

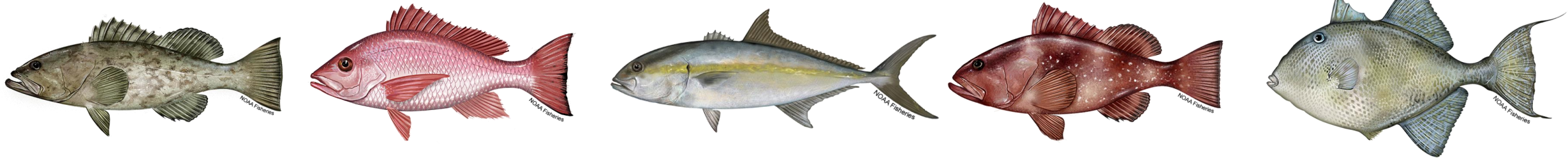
Recreational Initiative



Final Summary Report
April 8, 2025
Gulf Shores, Alabama

What is the Gulf Council's Recreational Initiative?

- An effort to engage the recreational community to:
 1. Review and evaluate past and current management strategies
 2. Explore potential innovative management strategies that could be applied in the future
- Includes seven key items specified in the Council's motion establishing the Initiative
- Used focal species of key interest to the recreational community to examine past/ongoing challenges and evaluate new approaches



Who's Involved

Steering Committee

- Provides guidance on overall effort (meets monthly)
- Includes leadership from the Gulf Council, NOAA Fisheries and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission as well as recreational representatives on the Gulf Council

Working Group

- Review management successes and failures and advise the Council on potential novel management measures.
- Focus on the exploration of ideas rather than reacting to proposed regulatory decisions from the Council.
- 12 members, consensus-based

Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

Platform	Progress Update	Public Feedback*	Notes
Council Meetings (January and April 2025)	Presentation with updates throughout Initiative	Public Comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working Group selected a representative to attend January and April Gulf Council meetings to help present results/field questions Dedicated Recreational Initiative public comment session at April meeting
Recreational Initiative Landing Page	Copies of presentations, public engagement session summaries, background and Working Group meeting materials, etc.	Public comment/input web portal (Comments submitted via portal are publicly accessible)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Posted materials to be shared by Steering Committee, Working Group members, etc.
Virtual Public Engagement Session after each Working Group meeting	Brief presentation summarizing recent Working Group Meeting	Three-hour virtual evening meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each session held 2-3 weeks after Working Group meetings Working Group members invited to attend but not actively participate Summaries prepared by Council staff.

**Given these opportunities, there was not a public comment period during Working Group meetings.*

WG Meeting 1: Vision for Rec. Reef Fish Management

Common Themes in the Discussion to Develop a Vision:

- Data
- Trust
- Regional fisheries management
- Collaborative management
- Predictability
- Stability
- Access
- Growth in participation

Working Vision:

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.

WG Meeting 1: Goals for Rec. Reef Fish Management

Working Vision:

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.

Goal 1
Trusted Data

Goal 2
Establish trust
with the
recreational
community

Goal 3
Develop
predictable
and reliable
recreational
access

Goal 4
Allow for
regional
flexibility in
management

Goal 5
Increase
Recreational
Community
Engagement
in the
Management
Process

Goal 6
Maximize angler
satisfaction, and
accommodate
growth

Working Group Meeting 2: Broad Messages

Seasons

- For charter/tackle industry, need something open (across reef fish) all the time (for certain regions, is true of private anglers too)
- But for the average private angler, more overlap in seasons enables opportunity to harvest multiple species and could reduce discards
- Generally, for-hire prefers predictable seasons. Private anglers prefer longer seasons even if not predictable

Accountability Measures

- Flexibility for post-season AMs preferred → distribute paybacks across multiple years?
- Better messaging on the potential impact that management actions will have on fishery (“Where are we going?” “What is ultimately possible biologically re. seasons/harvest?”)

Regional/Sector Considerations

- Interest in exploring opportunities for finer-scale spatial management (e.g., eastern v. western Gulf) while maintaining Council management authority
- Different season preferences for private v. for-hire → differential management may be desired
- Mechanics of both (sub-ACLs? Different management under shared ACL?) unclear

