

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Public Comment Guidelines
Approved January 24, 2022

About these Guidelines

The following guidelines are created for Council staff and the public to outline Council procedures for collecting, storing, and communicating public comments. Consideration of public comment is an integral part of the Council process; thus, staff is responsible for ensuring that public comments are handled properly. We strive to provide easy opportunities to provide public comment and prioritize the effective synthesis of comments for Council use in the decision-making process.

Written Comment Collection

Written public comment is welcome at any time and on any topic. In addition to gathering general comments, we endeavor to collect issue-specific comments throughout the development of amendments to our Fisheries Management Plans. We also collect targeted comments on additional issues including: fish stock status, Executive Orders and coral grant related activities. We ask commenters to submit their name, email address, location, and association with the fishery along with each comment so we can gain a better understanding of each perspective. However, those who wish to remain anonymous may do so by simply choosing not to fill in those data fields on the online comment forms or by requesting that comments sent via email remain anonymous.

General Comments

Written general comments can be submitted by email (to gulfcouncil@gulfcouncil.org), by written correspondence (to 4107 W. Spruce St. Suite 200, Tampa, FL 33607), or through our General Comment web form located on the Council website (www.gulfcouncil.org). Comments received via email or written correspondence will be uploaded to the appropriate comment repository. Comments received online will automatically populate in the comment repository. Comments submitted by Tuesday prior to each Council meeting will be included in the “other fisheries issues” portion of the public comment agenda item in the Council briefing materials.

Comments Specific to a Council Action

Upon initiation of an amendment or framework action, staff will create a unique comment form and link it to the “Amendments Under Development” webpage. The simplest way to do this is to copy another Google Form in the Gulf Council Google Drive folder: Amendments - Implemented, Under Dev, On Hold, Gen Comments > Under Development. The title will need to be updated with the appropriate document name and a new spreadsheet will need to be created to capture responses. These links will then need to be added to the appropriate “Submit Comment” and “Read Comments” on the “Amendments Under Development” page. Staff will search comments in the

general comment repository from the year prior to initiation of the action and add those legacy comments to the newly created issue-specific comment repository. Issue specific comments can still be submitted via email and written correspondence and staff will sort them into the appropriate issue-specific comment repository. Issue-specific comments will be collected until 5:00 PM eastern time on the Tuesday before the Council meeting when final action on the issue is scheduled to take place. Staff will summarize all comments received, add the summary and full text comments to the Council briefing materials, and present them to the appropriate Council Committee before final action is taken. After final action is taken on a document, staff will disable the comment form and the comments will be added to the document itself.

.pdf Comments and Comments Received on Multiple Issues

If a letter/PDF document comes through, it is saved in Google Drive > Public Comment PDF Letters. Then the link that is created is added as the “comment” in the appropriate comment sheet. If it covers multiple issues the comment/link is entered multiple times over the appropriate comment forms.

Comment Campaigns/Form Letters

When form letters or comment campaigns with identical comments are received, staff will upload one copy of the letter to the appropriate comment repository and keep a running list of the name, location, and affiliation of each person who submitted a letter.

Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Comments

Written comments received in reference to SSC agenda items will be added to the SSC meeting materials under the public testimony agenda item. They are also added to the ‘General Comment’ repository.

Solicitation of Comments

Written comments on fishery issues are welcome at any time and can be submitted by mail, email, or using our online comment forms. Oral testimony is also welcome during virtual and in-person scoping, public hearing, AP, SSC, Technical Committee, and Council meetings. When the Council initiates scoping or public hearing for an action, it will also provide guidance to staff on how to solicit comments. Typically, formal scoping is bypassed for framework actions and comments are solicited on the public hearing draft of a framework using all written comment mechanisms and through the production of a tutorial video. Full plan amendments can undergo formal scoping, but it is not a requirement. During public hearing for an amendment, staff typically prepares a tutorial video and solicits comments through a virtual hearing, in-person hearing, or a combination of both. Additionally, the Council may choose to solicit comments during scoping or public hearings in other ways. Below is an outline of each method used to solicit comment:

Video

A short video tutorial explaining proposed management changes and the actions and alternatives available. Videos should contain information on how to submit written

comments. Videos will be posted on the Council website and on social media (primarily Youtube).

Webinars

Hearings conducted by webinar should begin with a presentation on the proposed management changes and the actions and alternatives available. A question and answer session should follow before public testimony is taken. A combination of communication staff, technical staff, Council members, and supporting administrative staff should be present. A staff member will write a summary report of each meeting for inclusion in Council meeting briefing materials before final action. Webinar hearings should be announced via FRN, press release, and on social media.

In-Person Meetings

In-person hearings can be held across the Gulf or in select geographic areas. Council members and staff will work together to choose appropriate locations. In-person hearings should begin with a presentation on the proposed management changes and the actions and alternatives available. A question and answer session should follow before public testimony is taken. A combination of communication staff, technical staff, Council members, and supporting administrative staff should be present. A staff member will write a summary report of each meeting for inclusion in Council meeting briefing materials before final action. In-person hearings should be announced via FRN, press release, and on social media. Public comment is also taken during Council meetings, SSC meetings, Technical Committee meetings, and AP meetings.

Blog Posts

A *Council Meeting Preview* blog article is published in advance of each Council meeting. This article explains any final action items on the agenda and provides educational materials and mechanisms for submitting public comment. When few or no final action items are scheduled, the blog article will focus on highlighting some of the other important issues that will be addressed. When appropriate, links to educational materials and comment forms for those issues are provided.

