

GULF COUNCIL RECREATIONAL INITIATIVE WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRIORITIZATION

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 initiative focused on 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.

A 12-member Working Group consisting of Gulf recreational reef fishery stakeholders who were selected by the Gulf Council via an application process were convened for three in-person meetings between October 2024 and February 2025 (Figure 1.1.1). To support achievement of this vision, the Working Group identified six goals for Gulf recreational reef fish management ([Meeting 1 Summary Report](#), Table 1.1.1). 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 ([Meeting 2 Summary Report](#), [Meeting 3 Summary Report](#)). The Working Group developed a series of 19 major consensus recommendations for the Gulf Council to consider to improve recreational reef fish management (Table 1.1.1).

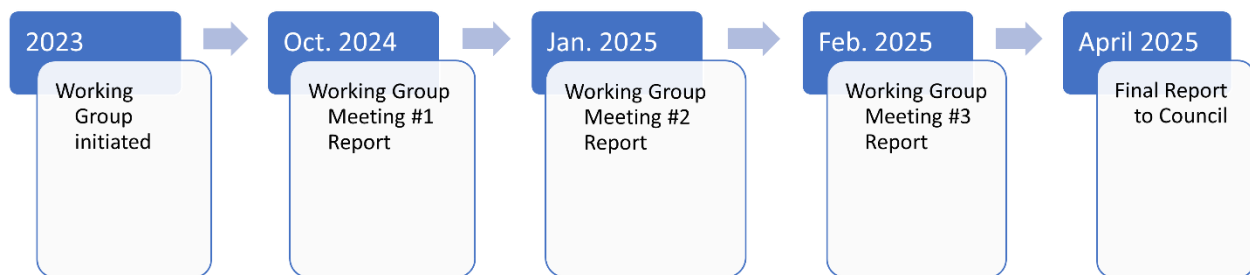


Figure 1.1.1 Recreational Initiative Working Group timeline of progress to date. The working group was established in 2023 and populated in August of 2024, and convened in-person 3 times. A final report was delivered to the Council in April 2025.

The Council reviewed the [Final Recreational Initiative Working Group report](#) at the April 2025 Council meeting, and requested staff develop additional context to aid the Council in prioritization of the Working Group recommendations. In response, Council Staff compiled all Working Group recommendations and used a decision flowchart (Figure 1.1.2) to categorize each recommendation by approach (education vs management: Table 1.1.2 and Table 1.1.3), status of action, timeline to action, and contributors required. These categories were determined to aid the Council in identifying the recommendations that have been initiated previously, and if not initiated, the appropriate timeline and workload that can be expected for such action. At this juncture, the Council should identify which Working Group priorities that it wishes to initiate action on, and of those that are selected, prioritize action. In prioritizing the Working Group

recommendations, it would be advantageous to consider pre-existing staffing constraints amongst Council staff, SERO and the SEFSC. Additionally, it would be prudent to consider which recommendations align with executive orders 14276: Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness and 14192: Unleashing Prosperity through Deregulation, to meet overarching goals of the current administration.

