

# Gulf Council Recreational Initiative: Final Report and Recommendations



## Recreational Initiative

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gulf Council established the Recreational Initiative in 2023 to review and evaluate past and current recreational reef fish management strategies and explore innovative management tools and approaches that could increase angler opportunity and satisfaction while achieving conservation objectives. The Council assembled a six-member Steering Committee consisting of leadership from the Gulf Council, NOAA Fisheries, and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, as well as recreational sector members on the Gulf Council, to guide the work of the Initiative. While the Initiative considered management of the entire reef fish management complex, the Steering Committee selected five focal species of particular interest to anglers to serve as case studies for consideration: gag grouper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, red grouper, and red snapper.

The Recreational Initiative sought to address seven key items:

1. Development, review, and revision of goals and objectives for recreational fisheries management;
2. A review of the status of Federally managed species in the Gulf that are highly sought after by recreational anglers, including recreational sources of directed and bycatch mortality;
3. A review of recreational management measures, including how management measures have changed over time;
4. Assessment of the performance and efficacy of recreational accountability measures and recommended improvements;
5. Evaluation and consideration of harvest control rules (i.e., pre-agreed guidelines) for setting bag, size, and season limits;
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; and
7. Exploration of innovative new management strategies.

At the core of the Recreational Initiative's activities was a 12-member Working Group consisting of a diverse array of Gulf recreational reef fishery stakeholders who were selected by the Gulf Council via an application process. The Working Group convened for three in-person meetings between October 2024 and February 2025 and worked to find consensus on topics focused on the Initiative's seven items. In addition, the Council sought to gather input on recreational reef fish management from members of the public via a robust stakeholder engagement approach that included: a) an online comment portal; b) a series of three virtual public input sessions held shortly after each Working Group meeting; and c) a final virtual and in-person special comment session held during the Council meeting where final outcomes of the Recreational Initiative were reported.

At its first meeting, Working Group members agreed on a shared vision for Gulf recreational reef fish management:

*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.*

To support achievement of this vision, the Working Group identified six goals for Gulf recreational reef fish management. At subsequent meetings, the Working Group reviewed and assessed past and ongoing management measures for the five focal species and explored potential alternative management strategies. While a myriad of recommendations were made over the course of the three meetings, the Working Group developed a series of 19 major consensus recommendations for the Gulf Council to consider in order to improve recreational reef fish management.

The 19 primary consensus recommendations, summarized below, ranged from broad, systemic management changes to species-specific adjustments to management measures, and were grouped according to each of the six goals identified by the Working Group:

#### Goal 1: Trusted Data

- Develop specific and measurable guidelines and expectations for Gulf recreational data providers regarding the quality of data acceptable for use.
- Electronic angler self-reporting, including both mandatory and voluntary programs, should continue to play a role to promote transparency and enhance catch and effort estimates.

#### Goal 2: Establish Trust with the Recreational Community

- Improve messaging regarding the potential impact of management options on future recreational opportunities, endeavoring to better educate anglers and raise awareness regarding reef fish biology and management.

#### Goal 3: Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access

- Explore development of a harvest control rule approach to develop multi-year measures for reef species.
- Examine the feasibility of implementing carryover provisions for the uncaught portion of an Annual Catch Limit and/or distributing paybacks for overages over multiple years.

#### Goal 4: Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management

- Consider (or, in the case of red snapper, continue) implementing regional/state flexibility in management approaches (while maintaining federal authority) wherever possible, including for red and gag grouper (which are only incidentally caught outside of Florida) and for greater amberjack (for which the fishery differs markedly between the eastern and western Gulf).

#### Goal 5: Increase Recreational Community Engagement in the Management Process

- Partner with recreational community leaders and pursue other approaches to better engage anglers, educate them on the management process, and demonstrate how they can be involved.

### Goal 6: Maximize Angler Satisfaction, and Accommodate Growth

- Consider approaches for reef fish management on a multi-species basis, including maximizing overlap in seasons and/or exploring an aggregate “reef fish season.”
- Continue promoting efforts to reduce recreational post-release mortality.

The Council should expeditiously develop a process for establishing priorities and timelines for implementing these recommendations, while incorporating the recreational community into the process, in order to improve Gulf recreational reef fish fishery outcomes for anglers.

## **II. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

The Gulf Council’s Recreational Initiative was conceived in 2023 to improve upon current recreational management approaches for federally managed Gulf reef fish species. The Initiative arose in response to ongoing angler dissatisfaction with management measures resulting from a combination of a) federal requirements to adhere to annual catch limits and accountability measures, b) more restrictive regulations, and c) the increasing size and efficiency of the recreational sector. Broadly, the Recreational Initiative sought to review and evaluate past and current management strategies and explore innovative recreational management tools and approaches that could increase angler opportunity and satisfaction while achieving conservation objectives for reef species.

During its April 2023 Council meeting, a motion was approved to develop a Recreational Initiative to “evaluate the efficacy of current Federal recreational reef fish management in the Gulf and develop future management approaches and guidance intended to prevent overfishing, address discards and/or discard mortality, account for uncertainty in recreational data, and provide for innovative new management approaches to regulate Federally managed recreational fisheries.”<sup>1</sup>

The Council specified that the Initiative should include the following items:

1. Development, review, and revision of goals and objectives for recreational fisheries management;
2. A review of the status of Federally managed species in the Gulf that are highly sought after by recreational anglers, including recreational sources of directed and bycatch mortality;
3. A review of recreational management measures, including how management measures have changed over time;
4. Assessment of the performance and efficacy of recreational accountability measures and recommended improvements;
5. Evaluation and consideration of harvest control rules (i.e., pre-agreed guidelines) for setting bag, size, and season limits;

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<sup>1</sup> Additional background on the Recreational Initiative can be found here: [https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/G-4a-Draft-Process-to-Complete-Recreational-Initiative-2023\\_V8.pdf](https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/G-4a-Draft-Process-to-Complete-Recreational-Initiative-2023_V8.pdf).

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; and,
7. Exploration of innovative new management strategies.

### III. PROCESS

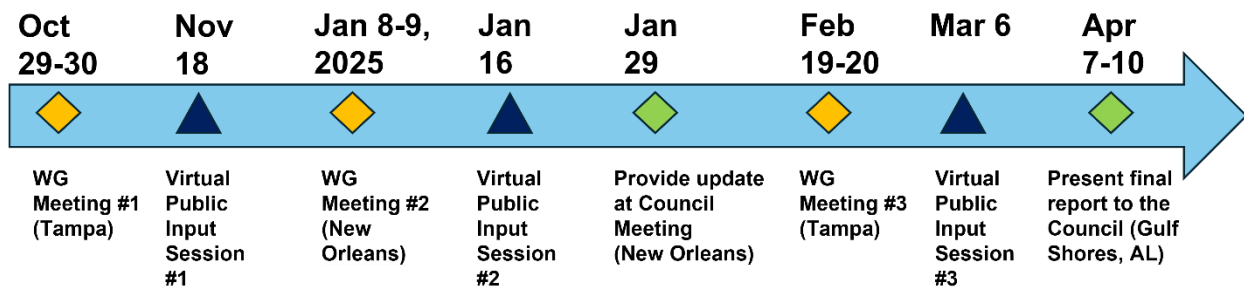
#### *Steering Committee*

To guide the work of the Recreational Initiative, in early 2024 a six-member Steering Committee was assembled consisting of leadership from the Gulf Council, NOAA Fisheries, and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, as well as recreational fishery sector members on the Gulf Council:

- Dr. Carrie Simmons, Executive Director, Gulf Council
- Andy Strelcheck, Southeast Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries  
*(Proxies: Frank Helies, Jack McGovern)*
- Russ Dunn, Recreational Fishing Coordinator, NOAA Fisheries
- Dave Donaldson, Executive Director, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission  
*(Proxy: Gregg Bray)*
- Michael McDermott, private angler (Mississippi), Gulf Council member
- Capt. Ed Walker, private/charter/commercial fisherman (Florida), Gulf Council member

The Steering Committee met virtually no less than monthly from May 2024-March 2025.

To coordinate the activities of the Steering Committee and to plan, facilitate, and synthesize outcomes of Recreational Initiative meetings, the Council contracted Dr. Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus (Pelagic Strategies) as consultants.



*Summary of Recreational Initiative timeline. “WG” refers to the Recreational Initiative Working Group. Yellow diamonds denote Working Group meetings; blue triangles denote virtual public input sessions; green diamonds denote Council meetings.*

Early in the process, the Steering Committee identified five Gulf reef fish species to serve as “focal species” for the purposes of the Recreational Initiative, recognizing that the broad intent of the Initiative was to identify management approaches which could be applied to a wide array

of species. The focal species selected were those of high interest to the recreational community that had varied biology, stock status, and management challenges: gag grouper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, red grouper, and red snapper.

### ***Working Group***

The core work of the Recreational Initiative was carried out by a 12-member Working Group consisting of Gulf recreational fishery stakeholders, including representatives from the private angling community, the for-hire sector, and the fishing tackle industry. Working Group members were solicited through an open application process facilitated by Gulf Council staff in summer 2024, with the goal of selecting members who represented the diversity of interests, geographic range, and fishing experience of participants in the Gulf federal reef fish fishery. The Council received 110 applications; following a fishery violation background check, Working Group members were selected during a closed session of the Gulf Council during its August 2024 meeting.

The Working Group consisted of the following individuals:

Hughes Andry (TX)  
Shane Bonnot (TX)  
Ray Cole (AL)  
Ken Haddad (FL)  
Frank Harwell (AL)  
Robert Hilliard (FL)  
Robert Hudson II (FL)  
Ralph Humphrey, Jr. (MS)  
Michael Kuljis (MS)  
John Marquez, Jr. (MS)  
Jacob Mouton (LA)  
Jeffrey Plumlee (LA)

The Working Group was tasked with reviewing past management successes and failures in recreational reef fish management and with advising the Council on potential novel management approaches. The group was encouraged to focus on the exploration of new, innovative ideas to balance angler satisfaction with resource health and to develop consensus recommendations for the Council to consider.

The Working Group met three times from October 2024-February 2025 to address the seven items of the Recreational Initiative:

October 29-30, 2024, Tampa, FL  
January 8-9, 2025, New Orleans, LA  
February 19-20, 2025, Tampa, FL

During the meetings, Working Group members were asked to keep the following core tenets in mind:

1. The focus of these meetings is to *collect information* from Working Group members, not one-way communication/lecturing.
2. Working Group members are encouraged to consider *innovative, creative, and potentially “game changing” solutions* for the future of recreational fisheries management in the Gulf.
3. Working Group members should focus not on rehashing issues from the past, but on being *forward-thinking*, using lessons from the past to inform future approaches.
4. The fisheries landscape is ever-changing (e.g., advancing technology, increasing participation) and Working Group members should consider *strategies that are resilient to a dynamic setting*.