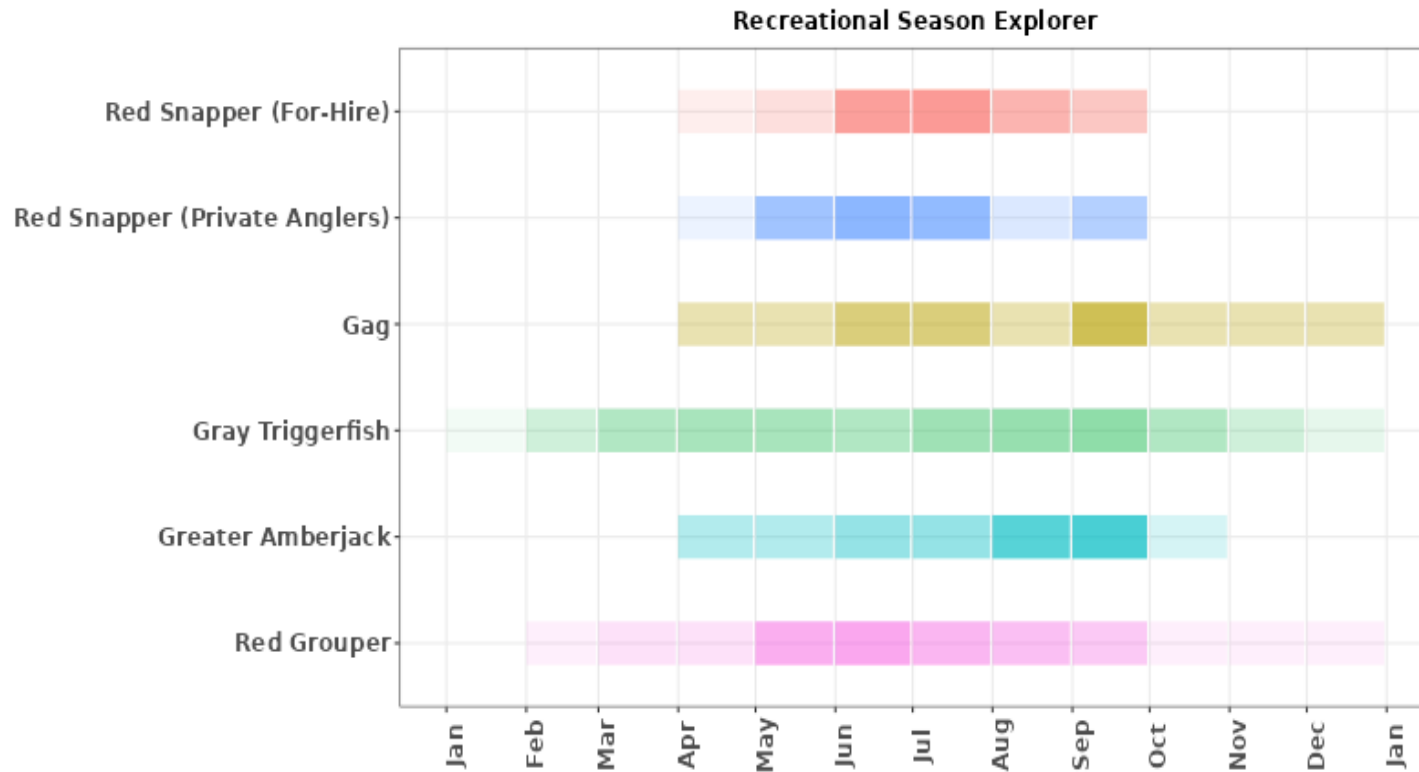
Working Group Meeting 3 (Feb 19-20, Tampa)

Purpose: Explore innovative management strategies for Gulf reef fish species, using the five focal species to illustrate potential approaches

- Evaluate and consider a harvest control rule approach (i.e., pre-agreed guidelines) for setting bag, size, and season limits
- Review alternative management approaches and evaluate their applicability for use in reef fish management
- Determine whether certain approaches are better suited to certain fisheries/species
- **Develop consensus statements and recommendations encapsulating the Recreational Initiative process**



Preferred Seasons “Homework”



Season Duration (Months)	
Species	Months
Red Snapper (Federal For-Hire)	3
Red Snapper (Private Angler)	3
Gag	1
Gray Triggerfish	8
Greater Amberjack	2
Red Grouper	5

*Each member was asked to indicate preferred seasons (in months) for selected species.
Number of respondents: FL-3, AL-2, MS-2, LA-2, TX-2*

Alternative Management Approaches (1)



Percent Change Approach

“Harvest Control Rule” Approach:

- Provide **stability** in recreational bag, size, and season limits
- Develop strategies to increase management **flexibility**
- Achieve **accessibility** aligned with availability and stock status

Future RHL vs estimated harvest	Biomass vs target level (SSB/SSB _{MSY})	Required Change in Harvest
RHL is above the range (harvest expected to be lower than the RHL)	Very high (above 150%)	Liberalization % = difference between harvest estimate and RHL, not to exceed 40%
	High (100% - 150%)	Liberalization % = difference between harvest estimate and RHL, not to exceed 20%
	Low (below 100%)	Liberalization: 10%
RHL is within the range (harvest expected to be close to the RHL)	Very high (above 150%)	Liberalization: 10%
	High (100% - 150%)	No liberalization or reduction: 0%
	Low (below 100%)	Reduction: 10%
RHL is below the range (harvest expected to exceed the RHL)	Very high (above 150%)	Reduction: 10%
	High (100% - 150%)	Reduction % = difference between harvest estimate and RHL, not to exceed 20%
	Low (below 100%)	Reduction % = difference between harvest estimate and RHL, not to exceed 40%



Alternative Management Approaches

Approach	Description
Harvest Rate Management	Targets fishing mortality rates rather than fixed catch limits
Harvest Tags/Days at Sea	Harvest tags: Can be used to collect data or monitor harvest Days at sea: Allocation-based management tool to regulate effort
Depth/Distance-Based Management	Creating management areas with unique harvest regulations based on depth or distance
Conservation Equivalency	Gives states flexibility to develop alternative regulations that address state/regional differences while achieving same (quantifiable) conservation impact
Permits/Endorsements/Stamps (e.g., Federal Reef Fish Permit)	Voluntary or mandatory permit/designation to identify the “universe” of federal waters anglers (FL, AL, MS, and AL have state programs)
Voluntary/Mandatory Catch Reporting	Electronic reporting of effort and/or landings
Release Mortality Reduction	Management changes aimed to reduce discard mortality
Carryover Provisions	Allow for carrying over uncaught portion of allowable catch (if it does not result in overfishing)—also required payback of overages

