

Recreational Initiative

Meeting Summary

Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 1 October 29-30, 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's Recreational Initiative Working Group convened its first of three Working Group meetings in Tampa, Florida from October 29-30, 2024, with the following purpose:

- Develop goals and objectives for recreational fisheries management for reef species in the Gulf of Mexico; and
- Provide Working Group members with an opportunity to share their views on reef fish stock status and management, provide perspectives on what management “success” would look like, and offer initial thoughts on approaches that they would like to see the Council consider.

Following an overview of the Initiative and hearing perspectives on recreational fisheries management and challenges from leadership at the Gulf Council and NOAA Fisheries, Working Group members explored key challenges in Gulf recreational reef fish fisheries along with successes in management to potentially build upon.

With this context in mind, the Working Group developed the following working vision for successful recreational reef fish management in the Gulf of Mexico:

A sustainable recreational fishery that is based on trusted data, offers predictable and reliable access, engages and empowers anglers in management, maximizes angler satisfaction, and accommodates growth and regional flexibility.

The Working Group identified six broad goals, with each representing a specific, measurable target needed to achieve the vision:

1. Trusted Data
2. Establish Trust with the Recreational Community
3. Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access
4. Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management
5. Increase Recreational Community Engagement in the Management Process
6. Maximize Angler Satisfaction and Accommodate Growth

In addition, the Working Group developed objectives viewed as necessary to accomplish each of these goals. With a working vision, goals, and objectives for Gulf recreational reef fish management in hand, the Working Group will next convene in early 2025 to review stock status and evaluate past and ongoing management measures for each of the Recreational Initiative's five focal species.

DETAILED REPORT

The [Gulf Council Recreational Initiative](#) Working Group held its first of three meetings at Gulf Council headquarters in Tampa, Florida, from October 29-30, 2024. The full agenda and background materials are available on the [meeting webpage](#). Eleven of 12 Working Group members were in attendance, along with all six Steering Committee members, Gulf Council staff, and others (Appendix 1).

The purpose of Meeting 1 was to:

- Develop goals and objectives for recreational fisheries management for reef species in the Gulf of Mexico; and
- Provide Working Group members with an opportunity to share their views on reef fish stock status and management, provide perspectives on what management “success” would look like, and offer initial thoughts on approaches that they would like to see the Council consider.

Day 1 Overview

Introductions and Background

Following brief introductory remarks by Steering Committee members Dr. Carrie Simmons (Gulf Council) and Andy Strelcheck (NOAA Fisheries), Working Group members introduced themselves and were asked to share their opinions regarding a) the biggest problem and b) the biggest success in Gulf federal recreational reef fish management. Their responses are summarized below:

| Biggest Problem | Biggest Success |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allocation between commercial, recreational, and for-hire sectors• Initial “snap-judgment” in 2023 based on unrealistic gag grouper catch estimates. This undermined trust in the Council and NOAA’s science and management (<i>noted by two Working Group members</i>)• Broadly, data and trust in the data (<i>noted by two Working Group members</i>)• Discards• Inaccurate stock assessments• Lack of predictability in regulations which impedes business planning• Difficult to correlate on-the-water observations with management actions• Rebuilding angler trust in the management process• Improving private recreational angler participation in the process | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tremendous rebound of the red snapper stock• Delegating red snapper management to the states, which has allowed states to craft regulations that best suit their needs (<i>noted by seven Working Group members</i>) |

Meeting facilitators Willy Goldsmith and Andy Loftus provided a [brief overview of the Recreational Initiative](#), including key items to accomplish, the individuals/groups involved, the task of the Working Group, and opportunities for stakeholder engagement.

NOAA Fisheries and Gulf Council leadership then gave introductory presentations to set the stage for Working Group discussions. Andy Strelcheck and Russ Dunn (NOAA Fisheries) provided a [federal perspective on the Recreational Initiative](#), citing the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and highlighting the challenges to angler satisfaction. They also mentioned the development of recreational fisheries

goals and objectives for other fisheries/regions around the nation, such as in the Mid-Atlantic, where the Mid-Atlantic Council's Recreational Reform Initiative seeks to 1) provide stability in regulations, 2) develop strategies to increase management flexibility, and 3) achieve accessibility aligned with stock status and availability.

Working Group members expressed interest in learning more about the Recreational Reform Initiative and its recently implemented Harvest Control Rule, which survived a legal challenge earlier in the year. Working Group members thought these Mid-Atlantic efforts could help inform approaches in the Gulf.