All Working Group meetings were held in person but also included a virtual option to allow for remote attendance by members of the public or other interested individuals.

### ***Stakeholder Engagement***

A key component of the Recreational Initiative was providing opportunities for members of the public to offer their views on Gulf recreational reef fish management and potential approaches to improve outcomes moving forward. To facilitate public input, the Steering Committee and Council staff developed a Recreational Initiative Stakeholder Engagement Strategy that focused on the three following objectives:

1. Acknowledge the recreational sector’s dissatisfaction with management: Demonstrate that the Council is listening to stakeholder concerns and is working in the best interests of the recreational community within the confines of what’s legally permissible.
2. Promote transparency in the Recreational Initiative process: Invite feedback from the broader recreational community and build a sense of shared ownership/investment.
3. Lay the foundation for durability/success of the Recreational Initiative: By securing buy-in from the recreational community, the Initiative has a better chance of gaining momentum within both community and the Council and achieving intended outcomes, as opposed to “fizzling out.”

To maximize the opportunity for public input, the Steering Committee elected to provide the following focused avenues for collecting feedback:

1. At the January and April 2025 Gulf Council meetings, where updates on the Recreational Initiative were provided and public comment was solicited (including at a dedicated Recreational Initiative public comment session at the April meeting).
2. An online public comment portal on the Gulf Council’s website, where members of the public could submit their thoughts and view the comments of others at any time.
3. A series of three Recreational Initiative public input sessions held virtually following each Working Group meeting, during which the consultants provided a summary of the most recent meeting and Gulf Council staff solicited feedback on key discussion topics and Working Group meeting outcomes.

Following each public input session, Council staff developed a written summary (see Appendix 4) and PowerPoint presentation, which were shared with both the full Council and with the Working Group for their consideration.

#### **IV. WORKING GROUP MEETING OUTCOMES**

The following sections are a brief synopsis of the activities and outcomes from each of the Working Group's three meetings. For a more detailed overview, please review each meeting's full summary, included as appendices to this report.

##### ***Working Group Meeting 1 (see Appendix 1 for full summary)***

The Council's Recreational Initiative Working Group convened its first of three meetings in Tampa, Florida from October 29-30, 2024, with the following purpose:

- Develop goals and objectives for recreational fisheries management for Gulf reef species; 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.

The first day of the meeting focused on the following:

- 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 (Working Group members):
  - 1) Past Challenges
  - 2) Past Successes

Following an overview of the Initiative and hearing perspectives on recreational fisheries management and challenges from leadership at the Gulf Council and NOAA Fisheries, Working Group members explored key challenges in Gulf recreational reef fish fisheries along with successes in management to potentially build upon.

Key challenges identified included:

I. Education/Engagement	II. Access and Equity	III. Magnuson-Stevens Act
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust deficit: A need to educate anglers on how regulations are developed and data's role</li> <li>• Achieve effective engagement in the absence of a crisis</li> <li>• Perception that stock status often better than regulations suggest</li> <li>• Must improve distribution channels to anglers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gulf-wide management approach doesn't meet local fishery needs</li> <li>• Interannual regulatory instability</li> <li>• Can often only harvest one species at a time which concentrates pressure</li> <li>• Allocation dissatisfaction</li> <li>• High discard rates</li> <li>• Misalignment between stock rebuilding and management (especially with quickly rebuilding stocks)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federal fisheries law hampers exploration of new approaches for the recreational community</li> <li>• 2006 reauthorization is incompatible with recreational fisheries, demands more of the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP)</li> </ul>
IV. Data and Assessments	V. Increased Effort/Efficiency	VI. Ecosystem Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of unified, integrated data collection across Gulf states<sup>2</sup></li> <li>• Estimating discards a key challenge<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Lengthy stock assessments hinder timely decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreational sector is growing, increasing fishing pressure</li> <li>• Technology and social media have increased efficiency</li> <li>• Oil rig removal is reducing habitat and concentrating effort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depredation (sharks and marine mammals)</li> <li>• Changing water temperature patterns affecting fish distribution and impacting fishery dependent data (e.g., grouper)</li> </ul>

Key successes identified fell into two major categories:

I. Education/Engagement	II. Assessments/Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council's Fishermen Feedback Tool facilitates stakeholder input during assessments (but more awareness needed)</li> <li>• Council outreach at angling community events</li> <li>• Marine Resource Education Program is valuable but could be distilled into short films that are broadly sharable</li> <li>• Council outreach materials are available, but can be difficult to find</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State management for red snapper (Am. 50A) allows for the tailoring of management measures to each state and could be applied to other species</li> <li>• Council's utilization of frameworks instead of amendments has enabled more rapid response to issues</li> <li>• Numerous reef stocks (e.g., yellowtail, mangrove [gray], and vermilion snapper) are healthy with liberal regulations</li> <li>• Successful rebuilding of some stocks, and red snapper quotas has increased substantially</li> <li>• New assessment/data collection approaches, such as new technologies (video, AI) and the Great Red Snapper Count</li> <li>• Artificial reefing has expanded recreational opportunities</li> </ul>

With this context in mind, the Working Group developed the following working vision for successful recreational Gulf reef fish management:

***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.***

<sup>2</sup> Note: Mississippi and Alabama are currently testing Louisiana's LA Creel Program in their respective states.

<sup>3</sup> Note: The Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission anticipates [issuing up to \\$7 million](#) of IRA funding in 2025 to projects focused on estimating fishing effort and discards.

The Working Group identified six broad goals to achieve the vision:

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

In addition, the Working Group developed objectives viewed as necessary to accomplish each of these goals, which are included in the full meeting summary. These objectives were vital later in the Recreational Initiative process as they provided the building blocks to help inform the consensus recommendations ultimately developed by the Working Group.

### ***Working Group Meeting 2 (see Appendix 2 for full summary)***

The Recreational Initiative Working Group convened the second of three Working Group meetings in New Orleans, Louisiana on January 8-9, 2025, with the purpose of ensuring collective understanding of stock status and management measures/history for each of the Recreational Initiative's five focal species (gag grouper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, red grouper, and red snapper):

- Review the status of Federally managed species in the Gulf 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

Following presentations summarizing the management history of each of the five focal species, Working Group members were asked to address the following questions for each species:

- *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?*

The Working Group generally agreed on the following key aspects:

*Management and Seasons*

- For charter/tackle industries, there is a need for the harvest season for at least one focal reef fish species to be open at all times
- For the average private angler, more overlap in seasons enables opportunity to harvest multiple species and could reduce discards
- Generally, the charter/tackle industries prefer predictable seasons; private anglers prefer longer seasons even if not predictable

*Accountability Measures*

- Flexibility for post-season accountability measures is preferred and, if possible, paybacks should be distributed across multiple years
- Better messaging is needed on the potential impact that management actions will have on the fishery (e.g., “Where are we going? What is ultimately possible biologically regarding seasons, harvest, etc.?”)

*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 versus for-hire sectors may warrant differential management (i.e., sector separation)
- Potential multiple avenues to approach these strategies (e.g., separate sub-Annual Catch Limits by sector/region vs. differential management under a shared Annual Catch Limit)

Key observations and recommendations specific to each of the five focal species included:

<i>Red Snapper</i>	<i>Gag &amp; Red Grouper</i>	<i>Gray Triggerfish &amp; Greater Amberjack</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relative satisfaction with fishing opportunities since implementation of state management; some concerns with state allocations and localized depletion</li> <li>● Relative satisfaction with state data collection programs; concern about aligning data collection across states and state data recalibration to MRIP in some instances</li> <li>● Concerns about the lack of information on discards</li> <li>● Concern that data programs across states need to be better aligned</li> <li>● Sector separation caused consternation, but state management has helped to alleviate some of that</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sources of dissatisfaction (gag) include the September season (fishery not open when water is cool/fish inshore and readily accessible), 2024 gag payback accountability measures, and perceived disconnect between science and real-time observations</li> <li>● Regional flexibility: Most catch is in Florida interest in differential management approach (under Council authority) for Florida versus other states that only catch red/gag grouper incidentally</li> <li>● Interest in finer-scale management <i>within</i> Florida</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Generally, trips don’t target only these species; preference to overlap seasons with red snapper/other species to allow for multi-species trips</li> <li>● Current triggerfish regulations are not perceived as overly constraining</li> <li>● Regional differences between eastern and western Gulf amberjack fisheries may be conducive to regional management</li> <li>● Vessel limits for amberjack (scaled by # anglers on board) may be favorable if it extends the season length</li> <li>● Need to increase communication surrounding the Greater Amberjack Count and set expectations moving forward with dissemination of the results</li> <li>● Misidentification/harvest of juvenile amberjack may be constraining rebuilding</li> <li>● Impact of habitat loss (sargassum, artificial reefs) needs to be considered in the greater amberjack assessment</li> </ul>

### ***Working Group Meeting 3 (see Appendix 3 for full summary)***

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

Explore innovative management strategies for Gulf reef species, using the five focal species to illustrate potential approaches. 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
- 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<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup>; and

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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."

- 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 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

## **V. CONSENSUS RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Recreational Initiative Working Group developed specific recommendations oriented around a jointly identified vision and set of goals for recreational reef fish management:

**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.

After the third Working Group meeting all 12 members were given the opportunity to review and finalize draft consensus recommendations via email. Conversations and recommendations focused on the five focal reef fish species: Gag grouper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, red grouper, and red snapper. While some recommendations are focused on individual species, others are broadly applicable to the Gulf’s reef fish complex.