Alternative Management Approaches (2)

Considerable Interest:

- Harvest Control Rule approach
- Release mortality reduction
- Carryover provisions; paybacks over multiple seasons
- Voluntary and/or mandatory catch reporting

Some Interest:

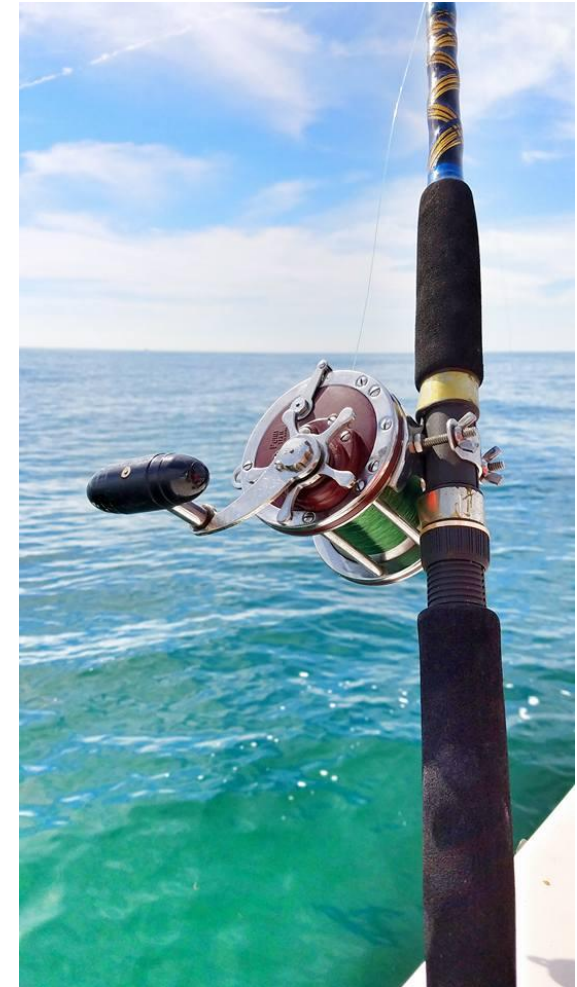
- Harvest rate management
- Conservation equivalency
- Permits/endorsements/stamps

Little to No Support:

- Depth/distance-based management
- Harvest tags

Development of Consensus Recommendations

- Developed to help achieve each of the six goals identified at Working Group Meeting 1
- Verbiage finalized via correspondence following Working Group Meeting 3
- Some are focused on individual focal species; others are broadly applicable to the Gulf reef fish complex



Goal 1: Trusted Data

Recommendation 1.1: Set specific and measurable guidelines and expectations for Gulf recreational data providers regarding the quality of data that will be acceptable, beyond the ambiguous “best available data.”

Recommendation 1.2: Electronic self-reporting by anglers should continue to play a role in estimating recreational Gulf reef fish catch, including both mandatory and voluntary programs and

Recommendation 1.3: Explore opportunities to increase the applicability of voluntary angler self-reporting of effort and catch, including through pilot studies to evaluate how best to both validate self-reported data

Goal 2: Establish Trust with the Recreational Community

Recommendation 2.1: Improve messaging regarding the potential on-the-water impact of management actions (e.g., what increase in catch limits anglers could expect to result from a decrease in discard mortality and/or rebuilding a stock).

Recommendation 2.2: Better communicate the conservation implications of different fishing activities based on individual species' biology and life-history, empowering anglers to make better decisions based on their conservation ethic.

Recommendation 2.3: Improve awareness of the tremendous volume of outreach and educational material already available through the Council and its partners.

Goal 3: Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access

Recommendation 3.1: Explore development and implementation of a harvest control rule approach for Gulf focal reef fish species to set multi-year measures, beginning with an evaluation of indicators that could be used to assess stock status in the absence of an assessment.

Recommendation 3.2: Examine the feasibility of implementing carryover provisions for the uncaught portion of an Annual Catch Limit for reef fish species, along with assessing the ability to distribute paybacks for Annual Catch Limit overages across multiple subsequent years to increase stability. Implementation of these could be explored through a pilot study and would be contingent upon stock status and/or trend.

Goal 4: Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management

Recommendation 4.1: Consider implementing regional/state flexibility in recreational reef fish management (while maintaining federal management authority) whenever possible.

Recommendation 4.2: Explore a regional management approach for red and gag grouper (maintaining a single Gulf-wide Annual Catch Limit) that splits management measures between Florida, where the vast majority of both species are caught, and the other four Gulf states, where gag and red grouper are only encountered rarely (i.e., allow for retention of incidental catch).

Recommendation 4.3: Explore differentiating management measures (i.e., size limit, bag limit, and season) for greater amberjack between the eastern (FL, AL) and western Gulf (MS, LA, TX) given regional differences in fishery characteristics (maintaining a single Gulf-wide Annual Catch Limit).

Recommendation 4.4: Continue to delegate authority for setting red snapper management measures for private recreational anglers and state guideboats to each of the five Gulf states.

Goal 5: Increase Recreational Community Engagement in Management

Recommendation 5.1: Seek opportunities to partner with recreational fishing community leaders to educate and engage anglers to be more active participants in the Gulf Council's management process—potentially through a leadership program sponsored by the Gulf Council.

Recommendation 5.2: Work with partners to develop scaled-down modules of the Marine Resources Education Program (MREP) to share with a wider audience—possibly including short videos on specific components of the fisheries science and management process.