In addition, Working Group members emphasized the trust gap between the recreational community and managers, which is exacerbated by data uncertainty that can have dramatic on-the-water implications. This distrust can reduce the likelihood of anglers contributing to the data collection and management processes and highlights the need to better educate the recreational community. Andy Strelcheck noted that NOAA Fisheries has recognized some of these data challenges and is taking steps to address them—for example, through moving from Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) estimates to Florida State Reef Fish Survey estimates for gag grouper. He also mentioned that NOAA Fisheries has recently allocated funding to support data integration across Gulf state surveys.

Dr. Carrie Simmons (Gulf Council) described the [Council's past efforts](#) to engage with the recreational community, including:

- A series of ten Recreational Angler Participation (RAP) sessions (one virtual) in 2014 to engage with stakeholders regarding frustration and concern with federal oversight of recreational fisheries;
- The Gulf Angler Focus Group led by a coalition of sportfishing associations, which met bi-monthly in 2015-2016 to identify and evaluate alternative management options to provide for reasonable access and sustainable harvest of Gulf reef fish (focusing on red snapper and eventually leading to sector separation through Amendment 40); and
- The Joint Council Recreational 102 Working Group composed of Gulf and South Atlantic Council members, which met four times in 2020-2022 to address the goals of Section 102 of the Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act (Modern Fish Act)—specifically to explore alternative approaches for managing recreational fisheries to expand opportunities.

She noted that the Recreational Initiative is distinct from these efforts through its focus on five key species, its selection of a small stakeholder group with representation from across the Gulf, its emphasis on an exploratory process through facilitated meetings without predetermined outcomes, a thorough and transparent process for stakeholder engagement, and support and involvement from both the Gulf Council and NOAA Fisheries.

Council staff noted that the vast majority of the key themes emerging from each of those previous efforts aligned with the challenges identified by Working Group members at the meeting's outset, demonstrating the persistence of these issues. In addition, Steering Committee members encouraged Working Group members to share their views on what "success" for Gulf

recreational reef fish fisheries should look like, as hearing all perspectives would help the group converge on a collective vision.

Looking Back at Recreational Reef Fish Management: Challenges and Successes

Following lunch, the Working Group completed a series of breakout sessions (two breakout groups of six members) and subsequent plenary discussions focused on assessing some of the key challenges and successes of Gulf recreational fisheries management.

Challenges

Working Group members were asked to think through the following questions to spur dialogue regarding challenges:

1. *What are the greatest sources of angler dissatisfaction in Gulf reef fish fisheries?*
2. *Can you provide specific examples of management decisions that were particularly challenging? Are there specific missed opportunities that you can identify?*
3. *Are there factors outside of the Gulf Council's control that you view as contributing to and/or exacerbating these challenges?*
4. *Is it the Gulf Council's big picture strategy (goals) for recreational management that is failing, or the execution of that strategy (objectives)?*

The following represents a synthesis of the major messages and discussion points that emerged:

| | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I. Education/Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust deficit: A need to educate anglers on how regulations are developed and data's role • Achieve effective engagement in the absence of a crisis • Perception that stock status often better than regulations suggest • Must improve distribution channels to anglers | II. Access and Equity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gulf-wide management approach doesn't meet local fishery needs • Interannual regulatory instability • Can often only harvest one species at a time which concentrates pressure • Allocation dissatisfaction • High discard rates • Misalignment between stock rebuilding and management (especially with quickly rebuilding stocks) | III. Magnuson-Stevens Act <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal fisheries law hamstrings exploration of new approaches for the recreational community • 2006 reauthorization is incompatible with recreational fisheries, demands more of MRIP |
| IV. Data and Assessments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of unified, integrated data collection across Gulf states¹ • Estimating discards a key challenge² • Lengthy stock assessments hinder timely decision-making | V. Increased Effort/Efficiency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreational sector is growing, increasing fishing pressure • Technology and social media have increased efficiency • Oil rig removal is reducing habitat and concentrating effort | VI. Ecosystem Impacts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depredation (sharks and marine mammals) • Changing water temperature patterns affecting fish distribution and impacting fishery dependent data (e.g., grouper) |

¹ Note: Mississippi and Alabama are currently testing Louisiana's LA Creel Program in their respective states.

² Note: The Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission anticipates [issuing up to \\$7 million](#) of IRA funding in 2025 to projects focused on estimating fishing effort and discards.

