Recreational Initiative

Tab B, No. 6(c)

Meeting Summary

Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 3
February 19-20, 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gulf Council's Recreational Initiative Working Group convened for its third and final meeting in Tampa, Florida on February 19-20, 2025, with the following purpose:

Explore innovative management strategies for Gulf reef fish species, using the five focal species to illustrate potential approaches (Recreational Initiative Item 7). Specifically, the Working Group aimed to:

- Evaluate the tradeoffs between current management measures (season length, possession limits, etc.);
- Evaluate and consider the application of Harvest Control Rules and other alternative management approaches for recreational reef fish management; and
- Develop consensus on actions for the Council to consider on long-term management goals and priority action items identified by the Working Group.

Preferred Season Timing Overlap

Working Group members reviewed results of an exercise they completed prior to the meeting to indicate preferred season timing/overlap for each of the five focal species given current season lengths. Participants generally agreed that maximizing overlap in seasons among focal species was a key priority, with particular attention given to maximizing overlap with red snapper (specific preferences in overlaps varied depending on location). While Working Group members discussed potentially further reducing bag limits for some focal species to allow for longer seasons/greater overlap, appetite for this approach was limited given that existing limits were perceived as already quite low and any marginal season length increases from further reductions would likely be minimal.

Alternative Management Approaches

The Working Group heard a series of presentations illustrating potential alternative management approaches that had previously been proposed/implemented for recreational management in the Gulf and/or other regions:

Approach	Description
Harvest Control Rule approach	Percent change in harvest is pre-determined based on a combination of a) anticipated future harvest relative to catch limits and b) stock status
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 the 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

Working Group Members expressed **considerable interest** in the following approaches:

- The Harvest Control Rule approach—specifically, the Percent Change Approach implemented by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, was viewed favorably given its potential to increase interannual stability in regulations, although the approach in its current form is relatively "data-hungry" (e.g., requiring a stock assessment update every two years, which is not currently available for Gulf reef fish species);
- Release mortality reduction, including support for continuing the requirements of the DESCEND Act and education and outreach initiatives such as the Return 'Em Right program;
- Carryover provisions were perceived as potentially increasing stability by allowing for the carrying over of the uncaught portion of an Annual Catch Limit while also allowing flexibility to spread paybacks for overages over a period of years rather than a single year (to the extent permissible by law); and
- Voluntary and/or mandatory catch reporting, which were viewed by Working Group members as continuing to have considerable potential for improving Gulf reef fish catch/effort data quality and transparency, particularly using existing app-based reporting, although members recognized challenges regarding data validation and bias.

Working Group Members expressed **some interest** in:

- Harvest rate management, which was not viewed as currently feasible given data requirements but could be considered as a long-term possibility;

- Conservation equivalency, which aligned with Working Group members' perceived need for more regionally-tailored management but brought with it concerns over the data needs and workload necessary to quantify equivalency in management measures; and
- Permits/endorsements/stamps (e.g., a federal reef fish permit): Working Group members recognized the need for assessing the "universe" of Gulf recreational reef fish anglers but noted that, with the exception of Texas, all Gulf states already have some form of a required endorsement or registration for targeting reef fish.

Working Group Members expressed **little to no support** for:

- Depth/distance-based management, which may have some applications but also brings with it concerns about its impact on discard mortality as well as its enforceability; and
- Harvest tags and days at sea, which Working Group members generally opposed given substantial concerns over how fishing privileges could be allocated fairly and equitably across members of the angling public.

Consensus Recommendations

During the meeting's second day, the Working Group began progress toward developing a series of consensus recommendations. After the third meeting all 12 Working Group members were given the opportunity to refine and finalize the consensus recommendations via email. It is recommended that the Council consider these consensus statements and prioritize them in order to meet each of the six goals identified at the first Working Group meeting:

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

DETAILED REPORT

The Gulf Council Recreational Initiative Working Group held its third and final meeting at Gulf Council headquarters in Tampa, FL, on February 19-20, 2025. The full agenda and background materials are available on the Gulf Council's website. Ten of 12 Working Group members were in attendance, along with all six Steering Committee members, Gulf Council staff, and members of the public (Appendix 1).