Recommendation 5.3: Promote opportunities for anglers to report catch information and on-the-water observations of fish abundance and presence (e.g., through the Council's Fisherman Feedback Tool).

Goal 6: Maximize Angler Satisfaction and Accommodate Growth

Recommendation 6.1: Implement a replacement and/or enhancement to DESCEND Act, which requires Gulf reef fish anglers to have a descending device rigged and ready for use, by January 2026 to reduce discard mortality in a growing fishery.

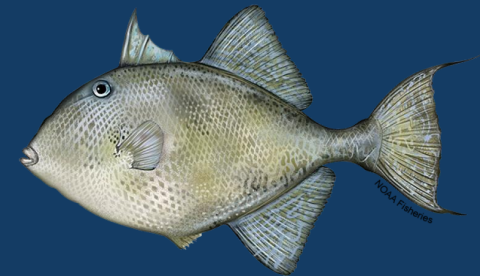
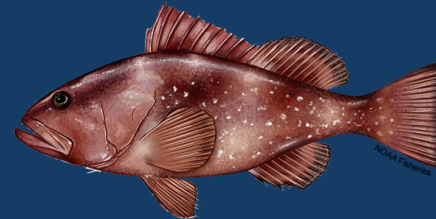
Recommendation 6.2: Work with the recreational community to develop seasons that maximize overlap in focal species to enable harvest of multiple species on a given trip and reduce discards. Maximizing overlap with the season for red snapper should be a key priority. At the same time, the Council should recognize the for-hire and tackle industry's need to have a focal species available for harvest at all times.

Recommendation 6.3: Explore the use of vessel rather than individual bag limits for greater amberjack (possibly scaled by number of anglers on board) to extend the season length.

Recommendation 6.4: Explore the concept of an aggregate “reef fish season” and bag limit to reduce discards and allow harvest of multiple species, integrated with recommendations for promoting regional management flexibility (Goal 4) where possible (and recognizing implementation challenges due to the current requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act).

Consensus Statements

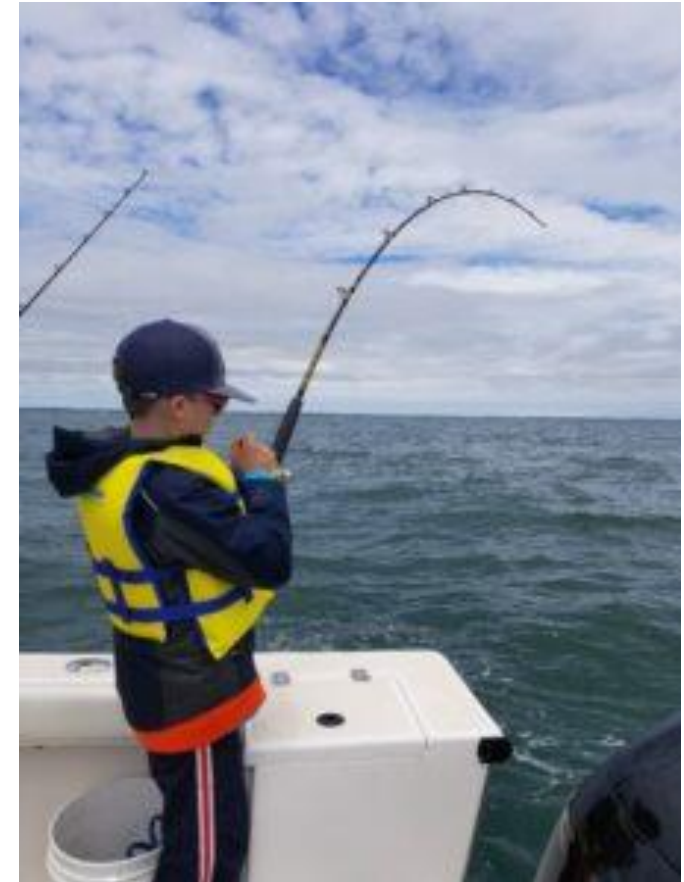
Working Group Member Perspective



Recreational  Initiative

Recommended Next Steps

- We encourage the Council to expeditiously develop a process (i.e., implementation plan) establishing priorities and timelines for acting upon these recommendations
- Prioritize and implement “low-hanging fruit” actions quickly
- Consider the “intent” or motivation behind recommendations that are deemed too difficult to implement and take action accordingly
- Provide feedback/updates on everything that you do!



Reflections on the Process

- Gulf reef fish fisheries are diverse and necessitate flexible and innovative management
- Much of what we heard was related to communication & engagement rather than process/outcomes
- Implementation of some recommendations (e.g., related to data) are already in process
- Some recommendations could take years/decades—need careful prioritization
- Review all materials for recommendations (meeting summaries, public input)—not just final report



Acknowledgments

Steering Committee Members

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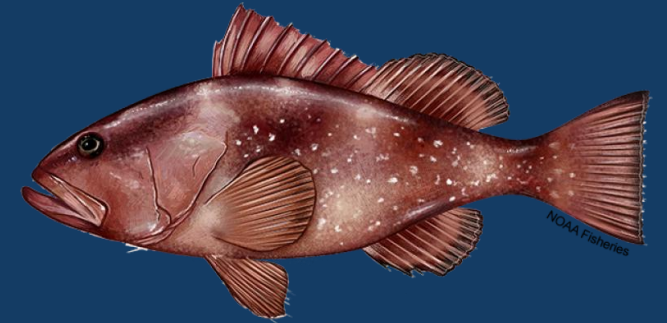
And:

Gulf Council members
Participating members of the
public

Thank you!