Successes

Working Group members reviewed the following questions when evaluating successes:

1. *Are there specific examples of Gulf recreational fisheries (reef fish or otherwise) where management is working well?*
2. *More broadly, are there approaches to management—whether specific strategies, stakeholder engagement, or other—that the Council has successfully applied and which should be emulated in other Gulf fisheries?*

Working Group members identified two major categories of successes in recreational reef fish management in the Gulf:

| I. Education/Engagement | II. Assessments/Management |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Council’s Fishermen Feedback Tool facilitates stakeholder input during assessments (but more awareness needed)• Council outreach at angling community events• Marine Resource Education Program is valuable but could be distilled into short films that are broadly sharable• Council outreach materials are available, but can be difficult to find | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• State management for red snapper (Am. 50A) allows for the tailoring of management measures to each state and could be applied to other species• Council’s utilization of frameworks instead of amendments has enabled more rapid response to issues• Numerous reef stocks (e.g., yellowtail, mangrove [gray], and vermilion snapper) are healthy with liberal regulations• Successful rebuilding of some stocks, and red snapper quotas has increased substantially• New assessment/data collection approaches, such as new technologies (video, AI) and the Great Red Snapper Count• Artificial reefing has expanded recreational opportunities |

Defining “Success”: Developing a Vision, Goals, and Objectives

To set the stage for Day 2, at the end of Day 1 the meeting facilitators gave a [brief presentation](#) defining a vision, goals, and objectives and providing examples to illustrate how the three support one another. Prior to beginning the workshop’s second day, Working Group members were asked to write down a draft vision statement and share it with the facilitators, along with a proposed solution to the one of the main challenges shared at the beginning of the meeting:

- Data collection not trusted by anglers
- Single stock management Gulf-wide given the differences in user groups and geographic range
- Lack of trust in the management system by anglers
- Data collection and mandated management outcomes do not align
- A need to improve general communication with anglers

Day 2 Overview

The focus of the Working Group meeting’s second day was to develop a vision, goals, and objectives for the recreational reef fish fishery in the Gulf of Mexico.

To begin the dialogue, Working Group members shared their proposed solution to one of the challenges that had been identified the previous day. These proposed solutions are detailed in Appendix 2.

Developing A Vision for Successful Recreational Reef Fish Management in The Gulf of Mexico

Working group members were asked to provide individual thoughts on a vision for the Gulf of Mexico Recreational Reef Fish Fishery (Appendix 3). Common themes from those vision statements included: Data, regional fisheries management, collaborative management, trust, predictability, stability, access, sustainability, and growth in participation. The Working Group synthesized these into an agreed-upon common working vision Statement for the Gulf of Mexico recreational reef fish fishery:

A sustainable recreational fishery that is based on trusted data, offers predictable and reliable access, engages and empowers anglers in management, maximizes angler satisfaction, and accommodates growth and regional flexibility.

Identifying Goals and Objectives

Goals are specific, measurable targets that are designed to achieve the vision. Objectives are measurable actions under each goal to achieve those. The Working Group identified a series of six goals to achieve the vision, with objectives needed to meet those goals.

Goal 1: Trusted Data

Objective 1: Timely, transparent, accurate

Strategy a: harvest data that are compatible Gulf-wide

Objective 2: Engage/optimize the recreational community in data collection

Objective 3: Improve estimates of discard data

Objective 4. Incorporate innovative strategies to capture fishery-independent data

Goal 2. Establish Trust with The Recreational Community

Objective 1: Promote transparency and angler inclusion in the data collection process

Objective 2: Educate anglers on the data collection and application process

Objective 3: Educate anglers on the importance of angler input into the management process

Strategy a: Improve the process to maximize recreational input/public comment and educate them on how the comments are used

Goal 3: Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access

Objective 1: Develop and communicate recreational regulations (especially seasons) that maximizes lead time

Objective 2: Explore development of longer-term (e.g., multi-year) management measures to minimize churn/volatility (“smoothing”), drawing on examples from other regions

Strategy a: Consult with recreational anglers and industry regarding potential tradeoff between achieving regulatory stability and maximizing access

Goal 4: Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management

Objective 1: Explore state or regional management for reef fish species other than red snapper

Strategy a: Identify candidate species that meet a set of biological and fishery criteria for finer-scale spatial management.

- i. Consider the characteristics of both the recreational fishery for a species (including economics), and stock assessment data in such an evaluation.

Strategy b: Evaluate state or regional allocation of recreational catch limits for reef species other than red snapper

Goal 5: Increase Recreational Community Engagement in the Management Process

Objective 1: Leverage community leaders/“champions” to get the word out (particularly social media, but including radio, club presidents, TV show hosts, etc.)