The purpose of Working Group Meeting 3 was to:

Explore innovative management strategies for Gulf reef species, using the five focal species to illustrate potential approaches (Recreational Initiative Item 7). Specifically, the Working Group aimed to:

- Evaluate the tradeoffs between current management measures (season length, possession limits, etc.);
- Evaluate and consider the application of Harvest Control Rules and other alternative management approaches for recreational reef fish management; and
- Develop consensus on actions for the Council to consider on long term management goals and priority action items identified by the Working Group.

Day 1 Overview

Introductions and Background

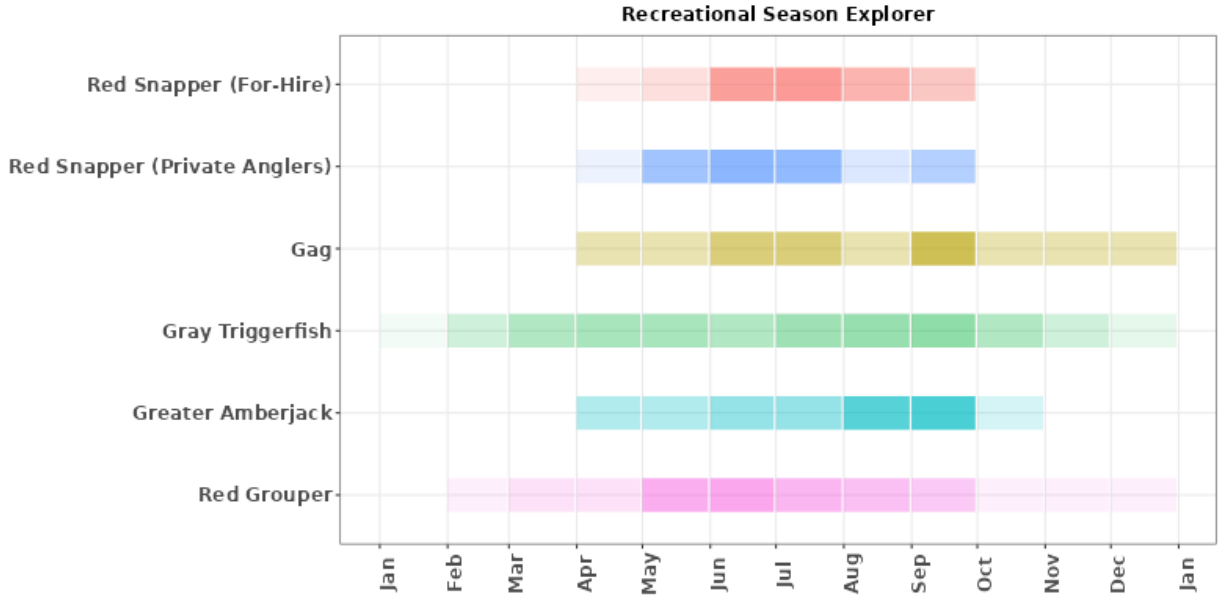
Following opening remarks by Recreational Initiative Steering Committee members Dr. Carrie Simmons (Gulf Council Executive Director) and Andy Strelcheck (NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Administrator), consultants Dr. Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus provided a summary of the major takeaways from the Working Group's first two meetings and reviewed the purpose and agenda of Working Group Meeting 3.

Dr. Max Birdsong (Gulf Council Social Scientist) then gave an overview of public comments received during the second virtual public engagement session on January 16, 2025, when members of the public were invited to comment on the major discussion points and outcomes from Working Group Meeting 2 (held January 8-9, 2025 in New Orleans, Louisiana). Following the presentation, Mr. Strelcheck noted the differing opinions on major topics by some participants in the January 16 session; for example, one individual mentioned that short seasons lead to high discard mortality, while another noted that they rarely observed fish dying after release and questioned the reliability of discard mortality estimates.