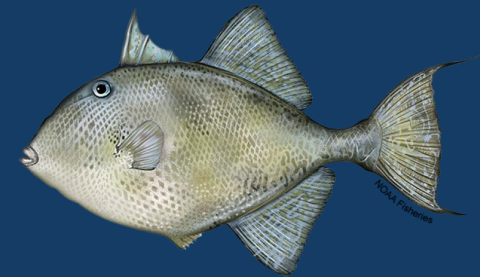
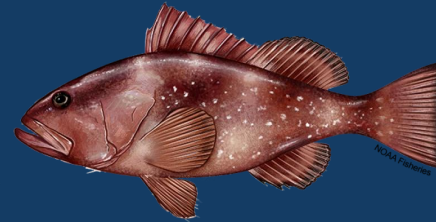


Questions and Discussion



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Backup

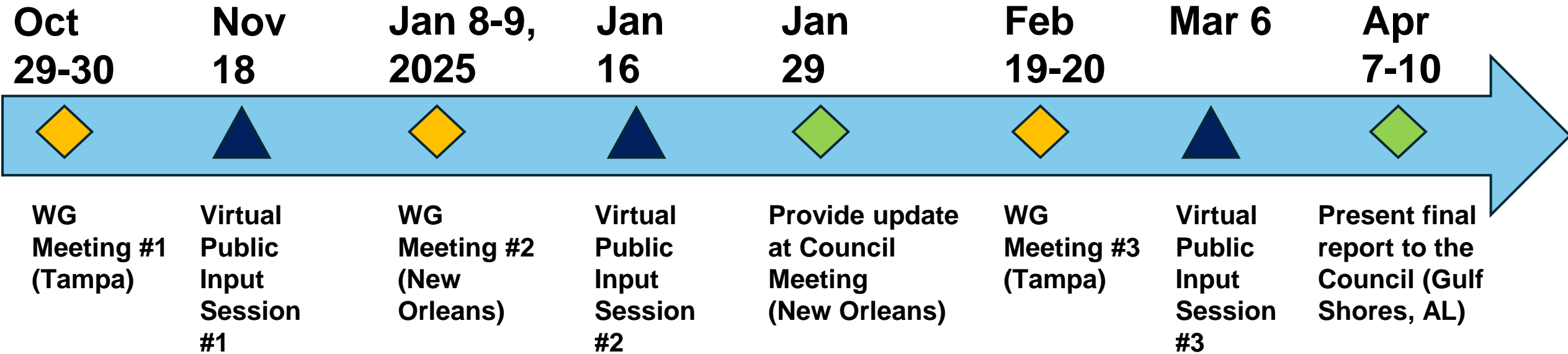


Recreational  Initiative

Recreational Initiative Items

<p>1. Development, review, and revision of goals and objectives for recreational fisheries management.</p>	<p>5. Evaluation and consideration of harvest control rules (i.e., pre-agreed guidelines) for setting bag, size, and season limits.</p>
<p>2. A review of 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.</p>	<p>6. Scientific recommendations to the Council for addressing variability and uncertainty in recreational catch estimates, including use of multiple years of data, identification of catch estimates that are the result of low sample sizes or outliers, and statistical recommendations and guidance for how such approaches could be implemented.</p>
<p>3. A review of recreational management measures, including how management measures have changed over time.</p>	<p>7. Exploration of innovative new management strategies.</p>
<p>4. Assessment of the performance and efficacy of recreational accountability measures and recommended improvements.</p>	

