

**Gulf Council**  
**Outreach and Education Technical Committee**

**Meeting Summary**

Tampa, Florida

December 11, 2025

The meeting of the Gulf Council’s (Council) Outreach and Education Technical Committee (O&E) was convened at 8:30 AM, EST on December 11, 2025. The agenda for the meeting was adopted and the minutes from the November 13, 2024, meeting were approved as written.

**Management Areas and Boundaries Mapping**

Discussion Fisheries Management Areas on Charts and 9-Mile Boundary Case Study

Staff provided an update on progress made on getting fisheries management areas on commercially available charts. While this project was supported by the O&E during its 2024 meeting, Council staff cautioned that it may be difficult and indicated that the State of Florida was unable to accomplish the goal. Staff shared challenges associated with creating and hosting fisheries areas though a case study of the process it followed to create and share the 9-mile Reef Fish Boundary in the Gulf of America. Accomplishing this objective proved difficult for several reasons. First, the legal mechanisms for producing NOAA cartography products and NMFS regulations areas are a separate and incomparable structure. Therefore, no intersection between the production of official NOAA outputs and NMFS regulations exists and would have to be created through high-level NOAA engagement. Second, most commercially available spatial technology companies are global in scope and focus their products on marine transport and navigation. Reports from NMFS staff working on vessel speed reduction areas to conserve right whale populations indicated that these companies do not consider smaller regional-specific issues cost effective when developing their products. Lastly, recent staff reductions at the Southeast Regional Office have resulted in an absence of GIS personnel to collaborate on this issue directly.

Several O&E members suggested the Council engage NOAA, and possibly other regional Councils, to inform them of the problem and encourage them to address this issue. Council staff stated that they had not yet spoken to other Councils to assess whether they have encountered similar difficulties. The O&E suggested transmitting an official

correspondence as an appropriate approach for elevating this issue with the goal of improving the education and outreach to fishermen regarding spatial fishing regulations.

**Motion:** The O&E asks the Council to draft a letter to NOAA Fisheries Southeast or consider asking the CCC to draft a letter to NOAA Fisheries in support of NOAA putting effort towards providing appropriate marine regulatory areas and boundary lines that reflect current regulations, with the end goal of serving them to commercially available mapping tools.

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

### Review of Management Area Map Webtool

Council staff presented the webtool and provided an overview of its features. An O&E member recommended including some information that provides the rationale for the implementation of each regulatory area. Another member recommended better delineating the jurisdictional boundaries between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils so that users are aware that the tool does not reflect South Atlantic fishing regulations. One O&E member also suggested providing an instructional video or using pop-ups on the webtool that explains how various elements work. The O&E suggested the inclusion of an AI box where anglers could input questions about area regulations which could then be highlighted within the map. Council staff agreed to incorporate the O&E's suggested modifications into the webtool. They also stated that polygon boundary coordinates would be presented for each area for the next version of the webtool and work was being conducted that would allow users to download shapefiles and upload on their personal GPS units.

### **Recreational Initiative Recommendations Outreach**

Council staff provided a presentation summarizing the recreational initiative working group's effort and work group recommendations, and the Council-prioritized 5 education recommendations. The O&E suggested tactics to accomplish each recommendation and prioritized work as follows:

1. *(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.*

- i. Broad support for scaled-down MREP modules
  - ii. Emulate other successful education modules (Ex: Return ‘Em Right)
2. *(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.*
- i. Enhancement of pre-existing Council products (one-pagers, etc.)
  - ii. Better cross promotion of materials via short videos, blogs, infographics all shared across social and web platforms.
3. *(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 provide public comment.*
- i. Broad Committee support for utilizing the MREP network and Advisory Panel members to better engage with alumni of the program to enhance ongoing outreach efforts.
  - ii. Including those individuals who are interested in participating in the process, applicants of MREP or the Recreational initiative working group who were not selected to participate, in ongoing outreach.
4. *(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.*
- i. Enhanced discussion and outreach for the ongoing challenges associated with maximizing access as well as season structure overlap.
  - ii. highlighted that better discussion of the trade-offs associated with these management decisions are needed (e.g., the gag grouper season change to September 1).
5. *(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).*
- i. Utilize pre-existing independent apps and processes that exist for self-reporting (fish brains, fisherman feedback, SEAFAN.net, etc.).
  - ii. Enhanced collaboration with FishRules to better enhance self-reporting options.

- iii. Fish Rules push notifications to better enhance engagement with anglers on ongoing Council-activities (e.g., actions, fisherman feedback).

Council staff will take the input provided by the Committee to develop an action guide and workplan to present to the Council at the January 2026 Council meeting in New Orleans, LA. Mr. Bob Hilliard (Clearwater, FL), provided public comment about his involvement in the working group and Council process thus far. He highlighted that he became involved in his application for the recreational initiative working group, which he discovered through Facebook posts from the Gulf Council. A committee member inquired on the discussion of whether the recreational initiative working group had broad consensus in its recommendations and whether or not they were ranked. Mr. Hilliard noted that given the differences in diversity of species and habitat many working group members had different priorities throughout the process.

### **Sea Grant Reef Fish Extension Update**

Dr. Marcus Drymon provided a presentation on the Sea Grant Reef Fish Extension program. This program was a multi-state collaborative approach to reef fish extension that aimed to address the issue of stock assessment results being at odds with what fishermen observe on the water. This issue erodes stakeholder credibility in science. Simultaneously, Congressional funding for single species snapshots, like the Great Red Snapper Count, furthered the disconnect because there were no resources to share findings with anglers. The project wanted to build on the conventional one-way flow of information by incorporating fishermen in the process of identifying research needs and communicating scientific results with the science and management communities.