*The Working Group recommends that the Council develop an implementation plan for the following recommendations within 6 months, including setting priorities and timelines.*

CONSENSUS RECOMMENDATIONS	
<b>Goal 1: Trusted Data</b>	<p><b>Recommendation 1.1:</b> To achieve Gulf-wide consistency, <u>specific and measurable guidelines</u> and expectations must be set for Gulf recreational data providers regarding the quality of data that will be acceptable, beyond the ambiguous “best available data.”</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 1.2:</b> To promote transparency in recreational data and improve catch and effort estimates, electronic <u>self-reporting</u> by anglers should continue to play a role in estimating recreational Gulf reef fish catch, including both mandatory programs (such as the Mississippi Tails and Scales/Alabama Snapper Check apps) and voluntary programs.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 1.3:</b> Opportunities to increase the applicability of <u>voluntary angler self-reporting of effort and catch</u> should be explored, including through the development of pilot studies to evaluate how best to both validate self-reported data with existing state surveys.</p>
<b>Goal 2: Establish Trust with the Recreational Community</b>	<p><b>Recommendation 2.1:</b> The Council should <u>improve messaging regarding the potential on-the-water impact</u> that management actions could have on the recreational fishery by projecting outcomes that can be interpreted by non-specialists (e.g., what increase in catch limits anglers could expect to result from a decrease in discard mortality and/or from rebuilding a stock).</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 2.2:</b> The Council should <u>better communicate the conservation implications of different fishing activities</u> based on individual species’ biology and life-history (e.g., depth/location and months of spawning, etc.), empowering anglers to make better decisions based on their conservation ethic.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 2.3:</b> The Council should <u>improve awareness of the tremendous volume of outreach and educational material</u> already available through the Council and its partners.</p>

*(Continued on next page)*

<p><b>Goal 3: Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access</b></p>	<p><b>Recommendation 3.1:</b> The Council should explore development and implementation of a <u>harvest control rule approach</u> for Gulf focal reef fish species to set multi-year measures (e.g., size and bag limits and seasons), beginning with an evaluation of fishery-dependent or independent indicators that could be used to assess stock status in the absence of an assessment.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 3.2:</b> The Council should examine the feasibility of implementing <u>carryover provisions for the uncaught portion of an Annual Catch Limit</u> for reef fish species, along with assessing the ability to <u>distribute paybacks for Annual Catch Limit</u> 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.</p>
<p><b>Goal 4: Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management</b></p>	<p><b>Recommendation 4.1:</b> The Council should consider implementing <u>regional/state flexibility</u> in recreational reef fish management (while maintaining federal management authority) whenever possible.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 4.2:</b> The Council should explore a <u>regional management approach for red and gag grouper</u> (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. Specifically, such an approach should maximize harvest opportunity for anglers in Florida while allowing for limited year-round retention of incidental catch in other states.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 4.3:</b> The Council should explore <u>differentiating management measures</u> (i.e., size limit, bag limit, and season) for <u>greater amberjack</u> between the eastern Gulf (Florida and Alabama) and western Gulf (Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas) given regional differences in fishery characteristics (maintaining a single Gulf-wide Annual Catch Limit).</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 4.4:</b> The Council should <u>continue to delegate authority for setting red snapper management measures</u> for private recreational anglers and state guideboats to each of the five Gulf states.</p>

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<p><b>Goal 5:</b>  <b>Increase</b>  <b>Recreational</b>  <b>Community</b>  <b>Engagement</b>  <b>in The</b>  <b>Management</b>  <b>Process</b></p>	<p><b>Recommendation 5.1:</b> The Council should seek opportunities to <u>partner with recreational fishing community leaders</u> 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, where participants are invited to attend council meetings, review outreach materials, and providing public comment.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 5.2:</b> The Council should work with partners to develop <u>scaled-down modules of the Marine Resources Education Program (MREP)</u> to share with a wider audience—possibly including short videos on specific components of the fisheries science and management process.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 5.3:</b> The Council should promote <u>opportunities for anglers to report catch information</u> and on-the-water observations of fish abundance and presence (e.g., through the Council’s Fisherman Feedback Tool).</p>
<p><b>Goal 6:</b>  <b>Maximize</b>  <b>Angler</b>  <b>Satisfaction</b>  <b>and</b>  <b>Accommodate</b>  <b>Growth</b></p>	<p><b>Recommendation 6.1:</b> The Council should implement a <u>replacement and/or enhancement to DESCEND Act</u> (P.L. No. 116-340), 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.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 6.2:</b> The Council should work with the recreational community, including the for-hire and private angler sectors, to <u>develop seasons that maximize overlap in focal species</u> to enable harvest of multiple species on a given trip and reduce discards. Maximizing overlap with the season for red snapper, the primary target for reef fish anglers Gulf-wide, 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.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 6.3:</b> The Council should explore the use of <u>vessel rather than individual bag limits for greater amberjack</u> (possibly scaled by number of anglers on board) to extend the season length.</p>
	<p><b>Recommendation 6.4:</b> The Council should explore the concept of an <u>aggregate “reef fish season”</u> 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 challenges that certain “choke species” could hinder implementation due to the current requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act).</p>

## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

The recommendations generated through the Recreational Initiative, embodied in this report, full meeting summaries, and public input sessions, present both a tremendous opportunity and challenge for reforming the management of federal Gulf recreational reef fish fisheries. The Gulf Council already devotes a great amount of time, energy, and resources to recreational reef fisheries management, although the Initiative illustrated that the details of that process are often unclear to the broader angling public that is impacted by management decisions. To *fully* implement the Working Group's recommendations could take years or decades and may not be possible with existing resources that are available. Some recommendations to reform management may fall outside of the Council's scope and may not even be possible under existing authorities and legislative requirements. Considering this, the Council will need to carefully prioritize and allocate resources toward achieving recommendations, as desired and identifying potential areas in governing statutes that would need to be modified to achieve the exact outcome.

The topic of improving the quality, timeliness and trust in data used to make management decisions (as described in Item #6 of the Council's initial motion in 2023) was discussed throughout the entirety of the Recreational Initiative process. The Working Group was deemed to not be the appropriate body to make robust scientific recommendations on how such approaches could be implemented. However, the Working Group did make several consensus recommendations that qualitatively address data enhancements to assist in improving recreational catch estimates (and/or the credibility of such estimates to the angling community) that could be used to guide further scientific recommendations, such as:

- Voluntary and/or mandatory catch reporting, particularly using existing app-based reporting
- Requiring data providers to meet a certain "quality assurance" level before providing data to the Council
- Enhancing near real-time data with a system for reporting on-the-water observations, and others.

Further, the Working Group was made aware of numerous ongoing efforts to improve recreational catch estimates by the NOAA Office of Science and Technology, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, and the five Gulf state marine resource divisions, whose personnel have the expertise to make statistical and scientific recommendations to strengthen data quality and availability. The Working Group's recommendations related to improving data should be communicated by the Council to the leaders of these efforts. Additionally, the Council should consider forming an Interdisciplinary Planning Team or Technical Working Group that can provide scientific and statistical recommendations and advice to supplement the input provided by the Working Group for Item 6.

The Recreational Initiative process reinforced that the Gulf's recreational reef fish fisheries are diverse in terms of species availability and timing, angler preferences, business interests, and regional preferences. As such, there is no "one size fits all" solution to improving the management of fisheries or angler satisfaction with that management. The solutions presented

here, however, present opportunities for improving angler satisfaction across a breadth of regions and interests. Some of these recommendations may have been generated through “fresh thinking or fresh approaches” to ongoing challenges given that the Working Group consisted of members from diverse backgrounds, including those who had little or no previous involvement with the management process.

The Council should expeditiously develop a process establishing priorities and timelines for acting upon these recommendations in order to improve Gulf recreational reef fish fishery outcomes for anglers. Continued recreational community participation should be an integral part of this effort.

In the process of developing solutions, the Council should consider each recommendation both on its own merit and potential as well as within the context of overall management, considering ways to implement them or develop creative solutions that meet the underlying premise of the recommendation. Recommendations that are determined impossible or too difficult/costly to be implemented should be evaluated for their *intent* to determine possible actions that could be taken to meet that intent. While the recommendations generated through this process may never be *fully* implemented, a stepwise, incremental approach will lead to improved angler satisfaction and a healthy Gulf reef fish resource.

## **VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We greatly appreciate the time and effort contributed by the twelve individuals who volunteered their time to serve on the Recreational Initiative Working Group. Their willingness to share their knowledge, experiences, and perspective over the course of three multiple-day meetings was integral to establishing recommendations for a constructive path forward for Gulf recreational reef fish management. The Steering Committee, along with their proxies, provided invaluable guidance and support that drove this effort. The entire Gulf Council staff, including Dr. Carrie Simmons, Dr. John Froeschke, Emily Muehlstein, Sarah Gardiner, Dr. Max Birdsong, Camilla Shireman, Bernie Roy, and Kathy Pereira, went above and beyond their normal duties to provide the resources, information, and logistical support that were necessary to carry out this initiative in a very abbreviated timeframe. Finally, we greatly appreciate the contributions made by members of the Gulf Council and the interested public who contributed thoughts, ideas and suggestions on how to improve the management of recreational reef fish species. This project was funded under federal award #NA20NMF4410007 from NOAA Fisheries.

## **APPENDIX 1. WORKING GROUP MEETING 1 SUMMARY**

### **Meeting Summary**

#### **Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 1 October 29-30, 2024**

##### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Gulf Council’s Recreational Initiative Working Group convened its first of three Working Group meetings in Tampa, Florida from October 29-30, 2024, with the following purpose:

- Develop goals and objectives for recreational fisheries management for reef species in the Gulf; 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.

Following an overview of the Initiative and hearing perspectives on recreational fisheries management and challenges from leadership at the Gulf Council and NOAA Fisheries, Working Group members explored key challenges in Gulf recreational reef fish fisheries along with successes in management to potentially build upon.

With this context in mind, the Working Group developed the following working vision for successful recreational reef fish management in the Gulf:

***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.***

The Working Group identified six broad goals, with each representing a specific, measurable target needed to achieve the vision:

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

In addition, the Working Group developed objectives viewed as necessary to accomplish each of these goals. With a working vision, goals, and objectives for Gulf recreational reef fish management in hand, the Working Group will next convene in early 2025 to review stock status

and evaluate past and ongoing management measures for each of the Recreational Initiative’s five focal species.

**DETAILED REPORT**

The [Gulf Council Recreational Initiative](#) Working Group held its first of three meetings at Gulf Council headquarters in Tampa, Florida, from October 29-30, 2024. The full agenda and background materials are available on the [meeting webpage](#). Eleven of 12 Working Group members were in attendance, along with all six Steering Committee members, Gulf Council staff, and others (Appendix 1).

The purpose of Meeting 1 was to:

- Develop goals and objectives for recreational fisheries management for reef species in the Gulf; 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.

