

Gulf Council
Recreational Initiative Public Engagement Meeting Summary
April 8, 2025

**46 Council, staff, and public attendees (37 in-person and 9 virtual).
11 provided comment**

Joshua Ellendar – Louisiana: Charter Fisherman

We need state or regional management. The more issues we have, the more he is confident that state management will solve the problems, so the states don't have to battle with one another. Across the Gulf there are different fisheries and people fish them differently at different times of year. Please focus heavily on state and regional management. The Council could set and oversee the ACLs but states should set management measures.

Jonathan Pharr - Mississippi/Alabama: Recreational fisherman starting charter business

State and regional management has already improved things. One of the things that is frustrating for recreational fisherman is that they have to follow seasons. He loves that Alabama and Louisiana offered 7-day a week fishing. The broader seasons are good. He would like the gray triggerfish size limit to be reduced to 14 inches. It takes too long for them to get that big and they're overpopulated. Consider managing with some sort of tag method. He hates catching snapper out of season and recreational tag system would allow more flexibility for when to fish. He also supports allowing uncaught quota to be carried over to the next year.

Dale Woodruff – Orange Beach, Alabama: Charter Fisherman and President of the Alabama Charter Fishing Association

He has a multi-passenger vessel and a 6-pack vessel. Sometimes the Council has its hands tied behind its' back and sometimes it is free to make changes. It's a shame when we have a healthy fishery like greater amberjack, but we don't have access to it. This year, there will be a month and a half long season but there are so many fish it's like dealing with porpoises. He went fishing today and when he was trying to catch vermillion snapper amberjack were biting as well. The amberjack kept breaking them off. On his sounder he could count at least 50 amberjacks per spot that were legal within 10 miles of shore. When

they catch fish quickly it should indicate that there is a healthy fishery even though the ACLs are low. Science is always lagging behind and he wonders why the stock assessment isn't finding the fish. A year ago he ran across a huge school of amberjack in 600 feet of water cruising the rip, he's never seen that before. We need more access to gray triggerfish while we wait on a stock assessment. The fish slow their growth after about 3 years, and it takes them a long time to grow to 15 inches. It was suggested to lower the limit to 14 inches, since they're already spawning around 12 inches. Scamps are self-regulated, there are days you fish them and catch none and days you catch some. During June and July they do a lot of vermillion fishing and red snapper fishing. Scamp will be caught indirectly that time of year in deeper water. There needs to be a way to allow for retention or an indirect limit of fish that's not the primary target out of season.

Roston Henderson – Alabama: Recreational spearfisherman

Spearfishermen should be allowed to harvest bull sharks. The data is an issue and needs to be more trustworthy.

Jim Zubrick – Steinhatchee, Florida: Commercial fisherman

He was a Charter fisherman and has been a recreational fisherman his whole life. The working group didn't talk about how the vast majority of commercial and charter for-hire fishermen like reporting and see value in it. The groups that are accountable appreciate it and don't want to give that up. You can be accountable on your phone. He is against removing the 20-fathom closure removal.

Brian Lewis – Clearwater, Florida: Commercial fishing boat owner

He is frustrated with the fish he can't catch. He has preached a harvest tag program and wants to support it. It would allow fishermen to choose when they want to fish rather than deal with seasons. The Council needs to take measures to reduce discards and discard mortality. The current recreational data collection program is a guessing game. There should be a reef fish permit for the recreational fishery. The 20-fathom closure should remain in place because plenty of fishermen do follow the rules.

Mark Trion – Gulf Breeze, Florida: Commercial bandit boat

Dead discards in the recreational sector are a problem and the issue is worse with shark and dolphin depredation. He fishes like a recreational angler but just stays out longer and tries to catch more fish. Recreational anglers need to be educated about how to mitigate dead discards. If porpoises take his fish, he moves 4 to 5 miles to get away from them. There are more and more recreational anglers all the time and they're using better technology. Recreational effort has also increased significantly. The Council needs to identify the private recreational angler user group with a permit and use smart phones to hail-out, hail-in, and report.

Richard Fischer - Louisiana Charter Boat Association

Thank you for hosting the rec initiative and the members of the Work Group for such a productive series of meetings. He was taken aback, in a good way, on how the anglers and Agency communicated and discussed uncomfortable truths and didn't run away from them. In Louisiana, the state charter fisherman have an earlier opening date, higher possession limit, and longer season. Last year, the state fleet harvested 67,000 pounds of red snapper and the federal fleet harvested 100,000 pounds. Since they don't have to go as far out, they have a less expensive trip. The Council can't address the inequity directly, but can allow for more state management. There also needs to be more enforcement to address the issue. He supports state or regional management appreciates the gag grouper recommendation that came out of the working group. The eastern and western Gulf have different fisheries management may need to move towards that idea. He would also like to see more acceptance of data that comes from the state programs instead of MRIP.

Brandon Lindsey – Tarpon Springs, Florida: Charter and Recreational Fisherman

He talked to a lot of local charter guys and would suggest moving red grouper season open date to April or May. Red grouper discards are so bad during red snapper season so there needs to be overlap. They primarily fish after winter anyways because of the north wind keeps them off the water until spring. Additionally, the end of the year is more important for red grouper the the beginning.

Johnny Williams – Galveston Texas: Partyboat

This year the federal for-hire component was only allowed to catch 70% of their red snapper quota. The season was shut in August and didn't reopen until November when weather is bad and people are busy with holidays. The other sectors got to catch their fish.

Start the red snapper fishing year on April 1st for the federal for-hire red snapper fishermen. It would extend the opportunity to fish and allow them to catch the fish they were entitled to.

Susan Boggs – Orange Beach, Alabama: Reel Surprise Charters and Marina

The recreational initiative was a large lift and effort. If you have three fishermen in a room no one can agree and when you multiply that by a million, you'll get nothing. The question was posed as to whether the recreational sector in many cases is going to overlap with the charter for-hire headboat sector. Whatever decisions are made should consider that the recreational sector is tied to the charter/headboat sector. Not many of the working group members represent charter/headboat sector. She does not support regional management for the federal for-hire fleet. If it works for the private recreational sector, then do it for them.