Preferred Season Length Exercise

In the weeks prior to the meeting, Working Group members were asked to complete a short exercise indicating their preferred season timing/overlap for each of the following focal species/sectors given current season lengths: for-hire red snapper (season length of three months); private red snapper (three months); gag grouper (one month); gray triggerfish (eight

months); greater amberjack (two months); and red grouper (five months). Their responses are presented in the following graphic, with darker colors indicating a higher number of respondents[1]:



Summary of season timing and overlap preferences by Working Group members. There were eleven total respondents: three from Florida and two each from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.

Steering Committee member and Gulf Council member Capt. Ed Walker noted that while the exercise was helpful conceptually, it is important to note that the timing of a season for a certain species can impact season length based on fish availability. As a result, Working Group members should consider that having a season open when the fishing is "best" would mean a shorter season for a given species. Working Group member opinions differed on this topic; one member indicated a preference for a longer season at an off-peak time for a given species to allow for more opportunity to harvest over a longer period of time and adjust when to fish based on weather, scheduling, etc. Another member added that a longer season better enables overlap in species as opposed to targeting just a single species on a trip, especially when fishing takes place far offshore. Conversely, another member mentioned that he would rather "work smarter and not harder" and harvest fish during a smaller time window when they were readily available.

Some Working Group members noted that these different preferences may provide further justification for regional management within the Gulf, particularly for species that are common in some areas (e.g., gag and red grouper in Florida) but less common elsewhere (where, for example, a longer season allowing for limited incidental retention could be implemented). One member observed that respondents outside of Florida generally preferred more overlap across

[1] Some Working Group members selected more than the maximum allowable number of months for certain species, so these results should be considered as a high-level exploratory exercise regarding preferred season length/overlap rather than as specific recommendations.

species' seasons, whereas in Florida anglers optimized for having a season open when the fishing was best for a given species.

Mr. Strelcheck asked if Working Group members thought the exercise should be shared with a broader audience. Some members thought it should be opened up to the public, whereas others thought a more targeted approach—for example, soliciting responses from members of relevant Gulf Council Advisory Panels—would be more effective. Capt. Walker noted that it would be particularly important to hear from the for-hire sector, mentioning that the preferences indicated by the predominantly private-angler Working Group concentrated seasons/overlap from late spring through early fall, with few or no seasons open during the winter months.

Following the group discussion, Working Group members separated into two breakout groups and were asked to think through the following questions regarding preferred species-specific management measures:

- *Using the analysis presented, what is your preferred season overlap?*
- *Would you be willing to trade off stricter possession limits for a longer season?*

During breakout session-report outs, Working Group members generally agreed that maximizing overlap in season among focal species was a key priority, with particular attention given to maximizing overlap with red snapper given that it is the predominant target reef fish species in the Gulf. That being said, preferred overlaps varied depending on location—for example, Louisiana Working Group members sought to maximize overlap between red snapper and greater amberjack whereas Florida Working Group members sought to maximize overlap between red snapper and grouper species. In some cases, Working Group members did not even select preferred seasons for a given species given that it was rarely encountered in their portion of the Gulf (e.g., red grouper in Texas). There was general agreement that these geographic differences lent greater credence to a more regional management approach.

While Working Group members discussed potentially further reducing bag limits for some focal species to possibly allow for longer seasons/greater overlap, given that bag limits are already low and the likely marginal season increases that could result from further reductions, appetite for this approach was limited.

Other considerations offered by Working Group members were reducing crowding/the derby effect (which could be achieved by having longer seasons and/or a season that is partially not within the summer months), not allowing harvest during a species' peak spawning months (this information was provided on the online preferred season exercise), and the fact that greater overlap doesn't necessarily counteract the negative impact of strict possession/bag limits given that it can be difficult to catch multiple species on a trip in some areas

Lessons from the Mid-Atlantic: Alternative Approaches to Management of Federally Managed Recreational Fisheries

Julia Beaty, Fishery Management Specialist with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Mid-Atlantic Council), provided Working Group members with an overview of recent and

ongoing activities that constitute the Mid-Atlantic Council's Recreational Reform Initiative. Ms. Beaty described some of the Mid-Atlantic management challenges for key species that were similar to those encountered in the Gulf, including: widespread angler dissatisfaction with some management measures; perceptions that measures were not reflective of stock status; and concepts around how catch and effort data collected through the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) were used when setting measures. For example, despite historically high black sea bass stock size (double the spawning stock biomass target), anglers continued to observe size limits increase and bag limits decrease.