Summary of Recreational Initiative Timeline

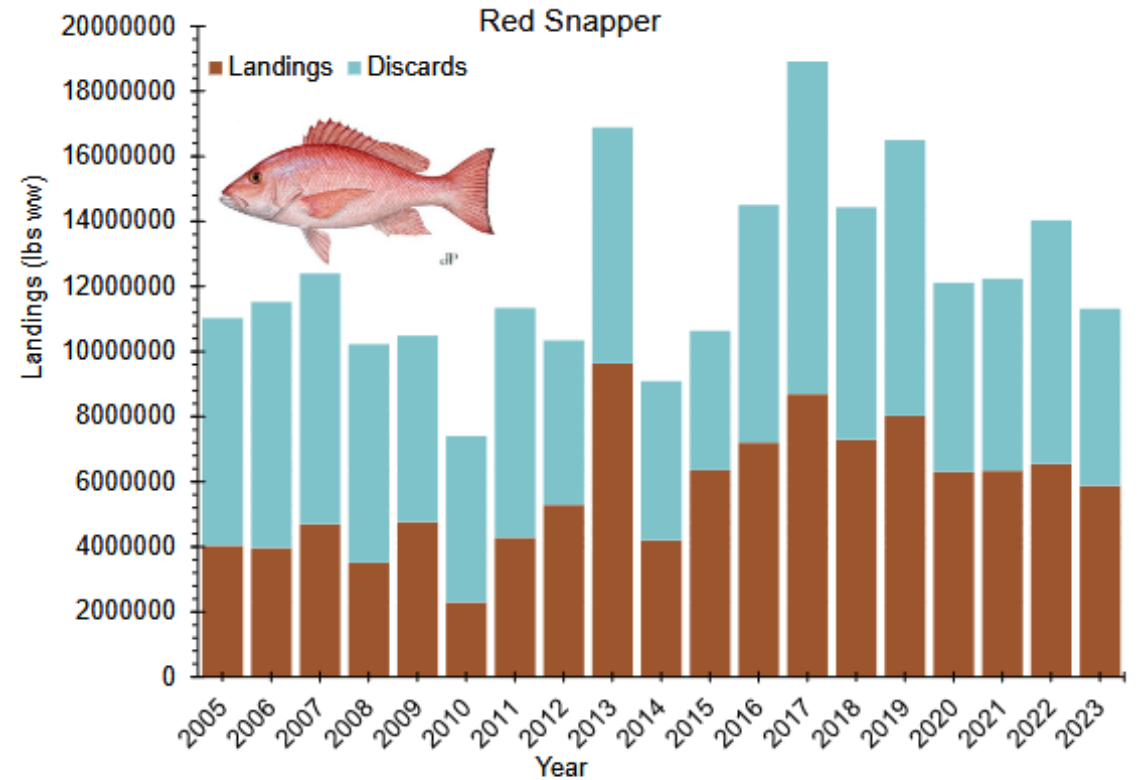
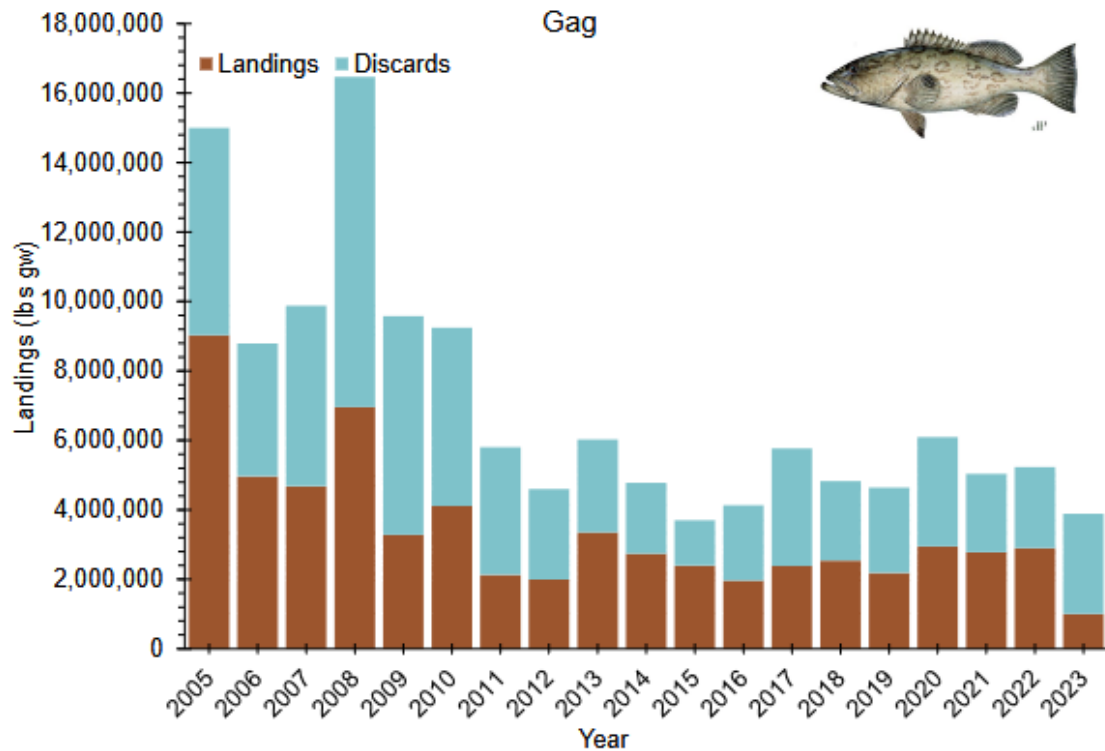


Working Group Meeting 2 (Jan 8-9, 2025, New Orleans)

Purpose: Ensure collective understanding of stock status and management measures/history for each of the Recreational Initiative's five focal species

- *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*

Examples: Changes in Landings/Discards Over Time



Working Vision: 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.

Goal 1: Trusted Data	Goal 2: Est. Trust	Goal 3: Devel. Predictable/ Reliable Access	Goal 4: Allow for Regional Flexibility in Mgt	Goal 5: Incr. Rec Engagement in Mgt	Goal 6: Max angler satisfaction
O1: Timely, transparent, accurate	O1: Promote transparency/ angler inclusion	O1: Develop/ communicate rec regs that maximizes lead time	O1: Explore state or regional mgt beyond red snapper for other reef fish species	O1: Leverage “champions”	O1: Eval. efficacy of current mgt system
O2: Engage rec community	O2: Educate anglers on data process	O2: Explore devel. of multi-yr mgt to minimize volatility		O2: Develop partnerships/ “MREP light”	O2: Explore legal/reg flexibility (multispecies?)
O3: Improve estimates of discard data	O3: Educate anglers on importance of mgt input			O3: Face to face communication	O3: Eval. approaches outside Gulf
O4: Inc. innovative strategies to capture fishery-indep data	O4: Timely/consistent comms re. stock status/mgt			O4: Quantify rec preferences	O4: Project future growth and impact on mgt strategies
	O5: Develop innovative methods to encourage angler input			O5: Consolidate rec issues at mtgs	O5: Consider barriers to access because availability doesn't = season
				O6: Eval lost oppty's due to discards	

Working Group Meeting #1 Overview

- Held Oct 29-30, 2024 at Gulf Council headquarters in Tampa, FL

Purpose:

- 1) Develop **goals and objectives** for recreational fisheries management for reef species in the Gulf of Mexico (*Item 1*).
- 2) 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.