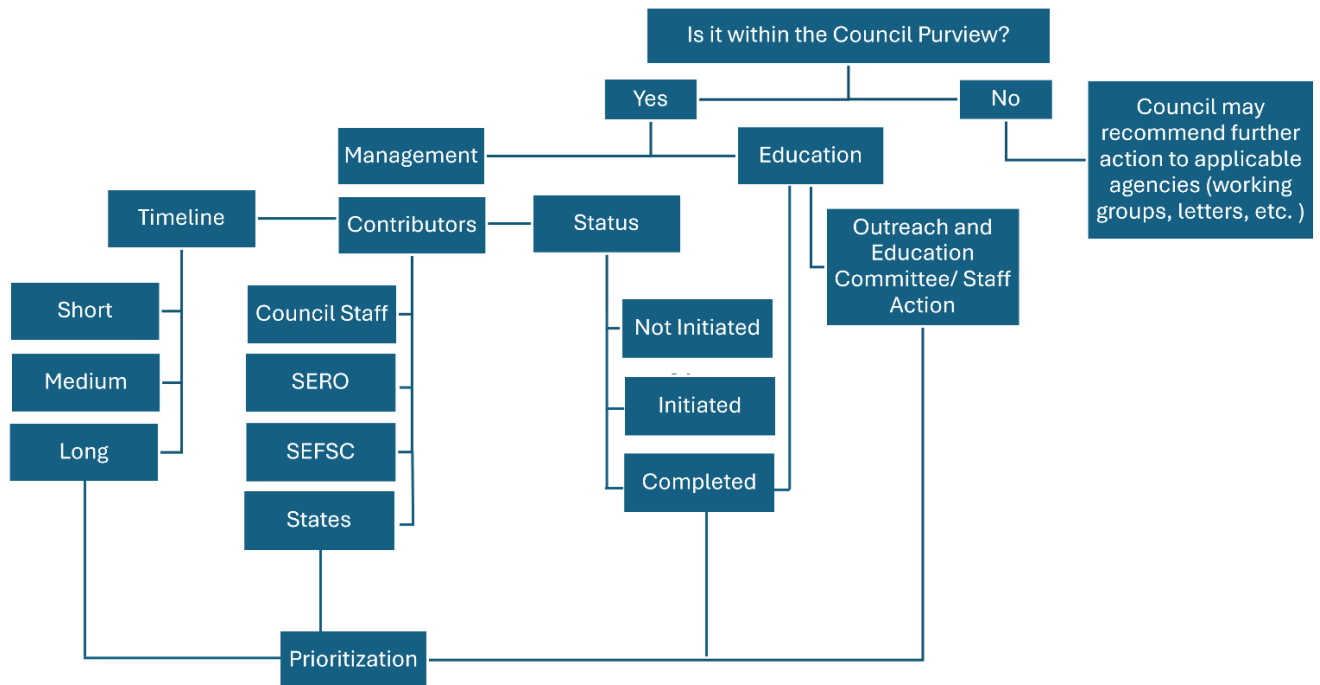


Figure 1.1.2 Decision flowchart to sort Recreational Initiative Working Group recommendations into type of management action, status of action, timeline of action, and required contributors to action.

Table 1.1.1 Recreational Initiative Working Group recommendations (19) and determination of whether each recommendation is under the Council purview, the approach required, the status of the action, potential timeline to action, and contributors required for action to take place.

	Working Group Recommendation	Under Council Purview	Approach		Status			Timeline to Action			Contributors			
			Education	Management	Completed	Initiated	Not Initiated	Short	Medium	Long	Council	SERO	SEFSC	States
Trusted Data	1.1: To achieve Gulf-wide consistency, specific and measurable guidelines 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.”	Maybe		X		X				X		X	X	X
	1.2: To promote transparency in recreational data and improve catch and effort estimates, electronic self-reporting 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.	Maybe	X	X			X			X	X	X	X	X
	1.3: Opportunities to increase the applicability of voluntary angler self-reporting of effort and catch should be explored, including through the development of pilot studies to evaluate how best to both validate self-reported data with existing state surveys.	No		X		X			X				X	X
Establish Trust with the Recreational Community	2.1: The Council should improve messaging regarding the potential on-the-water impact 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).	Yes	X			X					X			
	2.2: The Council should better communicate the conservation implications of different fishing activities 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.	Yes	X			X						X		

	Working Group Recommendation	Under Council Purview	Approach		Status			Timeline to Action			Contributors			
			Education	Management	Completed	Initiated	Not Initiated	Short	Medium	Long	Council	SERO	SEFSC	States
	2.3: The Council should improve awareness of the tremendous volume of outreach and educational material already available through the Council and its partners.	Yes	X			X					X			
Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access	3.1: The Council should explore development and implementation of a harvest control rule approach 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.	Yes		X			X			X	X	X	X	X
	3.2: The Council should examine the feasibility of implementing carryover provisions for the uncaught portion of an Annual Catch Limit for reef fish species, along with assessing the ability to distribute paybacks for Annual Catch Limit overages across multiple subsequent years to increase stability. Implementation of these could be explored through a pilot study and would be contingent upon stock status and/or trend.	Yes		X		X			X		X	X		
Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management	4.1: The Council should consider implementing regional/state flexibility in recreational reef fish management (while maintaining federal management authority) whenever possible.	Yes		X		X				X	X	X	X	X
	4.2 The Council should explore a regional management approach for red and gag grouper (maintaining a single Gulf-wide Annual Catch Limit) that splits management measures between Florida, where the vast majority of both species are caught, and the other four Gulf states, where gag and red grouper are only encountered rarely. 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.	Yes		X			X		X		X	X	X	X

