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NOAA
FISHERIES
SERVICE

**SOUTHEAST REGION
Saltwater Recreational Fishing
Action Agenda**

November 2011

NOAA



A Message from the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries

I am pleased to share with you the NOAA Fisheries' southeast regional saltwater recreational fishing action agenda for 2012. Prepared by regional NOAA Fisheries staff in consultation with members of the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee's Recreational Fisheries Working Group and other members of the public, this plan follows through on commitments made in the National Recreational Fisheries Action Agenda to develop regional plans that focus on actions where you live and fish.

Since September 2009 when NOAA announced its commitment to a *Recreational Fisheries Engagement Initiative*, we have taken concrete actions to strengthen our ties with recreational fishermen across the nation. From appointing a new National Policy Advisor for Recreational Fisheries and nominating regional recreational fishing coordinators to hosting collaborative workshops on key issues and increasing our level of collaboration with our MAFAC advisors and anglers like you, we have worked to fulfill our commitments. These individual actions represent significant steps that build cooperation and create momentum.

These regional action plans are another step forward. Each plan is organized around the five priority goals you identified during the 2010 Saltwater Recreational Fishing Summit. The objectives, activities, expected deliverables, and timelines reflect our best thinking on how we can make progress on the issues you raised.

Please take a moment to read through the plan, share it with your friends and colleagues, and let us know what you think. We would like to know because these action agendas are not an end in themselves, but rather a means-to-that-end we all seek – healthy fish stocks, vibrant and satisfying recreational fisheries, and a trusting relationship. We know that success will be judged not on the number of our promises, but on the strength of our actions and we encourage you to work with us as we work to implement the plans.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can best move forward together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Schwaab', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Eric Schwaab
Assistant Administrator
NOAA Fisheries Service

Background

The April 2010 Recreational Saltwater Fishing Summit marked the renewal of a conversation with the recreational fishing community to help forge a stronger partnership through dialogue and follow-up action. Summit participants highlighted a range of issues, including better catch, effort, and economic data; improved and more regular communication regionally and nationally; and more consistent inclusion of recreational interests in management processes. The October 2010 Recreational Saltwater Fisheries Action Agenda (National Action Agenda) was the immediate outcome of that exchange.

In May 2011, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announced that it would host seven Regional Action Plans (RAPs): Northeast (Maine-Virginia), Southeast (North Carolina-Texas, including the Caribbean), Southwest (California), Northwest (Oregon and Washington), Alaska, Pacific Islands, and Highly Migratory Species (Northeast and Southeast). These Regional Action Plans are intended to serve as publicly available roadmaps detailing regional priorities and objectives for addressing regional recreational fishing issues.

Regional Overview

NMFS' southeast region (SER) comprises eight coastal states (Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina), the territory of U.S. Virgin Islands, and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The southeast region works with three Fishery Management Councils—Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and Caribbean. These three Councils manage a total of 18 fishery management plans, containing 172 fish stocks or complexes within their respective Exclusive Economic Zones.

In 2008, an estimated 6.1 million U.S. recreational fishermen completed over 46 million fishing trips and spent over \$19 billion in fishing trip and durable equipment expenditures¹ in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic. The majority of these anglers were residents of a regional coastal county.

The following is a list and brief description of the region-wide recreational fishing issues in the southeast, followed by a list of issues specific to the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic, and Caribbean.

- **Science and Data Collection** – For some species, constituents lack confidence in the science and data collection methods, including information used to set catch limits and quotas, landings and effort estimations, and stock assessment models.
- **Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP)** – Fishermen have expressed frustration with the timeline of the MRIP and would like to see this program implemented more quickly.
- **Annual Catch Limits/Accountability Measures (ACLs/AMs)** – Fishermen have expressed frustration with the lack of flexibility with new Magnuson-Stevens Act Fishery Conservation and Management Act requirements for ACLs and AMs, especially regarding how ACLs and AMs may trigger closures and reduce season length.
- **Data Poor Stocks** – There is concern that management decisions are being based on stocks with little or no data or on outdated datasets.

¹ Fisheries Economics of the United States (2008). *Note: Information for recreational fisheries in the U.S. Caribbean (Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands) was not available and therefore not included in final figures.*

- **Allocation** – There is increased demand on the regional Councils to allocate more catch to the recreational sector.
- **Bottlenose Dolphin Interactions with Recreational Fishing Gear** – There are increased reports of dolphin depredation (removing bait and catch from fishing gear) and scavenging (consuming bycatch and discards). The SER is also documenting higher numbers of dolphin strandings and incidents where animals are becoming entangled in recreational fishing gear, resulting in serious injury or death.

Note: A large highly migratory species recreational fishery in the southeastern U.S. and Caribbean is managed by the NMFS Highly Migratory Species division, rather than by the Councils. Thus, more information on this fishery can be found in the Highly Migratory Species Recreational Action Plan.