The Recreational Reform Initiative was implemented in response to these challenges for four species—black sea bass, bluefish, scup, and summer flounder[2]—and included three goals:

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

Ms. Beaty walked Working Group members through the Percent Change Approach for setting recreational management measures that was developed through the Harvest Control Rule Framework/Addenda and first implemented for the 2023 fishing year. Broadly, the approach requires a percent change in harvest based on a combination of anticipated future harvest and stock status.[3] The Council projects whether estimated harvest is expected to be below, close to, or exceed the Recreational Harvest Limit (RHL) for a given species based on a recreational demand model derived from MRIP data, stock assessment projections, and angler preference data. Stock status is evaluated by comparing the biomass from the most recent stock assessment update to the target biomass. The combination of anticipated harvest (after accounting for dead discards) and stock status dictates the percent change in harvest (if any) that should result—for example, if harvest is expected to exceed the RHL but biomass is very high (more than 150% of the target), then only a 10% reduction in harvest is required. When a stock's status is healthy, the approach allows for more liberal reductions. Management measures are set for two years at a time, concurrent with the timing of stock assessment updates.

[2] These four species are all jointly managed by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

[3] The percent change approach does not apply to stocks that are overfished, which require rebuilding plans.

Percent Change Approach

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%**

In the Mid-Atlantic region, the Percent Change Approach was met with criticism by commercial fishing interests and some environmental non-governmental organizations due to concerns that it would allow recreational anglers to exceed the RHL and possibly Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act. A federal judge ruled in favor of NOAA Fisheries, arguing that the approach struck a balance between preventing overfishing and achieving optimum yield. The Percent Change Approach is set to expire at the end of 2025, and the Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework/Addenda considers whether/how to continue using the approach for 2026 and beyond.

Ms. Beaty also briefly described the Mid-Atlantic Council's Sector Separation and Data Collection Amendment, which will explore:

- Managing for-hire recreational fisheries separately from other recreational fishing modes
- Collection and use of recreational data, such as private angler reporting and enhanced for-hire vessel trip reporting requirements

Capt. Walker asked about the perceived level of support for sector separation and electronic self-reporting. Ms. Beaty described that effort is still in the scoping stage, but the for-hire sector was frustrated with the fact that Vessel Trip Report (VTR) data were not used for the catch estimation purposes and the volatility of MRIP estimates. Regarding self-reporting, there appears to be more support from those outside of the private recreational community (e.g., the commercial sector) for such an approach, and there are concerns about the effectiveness/reliability of self-reporting; that being said, there is widespread interest in improving catch and effort estimates.

Dr. Simmons asked about how the transition to the Percent Change Approach has been perceived by the recreational community in the Mid-Atlantic. Ms. Beaty noted that anglers are still frustrated about black sea bass management and particularly the need for a reduction (albeit smaller than previously required) when the RHL was expected to be exceeded despite the stock's very high biomass. However, anglers have been more understanding/accepting of the approach

for summer flounder and have generally had a favorable view of changing to a two-year management cycle, which increases stability.

A Working Group member asked if the Mid-Atlantic Council was obligated to adhere to the specified percent changes in recreational harvest for each combination of projected harvest and stock status shown. Ms. Beaty noted that the Mid-Atlantic Council has generally followed the prescribed changes in harvest specified by the approach, but may deviate in some special circumstances—for example, if a stock assessment is delayed or if there is an update to the recreational demand model or other data inputs.