Objective 2: Develop partnerships to implement “MREP light” modules around the Gulf of Mexico (funding required)

Strategy a: Educate regarding importance of providing data

Objective 3: Prioritize face-to-face communication: Develop short, bite-sized pieces of information to share face-to-face

Strategy a: Engage with industry to explore opportunities for inclusion in consumer and trade events

Objective 4: Quantify perceptions/preferences of the recreational community

Strategy a: Assess the “silent majority” who are unaware of fisheries management processes

Objective 5: Explore opportunities, where possible, to consolidate recreational issues at management meetings to facilitate engagement/input

Objective 6: Evaluate lost fishing opportunities resulting from discards and continue to engage anglers in efforts to reduce fishing mortality

Goal 6: Maximize Angler Satisfaction and Accommodate Growth

Objective 1: Evaluate the efficacy of the current management system for enabling angler satisfaction and fishery growth

Objective 2: Explore degree of legal/regulatory flexibility that is available for achieving this goal (especially in the context of a multispecies complex)

Objective 3: Evaluate approaches for providing flexibility in management that have been pursued outside the Gulf (state, regional, international, etc.)

Objective 4: Project future growth in recreational fisheries and impact on management strategies (or effectiveness of those strategies) on fully rebuilt stocks

Objective 5: Consider barriers to access for certain species due to misalignment between species availability (e.g., inshore/offshore) and season

Workshop Conclusion and Next Steps

Members of the Steering Committee and the facilitators thanked Working Group members for their thoughtful contributions over the course of the meeting. They noted that the group’s next meeting, scheduled for January 2025, would focus on reviewing stock status and evaluating past and ongoing management measures for each of the Recreational Initiative’s five focal species.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 1 Attendance

Working Group Members (State)

Hughes Andry (TX)
Shane Bonnot (TX)
Ray Cole (AL)
Ken Haddad (FL)
Frank Harwell (AL)
Robert Hilliard (FL)
Robert Hudson II (FL)
Ralph Humphrey, Jr. (MS)
Michael Kuljis (MS)
John Marquez, Jr. (MS)
Jeffrey Plumlee (LA)

Steering Committee Members

Carrie Simmons – Gulf Council Executive Director
Dave Donaldson – Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission Executive Director
Michael McDermott – Private angler (Mississippi), Council Member
Andy Strelcheck, NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Administrator
Russ Dunn – NOAA Fisheries Recreational Fishing Coordinator
Ed Walker – Private/charter/commercial fisherman (Florida), Council Member

Supporting Gulf Council Staff

John Froeschke, Deputy Executive Director
Emily Muehlstein, Public Information Officer
Sarah Gardiner, Fishery Biologist
Camilla Shireman, Administrative & Communications Assistant
Max Birdsong, Social Scientist
Bernadine Roy, Office Manager

Facilitators (Pelagic Strategies)

Willy Goldsmith
Andrew Loftus

Others

In Person Attendees:

Taylor Beyea
Catherine Bruger
Shepherd Grimes
Frank Helies
Sean Meehan

Others (continued)

Virtual Attendees:

Kesley Banks
Jeff Barger
Brett Booth
James Bourland
Gregg Bray
Eric Brazer
Ben Choi
Manuel Coffill-Rivera
Josh Cooper
Tiffanie Cross
Blakeley Ellis
Matt Freeman
Joe Froeschke
Edward Glazier
Alisha Gray
Martha Guyas
Nicholas Haddad
Michael Hagen
Chris Hensley
Ryan Hessong
Lisa Hollensead
Joseph Hudson
Haley Hutto
Don Jones

Brent Kempton
Joshua Kilborn
Michael Larkin
Sarah Lazo
Mara Levy
Ty Lindsey
Daniel Luers
Charlotte Marin
Michelle Masi
Jessica Matos
Natasha Mendez-Ferrer
David Moss
Lewis Naisbett-Jones
Steve Papen
Randy Pausina
Nathan Putman
David Records
Alexis Sabine
Charlotte Schiaffo
Chris Schieble
Mary Schuiteboer
Steven Scyphers
Kali Spurgin
Shawn Watson