WG Meeting 1: Day 1 Overview

- Overview of the Recreational Initiative (Pelagic Strategies)
- Federal Perspective on the Recreational Initiative (NOAA Fisheries staff)
- Past Council Efforts to Engage with the Gulf Recreational Reef Fish Community (Gulf Council staff)
- Breakout Sessions:
 - 1) Past Challenges
 - 2) Past Successes



WG Meeting 1: Key Challenges

I. Education/Engagement

- Educate re. how regulations are developed
- Improve distribution channels (“ambassadors?”)
- Need to achieve effective engagement in the absence of a crisis
- Disconnect between stock status and regulations (e.g., Western Gulf red snapper)
- Trust issues in data collection → create awareness about data’s role

II. Access and Equity

- Gulf-wide “one-size-fits-all” approach doesn’t meet state/regional fishery needs/characteristics
- Interannual instability of regulations
- Only available to harvest one species at a time → increased pressure
- Dissatisfaction with allocation
- High discard rates
- Misalignment between stock rebuilding and management (quickly rebuilding stock → low satisfaction)



Fish Rules



South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

WG Meeting 1: Key Challenges

III. Legal Constraints

- MSA framework hampers exploration of new approaches for the recreational community
- 2006 MSA reauthorization added requirements incompatible with recreational fisheries, put higher demands on MRIP than for what it was initially designed

IV. Data/Assessments

- Is a need for unified, integrated data across states
- Discard data a particular challenge
- Lengthy stock assessments impact timely decision-making

V. Increased Effort/Efficiency

- Growing size of the recreational sector (especially during COVID) has increased fishing pressure
- On-the-water technology (e.g., mapping, spot-lock) is perceived to have increased efficiency
- Information transfer (e.g., via social media) has dramatically lowered the learning curve
- Oil rig removal is reducing habitat and can concentrate effort

VI. Climate/Ecosystem Impacts

- Depredation
- Changes in water temperature patterns are impacting fish distribution and could impact fishery-dependent data (e.g., grouper)

WG Meeting 1: Key Successes to Possibly Build Upon

I. Education/ Engagement

- The Council's Fishermen Feedback Tool enables greater stakeholder input during the stock assessment process, but more engagement needed to increase awareness
- Council outreach at angling community events
- MREP is valuable, although it can be difficult to distill the information down for common anglers—consider short films/documentaries?
- Lots of outreach materials are available but can be difficult to find

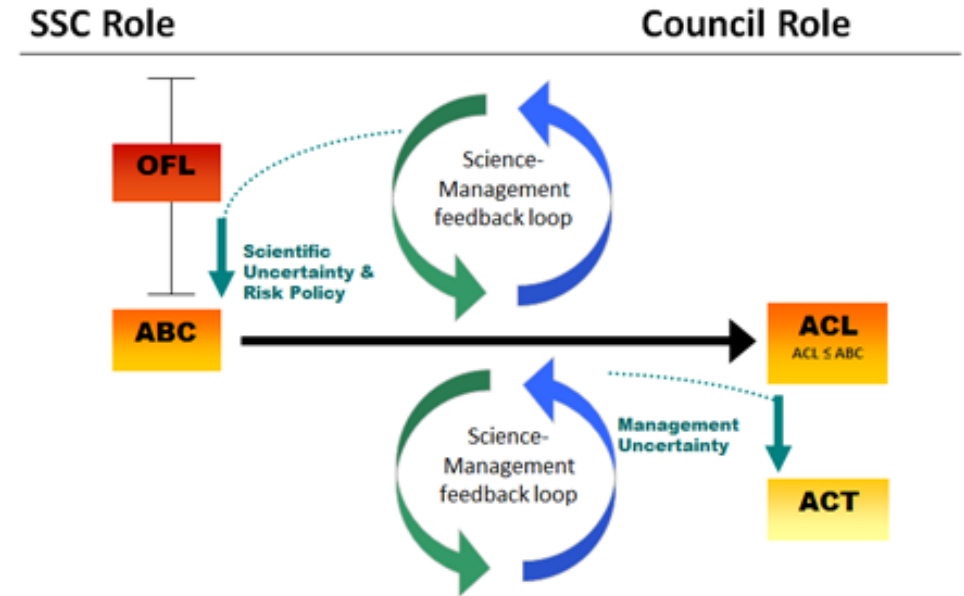
II. Assessments/Management

- State management for red snapper (Amendment 50A) was huge win allowing for the tailoring of management measures to each state, longer seasons → apply to other species?
- The Council's utilization of frameworks instead of amendments, along with interim analyses, had enabled more rapid and nimble response to fishery issues
- Are numerous reef fish species with healthy stocks and liberal regulations (vermilion snapper, mangrove snapper, yellowtail snapper, etc.)
- Successful rebuilding of some stocks, such as king mackerel (although it has subsequently declined) and red snapper quotas has increased substantially
- New assessment/data collection approaches, such as independent university fishery surveys, new technology (video, AI), and the Great Red Snapper Count
- Artificial reefing has expanded recreational opportunities

Working Group Meeting 2 Agenda

Presentations:

- Recreational Data in the Gulf of Mexico
- The Federal Management Process and its role in Gulf Council Management
- Accountability Measures
- Changes in Landings and Discards Over Time
- Management Overviews for Focal Species



Related roles of the regional fishery management councils and their Scientific and Statistical Committees in translating scientific information into recommendations for annual catch limits.