Members of the Working Group expressed interest in the Percent Change Approach but noted its dependency on data that were not readily available for Gulf reef fish, such as a new stock assessment update every two years. Such an assessment pace is not feasible for Gulf reef fish species, meaning that another tool for assessing stock status (i.e., an index or set of indices) would be needed. There was also discussion about considering a stock's *trend* (e.g., increasing, decreasing, stable) in addition to its current status as an input to future management actions. Working Group members also asked about the recreational demand model used to project harvest—while no such information currently exists for the Gulf recreational sector, catch and effort data alone could be used for forecasting purposes.

Alternative Management Strategies Proposed in Previous Efforts

During the afternoon of the meeting's first day, Council staff, Steering Committee members, and consultants gave a series of short presentations describing eight alternative management strategies for Gulf recreational reef fish management that had been previously proposed:

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 the 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

Following these presentations and group discussion, Working Group members separated into breakout groups to discuss the alternative management measures that had been presented (including the Harvest Control Rule approach) and their potential applicability to recreational reef fish management. Specifically, they were asked to consider the following questions:

- *What do you like/not like about particular alternative management strategies?*
- *For what species and under what circumstances could you see a given strategy being useful?*
- *What do you believe are the biggest challenges for implementing particular strategies?*
- *Would any strategies be worth exploring through a pilot study or exempted fishing permit?*

Working Group member views on each of the alternative management strategies, based on full group and breakout discussions, are summarized below.

Harvest Control Rule/Percent Change Approach
The Working Group agreed that the Harvest Control Rule approach implemented for Mid-Atlantic species could be a useful tool for Gulf reef fish, although members recognized data limitations regarding stock assessment frequency (needed to assess stock status) and angler preference/behavior data (needed to project harvest). There was particular support for setting management measures for two years at a time, which would help to increase interannual regulatory stability to the benefit of both private anglers and the for-hire sector.

Harvest Rate Management
Given the data requirements, including an understanding of recruitment, annual stock assessments, and near-real-time catch information to estimate mortality, harvest rate management was not viewed as a feasible management option in the near- or even medium-term. However, looking into the future, if these data could be acquired this approach could eventually be considered as an alternative to pound-based catch limits.

Harvest Tags/Days at Sea
Working Group members understood the theoretical rationale for implementing harvest or effort controls in the form of harvest tags and days at sea, respectively. However, there was substantial concern regarding allocation, particularly for harvest tags, given the requirement of the Magnuson-Stevens Act to allocate fishing privileges fairly and equitably. This is particularly the case for fisheries with a high number of participants. As a result, the Working Group did not recommend that the Council pursue these approaches for reef fish species.

Depth/Distance-Based Management
Members of the Working Group noted that for species that are encountered as part of a complex (e.g., reef fish), depth- or distance-based management may be less effective due to discard mortality concerns. In order to be more effective in these cases, fishing effort (i.e., no targeting closures) may have to be regulated, which would likely be unpopular with anglers. In addition, the Working Group raised concerns regarding the ability to a) demonstrate the effectiveness of depth/distance-based management and b) adequately enforce compliance with such measures. Council staff noted that the Council is currently considering removal of its 20-fathom shallow-

water grouper closure for these reasons. While members of the Working Group understood the potential benefits of such closures, due to challenges regarding implementation and the ability to demonstrate success, support for broadening application of this approach was limited.

Conservation Equivalency

Working Group members recognized that the concept of conservation equivalency aligned with their support for a transition to more regionally-tailored management within the Gulf voiced at previous Working Group meetings. Mr. Strelcheck noted that the delegation of authority for managing the private-angler red snapper fishery to Gulf states was similar to, but not the same as, conservation equivalency. Conceptually, there was support for broadening this approach to other species, although given the distribution of other species in the Gulf perhaps only greater amberjack would be a reasonable candidate species. There was some concern over the potential data needs and amount of work to develop conservation equivalency plans that could quantify that they met conservation goals.