Appendix 2. Challenges and Solutions: Working Group Perspectives

- **Challenge: Data collection not trusted by anglers**
 - Solution: rebuilding trust amongst anglers by:
 - Displaying how angler feedback is used and incorporated
 - Increasing outreach and extending networks of communication
 - Developing a “docuseries” highlighting the importance of data in fisheries management that promotes the wellness of the fishery
 - Educating anglers on the importance of data collection, particularly how fishing effort plays into stock assessments and discards
 - Solution: Improve the quality of data by
 - Incentivizing use of citizen science programs
 - Incentivizing accurate data reporting by recreational anglers
 - Developing more standardized reporting
 - Engaging with groups of young fishermen and those involved in social media to aid in communication for reliable fisheries data collection
 - Improving discard data using information from anglers
 - Coordinating data collection across Gulf states
 - Utilizing congressional activities to promote better data collection
 - Making key information and data that are reported by anglers easily accessible and available so the recreational community can pinpoint the process and utilization of data
- **Challenge: single stock management Gulf wide given the differences in user groups and geographic range**
 - Solution: Customize management for specific areas/fisheries by:
 - Implementing regional management
 - Increasing flexibility into the fishery management process from a regional aspect given varying state needs
 - Developing dynamic in-season management to increase angler flexibility
- **Challenge: Lack of trust in the management system by anglers**
 - Solution: Enhanced engagement with recreational community
 - Trust with recreational community would help with more measurable “wins”
 - Build in accountability for public comment—many feel that virtual comment letters don’t carry the same weight as an in-person public testimony
 - Improve communication and engagement with regional outlets of communications (e.g., email blasts with openings/closures etc.)
 - Utilize more consistent management and seasons, open/close dates to accommodate recreational anglers and charter for annual planning
 - Develop a Gulf-wide fishing permit (similar to waterfowl stamp) to provide the basis for improved effort information.

- Utilize slot limit approach for fishing (e.g., 1 within the XX-XX inches and 1 over XX inches)
- **Challenge: Data collection and mandated management outcomes don't align**
 - Solution: Modify MSA to allow new and innovative solutions for recreational fisheries management (example: Season length and overlap for multi-species approach that does not utilize the current MSY approach outlined in MSA)
 - Evaluate a suite of recreational reef fish management instead of species-by-species
 - Reduce and quantify discards using correct messaging
- **Challenge: Improve general communication with anglers**
 - Solution:
 - Greater use of social media, particularly targeted to specific segments of the angler community
 - Use social media influencers to get messages out via trusted sources
 - Use a network of “fishery ambassadors” to help reach anglers

Appendix 3. Individual Working Group Member's Thoughts on Vision

1. Maintain a healthy Gulf of Mexico with sustainable fisheries for the future
2. Resource management that provides both a sustainable and predictable fishery
 - Goal 1: Reef fish seasons that allow for best available access with predictable starts set 12 months in advance
 - Goal 2: visibility of what a combined reef fish season would look like versus segmented by species
3. Regionally flexible fishery that provides maximum access using reliable, timely, and trusted data for stock assessments
4. Allow each state to manage snapper; incorporate independent data surveys; regional oversight; correlate data from red snapper; have readily available alternative explanations and inquiries from Council
5. Achieving successful Gulf recreational fisheries management that balances conservation and access with more accurate, state-led recreational data collection instead of the less accurate federal Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP)
6. Gulf reef fish are managed to accommodate growth in recreational fishing and results in angler satisfaction.
 - Goal 1: Evaluate the current reef fish management system for obstacles to current and future angler access and satisfaction
 - Goal 2: Develop a new fishery management system specifically for Gulf recreational reef fish
7. Each Gulf state manages all reef fish out to 200 miles, utilizing their own stock assessments. Allow the Council to act as a Steering Committee only (not a decision-making entity)
8. To foster a collaborative recreational fishing community that champions the open sharing of data, empowering anglers and stakeholders alike to enhance sustainable management of fish stocks and fishing regulations in the Gulf of Mexico.
9. Maximizing opportunity through participation, science, and stewardship; improve and solicit angler participation; expedite and advance the science; instill concepts of ownership and stewardship among participating anglers
10. Provide fishing access to present and future recreational fishermen while achieving management objectives.
 - Goal 1: Further utilize regional management model
 - Goal 2: Improve angler engagement and trust in data collection
 - Goal 3: Incorporate innovative strategies to fishery independent data collection and fishery-dependent data collection
11. Recreational reef fish fisheries of larger stocks, multispecies trips, and more fish.
 - Goal 1: Implement a universal reporting system for all states and get all states to agree on a reporting system
 - Goal 2: Faster stock assessments
 - Goal 3: Lower discards
 - Goal 4: Gain trust and support from recreational fishermen
 - Goal 5: Create new reefs and maintain the reefs we have