	Working Group Recommendation	Under Council Purview	Approach		Status			Timeline to Action			Contributors			
			Education	Management	Completed	Initiated	Not Initiated	Short	Medium	Long	Council	SERO	SEFSC	States
	4.3: The Council should explore differentiating management measures (i.e., size limit, bag limit, and season) for greater amberjack 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).	Yes		X		X				X	X	X		X
	4.4: The Council should continue to delegate authority for setting red snapper management measures for private recreational anglers and state guide boats to each of the five Gulf states.	Yes		X	X						X	X		X
Increase Recreational Community Engagement in the Management Process	5.1: The Council should seek opportunities to partner with recreational fishing community leaders to educate and engage anglers to be more active participants in the Gulf Council’s management process—potentially through a leadership program sponsored by the Gulf Council, where participants are invited to attend council meetings, review outreach materials, and providing public comment.	Yes	X					X			X			
	5.2: The Council should work with partners to develop scaled-down modules of the Marine Resources Education Program (MREP) to share with a wider audience—possibly including short videos on specific components of the fisheries science and management process.	Yes	X					X			X			
	5.3: The Council should promote opportunities for anglers to report catch information and on-the-water observations of fish abundance and presence (e.g., through the Council’s Fisherman Feedback Tool).	Yes	X				X		X		X			
	6.1: The Council should implement a replacement and/or enhancement to DESCEND Act (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.	Yes		X		X		X			X	X		

	Working Group Recommendation	Under Council Purview	Approach		Status			Timeline to Action			Contributors			
			<i>Education</i>	<i>Management</i>	<i>Completed</i>	<i>Initiated</i>	<i>Not Initiated</i>	<i>Short</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Long</i>	<i>Council</i>	<i>SERO</i>	<i>SEFSC</i>	<i>States</i>
Maximize Angler Satisfaction and Accommodate Growth	6.2: The Council should work with the recreational community, including the for-hire and private angler sectors, to develop seasons that maximize overlap in focal species to enable harvest of multiple species on a given trip and reduce discards. Maximizing overlap with the season for red snapper, 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.	Yes	X	X			X			X	X	X	X	X
	6.3: The Council should explore the use of vessel rather than individual bag limits for greater amberjack (possibly scaled by number of anglers on board) to extend the season length.	Yes		X		X			X		X	X		
	6.4: The Council should explore the concept of an aggregate “reef fish season” and bag limit to reduce discards and allow harvest of multiple species, integrated with recommendations for promoting regional management flexibility (Goal 4) where possible (and recognizing challenges that certain “choke species” could hinder implementation due to the current requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act).	Yes			X			X		X	X	X	X	

Table 1.1.2 Education and Outreach Recreational Initiative Working Group recommendations (8) and determination of whether each recommendation is under the Council purview, the status of the action, potential timeline to action, and contributors required for action to take place.

	Working Group Recommendation	Under Council Purview	Status			Timeline to Action			Contributors			
			Completed	Initiated	Not Initiated	Short	Medium	Long	Council	SERO	SEFC	States
Trusted Data	1.2: To promote transparency in recreational data and improve catch and effort estimates, electronic self-reporting 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.	Maybe		X				X	X	X	X	X
Establish Trust with the Recreational Community	2.1: The Council should improve messaging regarding the potential on-the-water impact 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).	Yes		X			X		X			
	2.2: The Council should better communicate the conservation implications of different fishing activities 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.	Yes		X					X			
	2.3: The Council should improve awareness of the tremendous volume of outreach and educational material already available through the Council and its partners.	Yes		X					X			