Permits/Endorsements/Stamps

Working Group members broadly recognized the need for effectively assessing the "universe" of Gulf recreational reef fish anglers. They noted that, with the exception of Texas, all Gulf states had some form of a required endorsement for targeting reef fish, although the mechanism for obtaining one varied by state (same v. separate web page as for fishing license, paid/unpaid, etc.). The Working Group generally agreed that some sort of low-level barrier, such as a nominal fee or separate (but well-publicized) webpage, should be used rather than having anglers simply check a box when obtaining their fishing license; doing so would enable managers to better assess the number of anglers who are truly targeting reef fish offshore and will make the extra effort to obtain an endorsement. They also noted the need to engage and educate anglers regarding the purpose of the endorsement (i.e., to improve catch/effort data), and, if payment is required, what those funds support.[4]

Voluntary/Mandatory Catch Reporting

The Working Group discussed extensively the potential for developing and/or expanding electronic catch reporting for recreational reef fish, recognizing that several state-based programs already exist in the Gulf (e.g., Tales 'n Scales in Mississippi and Snapper Check in Alabama). Broadly, they supported the notion of self-reporting and agreed that a major need was obtaining buy-in from anglers as well as addressing the biases that can result from who reports versus who doesn't. There was interest in implementing pilot studies with anglers to help address these challenges. One Working Group member brought up the potential of integrating both voluntary and mandatory self-reporting into existing data collection systems, including MRIP, which is currently re-envisioning its partnership approaches with data providers. Mr. Strelcheck noted that the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission had recently received $7 million to fund projects that could address some of these approaches.

[4] Funds from a federal endorsement enter the Federal Treasury for general use, but funds from a state-administered endorsement could be used to support fishery activities/infrastructure such as artificial reefs, boat ramps/access points, research, etc.

Release Mortality Reduction
There was broad Working Group member support for continuing measures to reduce discard mortality, including extending the requirements of the DESCEND Act (P.L. No. 116-340)[5] beyond January 2026 and the outreach, education, and research components of the Return 'Em Right initiative. Working Group members also recognized the long-term need to quantify the impacts of these efforts in order to incorporate them into stock assessments and lead to tangible impacts for anglers.

Carryover Provisions
Working Group members strongly supported the notion of being able to carry over the uncaught portion of an ACL to the following year, given that paybacks for overages are already required. [6] One Working Group member noted that allowing carryover would increase angler satisfaction and reduce criticism of the Council/NOAA Fisheries if the entire catch limit is not harvested in a given year. That being said, there was recognition that a catch underage could be due to a declining stock condition; as a result, implementation of any carryover provisions would need to be accompanied by a management tool or index to determine stock health and trend.

Other Approaches
Over the course of the discussion, Working Group members proposed and discussed several other potential alternative management measures, including:

- The implementation of a slot limit (as opposed to a minimum size limit) for protecting larger spawning fish, although a Council staff member noted that quantifying the conservation benefits of such a measure could be challenging.

- The concept of a joint "reef fish season" with an aggregate bag limit for multiple reef fish species, although a Working Group member noted the difficulty in implementing such an approach under the current provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act due to choke species (i.e., the catch limits on the most restricted species would effectively restrict harvest for other species once that limit is reached). However, it could potentially be implemented for reef fish species for which stock status is currently stable/healthy and regulations fairly liberal.

- Capt. Walker asked Working Group members to consider the potential applicability of marine sanctuaries/marine protected areas/special access areas for conserving Gulf reef fish species. One Working Group member mentioned that in hunting there are general public access areas and other special access areas that are managed for trophies/greater abundance (accessible by lottery/application); could a similar approach be implemented

[5] The Direct Enhancement of Snapper Conservation and the Economy through Novel Devices (DESCEND) Act of 2020 was implemented in 2021 and requires commercial and recreational fishermen to possess a venting tool or descending device that is rigged and ready for use when fishing for reef fish in Federal Gulf waters. The law is set to sunset in January 2026.