**Day 1 Overview**

**Introductions and Background**

Following brief introductory remarks by Steering Committee members Dr. Carrie Simmons (Gulf Council) and Andy Strelcheck (NOAA Fisheries), Working Group members introduced themselves and were asked to share their opinions regarding a) the biggest problem and b) the biggest success in Gulf federal recreational reef fish management. Their responses are summarized below:

<b>Biggest Problem</b>	<b>Biggest Success</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allocation between commercial, recreational, and for-hire sectors</li> <li>• Initial “snap-judgment” in 2023 based on unrealistic gag grouper catch estimates. This undermined trust in the Council and NOAA’s science and management (<i>noted by two Working Group members</i>)</li> <li>• Broadly, data and trust in the data (<i>noted by two Working Group members</i>)</li> <li>• Discards</li> <li>• Inaccurate stock assessments</li> <li>• Lack of predictability in regulations which impedes business planning</li> <li>• Difficult to correlate on-the-water observations with management actions</li> <li>• Rebuilding angler trust in the management process</li> <li>• Improving private recreational angler participation in the process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tremendous rebound of the red snapper stock</li> <li>• Delegating red snapper management to the states, which has allowed states to craft regulations that best suit their needs (<i>noted by seven Working Group members</i>)</li> </ul>

Meeting facilitators Willy Goldsmith and Andy Loftus provided a [brief overview of the Recreational Initiative](#), including key items to accomplish, the individuals/groups involved, the task of the Working Group, and opportunities for stakeholder engagement.

NOAA Fisheries and Gulf Council leadership then gave introductory presentations to set the stage for Working Group discussions. Andy Strelcheck and Russ Dunn (NOAA Fisheries)

provided a [federal perspective on the Recreational Initiative](#), citing the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and highlighting the challenges to angler satisfaction. They also mentioned the development of recreational fisheries goals and objectives for other fisheries/regions around the nation, such as in the Mid-Atlantic, where the Mid-Atlantic Council's Recreational Reform Initiative seeks to 1) provide stability in regulations, 2) develop strategies to increase management flexibility, and 3) achieve accessibility aligned with stock status and availability.

Working Group members expressed interest in learning more about the Recreational Reform Initiative and its recently implemented Harvest Control Rule, which survived a legal challenge earlier in the year. Working Group members thought these Mid-Atlantic efforts could help inform approaches in the Gulf.

In addition, Working Group members emphasized the trust gap between the recreational community and managers, which is exacerbated by data uncertainty that can have dramatic on-the-water implications. This distrust can reduce the likelihood of anglers contributing to the data collection and management processes and highlights the need to better educate the recreational community. Andy Strelcheck noted that NOAA Fisheries has recognized some of these data challenges and is taking steps to address them—for example, through moving from Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) estimates to Florida State Reef Fish Survey estimates for gag grouper. He also mentioned that NOAA Fisheries has recently allocated funding to support data integration across Gulf state surveys.

Dr. Carrie Simmons (Gulf Council) described the [Council's past efforts](#) to engage with the recreational community, including:

- A series of ten Recreational Angler Participation (RAP) sessions (one virtual) in 2014 to engage with stakeholders regarding frustration and concern with federal oversight of recreational fisheries;
- The Gulf Angler Focus Group led by a coalition of sportfishing associations, which met bi-monthly in 2015-2016 to identify and evaluate alternative management options to provide for reasonable access and sustainable harvest of Gulf reef fish (focusing on red snapper and eventually leading to sector separation through Amendment 40); and
- The Joint Council Recreational 102 Working Group composed of Gulf and South Atlantic Council members, which met four times in 2020-2022 to address the goals of Section 102 of the Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act (Modern Fish Act)—specifically to explore alternative approaches for managing recreational fisheries to expand opportunities.

She noted that the Recreational Initiative is distinct from these efforts through its focus on five key species, its selection of a small stakeholder group with representation from across the Gulf, its emphasis on an exploratory process through facilitated meetings without predetermined outcomes, a thorough and transparent process for stakeholder engagement, and support and involvement from both the Gulf Council and NOAA Fisheries.

Council staff noted that the vast majority of the key themes emerging from each of those previous efforts aligned with the challenges identified by Working Group members at the

meeting’s outset, demonstrating the persistence of these issues. In addition, Steering Committee members encouraged Working Group members to share their views on what “success” for Gulf recreational reef fish fisheries should look like, as hearing all perspectives would help the group converge on a collective vision.

Looking Back at Recreational Reef Fish Management: Challenges and Successes

Following lunch, the Working Group completed a series of breakout sessions (two breakout groups of six members) and subsequent plenary discussions focused on assessing some of the key challenges and successes of Gulf recreational fisheries management.

*Challenges*

Working Group members were asked to think through the following questions to spur dialogue regarding challenges:

1. *What are the greatest sources of angler dissatisfaction in Gulf reef fish fisheries?*
2. *Can you provide specific examples of management decisions that were particularly challenging? Are there specific missed opportunities that you can identify?*
3. *Are there factors outside of the Gulf Council’s control that you view as contributing to and/or exacerbating these challenges?*
4. *Is it the Gulf Council’s big picture strategy (goals) for recreational management that is failing, or the execution of that strategy (objectives)?*

The following represents a synthesis of the major messages and discussion points that emerged:

<p><b>I. Education/Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust deficit: A need to educate anglers on how regulations are developed and data’s role</li> <li>• Achieve effective engagement in the absence of a crisis</li> <li>• Perception that stock status often better than regulations suggest</li> <li>• Must improve distribution channels to anglers</li> </ul>	<p><b>II. Access and Equity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gulf-wide management approach doesn’t meet local fishery needs</li> <li>• Interannual regulatory instability</li> <li>• Can often only harvest one species at a time which concentrates pressure</li> <li>• Allocation dissatisfaction</li> <li>• High discard rates</li> <li>• Misalignment between stock rebuilding and management (especially with quickly rebuilding stocks)</li> </ul>	<p><b>III. Magnuson-Stevens Act</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federal fisheries law hampers exploration of new approaches for the recreational community</li> <li>• 2006 reauthorization is incompatible with recreational fisheries, demands more of MRIP</li> </ul>
<p><b>IV. Data and Assessments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of unified, integrated data collection across Gulf states<sup>6</sup></li> <li>• Estimating discards a key challenge<sup>7</sup></li> <li>• Lengthy stock assessments hinder timely decision-making</li> </ul>	<p><b>V. Increased Effort/Efficiency</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreational sector is growing, increasing fishing pressure</li> <li>• Technology and social media have increased efficiency</li> <li>• Oil rig removal is reducing habitat and concentrating effort</li> </ul>	<p><b>VI. Ecosystem Impacts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depredation (sharks and marine mammals)</li> <li>• Changing water temperature patterns affecting fish distribution and impacting fishery dependent data (e.g., grouper)</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> Note: Mississippi and Alabama are currently testing Louisiana’s LA Creel Program in their respective states.

<sup>7</sup> Note: The Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission anticipates [issuing up to \\$7 million](#) of IRA funding in 2025 to projects focused on estimating fishing effort and discards.

## Successes

Working Group members reviewed the following questions when evaluating successes:

1. *Are there specific examples of Gulf recreational fisheries (reef fish or otherwise) where management is working well?*
2. *More broadly, are there approaches to management—whether specific strategies, stakeholder engagement, or other—that the Council has successfully applied and which should be emulated in other Gulf fisheries?*

Working Group members identified two major categories of successes in recreational reef fish management in the Gulf:

<b>I. Education/Engagement</b>	<b>II. Assessments/Management</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Council’s Fishermen Feedback Tool facilitates stakeholder input during assessments (but more awareness needed)</li><li>• Council outreach at angling community events</li><li>• Marine Resource Education Program is valuable but could be distilled into short films that are broadly sharable</li><li>• Council outreach materials are available, but can be difficult to find</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• State management for red snapper (Am. 50A) allows for the tailoring of management measures to each state and could be applied to other species</li><li>• Council’s utilization of frameworks instead of amendments has enabled more rapid response to issues</li><li>• Numerous reef stocks (e.g., yellowtail, mangrove [gray], and vermilion snapper) are healthy with liberal regulations</li><li>• Successful rebuilding of some stocks, and red snapper quotas has increased substantially</li><li>• New assessment/data collection approaches, such as new technologies (video, AI) and the Great Red Snapper Count</li><li>• Artificial reefing has expanded recreational opportunities</li></ul>

## Defining “Success”: Developing a Vision, Goals, and Objectives

To set the stage for Day 2, at the end of Day 1 the meeting facilitators gave a [brief presentation](#) defining a vision, goals, and objectives and providing examples to illustrate how the three support one another. Prior to beginning the workshop’s second day, Working Group members were asked to write down a draft vision statement and share it with the facilitators, along with a proposed solution to the one of the main challenges shared at the beginning of the meeting:

- Data collection not trusted by anglers
- Single stock management Gulf-wide given the differences in user groups and geographic range
- Lack of trust in the management system by anglers
- Data collection and mandated management outcomes do not align
- A need to improve general communication with anglers

## Day 2 Overview

The focus of the Working Group meeting’s second day was to develop a vision, goals, and objectives for the Gulf’s recreational reef fish fishery.

To begin the dialogue, Working Group members shared their proposed solution to one of the challenges that had been identified the previous day. These proposed solutions are detailed in Appendix 2.

### Developing A Vision for Successful Recreational Reef Fish Management in The Gulf

Working group members were asked to provide individual thoughts on a vision for the Gulf's recreational reef fish fishery (Appendix 3). Common themes from those vision statements included: Data, regional fisheries management, collaborative management, trust, predictability, stability, access, sustainability, and growth in participation. The Working Group synthesized these into an agreed-upon common working vision Statement for the Gulf recreational reef fish fishery:

***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.***

### Identifying Goals and Objectives

Goals are specific, measurable targets that are designed to achieve the vision. Objectives are measurable actions under each goal to achieve those. The Working Group identified a series of six goals to achieve the vision, with objectives needed to meet those goals.

#### *Goal 1: Trusted Data*

Objective 1: Timely, transparent, accurate

Strategy a: harvest data that are compatible Gulf-wide

Objective 2: Engage/optimize the recreational community in data collection

Objective 3: Improve estimates of discard data

Objective 4. Incorporate innovative strategies to capture fishery-independent data

#### *Goal 2. Establish Trust with The Recreational Community*

Objective 1: Promote transparency and angler inclusion in the data collection process

Objective 2: Educate anglers on the data collection and application process

Objective 3: Educate anglers on the importance of angler input into the management process

Strategy a: Improve the process to maximize recreational input/public comment and educate them on how the comments are used

#### *Goal 3: Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access*

Objective 1: Develop and communicate recreational regulations (especially seasons) that maximizes lead time

Objective 2: Explore development of longer-term (e.g., multi-year) management measures to minimize churn/volatility (“smoothing”), drawing on examples from other regions

Strategy a: Consult with recreational anglers and industry regarding potential tradeoff between achieving regulatory stability and maximizing access

*Goal 4: Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management*

Objective 1: Explore state or regional management for reef fish species other than red snapper

Strategy a: Identify candidate species that meet a set of biological and fishery criteria for finer-scale spatial management.