	Working Group Recommendation	Under Council Purview	Status			Timeline to Action			Contributors			
			Completed	Initiated	Not Initiated	Short	Medium	Long	Council	SERO	SEFC	States
<p>Increase Recreational Community Engagement in the Management Process</p>	<p>5.1: The Council should seek opportunities to partner with recreational fishing community leaders to educate and engage anglers to be more active participants in the Gulf Council’s management process—potentially through a leadership program sponsored by the Gulf Council, where participants are invited to attend council meetings, review outreach materials, and providing public comment.</p>	Yes			X	X			X			
	<p>5.2: The Council should work with partners to develop scaled-down modules of the Marine Resources Education Program (MREP) to share with a wider audience—possibly including short videos on specific components of the fisheries science and management process.</p>	Yes			X	X			X			
	<p>5.3: The Council should promote opportunities for anglers to report catch information and on-the-water observations of fish abundance and presence (e.g., through the Council’s Fisherman Feedback Tool).</p>	Yes		X		X			X			
<p>Maximize Angler Satisfaction and Accommodate Growth</p>	<p>6.2: The Council should work with the recreational community, including the for-hire and private angler sectors, to develop seasons that maximize overlap in focal species to enable harvest of multiple species on a given trip and reduce discards. Maximizing overlap with the season for red snapper, 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>	Yes			X			X	X	X	X	

Table 1.1.3 Management Recreational Initiative Working Group recommendations (13) and determination of whether each recommendation is under the Council purview, the status of the action, potential timeline to action, and contributors required for action to take place.

	Working Group Recommendation	Under Council Purview	Status			Timeline to Action			Contributors			
			Completed	Initiated	Not Initiated	Short	Medium	Long	Council	SERO	SEFC	States
Trusted Data	1.1: To achieve Gulf-wide consistency, specific and measurable guidelines 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.”	Maybe			X			X		X	X	X
	1.2: To promote transparency in recreational data and improve catch and effort estimates, electronic self-reporting 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.	Maybe			X			X	X	X	X	X
	1.3: Opportunities to increase the applicability of voluntary angler self-reporting of effort and catch should be explored, including through the development of pilot studies to evaluate how best to both validate self-reported data with existing state surveys.	No			X		X				X	
Develop Predictable and Reliable Recreational Access	3.1: The Council should explore development and implementation of a harvest control rule approach 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.	Yes			X			X	X	X	X	X
	3.2: The Council should examine the feasibility of implementing carryover provisions for the uncaught portion of an Annual Catch Limit for reef fish species, along with assessing the ability to distribute paybacks for Annual Catch Limit overages across multiple subsequent years to increase stability. Implementation of these could be explored through a pilot study and would be contingent upon stock status and/or trend.	Yes		X			X		X	X		
	4.1: The Council should consider implementing regional/state flexibility in recreational reef fish management (while maintaining federal management authority) whenever possible.	Yes		X				X	X	X	X	X

	Working Group Recommendation	Under Council Purview	Status			Timeline to Action			Contributors			
			Completed	Initiated	Not Initiated	Short	Medium	Long	Council	SERO	SEFC	States
Allow for Regional Flexibility in Management	4.2 The Council should explore a regional management approach for red and gag grouper (maintaining a single Gulf-wide Annual Catch Limit) that splits management measures between Florida, where the vast majority of both species are caught, and the other four Gulf states, where gag and red grouper are only encountered rarely. 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.	Yes			X		X		X	X	X	X
	4.3: The Council should explore differentiating management measures (i.e., size limit, bag limit, and season) for greater amberjack 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).	Yes		X				X	X	X		X
	4.4: The Council should continue to delegate authority for setting red snapper management measures for private recreational anglers and state guide boats to each of the five Gulf states.	Yes	X						X	X		X
Maximize Angler Satisfaction and Accommodate Growth	6.1: The Council should implement a replacement and/or enhancement to DESCEND Act (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.	Yes		X		X			X	X		
	6.2: The Council should work with the recreational community, including the for-hire and private angler sectors, to develop seasons that maximize overlap in focal species to enable harvest of multiple species on a given trip and reduce discards. Maximizing overlap with the season for red snapper, 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.	Yes			X			X	X	X	X	X
	6.3: The Council should explore the use of vessel rather than individual bag limits for greater amberjack (possibly scaled by number of anglers on board) to extend the season length.	Yes		X			X		X	X		
	6.4: The Council should explore the concept of an aggregate "reef fish season" and bag limit to reduce discards and allow harvest of multiple species, integrated with recommendations for promoting regional management flexibility (Goal 4) where possible (and recognizing challenges that certain "choke species" could hinder implementation due to the current requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act).	Yes			X			X	X	X	X	