[6] The National Standard 1 guidelines (50 CFR 600.310) mandated by the Magnuson-Stevens Act state: "For stocks and stock complexes in rebuilding plans, the [Accountability Measures] should include overage adjustments that reduce the [Annual Catch Limits] in the next fishing year by the full amount of the overage, unless the best scientific information available shows that a reduced overage adjustment, or no adjustment, is needed to mitigate the effects of the overage."

in the Gulf, with the closed areas enabling for greater access to the public areas? Another Working Group member mentioned that a closure could also be in time instead of in space (e.g., closing the season for one or two months out of the year). Others indicated their potential interest in exploring such an approach but noted that terminology would be important because the term "marine protected area" could alarm fishery stakeholders. In addition, the approach would be better suited for some states with larger coastlines versus those with already-limited access such as Mississippi and Alabama.

Mr. Strelcheck noted that given the increasing size and efficiency of the Gulf's fishing population, perhaps it would be worth considering public access zones near population centers where the fishing may not be high-quality but would allow for longer seasons and provide species with respite elsewhere.

Putting It All Together: Consensus Statements and Recommendations

The majority of the meeting's second day focused on developing Working Group consensus recommendations to the Council, focused on working toward the vision for Gulf recreational reef fish management through the achievement of six goals identified at the first Working Group meeting:

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

The Working Group finalized consensus recommendations via correspondence after the meeting concluded.

Final Thoughts: A Working Group Wish List

As a final exercise, Working Group members were asked to share what changes they would most like to see in management of the Recreational Initiative's five focal species.

Responses coalesced around several themes, including:

- Regional management:
    1. Exploring a transition to regional or state-focused management
    2. State management for greater amberjack
- Management/regulatory approaches:
    3. Developing a path for more predictable seasons
    4. Implementing the harvest control rule approach as a tool where appropriate
    5. Exploring implementation of carryover provisions

6. Implementing a replacement/enhancement to the DESCEND Act by January 2026

- Data:
    7. Validating voluntary data collection mechanisms through existing state surveys
    8. Setting guidelines and expectations for recreational data providers
    9. More emphasis on state catch and effort data
    10. Developing a user-friendly way to report catch information
- Angler Outreach and Engagement:
    11. Better demonstration of the potential angler benefits that could result from management actions (e.g., increased catch limits)
    12. Improving outreach and comprehensibility of fisheries science and management activities
    13. Establishing a Gulf Council education and leadership program that creates embedded leaders within the fishing community.
    14. Increasing participation of anglers (including "weekend warriors") in the Gulf Council management process

Workshop Conclusion and Next Steps

Members of the Steering Committee and the facilitators thanked the Working Group for their dedication and insight over the course of the three meetings, and shared that draft consensus recommendations would be circulated to the Working Group prior to finalization. Next steps include development of a final report and presentation describing the activities and recommendations of the Working Group, which will be shared with the Gulf Council at the April 2025 meeting in Gulf Shores, AL.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 3 Attendance

Working Group Member (State)
Hughes Andry (TX)
Shane Bonnot (TX)
Ken Haddad (FL)
Frank Harwell (AL)
Robert Hilliard (FL)
Robert Hudson II (FL)
Ralph Humphrey, Jr. (MS)
John Marquez, Jr. (MS)
Jacob Mouton (LA)
Jeffrey Plumlee (LA)

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

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

Facilitators (Pelagic Strategies)
Willy Goldsmith
Andrew Loftus

Others

In Person Attendees:

Frank Helies
Julia Beaty (invited speaker)

Virtual Attendees:

Kesley Banks
Jason Adriance

(Continued from previous page)

Tracey Bauer
Taylor Beyea
Heather Blough
Gregg Bray
Amy Dukes
Blakeley Ellis
Richard Fischer
Troy Frady
Jim Green
Martha Guyas
Daniel Hillburn
Thomas Hilton
Michael Hios
Chris Horton
Jeanette Huber
Christine Kittle
Michael Larkin
Mara Levy
Brian Lewis
Mark Lyons Jr.
Richard Malinowski
Jessica Matos
Genine McClair
Sean Meehan
Natasha Mendez-Ferrer
Asa Miller
Steve Papen
Nathan Putman
Richard Ryan
Chris Schieble
Kali Spurgin
Haley Stephens
CJ Sweetman
Clint Troxler
Chelsea Tuohy
Jennifer Waldo
Mick Walsh
Lauren Westcott
Geoff White
Danica Williams