better align fishing seasons across species in order to enable harvest of multiple species on a single trip and minimize discard mortality. This idea was seen as a win-win, offering potential benefits for nearshore waters that continue to feel the effects of harmful red tides. Finally, participants noted that seasons are often open during spawning, which seemed illogical.

Finally, there was a strong call for accountability and transparency in the scientific process. Stakeholders expressed frustration over the lack of repercussions for what they perceived as flawed science, emphasizing the need for third-party audits of the data being used to make decisions. Participants argued that errors in data interpretation and application have wide-reaching consequences, affecting both the livelihoods of anglers and public trust in fisheries management.

Positive Elements of Federal Management

Participants offered mixed feedback on federal fisheries management, with some acknowledging areas of success while others struggled to identify positive outcomes. A common sentiment was that stocks and access to many species have continued to decline over the years, despite rebuilding efforts. This left some participants skeptical of federal management's overall effectiveness. However, others pointed to specific achievements worth noting. For example, collaborative efforts with entities such as NOAA Sea Grant were praised for their impact on fish release techniques to minimize mortality. Additionally, some stakeholders highlighted the recovery of species like red snapper and lane snapper as evidence of progress. The contentious management decisions of past decades, though initially unpopular, were credited with placing Gulf fisheries ahead of those in the South Atlantic.

Limited entry programs for both commercial and federal charter sectors were identified as successful. While initially met with resistance, these programs have been recognized for their role in creating more sustainable fisheries by limiting capacity and ensuring long-term resource availability. Sector separation (i.e., separate Annual Catch Limits for the private and for-hire sectors), particularly for red snapper, was also highlighted as a positive development. Although initially controversial, this approach has proven effective in addressing specific needs of different fishing sectors.

Despite these successes, participants expressed ongoing frustration with certain aspects of management, such as balancing predictable seasons with longer fishing opportunities. While some stakeholders valued the certainty of set seasons, others preferred more flexibility, underscoring the challenge of meeting diverse angler needs.

Management Strategies to Achieve Desired Outcomes

Participants highlighted several strategies that could contribute to achieving the desired outcomes identified by the Working Group. A recurring recommendation was to accelerate

interim stock assessments, as many stakeholders felt that existing regulations and policies were based on outdated data that failed to reflect current conditions on the water. This disconnect between data and observed reality has led to frustration among anglers, who called for a more responsive and adaptive approach to fisheries management. Self-reported angler data was supported and participants indicated that the private sector was ready to take responsibility for developing and administering self-reporting programs.

Some participants emphasized the importance of incorporating diverse data sources to improve decision-making. For instance, representatives from the scuba diving community noted that they spend extensive time underwater and have unique insights into the behavior and abundance of certain species. They argued that their observations, which often contradict concerns about species like goliath grouper, greater amberjack, and lane snapper, should be factored into stock assessments to provide a fuller picture of fish populations.

Another key suggestion was to adopt multi-year annual catch limits (ACLs). This approach could help address community concerns by smoothing out the impacts of data spikes and providing more stability in management decisions. By allowing for minor overages without immediate penalties, multi-year ACLs could enhance trust in the management process and foster a sense of collaboration between anglers and regulatory bodies.

General Feedback

Participants shared diverse perspectives on overarching challenges and opportunities in fisheries management. A recurring topic was the potential role of self-reporting for recreational anglers. Several stakeholders suggested that self-reporting may be the most viable solution for improving the accuracy of data within the recreational sector. While acknowledging concerns about the reliability of voluntary data, participants felt that with accurate reporting, self-reporting could significantly enhance management outcomes and build trust between anglers and regulatory bodies.

Concerns were raised about the long-term implications of rebuilt stocks, with participants emphasizing that recovery does not necessarily mean unrestricted fishing opportunities. Increased fishing effort, if unmanaged, could undermine progress, highlighting the need for clear communication to set realistic expectations about what "rebuilding" means in practice. Participants also called for better consideration of external factors, such as weather events, when assessing estimated harvests. Limited fishable days during short seasons, such as for red grouper and gag grouper, were noted as a challenge, prompting suggestions for adjustments to harvest estimates that account for these constraints to ensure more accurate and equitable evaluations.

Finally, specific observations about species abundance highlighted gaps in current regulations. For example, stakeholders in the Panhandle region noted an overwhelming presence of triggerfish in certain areas, suggesting that current limits might be too restrictive given their abundance. These comments underscored the need for management approaches that are more closely aligned with real-time stock conditions and regional differences.

List of Commenters

Kevin Lausman
Bob Zales II
Dylan Hubbard
Steve Papen
Michael Hollingsworth
Ben Choi
Brad Boland
Chris Howell
Chad Gregg
Mathew DeLillo