OFL – Overfishing limit
ABC – Acceptable biological catch

ACL – Annual catch limit
ACT – Annual catch target

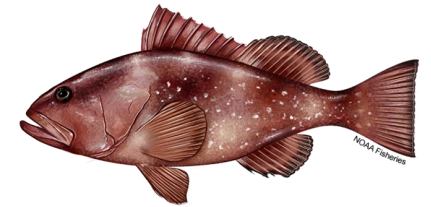
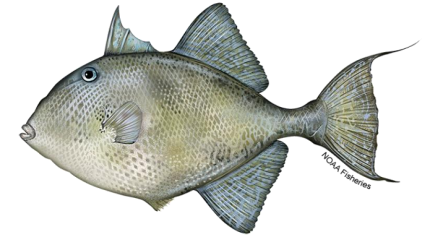
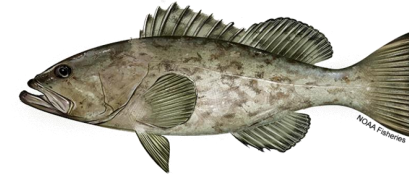
Species Overview Example: Gag Grouper

Gag Grouper History of Management



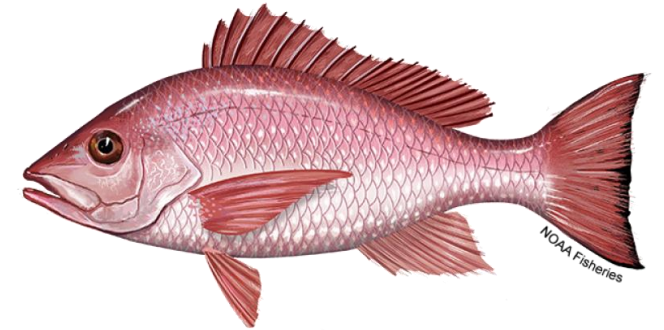
WG Meeting 2: Species-Specific Breakout Sessions

- *What are the benefits and challenges stemming from the key management decisions outlined in the presentation?*
- *What management decisions (or outcomes) have been the greatest sources of angler dissatisfaction?*
- *From an angler perspective, how well have the accountability measures in place been performing?*
- *Are there any elements of federal management that have been going well?*
- *What management strategies do you think would have contributed the most to achieving the desired outcomes that you identified in Working Group Meeting 1?*

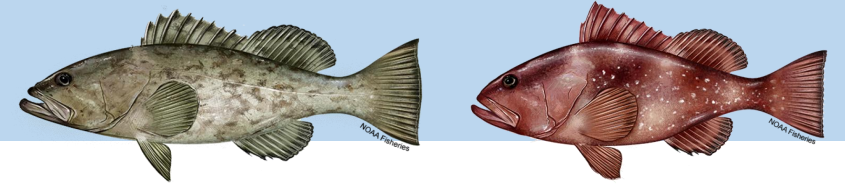


Red Snapper

- Relative satisfaction with fishing opportunities since state management
 - Concerns: state allocations, localized depletion
- Relative satisfaction with state data collection programs
 - Concern about state data recalibration to MRIP in some instances
 - Some concerns about lack of information on discards.
 - Concern that data programs across states need to be aligned
- Sector separation caused consternation but state management has helped to alleviate some of that



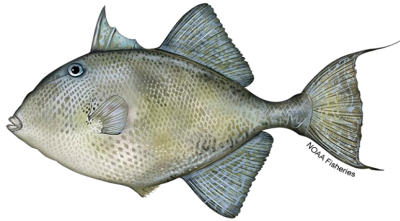
Gag and Red Grouper



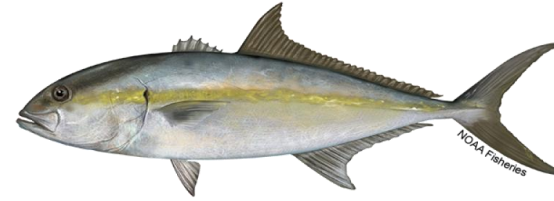
- Sources of dissatisfaction (gag):
 - September season: Fishery not open when water cool/fish inshore and readily accessible
 - Gag payback accountability measures in 2024
 - Disconnect between science and real-time observations (lots of fish inshore)
- Regional flexibility
 - Most catch is in Florida—differential management approach (under Council authority) for Florida v. other states that only catch red/gag grouper incidentally?
 - Finer-scale management *within* Florida?

Gray Triggerfish and Greater Amberjack

- **Generally:** Trips don't tend to target only these species— preference to overlap seasons with red snapper/other species to allow for multi-species trips



- Current triggerfish regulations are not constraining. Change in fishing behavior for red snapper (bigger bait) resulted in less triggerfish landed



- Regional differences between east and west GOM amberjack fisheries → regional management?
- Vessel limits for amberjack (scaled by # anglers on board?) may be favorable if it extends the season length. What is angler harvest satisfaction threshold?
- Communication surrounding the Great Amberjack Count and set expectations moving forward with dissemination of the results
- Misidentification/harvest of juvenile amberjack constraining rebuilding?
- Impact of habitat loss (sargassum, artificial reefs) needs to be considered in the assessment