Gulf of Mexico

- **Sector Separation** – Currently, there are two allocation groups – commercial and recreational (the latter includes both for-hire and private anglers). Some members of the Gulf for-hire fleet would like to see the recreational group split into separate for-hire and private sectors, while others oppose this idea. If adopted the two recreational sectors would receive their own allocations as set forth by the Gulf of Mexico Council.
- **Length of Red Snapper Recreational Fishing Season** – Red snapper stocks appear to be rebuilding, and projections estimate that overfishing ended in 2009. There are increased demands to lengthen the recreational season as the size and number of fish increases.
- **Gag** – This stock is overfished and is undergoing overfishing. Interim regulations prohibited the 2011 gag harvest for most of the year, with the exception of a 2- month recreational season from September 16 to November 15.
- **Greater Amberjack** – There have been frequent recreational quota overages for amberjack. These overages must be paid back in the following recreational fishing season through new ACL measures.
- **Grouper Allocation** – The Gulf Council is working on an amendment to address potential changes to the gag, black, and red grouper allocations (recreational and commercial).
- **Oil Spill** – There is growing concern regarding the impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on recreational fisheries, especially in relation to the health and reproduction of targeted species and potential short- and long-term ecological and socio-economic impacts.
- **For-hire Industry Flexibility** – The Gulf for-hire industry has requested greater flexibility to deal with reductions in the length of recreational fishing seasons. Some suggestions have included instituting days-at-sea or tagging programs. The Gulf Council is currently investigating the feasibility of these options.

South Atlantic

- **Red Snapper** – This stock is overfished and is undergoing overfishing. In 2010, a complete moratorium on harvesting red snapper in the South Atlantic was issued and will stay in place until further notice.
- **Black Sea Bass** – This stock is overfished and is undergoing overfishing. Currently, the recreational ACL is 409,000 pounds gutted weight. If the recreational ACL is met or projected to be met, recreational fishing for black sea bass is closed in-season. If the ACL is exceeded, the ACL for the following year will be reduced by the amount of that overage. The bag limit has been

reduced from 15 fish per person per day to 5 fish per person per day in an effort to extend the length of the recreational fishing season.

Caribbean (including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands)

- *Implementation of the Marine Recreational Information Program in USVI*– Currently, MRIP is not implemented in USVI.

Note: The majority of recreational fishing in federal waters is for highly migratory species in the Caribbean. Please reference the Highly Migratory Species Recreational Fishing Action Plan for more details.

Goals and Objectives

Several actions recently completed in the Southeast Region have focused on recreational fisheries issues. For example, in May 2011, the International Symposium on Circle Hooks was held in Miami. The symposium produced an updated science-based assessment of the management and conservation utility of circle hooks in commercial and recreational fisheries around the globe. Funding opportunities in the Southeast Region have also targeted species and issues linked to recreational fisheries interests. These projects range from studies on stock abundance, life history, and culture methods for recreationally important finfish (e.g., red snapper, blackfin tuna, and cobia) and baitfish species (e.g., goggle eye), to reducing the amount of fishmeal in commercial aquaculture diets, improving recreational catch data, and examining post-release mortality.

Currently, the Southeast Region is involved in a number of activities linked to the following five goals identified during the April 2010 Recreational Saltwater Fishing Summit.

GOAL 1: Improve Recreational Fishing Opportunities

Objective ►► Improve fishing flexibility within the for-hire industry

Project ►► Gulf Council Advisory Panels

The Gulf FMC assembled several panels to investigate more flexible management strategies to provide greater fishing opportunities to for-hire boat captains. NMFS' staff in the Southeast Region will participate in this process.

Timing ►► Ongoing, to be completed in 2012.

Objective ►► Extend Gulf of Mexico red snapper recreational fishing season

Project ►► Reopen the recreational fisheries when excess quota is available, and work closely with the Gulf FMC to evaluate alternative seasons.

NMFS is monitoring catch limits and working with the Councils to reopen fisheries where seasonal quotas are not met. For example, in 2010 the agency worked with the Gulf Council to reopen the recreational red snapper fishery, as fishing closures implemented during the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill left available quota unfulfilled. NMFS and the Gulf Council reviewed a similar action for 2011 recreational red snapper season; however, the fishery was not reopened because NMFS projected the quota would be exceeded. The Gulf Council is working on an amendment that will give the NMFS Southeast Regional Administrator the authority to reopen this recreational fishery in subsequent years without needing to go through the Council process. Additionally, the Gulf Council is currently evaluating new alternatives for

the 2012 recreational fishing season, such as having the season open only on weekends rather than on a continuous basis until the quota is met.

Timing ▶▶ The Gulf Council plans to make a decision on this action by early 2012, so changes to the management strategy will be effective before the June 1, 2012 season opening.