Social Media

The Council uses social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) to cross promote opportunities to submit public comment. When a press release, video, blog article, or public meeting is available, it is advertised using the appropriate social media channels.

Press Release

The Council will publish a press release to solicit public comment when an FRN publishes to announce meetings. Press releases are also used to solicit comment for non-traditional comment solicitation efforts (e.g. solicitation of comments on an Executive Order or a Fisherman's Feedback effort).

Website

All amendment-specific public comment opportunities and a general comment form are available on the "[Amendments Under Development](#)" webpage. Additionally, issues approved for public hearings are published on the Council [homepage](#). Public hearing meetings, scoping meetings, and all other public meetings that collect public comment are posted on the online calendar and on the appropriate meeting webpage.

Direct Mailing

The Council can send direct mailings soliciting comments to federal commercial and/or charter/headboat permit holders using the address data provided by the federal permit database.

Fish Rules Push

The Council can use the Fish Rules platform to engage anglers by creating a banner advertisement and/or adding a pop-up advertisement. Such adds can target an audience in the recreational app based on species or fishing location. In the commercial app, adds can target users based on permit.

Comment Deadlines

Generally, comments should be submitted no later than 5:00 PM eastern time on the Tuesday preceding each Council meeting. This allows staff time to sort and summarize comments for inclusion into Council briefing materials. Comments submitted after the Council meeting deadline and before final action is taken will still be included in the direct comment links for the Council to view; however, they will not be summarized and presented directly to the Council during its meeting. Comments that are submitted on a specific document after the Council takes final action will be included in the general comment repository.

Written comments submitted for AP, Technical Committee, SSC, and other relevant meetings will be added to the meeting materials as they're received. Since such comments are not summarized, there are no deadlines for inclusion as long as comments are submitted before the conclusion of the relevant meeting.

Relaying Written Comments to the Council

All written comments received, including comments submitted through online comment forms, are collected in the appropriate comment repository and publicly displayed on www.gulfcouncil.org in-real-time. Public comments received via email are added to the appropriate comment repository. Staff does not distribute public comment directly to Council members through email. Staff does not quantify the number of comments received in support or against an action.

General Comment

General public comments received between each Council meeting (and no later than 5:00 PM eastern time on the Tuesday before each Council meeting begins) are included under the public testimony section of the Council briefing materials.

Amendment Specific Comment

All Amendment specific comments for actions scheduled for final action, received before 5:00 PM eastern time on the Tuesday before each Council meeting, are summarized, included in the Council meeting briefing materials, and presented to the appropriate Council Committee before final action is taken. Comments received on framework action items are included in the Council Meeting briefing materials as full text comments.

Public Testimony

Public testimony is taken during most meetings of the Council and Council advisory bodies. In-person testimony is always taken and virtual testimony will be taken at the discretion of the Council Chairman. Each commenter is allowed to testify once during each public testimony session. Commenters must be present during the testimony session to present their own testimony. Written comment can be submitted if an individual is unable to testify on their own behalf. At the discretion of the chair, each commenter will be given a specified time interval to speak (usually three-minutes) and additional time may not be yielded to other speakers. Dignitaries who wish to give testimony will be given priority and are not subject to time limits.

Council meetings

In-Person

Commenters must register to give testimony at the kiosk near the meeting room entrance on the day of public testimony. Staff is available to assist with registration. A list of commenters will be projected in the meeting room.

Virtual

Virtual commenters must register to give virtual testimony on the link provided on the meetings materials webpage. Registration to provide virtual testimony must be completed one hour prior to the start of the public testimony session. Virtual commenters must log-in to the webinar under the same name used to register to provide comment.

Public hearing and scoping meetings

In-Person

Commenters must register to give testimony upon arrival to the meeting. Staff is available to assist with registration. Testimony will be taken in the order of sign-up.

Virtual

Virtual public hearing and scoping meetings will be held separately from in-person meetings. During virtual meetings, commenters will be prompted to 'raise their hand' to indicate their desire to testify. Staff will call-on each commenter, unmute their line, and allow them to provide testimony.

Relaying public hearing and scoping meeting comments to the Council

Each individual comment received during public hearing or scoping meetings is summarized in a public hearing summary along with a summary of written comments

received on the issue. The public hearing summary is included in the Council's briefing materials and presented to the Council before final action is taken on the issue.

Advisory Panel, Scientific and Statistical Committee, Technical Committee and other meetings

In-Person

Upon the initiation of public comment, members of the audience will be asked to raise their hand to indicate their desire to speak. The meeting Chairman will call on each commenter to provide testimony.

Virtual

Commenters will be prompted to 'raise their hand' to indicate their desire to testify. The meeting Chairman will call on each commenter and allow them to provide testimony.

Relaying other meeting comments to Council

Comments given during Advisory Panel, Scientific and Statistical Committee, Technical Committee and other meetings will be shared with the Council .

Record Keeping

Archiving

At the end of the calendar year, that year's general comments will be moved off the general comments sheet and into its own sheet. Amendments - Implemented, Under Dev, On Hold, Gen > General > Year.

When a document becomes final, staff will create a PDF of the final list of comments and save it in the transmittal folder on the H drive for that document. The "Submit Comments" link is removed from the website and the "Read Comments" link stays on the implemented page. In Google Drive, the Form is deleted (as no further comments need to be captured) and the Sheet is moved from Amendments - Implemented, Under Dev, On Hold, Gen Comments > Under Dev to Implemented under the appropriate species.