



Meeting Summary

Recreational Initiative Virtual Public Input Session March 6, 2025

The Gulf Council convened a virtual Public Input Session from 6-9 pm ET on Thursday, March 6, 2025, to review and hear feedback on the major discussion points and outcomes of the Recreational Initiative's third and final Working Group meeting. The purpose of the meeting, held in Tampa, FL on February 19-20, 2025, was to explore innovative management strategies for Gulf reef fish species, using the Initiative's five focal species (gag grouper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, red grouper, and red snapper) to illustrate potential approaches.

After an introduction to the session by Gulf Council Public Information Officer Emily Muehlstein, consultants Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus presented a summary of the discussion topics covered during Working Group Meeting 3. These topics included Working Group member preferences for season overlap of the five focal species to improve angler satisfaction and reduce discard mortality, as well as various alternative management strategies that were reviewed over the course of the meeting.

The Council then asked a series of questions to gather attendees' input on these topics. Participants were asked to share their perspectives on preferred season structures, potential adjustments to possession limits, alternative management approaches, and priority regulatory changes. Their responses are summarized below.

Season Overlap Preferences

A commenter expressed a preference for overlapping seasons, particularly for red snapper and red grouper, since these species are often caught together. They noted that having one species open while another must be discarded leads to unnecessary waste and increased discard mortality. Another commenter favored a peak season from May through August to maximize fishing opportunities during prime conditions, while also acknowledging that spreading out seasons could provide fishing opportunities throughout the year.

The discussion also touched on the challenges of applying uniform season dates across the Gulf. A member of the public pointed out that fishing conditions and species availability can vary significantly based on location, making a single region-wide season approach difficult to implement. Another commenter mentioned the large size of the gray triggerfish population in the panhandle region of Florida, suggesting in that some areas the species is so abundant it interferes with targeting other fish and can be a nuisance. Their suggestion included increasing harvest allowances or adjusting regulations to reflect observed stock status.

The comments of several participants reflected a general preference for longer seasons with stricter bag limits rather than short seasons with more liberal bag limits.

Alternative Management Strategies

Participants shared a range of views on alternative management strategies, with one questioning how accurate data could be collected to implement certain approaches effectively. A commenter was skeptical about harvest tags and days-at-sea programs, citing concerns about fairness in allocation and potential challenges with implementation. Another expressed interest in a permit or endorsement for targeting reef fish in offshore waters, particularly if issued at the state level, as a way to quantify angler participation and improve data collection.

A commenter expressed strong support for carryover provisions, viewing them as a fair way to allow unused quota from one year to roll into the next, particularly since payback provisions already exist when quotas are exceeded. They noted that carryover allowances could help improve angler perception of management decisions, making regulations feel more balanced and transparent. A different commenter expressed interest in release mortality reduction as a conservation strategy, suggesting that reducing fish handling time and improving best practices for returning fish to the water could have a significant impact on stock health.

Priority Regulatory Changes

When asked to identify a single regulatory change they would like to see, commenters provided a variety of responses. One wanted more flexibility in regional management, arguing that different areas of the Gulf experience varying fishing pressures and stock conditions. Another suggested increasing the red snapper minimum size limit from 16 inches to 18 or 20 inches to promote sustainability while maintaining harvest opportunities. Multiple commenters raised concerns about shark depredation, noting an increase in shark interactions that they believe are impacting catch rates in certain areas. Another suggested that state-collected data should play a larger role in federal decision-making, believing that it more accurately reflects local stock conditions. A commenter also expressed interest in simplifying management measures for anglers, as easier-to-follow regulations could improve both compliance and enforcement efficiency.

Participants and Locations:

Stace Stroud – Panhandle, FL

Jason Bole – Tampa, FL

Gregory Lawrence – Sabine Pass, TX

Jim Rinckley – Naples, FL

Travis Rolan – Panama City, FL

Michael Hios – Tampa, FL