- i. Consider the characteristics of both the recreational fishery for a species (including economics), and stock assessment data in such an evaluation.

Strategy b: Evaluate state or regional allocation of recreational catch limits for reef species other than red snapper

*Goal 5: Increase Recreational Community Engagement in the Management Process*

Objective 1: Leverage community leaders/“champions” to get the word out (particularly social media, but including radio, club presidents, TV show hosts, etc.)

Objective 2: Develop partnerships to implement “MREP light” modules around the Gulf (funding required)

Strategy a: Educate regarding importance of providing data

Objective 3: Prioritize face-to-face communication: Develop short, bite-sized pieces of information to share face-to-face

Strategy a: Engage with industry to explore opportunities for inclusion in consumer and trade events

Objective 4: Quantify perceptions/preferences of the recreational community

Strategy a: Assess the “silent majority” who are unaware of fisheries management processes

Objective 5: Explore opportunities, where possible, to consolidate recreational issues at management meetings to facilitate engagement/input

Objective 6: Evaluate lost fishing opportunities resulting from discards and continue to engage anglers in efforts to reduce fishing mortality

*Goal 6: Maximize Angler Satisfaction and Accommodate Growth*

Objective 1: Evaluate the efficacy of the current management system for enabling angler satisfaction and fishery growth

Objective 2: Explore degree of legal/regulatory flexibility that is available for achieving this goal (especially in the context of a multispecies complex)

Objective 3: Evaluate approaches for providing flexibility in management that have been pursued outside the Gulf (state, regional, international, etc.)

Objective 4: Project future growth in recreational fisheries and impact on management strategies (or effectiveness of those strategies) on fully rebuilt stocks

Objective 5: Consider barriers to access for certain species due to misalignment between species availability (e.g., inshore/offshore) and season

Workshop Conclusion and Next Steps

Members of the Steering Committee and the facilitators thanked Working Group members for their thoughtful contributions over the course of the meeting. They noted that the group’s next meeting, scheduled for January 2025, would focus on reviewing stock status and evaluating past and ongoing management measures for each of the Recreational Initiative’s five focal species.

## WORKING GROUP MEETING 1 APPENDICES

### Working Group Meeting 1—Appendix 1. Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 1 Attendance

#### Working Group Members (State)

Hughes Andry (TX)  
Shane Bonnot (TX)  
Ray Cole (AL)  
Ken Haddad (FL)  
Frank Harwell (AL)  
Robert Hilliard (FL)  
Robert Hudson II (FL)  
Ralph Humphrey, Jr. (MS)  
Michael Kuljis (MS)  
John Marquez, Jr. (MS)  
Jeffrey Plumlee (LA)

#### Steering Committee Members

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

#### Supporting Gulf Council Staff

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

#### Facilitators (Pelagic Strategies)

Willy Goldsmith  
Andrew Loftus

#### Others

##### *In Person Attendees:*

Taylor Beyea	Frank Helies
Catherine Bruger	Sean Meehan
Shepherd Grimes	

*Virtual Attendees:*

Kesley Banks  
Jeff Barger  
Brett Booth  
James Bourland  
Gregg Bray  
Eric Brazer  
Ben Choi  
Manuel Coffill-Rivera  
Josh Cooper  
Tiffanie Cross  
Blakeley Ellis  
Matt Freeman  
Joe Froeschke  
Edward Glazier  
Alisha Gray  
Martha Guyas  
Nicholas Haddad  
Michael Hagen  
Chris Hensley  
Ryan Hessong  
Lisa Hollensead  
Joseph Hudson  
Haley Hutto  
Don Jones

Brent Kempton  
Joshua Kilborn  
Michael Larkin  
Sarah Lazo  
Mara Levy  
Ty Lindsey  
Daniel Luers  
Charlotte Marin  
Michelle Masi  
Jessica Matos  
Natasha Mendez-Ferrer  
David Moss  
Lewis Naisbett-Jones  
Steve Papen  
Randy Pausina  
Nathan Putman  
David Records  
Alexis Sabine  
Charlotte Schiaffo  
Chris Schieble  
Mary Schuiteboer  
Steven Scyphers  
Kali Spurgin  
Shawn Watson

**Working Group Meeting 1—Appendix 2.** Challenges and Solutions: Working Group Perspectives

- **Challenge: Data collection not trusted by anglers**
  - Solution: rebuilding trust amongst anglers by:
    - Displaying how angler feedback is used and incorporated
    - Increasing outreach and extending networks of communication
    - Developing a “docuseries” highlighting the importance of data in fisheries management that promotes the wellness of the fishery
    - Educating anglers on the importance of data collection, particularly how fishing effort plays into stock assessments and discards
  - Solution: Improve the quality of data by
    - Incentivizing use of citizen science programs
    - Incentivizing accurate data reporting by recreational anglers
    - Developing more standardized reporting
    - Engaging with groups of young fishermen and those involved in social media to aid in communication for reliable fisheries data collection
    - Improving discard data using information from anglers
    - Coordinating data collection across Gulf states
    - Utilizing congressional activities to promote better data collection
    - Making key information and data that are reported by anglers easily accessible and available so the recreational community can pinpoint the process and utilization of data
- **Challenge: single stock management Gulf wide given the differences in user groups and geographic range**
  - Solution: Customize management for specific areas/fisheries by:
    - Implementing regional management
    - Increasing flexibility into the fishery management process from a regional aspect given varying state needs
    - Developing dynamic in-season management to increase angler flexibility
- **Challenge: Lack of trust in the management system by anglers**
  - Solution: Enhanced engagement with recreational community
    - Trust with recreational community would help with more measurable “wins”
    - Build in accountability for public comment—many feel that virtual comment letters don’t carry the same weight as an in-person public testimony
    - Improve communication and engagement with regional outlets of communications (e.g., email blasts with openings/closures etc.)
    - Utilize more consistent management and seasons, open/close dates to accommodate recreational anglers and charter for annual planning
    - Develop a Gulf-wide fishing permit (similar to waterfowl stamp) to provide the basis for improved effort information.

- Utilize slot limit approach for fishing (e.g., 1 within the XX-XX inches and 1 over XX inches)
- **Challenge: Data collection and mandated management outcomes don't align**
  - Solution: Modify MSA to allow new and innovative solutions for recreational fisheries management (example: Season length and overlap for multi-species approach that does not utilize the current MSY approach outlined in MSA)
    - Evaluate a suite of recreational reef fish management instead of species-by-species
    - Reduce and quantify discards using correct messaging
- **Challenge: Improve general communication with anglers**
  - Solution:
    - Greater use of social media, particularly targeted to specific segments of the angler community
    - Use social media influencers to get messages out via trusted sources
    - Use a network of “fishery ambassadors” to help reach anglers

**Working Group Meeting 1—Appendix 3.** Individual Working Group Member’s Thoughts on Vision

1. Maintain a healthy Gulf with sustainable fisheries for the future
2. Resource management that provides both a sustainable and predictable fishery
  - Goal 1: Reef fish seasons that allow for best available access with predictable starts set 12 months in advance
  - Goal 2: visibility of what a combined reef fish season would look like versus segmented by species
3. Regionally flexible fishery that provides maximum access using reliable, timely, and trusted data for stock assessments
4. Allow each state to manage snapper; incorporate independent data surveys; regional oversight; correlate data from red snapper; have readily available alternative explanations and inquiries from Council
5. Achieving successful Gulf recreational fisheries management that balances conservation and access with more accurate, state-led recreational data collection instead of the less accurate federal Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP)
6. Gulf reef fish are managed to accommodate growth in recreational fishing and results in angler satisfaction.
  - Goal 1: Evaluate the current reef fish management system for obstacles to current and future angler access and satisfaction
  - Goal 2: Develop a new fishery management system specifically for Gulf recreational reef fish
7. Each Gulf state manages all reef fish out to 200 miles, utilizing their own stock assessments. Allow the Council to act as a Steering Committee only (not a decision-making entity)
8. To foster a collaborative recreational fishing community that champions the open sharing of data, empowering anglers and stakeholders alike to enhance sustainable management of fish stocks and fishing regulations in the Gulf.
9. Maximizing opportunity through participation, science, and stewardship; improve and solicit angler participation; expedite and advance the science; instill concepts of ownership and stewardship among participating anglers
10. Provide fishing access to present and future recreational fishermen while achieving management objectives.
  - Goal 1: Further utilize regional management model
  - Goal 2: Improve angler engagement and trust in data collection
  - Goal 3: Incorporate innovative strategies to fishery independent data collection and fishery-dependent data collection
11. Recreational reef fish fisheries of larger stocks, multispecies trips, and more fish.
  - Goal 1: Implement a universal reporting system for all states and get all states to agree on a reporting system
  - Goal 2: Faster stock assessments
  - Goal 3: Lower discards
  - Goal 4: Gain trust and support from recreational fishermen
  - Goal 5: Create new reefs and maintain the reefs we have

## **APPENDIX 2. WORKING GROUP MEETING 2 SUMMARY**

### **Meeting Summary**

#### **Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 2 January 8-9, 2025**

##### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Gulf Council’s Recreational Initiative Working Group convened the second of three Working Group meetings in New Orleans, Louisiana on January 8-9, 2025, with the following 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 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

The Working Group generally agreed on the following key aspects:

##### *Management and Seasons*

- For charter/tackle industries, there is a need for the harvest season for at least one focal reef fish species to be open at all times
- For the average private angler, more overlap in seasons enables opportunity to harvest multiple species and could reduce discards
- Generally, the charter/tackle industries prefer predictable seasons; private anglers prefer longer seasons even if not predictable

##### *Accountability Measures*

- Flexibility for post-season Accountability Measures is preferred and, if possible, paybacks should be distributed across multiple years
- Better messaging is needed on the potential impact that management actions will have on the fishery (“Where are we going?” “What is ultimately possible biologically regarding 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 versus for-hire sectors may warrant differential management (i.e., sector separation)

- Potential multiple avenues to approach these strategies (e.g., separate sub-ACLs by sector/region versus differential management under a shared ACL)

Key observations and recommendations specific to each of the five focal species included:

<i>Red Snapper</i>	<i>Gag &amp; Red Grouper</i>	<i>Gray Triggerfish &amp; Greater Amberjack</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relative satisfaction with fishing opportunities since implementation of state management; some concerns with state allocations and localized depletion</li> <li>● Relative satisfaction with state data collection programs; concern about aligning data collection across states and state data recalibration to MRIP in some instances</li> <li>● Concerns about the lack of information on discards</li> <li>● Concern that data programs across states need to be better aligned</li> <li>● Sector separation caused consternation, but state management has helped to alleviate some of that</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sources of dissatisfaction (gag) include the September season (fishery not open when water is cool/fish inshore and readily accessible), 2024 gag payback accountability measures, and perceived disconnect between science and real-time observations</li> <li>● Regional flexibility: Most catch is in Florida—interest in differential management approach (under Council authority) for Florida versus other states that only catch red/gag grouper incidentally</li> <li>● Interest in finer-scale management <i>within</i> Florida</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 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</li> <li>● Current triggerfish regulations are not perceived as overly constraining</li> <li>● Regional differences between eastern and western Gulf amberjack fisheries may be conducive to regional management</li> <li>● Vessel limits for amberjack (scaled by # anglers on board) may be favorable if it extends the season length</li> <li>● Need to increase communication surrounding the Greater Amberjack Count and set expectations moving forward with dissemination of the results</li> <li>● Misidentification/harvest of juvenile amberjack may be constraining rebuilding</li> <li>● Impact of habitat loss (sargassum, artificial reefs) needs to be considered in the greater amberjack assessment</li> </ul>

Results of this Working Group meeting will feed into the discussion at the third and final Working Group meeting in February to form consensus recommendations for improving management of Gulf recreational reef fish fisheries.

## **DETAILED REPORT**

### **Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 2 January 8-9, 2025**

The [Gulf Council Recreational Initiative](#) Working Group held the second of three meetings in New Orleans, Louisiana, on January 8-9, 2025. The full agenda and background materials are available on the [Gulf Council's website](#). Eleven 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 2 was to:

*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 Gulf species that are highly sought after by recreational anglers, including recreational sources of directed and bycatch mortality (*Recreational Initiative Item #2*)
- Review and assess recreational management measures, including how management measures have changed over time (*Item #3*)
- Assess the performance and efficacy of recreational accountability measures and recommended improvements (*Item #4*)

#### **Day 1 Overview**

##### **Background on Gulf Reef Fish Data and Management**

Following opening remarks by Dr. Carrie Simmons, (Gulf Council Executive Director), consultants Dr. Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus provided a [summary of Working Group Meeting 1](#) and a review of Working Group Meeting 2's purpose and agenda. Dr. Max Birdsong (Gulf Council Social Scientist) then gave an [overview of public engagement](#) since Working Group Meeting 1.

Working Group members then heard several presentations intended to orient them at a high level to the data collection and management process for Gulf recreational reef fish species. Dave Donaldson (Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission Executive Director) presented an [overview of recreational fisheries data collection](#) efforts in the Gulf followed by a presentation on [the federal management process and its role in Gulf Council management](#) by Andy Strelcheck (NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Administrator) and Russ Dunn (NOAA Fisheries Senior Advisor for Recreational Fisheries).

A Working Group member asked Dave Donaldson if there was a sense of the percentage/number of Gulf anglers who actually target reef fish offshore. He mentioned that an estimated 10% of all Gulf anglers target reef fish, although there is no Gulf-wide recreational reef fish permit (this approach is currently being explored in the South Atlantic). Andy Strelcheck noted that some

Gulf states are requiring such permits at the state level, which may negate the need for a federal permit.

Regarding federal management, Working Group members queried whether it was time to “scrap everything” such as the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) and initiate Gulf fisheries management from a fresh start. Presenters noted that when MSA was first implemented, it was focused on commercial fisheries. The last major reauthorization was in 2006 and there have been many advances in fisheries management and changes to the fisheries since then, so it is likely time to begin thinking about changes but not scrapping everything. Working Group members also expressed concern over the long time lags built into the system, including lags between stock assessments and management and the generally long timeline for making management changes. Presenters commented that part of the management process time lag results from the extensive public processes that occur before an action is taken; there is a tradeoff between efficiency and transparency. More public involvement and oversight create a longer timeframe. Working Group members asked about the use of the interim or emergency rule process. Presenters noted that this was most often used to end or address overfishing (e.g., when there was a need to quickly reduce the commercial trip limit with greater amberjack). The problem is that interim or emergency measures can only be in place for 180 days and extended for up to another 186 days. The emergency and interim rules have to be followed up with longer term management measures.

Working Group members asked whether a Harvest Control Rule approach prevents the need to take emergency action on a stock. Presenters commented that it doesn’t prevent it but provides a quicker way to act and provides a pre-specified plan for those actions.

Dr. John Froeschke (Gulf Council Deputy Director) then provided a briefing on [Accountability Measures](#). Working Group members noted that when the Annual Catch Limit (ACL) for gag grouper was exceeded in 2023, there had been a number of unfishable days due to weather, and fishermen are frustrated with what they perceive as low-quality data that led to a premature closure and the implementation of accountability measures in 2024. Presenters noted that data systems weren’t designed to achieve the spatiotemporal precision that they are currently utilized for in management but often it is the only data available. Moving forward, managers will be using recreational gag catch data from Florida’s State Reef Fish Survey rather than from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). In addition, projecting effort/harvest based on season length can be difficult because effort does not change linearly with season length (i.e., more effort is often concentrated into a shorter season and may lead to an overage).

Working Group members asked specifically about one category of post-season accountability measures if the ACL is exceeded: Requiring in-season monitoring to prevent subsequent overages. Presenters responded that the approach for such monitoring depends on the species and the fishery; estimates for “rare-event species” that are seldom encountered during intercept surveys can vary widely while other species that are caught more often may have better monitoring data available. The “paybacks” in future seasons depend on the degree to which the ACL was exceeded, the health and status of the stock, and the programs that are available to provide monitoring data.

Following lunch, Andy Strelcheck (NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Administrator) provided a briefing on [changes in landings and discards over time](#) for the five focal reef fish species. He noted that every fish that dies when discarded is one less fish that could be allocated for harvest. Working Group members expressed that the term “discards” is misleading since many people think this means dead discards; “releases” is a better terminology. They asked about the reliability of discard data and how it can be improved. Presenters answered that there is limited at-sea observer data for recreational fisheries but some of the observer coverage in Louisiana and Texas has been expanded. The remainder of data on the number of released fish is based mainly on dockside sampling so it is self-reported data. These self-reported data are subject to recall bias and may not always be reliable, although additional research is ongoing to improve this. Working Group members asked how the mortality of released fish due to depredation is treated. For those species where information exists, depredation is included in the overall release mortality data.

#### Presentation/Discussion: Stock Status and Management for Focal Species

Following broad presentations and ensuing discussions on recreational data collection and management for Gulf reef fish fisheries, Council staff shared the history of stock status and management/accountability measures for each of the Recreational Initiative’s five focal species.

#### *Red Snapper*

Dr. John Froeschke (Gulf Council Deputy Director) provided an overview of [red snapper](#). Prior to breaking into smaller groups to discuss past management approaches and what actions could have been done differently, Working Group members had several questions. One member asked why, during recalibration of red snapper landings, did the Florida allocation increase so much while the Mississippi allocation was reduced by 50%. Dr. Froeschke explained that recalibration converted state survey data to the federal MRIP “currency” and used reference periods when both surveys were ongoing at the same time. The Florida State Reef Fish Survey provided higher estimates of catch than MRIP, while the Mississippi Tails n’ Scales survey provided considerably lower estimates of catch than MRIP. Data experts are still looking into why the Mississippi and MRIP surveys diverged so much during this time period, but the difference apparently comes from the federal effort survey (FES). Working Group members queried as to whether the Great Red Snapper Count can be applied to other species. Steering Committee members mentioned that this was a one-time, very intensive effort that might not be feasible for other species, but researchers are currently attempting the same approach with greater amberjack. The cost for the Great Red Snapper Count was \$10-\$12 million for one species for one year of data collection and it would be overly costly to do it for other species. Instead, NOAA Fisheries is trying to bolster basic independent research survey programs for all species rather than seeking to achieve the Great Red Snapper Count’s level of intensity and cost on a species-by-species basis.

Working Group members asked for an explanation of the science behind closing the fishery for private Mississippi anglers but allowing the federal for-hire fishery to continue harvesting red snapper. This was explained to be a result of the allocation (state-by-state private angler allocation and Gulf-wide for-hire allocation) that came from sector separation and the state-by-

state allocation of red snapper. Working Group members noted that there are a lot of charter operators in Louisiana that are no longer getting federal permits but are only obtaining state permits, and their catch cuts into the private-angler allocation in the state. They also noted that there was no state for-hire fishery in Mississippi until the state obtained management authority over red snapper harvest and created an in-state for-hire quota.

During the subsequent breakout session, Working Group members broke into two groups and were asked to think through the following questions regarding red snapper management:

- *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 for red snapper 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?*
- *What are your thoughts on having separate management for the private and for-hire elements of the recreational red snapper fishery?*

Key thoughts emerging from these discussions were:

- There is relative satisfaction with fishing opportunities for red snapper since state management was implemented (Amendment 50A).
- Sector separation caused consternation, but state management has helped to alleviate some of that.
- Data:
  - There is relative satisfaction with data collection programs for red snapper but some concern about recalibration resulting in catch reductions for some states.
  - Working Group members believe that scientists and managers should have gotten ahead on consistent data collection in order to avoid the need for calibration of state survey data. They should have considered the methodology for data collection prior to state management. However, it was noted that state surveys were still being developed while state management was being pilot-tested and later fully implemented by the Gulf Council.
  - There is concern that data programs across states need to be better aligned to achieve a more consistent Gulf-wide picture.
- There is concern about the lack of information on red snapper discards; “mixed bag limits” (different species) might be a management approach to reduce discards.

- *Generally*, for-hire operators and the tackle industry prefer predictable seasons for planning, marketing and inventory purposes. Private anglers prefer longer seasons even if less predictable.
  - When a season gets shorter, effort becomes a sprint and creates a derby mentality.

## **Day 2 Overview**

During Day 2, Working Group members continued their review of focal species stock status and management before working to synthesize key messages and themes emerging from the Recreational Initiative's first two Working Group meetings.

### *Gag and Red Grouper*

Emily Muehlstein (Gulf Council Public Information Officer) provided an overview of [gag grouper](#) stock status and management. She explained that gag grouper and red snapper were the only species that currently use the Florida state survey data currency for recreational catch/effort estimates.