The Gulf and South Atlantic States took fundamentally different approaches to this project. The South Atlantic states pooled their resources and hired a Sea Grant Reef Fish Extension Fellow who operated out of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council office. The Gulf States divided the money and worked on individual projects.

The Committee discussed how the Council could further success of the program. Dr. Drymon indicated that the Extension Fellowship was successful and suggested that it would be most effective to have a dedicated person highlighting the good work already being done with respect to reef fish. He emphasized that we should not be building adjacent projects, and we should instead highlight what already exists.

## **Anonymous Voicemail Pilot Review**

Staff provided a review of the Anonymous Voicemail Public Comment Pilot that aims to allow commentors to remain anonymous and allow people to comment without having to provide articulate written comments. The program, supported by the O&E in December 2024 and approved for pilot by the Council in January of 2025, was launched in June 2025. The program costs \$58 a month and has received 68 comments to date. Most comments received are relevant and many seem to be using the platform as intended, to discuss issues they may otherwise not talk about on the official Council record. Specifically, many comments focus on issues surrounding commercial Individual Fishing Quota program reform, sector conflicts, gear/area-based regulations, and complaints about enforcement. Staff did indicate a need to improve the process for reviewing and sharing data with the Council.

The O&E was supportive of the program and suggested that we need to put effort towards communicating its availability. One member indicated that it would be useful to explain how anonymity is guaranteed through an explanation of how the program works. The O&E suggested that comments should be summarized between each Council meeting and added to Council briefing materials for review.

**Motion:** To continue using the anonymous voicemail service.

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

## **Council Learning Opportunities**

Staff provided a brief history of different learning opportunities that have been tried during Council meetings to educate Council members, staff, and the public about fisheries issues such as: lunch and learn opportunities, themed question and answer sessions, and formal presentations on specific complex scientific or management topics. The O&E discussed the value of promoting continuing engagement and providing educational opportunities for Council members, but ultimately was unable to identify an appropriate format and method during Council meetings. Committee members expressed concerns that academics may present topics in a technical manner. Committee members also indicated that traditional question and answer sessions descend into public comment and become redundant over time. A member also noted that at the end of each Council meeting day, people may be saturated and likely have social or business obligations that would prevent attendance. One member suggested that a separate virtual learning series be considered and modeled after the South Atlantic program. A member also suggested that the intended audience be polled on topics they would like to learn more about.

## **FEP/FEI Stakeholder Engagement & Communications Plan**

Drs. Kelsi Furman (University of South Alabama), Steve Kasperski (Kasperski Consulting), and Nate Brugnone (Two Six Technologies) presented their plan for gathering and synthesizing information on stakeholder-driven Fishery Ecosystem Issues. The project also includes informing stakeholders of the Gulf Council's larger Ecosystem Fishery Plan project efforts for integration of the Fishery Ecosystem Issues into the management process. The contractors proposed engaging stakeholders by hosting in-person stakeholder workshops and conducting large language model analysis to generate conceptual models to represent social and ecological dynamics in Gulf fisheries. The Council is contracting this work as part of its ongoing Fishery Ecosystem Plan development, and workshops are expected to be held in spring 2026.

The O&E discussed strategies for selecting workshop locations, with consideration for the regional distribution of different types of stakeholder groups throughout the Gulf and inquired about the intended composition of participants at each workshop. The contractors clarified that the workshops were meant to have a mixed representation of stakeholders to gather broad perspectives on ecosystem concerns. Council staff contributed that funds are available to support stakeholder travel to workshops, which may mitigate concerns about meeting location. The O&E developed a list of stakeholder organizations by state, as well as a list of broad categories of stakeholders to be considered for inclusion in the workshops. Finally, the O&E contributed data sources for consideration for large language model analysis, including Council public input products and fishing-focused social media groups, forums, podcasts, and magazines.

## **2025 Communications Improvement Plan Progress and 2025 Analytics**

Staff presented an overview of communications analytics. Staff highlighted the Council re-branding project and indicated that the website overhaul went much smoother than expected with very few frequent users indicating that they had trouble navigating the reconstructed site. Staff also indicated that analytics are down across all platforms with the exception of the email listserv and some Facebook metrics. This is partly due to a lack of staff capacity, a lack of major final action items in the preceding year, and an intentional reduction in visibility prompted by similar efforts at the federal level.

## **2026 Communications Improvement Plan Ideas**

The O&E used a virtual whiteboard to suggest ideas for the 2026 Communications Improvement plan. The O&E suggested blog topics, video content ideas, social media content ideas, and other communications projects. The O&E also suggested appropriate mechanisms for honoring the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Gulf Council in 2026. Staff will produce a draft 2026 Communications Improvement Plan and present it to the Council during its January 2026 meeting.

## **Public Comment**

Jennifer Ziehe – Graduate Student at Scripps Institute of Oceanography

As part of the recreational initiative, the Council was encouraged to include tribal representation and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). The Gulf is the only Council that does not explicitly work with tribal communities. There are organizations in California that have done work to break down barriers to recreational fishing access for underserved communities. These organizations include Fishing in the City, an organization that pays transport and license cost to provide access to freshwater fishing, and the California State Coastal Conservancy.

A Committee Member responded that in Louisiana there are no federally recognized tribes; however, there are four state recognized tribes. A staff member responded that there are no federally recognized tribes in the Gulf of America.