Recreational Initiative

Meeting Summary

Recreational Initiative Virtual Public Input Session
November 18, 2024

The Gulf Council convened a virtual Public Input Session from 6-9 pm ET on Monday, November 18, 2024, to discuss the major discussion points and outcomes of the Recreational Initiative's first Working Group meeting. The meeting, held in Tampa, FL on October 29-30, 2024, had 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.

After an introduction to the session by Gulf Council Public Information Office Emily Muehlstein, consultants Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus presented a summary of Working Group meeting 1 (a written summary is available here).

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.

Are There Key Challenges That Are Not Identified Here?

Participants raised several data-related concerns, particularly about the lack of mandatory self-reporting for recreational anglers, which some believe could improve data for better management. One attendee pointed out that the main challenge is data validation, a longstanding obstacle that has prevented the effective use of self-reported data. They suggested that resolving this issue could make self-reported data more reliable and enhance management efforts. Additionally, participants noted that the current reliance on retrospective data instead of trend-based analysis undermines effective decision-making, with MRIP data specifically cited as problematic and unreliable.

High discard and bycatch rates were also discussed, particularly when anglers must release fish they cannot keep, only to see these fish preyed upon by sharks or dolphins. The lack of alignment between fishing seasons for various species, which are often caught in similar areas using similar techniques, was said to worsen these discard issues.

Participants also noted concerns regarding environmental changes and increased angler efficiency. Environmental degradation of nearshore habitats, exacerbated by poor water quality from river outflows, is forcing anglers further offshore. Meanwhile, new fishing technology allows the younger generation to fish farther out, putting more pressure on those offshore stocks.

Some participants noted that the complexity of fishery management creates significant barriers for "casual," less-engaged anglers. They argued that the complex regulations and technical language make it difficult for recreational fishermen to fully understand and comply with the rules, leading to frustration and a disconnect from the management process.

What Are Your Proposed Solutions to These Challenges?

Participants offered various solutions to the key challenges they discussed. To improve data collection and reporting, some recommended deploying biologists on private recreational fishing trips to gather reliable discard data firsthand—akin to the sampling that occurs on for-hire vessels. There were also proposals to develop phone apps for data collection. It was emphasized that these methods would require a robust validation system to ensure reliability. Additionally, engaging divers to provide fishery-independent observational data, such as video evidence, was suggested to enhance stock assessments.

Several regulatory solutions were also discussed. These included a multi-species management approach where anglers keep the first two reef-fish caught to reduce discards. Other suggestions focused on better aligning fishing seasons for different species to minimize bycatch and discard mortality. Some suggested issuing harvest tags, similar to systems used for hunting, to limit fishing mortality and facilitating data collection. The idea of a "red snapper fishing day" system, allowing anglers to declare specific fishing days, was another proposal aimed at improving management efficiency.

Some attendees highlighted the importance of improving water quality by collaborating with agencies to reduce pollution from river systems, pointing out that cleaner water could help restore nearshore habitats and support sustainable fishing practices.

Education and outreach were identified as essential components of effective fishery management. Participants suggested using social media to simplify complex concepts and help anglers better understand the system, reducing frustration and fostering trust.

Does the Vision Reflect What You Want from the Fishery?

Opinions on the Vision statement were positive, with most members feeling it was comprehensive and addressed a wide range of important issues. However, some emphasized the need for practical, incremental steps for effective implementation.

The concept of regional management received support, with participants suggesting that this approach could better account for variations in fish availability and local fishing practices. There was also a call for more adaptable management strategies to handle changing conditions in the fishery effectively.

A participant also stressed the importance of equitable access to fisheries to ensure fairness across different user groups. Some participants mentioned that equitable access included consideration of vessel size, sector, and geographic location.

Are There Any Goals That You Think Should Be Added to Achieve the Vision?

Participants emphasized the need for mandatory reporting across the recreational sector to enhance data accuracy and improve fishery management. They discussed implementing innovative tagging systems to ensure accountability and suggested incorporating voluntary data from divers to provide additional, firsthand observations. There was also interest in exploring real-time data systems, such as using methods like Google Analytics to track angler movements and make management decisions based on trends.

Sustainability initiatives were another focus, with participants stressing the importance of improving water quality and protecting nearshore ecosystems to reduce the necessity of offshore fishing. To address discard issues, participants proposed strategies like multi-species bag limits or a "first fish" policy to minimize waste and bycatch. These approaches were viewed as practical ways to make the fishery more efficient and sustainable.

Education and outreach were identified as essential for building support and understanding among anglers. Participants called for increased educational efforts, such as using social media to simplify complex management concepts, reduce frustration, and improve compliance.

Additional Points

Louisiana's red snapper management with its April-to-Labor Day season was praised as a success story by one participant.

List of Commenters

Matthew Delillo
Capt. Dylan Hubbard – Johns Pass, FL – Headboat Owner/Operator
Tommy Williams – Louisiana – Charter/Commercial/Private
Capt. Harvey Yankenson – Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Advisor
Chris Marrow – Florida Keys – Private Angler
Dan Carney – Southwest Florida – Private Angler
Capt. Clarence Seymour – Mississippi – Charter
Charles Wes Taliaferro – Florida – For-Hire
Timothy Nieman – Panama City, FL – Private Angler
Brad Brown – Matagorda, TX – Private Angler
Mike Colby – Clearwater, FL – Charter
Robert Sargent – Big Bend, FL – Private Angler
Mark Wheeler – Big Bend, FL – Private Angler
Charlie Kaplinger – Louisiana – Private Angler