Working Group members were curious to learn the process of converting catch estimates from MRIP's Fishing Effort Survey (FES) to the Florida data currency. Managers decided to use what was considered a more reliable effort survey and therefore developed the conversion to better manage the fishery. This was done for gag grouper during the most recent assessment since an estimated 98% of gag grouper landings are in Florida. Working Group members commented that the sudden changes due to a shift in surveys used for catch estimation is not understandable to average anglers and managers need to be conscious of this. Council staff noted that the benchmark assessment for gag, which indicated that the stock was overfished and undergoing overfishing, was also a big contributor to the drop in the ACL, as was incorporating red tide into the assessment.

Sarah Gardiner (Gulf Council Fishery Biologist) provided a stock status and management overview of [red grouper](#). Working Group members asked about the process that led the Council to conduct an interim analysis in 2018 that resulted in a decrease in the ACL for 2019. Council staff shared that the decision to conduct the interim analysis was largely a result of anglers/members of the public expressing concern (e.g., through Advisory Panels and public comment at Council meetings) about the lower numbers of red grouper they were observing. These observations were then corroborated by both the interim analysis, which showed that catch levels were too high, and by the 2019 stock assessment (SEDAR 61), which demonstrated that red grouper biomass had decreased and that productivity had been overestimated.

More generally, Working Group members asked about the process for determining the allocation percentages by sector for species. Council and NOAA Fisheries staff explained that typically those decisions have largely been based on historical landings. More recently, the Council has implemented a process and timeline for reviewing allocations. There is a national policy directive that provides some guidance, and any Council member can make a motion at any time to reconsider allocation.

Following these discussions, Working Group members separated into two breakout groups to consider the following questions for gag and red grouper management:

- *What are the benefits and challenges stemming from the key management decisions outlined in the presentations?*
- *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?*

Key responses from these discussions were:

- Specific to gag grouper:
  - Dissatisfaction with not being able to target gag grouper during the cooler months (only able to target in September when water is warm and fish are offshore).
  - Payback accountability measures following the 2023 season were not popular and undermined trust.
  - There is a disconnect between science and real-time observations (lots of small gags inshore).
  - Need to communicate that males are caught in deeper water and females are inshore.
- For both grouper species:
  - Most catch is in Florida. Can there be a differential management approach for Florida versus other states that only catch red/gag grouper incidentally (regional management under Council auspices)?
  - Is it possible to conduct finer-scale management *within* Florida based on fish biomass and fisher density?
  - The reasons for shortened seasons were never communicated to anglers very well, eroding trust (the information is not reaching the angler). Perhaps develop a dashboard to communicate the advancement toward reaching the ACL as the data are available?
- General messages:
  - Better messaging is needed on what the impact of management actions will be on the population/timeline and subsequent effect on anglers (“Where are we going? “What is ultimately possible biologically?”)
  - For charter/tackle industry, need something open (across reef fish) all the time and for the average private angler, more overlap in seasons enables an opportunity to harvest multiple species on a trip.
  - Flexibility for post-season accountability measures is preferred; distribute paybacks across multiple years if possible.

## *Gray Triggerfish and Greater Amberjack*

Following lunch, Dr. Carrie Simmons (Gulf Council Executive) provided a stock status and management overview for [greater amberjack](#).

A Working Group member noted that the species has been in a rebuilding plan for a long time and asked why it was taking so long to rebuild. Dr. Simmons responded that this is a very data poor species and that scientists only have landings data to drive the assessment. So, this causes some uncertainty.

Another Working Group member asked for the rationale behind closing the amberjack season in May. Dr. Simmons responded that May is when the species spawns and the closure is in place to protect spawning fish, especially females; however, the closure has not been in place long enough yet to determine whether there has been an impact.

Lastly, Working Group members asked about the Greater Amberjack Count and whether it is being executed/will be considered differently than the Great Red Snapper Count. Andy Strelcheck responded that the integration of the Great Red Snapper Count was not well planned, and that NOAA Fisheries is coordinating with the scientific community to better integrate Greater Amberjack Count data into the scientific and management process.

Following the greater amberjack discussion, Dr. Simmons provided a stock status and management overview for [gray triggerfish](#). One Working Group member asked whether the species migrates between the eastern and western Gulf; Dr. Simmons responded that there is insufficient data to answer that question.

For the third and final breakout session, Working Group members in each group were asked to consider the following discussion questions about Greater Amberjack and Gray Triggerfish:

- *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?*

Key responses from these discussions were:

- Generally, most anglers are not targeting only triggerfish or amberjack. The potential for overlap of amberjack and triggerfish seasons with red snapper/other species allows for multi-species trips.
- Specific to gray triggerfish:

- Triggerfish are more of an opportunistic catch. Many trips Gulf-wide are not targeting triggerfish. The current triggerfish regulations are not perceived as overly constraining to anglers (i.e., are generally not a source of dissatisfaction), while the change in fishing behavior for red snapper (bigger bait) has resulted in fewer triggerfish landed.
- Specific to greater amberjack:
  - Regional differences between east and west Gulf amberjack landings (more preferential habitat in the western Gulf) may make the species better suited to regional management.
  - Vessel limits for amberjack (scaled by number of anglers on board) may be favorable if it extends the season length—there is a need to assess the satisfaction threshold for how many amberjack people want to harvest.
  - Communication surrounding the Greater Amberjack Count is important to set expectations moving forward with dissemination of the results.
  - Misidentification of juvenile amberjack (i.e., harvest of juveniles) and insufficient habitat (sargassum, oil rigs) may be constraining rebuilding

### A Synthesis of Messages Heard During Working Group Meetings 1 and 2

Discussions during Working Group Meeting 2 embodied many of the themes, along with the Vision and Goals, developed during [Working Group Meeting 1](#).

Key thoughts and ideas emerging from this meeting included the following:

#### *Management and Seasons*

- For charter/tackle industries, there is a need for the season for at least one focal reef fish species to be open at all times
- For the average private angler, more overlap in seasons enables opportunity to harvest multiple species and could reduce discards
- Generally, the charter/tackle industries prefer predictable seasons; private anglers prefer longer seasons even if not predictable

#### *Accountability Measures*

- Flexibility for post-season Accountability Measures is preferred and, when possible, paybacks for any harvest overages should be distributed across multiple years
- Better messaging is needed on the potential impact that management actions will have on the 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 versus for-hire may warrant differential management (i.e., sector separation)

- Are multiple avenues to approach these strategies (e.g., separate sub-ACLs by sector/region versus differential management under a shared ACL)

Working Group members requested that a chart of hypothetical overlap of seasons for multiple species be developed. After some discussion it was agreed that prior to Working Group meeting 3, an exercise would be developed for the Working Group members to outline what they would like to see in overlapping seasons.

Working Group members are also to consider new management approaches that they would like to see and be prepared to share those at Working Group meeting 3 in February.

#### Workshop Conclusion and Next Steps

Members of the Steering Committee and the facilitators thanked Working Group members for their thoughtful contributions over the course of the meeting. They noted that the group's next meeting is scheduled for February 19-20, 2025 at Gulf Council headquarters in Tampa, FL.

## **WORKING GROUP MEETING 2 APPENDICES**

### **Working Group Meeting 2—Appendix 1.** Recreational Initiative Working Group Meeting 2 Attendance

#### Working Group Member (State)

Hughes Andry (TX)

Shane Bonnot (TX)

Ray Cole (AL)

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

Carrie Simmons, Gulf Council Executive Director

Dave Donaldson, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission Executive Director

Michael McDermott, Private angler (Mississippi), Council Member

Andy Strelcheck, NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Administrator

Russ Dunn, NOAA Fisheries Recreational Fishing Coordinator

Ed Walker, Private/charter/commercial fisherman (Florida), Council Member

#### Gulf Council Staff

John Froeschke, Deputy Executive Director

Emily Muehlstein, Public Information Officer

Sarah Gardiner, Fishery Biologist

Camilla Shireman, Administrative & Communications Assistant

Max Birdsong, Social Scientist

#### Facilitators (Pelagic Strategies)

Willy Goldsmith

Andrew Loftus

#### Others

*In Person Attendees:*

Richard Fischer

*Virtual Attendees:*

Jason Adriance  
Gregg Bray  
Catherine Bruger  
Jesse Buntin  
Susan Fleck  
Martha Guyas  
Frank Helies  
Lisa Hollensead  
Chris Horton  
Joseph Hudson  
Michael Larkin  
Genine McClair  
Jessica Matos  
David Nieland  
Ashford Rosenberg  
Chris Schieble  
Nicole Smith  
Kali Spurgin  
Jim Suomi  
CJ Sweetman

Clint Troxler  
John Ward  
Robert Zales II  
James Zurbrick  
Bryan Anderson  
Thomas Cibula  
Osborne Crosby  
Mark Dennis  
Miles Howell  
Scott Hickman  
Andrew LeGoubin  
Sarah Lazo  
S Myers  
Carole Neidig  
Mark Nicholas  
John Pendergrast  
Alexandra Schwaab  
Steven Van Buren  
Jerry Whisenhunt  
Danica William

## **APPENDIX 3. WORKING GROUP MEETING 3 SUMMARY**

### **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 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:

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Description</b>
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**

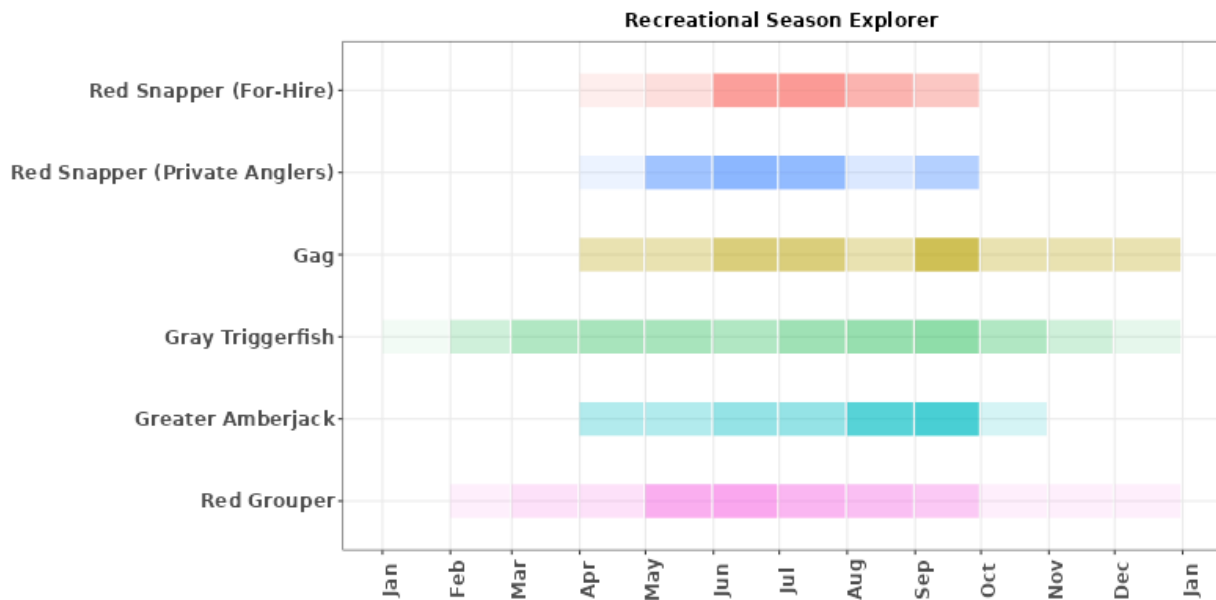
Following opening remarks by Recreational Initiative Steering Committee members Dr. Carrie Simmons (Gulf Council Executive Director) and Andy Strelcheck (NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Administrator), consultants Dr. Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus [provided a summary](#) of the major takeaways 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<sup>8</sup>:



*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

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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 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<sup>9</sup>—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.<sup>10</sup> 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.

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<sup>9</sup> These four species are all jointly managed by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

<sup>10</sup> 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 <sub>MSY</sub> )	Required Change in Harvest
RHL is <b>above</b> the range (harvest expected to be lower than the RHL)	<b>Very high</b> (above 150%)	<b>Liberalization</b> % = difference between harvest estimate and RHL, <b>not to exceed 40%</b>
	<b>High</b> (100% - 150%)	<b>Liberalization</b> % = difference between harvest estimate and RHL, <b>not to exceed 20%</b>
	<b>Low</b> (below 100%)	<b>Liberalization: 10%</b>
RHL is <b>within</b> the range (harvest expected to be close to the RHL)	<b>Very high</b> (above 150%)	<b>Liberalization: 10%</b>
	<b>High</b> (100% - 150%)	<b>No liberalization or reduction: 0%</b>
	<b>Low</b> (below 100%)	<b>Reduction: 10%</b>
RHL is <b>below</b> the range (harvest expected to exceed the RHL)	<b>Very high</b> (above 150%)	<b>Reduction: 10%</b>
	<b>High</b> (100% - 150%)	<b>Reduction</b> % = difference between harvest estimate and RHL, <b>not to exceed 20%</b>
	<b>Low</b> (below 100%)	<b>Reduction</b> % = difference between harvest estimate and RHL, <b>not to exceed 40%</b>

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.<sup>11</sup>

### *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.

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<sup>11</sup> 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)<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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."

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 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:

<b>Vision:</b> 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.					
<b>Goal 1:</b> Trusted Data	<b>Goal 2:</b> Establish Trust with the Recreational Community	<b>Goal 3:</b> Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access	<b>Goal 4:</b> Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management	<b>Goal 5:</b> Increase Recreational Community Engagement in the Management Process	<b>Goal 6:</b> 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.

## WORKING GROUP MEETING 3 APPENDICES

### Working Group Meeting 3—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:*

Jason Adriance  
Kesley Banks  
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

## APPENDIX 4. VIRTUAL PUBLIC INPUT SESSION SUMMARIES

### *Virtual Public Input Session 1*

#### 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 Gulf reef species; 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.

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 facilitate 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

## ***Virtual Public Input Session 2***

### **Meeting Summary**

#### **Recreational Initiative Virtual Public Input Session January 16, 2025**

The Gulf Council convened a virtual Public Input Session from 6-9 pm ET on Thursday, January 16, 2025, to discuss the major discussion points and outcomes of the Recreational Initiative's second Working Group meeting. The meeting, held in New Orleans, LA on January 8-9, 2025, had the following purpose:

- Ensure collective understanding of stock status and management measures/history for each of the Recreational Initiative's five focal species (red snapper, gag grouper, red grouper, gray triggerfish, and greater amberjack).
- *Review the status of Federally managed species* in the Gulf 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.

After an introduction to the session by Gulf Council Public Information Officer Emily Muehlstein, consultants Willy Goldsmith and Andrew Loftus presented a summary of Working Group Meeting 2.

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.

#### **Sources of Angler Dissatisfaction**

Participants expressed significant frustration with several management decisions and outcomes related to the five focal species. A recurring theme was the perceived disconnect between recreational data collection methods and the experiences of anglers on the water. Many felt that current data systems do not accurately reflect stock conditions, with some pointing out discrepancies between reported stock health and their observations. Concerns were also raised about the reliability of data used in stock assessments, particularly regarding discard mortality. Anglers noted that they often release fish without witnessing mortality, yet discard mortality estimates appear to disproportionately affect stock assessments.

Another major source of dissatisfaction stemmed from the lag between science and management. Anglers highlighted that decisions are often based on outdated data, with terminal data years for stock assessments lagging behind management based on those assessments by several years. Participants emphasized that the reluctance to develop a robust recreational data collection

program, despite existing frameworks, contributes to inefficiencies in addressing these issues. The absence of timely, granular data also limits the potential for more adaptive strategies, such as split seasons (i.e., multiple fishery openings in a single calendar year), which were described as challenging to implement effectively without improvements in data collection. Short seasons and the resulting discards were cited as a significant source of dissatisfaction. Participants better align fishing seasons across species in order to enable harvest of multiple species on a single trip and minimize discard mortality. This idea was seen as a win-win, offering potential benefits for nearshore waters that continue to feel the effects of harmful red tides. Finally, participants noted that seasons are often open during spawning, which seemed illogical.

Finally, there was a strong call for accountability and transparency in the scientific process. Stakeholders expressed frustration over the lack of repercussions for what they perceived as flawed science, emphasizing the need for third-party audits of the data being used to make decisions. Participants argued that errors in data interpretation and application have wide-reaching consequences, affecting both the livelihoods of anglers and public trust in fisheries management.

### **Positive Elements of Federal Management**

Participants offered mixed feedback on federal fisheries management, with some acknowledging areas of success while others struggled to identify positive outcomes. A common sentiment was that stocks and access to many species have continued to decline over the years, despite rebuilding efforts. This left some participants skeptical of federal management's overall effectiveness. However, others pointed to specific achievements worth noting. For example, collaborative efforts with entities such as NOAA Sea Grant were praised for their impact on fish release techniques to minimize mortality. Additionally, some stakeholders highlighted the recovery of species like red snapper and lane snapper as evidence of progress. The contentious management decisions of past decades, though initially unpopular, were credited with placing Gulf fisheries ahead of those in the South Atlantic.

Limited entry programs for both commercial and federal charter sectors were identified as successful. While initially met with resistance, these programs have been recognized for their role in creating more sustainable fisheries by limiting capacity and ensuring long-term resource availability. Sector separation (i.e., separate Annual Catch Limits for the private and for-hire sectors), particularly for red snapper, was also highlighted as a positive development. Although initially controversial, this approach has proven effective in addressing specific needs of different fishing sectors.

Despite these successes, participants expressed ongoing frustration with certain aspects of management, such as balancing predictable seasons with longer fishing opportunities. While some stakeholders valued the certainty of set seasons, others preferred more flexibility, underscoring the challenge of meeting diverse angler needs.

## **Management Strategies to Achieve Desired Outcomes**

Participants highlighted several strategies that could contribute to achieving the desired outcomes identified by the Working Group. A recurring recommendation was to accelerate interim stock assessments, as many stakeholders felt that existing regulations and policies were based on outdated data that failed to reflect current conditions on the water. This disconnect between data and observed reality has led to frustration among anglers, who called for a more responsive and adaptive approach to fisheries management. Self-reported angler data was supported and participants indicated that the private sector was ready to take responsibility for developing and administering self-reporting programs.

Some participants emphasized the importance of incorporating diverse data sources to improve decision-making. For instance, representatives from the scuba diving community noted that they spend extensive time underwater and have unique insights into the behavior and abundance of certain species. They argued that their observations, which often contradict concerns about species like goliath grouper, greater amberjack, and lane snapper, should be factored into stock assessments to provide a fuller picture of fish populations.

Another key suggestion was to adopt multi-year annual catch limits (ACLs). This approach could help address community concerns by smoothing out the impacts of data spikes and providing more stability in management decisions. By allowing for minor overages without immediate penalties, multi-year ACLs could enhance trust in the management process and foster a sense of collaboration between anglers and regulatory bodies.

## **General Feedback**

Participants shared diverse perspectives on overarching challenges and opportunities in fisheries management. A recurring topic was the potential role of self-reporting for recreational anglers. Several stakeholders suggested that self-reporting may be the most viable solution for improving the accuracy of data within the recreational sector. While acknowledging concerns about the reliability of voluntary data, participants felt that with accurate reporting, self-reporting could significantly enhance management outcomes and build trust between anglers and regulatory bodies.

Concerns were raised about the long-term implications of rebuilt stocks, with participants emphasizing that recovery does not necessarily mean unrestricted fishing opportunities. Increased fishing effort, if unmanaged, could undermine progress, highlighting the need for clear communication to set realistic expectations about what "rebuilding" means in practice. Participants also called for better consideration of external factors, such as weather events, when assessing estimated harvests. Limited fishable days during short seasons, such as for red grouper and gag grouper, were noted as a challenge, prompting suggestions for adjustments to harvest estimates that account for these constraints to ensure more accurate and equitable evaluations.

Finally, specific observations about species abundance highlighted gaps in current regulations. For example, stakeholders in the Panhandle region noted an overwhelming presence of

triggerfish in certain areas, suggesting that current limits might be too restrictive given their abundance. These comments underscored the need for management approaches that are more closely aligned with real-time stock conditions and regional differences.

**List of Commenters**

Kevin Lausman

Bob Zales II

Dylan Hubbard

Steve Papen

Michael Hollingsworth

Ben Choi

Brad Boland

Chris Howell

Chad Gregg

Mathew DeLillo

## ***Virtual Public Input Session 3***

### **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

## APPENDIX 5. STEERING COMMITTEE AND WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

### Steering Committee Members

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Dave Donaldson	Executive Director, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission	<a href="mailto:dave.donaldson@gsmfc.org">dave.donaldson@gsmfc.org</a>
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### Working Group Members

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