GOAL 2: Improve Recreational Catch, Effort, and Status Data

Objective ▶▶ **Implement an electronic logbook pilot program to improve catch and effort data for the for-hire fleet in the Gulf of Mexico.**

Project ▶▶ **Electronic logbook pilot program**

Staff with the NMFS Southeast Regional Office (SERO), Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC), Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC), Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) are collaborating on a joint project entitled Gulf of Mexico Logbook Pilot Program for Collection and Validation of Catch and Effort from For-Hire Fisheries. With the support of MRIP, this project is testing reporting and validation methods on 60 for-hire vessels in Corpus Christi, Texas, and 357 for-hire vessels in the Florida Panhandle.

Timing ▶▶ January 2012

Objective ▶▶ **Develop methods for improving recreational data collection in the for-hire sector and delivering data in a timelier manner.**

Project ▶▶ **Electronic logbook pilot program**

In October, 2010 the SEFSC developed a pilot study entitled Implementation of Electronic Logbooks on Headboats Operating in the U.S. South Atlantic. The South Atlantic Council and the Gulf of Mexico Council are considering implementation of electronic reporting for headboats, based in large part on a favorable review of the pilot program and subsequent report.

Timing ▶▶ Ongoing

Objective ▶▶ **Create a fishery-independent survey in the U.S. South Atlantic to index the abundance of red snapper and other reef fishes.**

Project ▶▶ **South East Fishery-Independent Survey (SEFIS)**

In 2010, the NMFS Southeast Fisheries Science Center created the SouthEast Fishery-Independent Survey (SEFIS) to work collaboratively with the Marine Resource, Assessment, and Prediction (MARMAP) program to sample reef fishes in the U.S. South Atlantic. In addition to bolstering fishery-independent samples, SEFIS has introduced underwater video as a new gear to index the abundance of reef fishes.

Timing ▶▶ Ongoing

Objective ▶▶ **Determine the frequency and geographic extent of bottlenose dolphin interactions with recreational fishing gear and the impact these interactions have on bottlenose dolphin populations.**

Project ▶▶ **Development of survey on bottlenose dolphin-recreational fishery interactions**

To meet this objective, the SERO Protected Resources and Sustainable Fisheries Divisions developed draft survey questions on dolphin-recreational fishery interactions. These questions are being considered for inclusion into the redesigned MRIP survey, as well as for in-house data analysis. The SERO Protected Resources Division also partnered with the

Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium on a 2-year research project in the northern Gulf of Mexico to assess/characterize the frequency of occurrence and geographic scope of depredation by bottlenose dolphins on recreational fishing gear. This project also focused on development of preventative measures to reduce/eliminate interactions and employed the assistance of for-hire boat captains for data collection and testing of mitigation measures. The project was completed in fall 2010 and SERO is awaiting the final report.

Timing ▶▶ Ongoing throughout 2011 and 2012

GOAL 3: Improve Social and Economic Data on Recreational Fisheries

Objective ▶▶ Provide improved and updated economic data to assist in making allocations and regulatory decisions

Project ▶▶ 2011 Angler Expenditure Survey

Execution of the 2011 Angler Expenditure Survey in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic.

Timing ▶▶ Data collection completed in December 2011.

Objective ▶▶ Understand the socio-economic impacts of natural disasters on the recreational fishing community

Project ▶▶ Understand the socio-economic impacts of natural disasters on the recreational fishing community.

The SEFSC continues a research effort to understand how changes in climatic activity (e.g., tropical storms and hurricanes) influence fishing activities in the Gulf of Mexico. The initial results of this work have been published in the peer-reviewed literature (e.g., Carter and Letson, 2009²).

Timing ▶▶ Ongoing throughout 2011

Objective ▶▶ Improve the understanding of human dimensions of recreational fishing

Project ▶▶ Improve the understanding of human dimensions of recreational fishing (e.g., motivations).

The SEFSC is involved in ongoing work regarding fishing site choice demand models, including:

- Improving our ability to forecast changes in sport fishing demand through the development of hedonic models (e.g., Carter and Letson, 2009). Additional work is planned for FY 2012 to examine changes in the fishing demand for private and for-hire vessels in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. (Ongoing)
- Improving estimates of cost and earnings in the for-hire sector via data collections, including the Louisiana-Florida for-hire fleet data collection (e.g., Liese and Carter, 2011³) and the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico fleet data collections. These collections are expected to be completed in FY 2012. Additionally, the SEFSC is seeking to collect for-hire fee data via the For-Hire (Telephone) Survey.

² Carter, D.W. and D. Letson. 2009. Structural Vector Error Correction Modeling of Integrated Sport fishery Data. *Marine Resource Economics* 24(1):19-41.

³ Liese, C. and D.W. Carter. 2011. Collecting Economic Data from the For-Hire Fishing Sector: Lessons from a Cost and Earnings Survey of the Southeast U.S. Charter Boat Industry. 14 p. In Beard, T.D., Jr., A.J. Loftus, and R. Arlinghaus (editors). *The Angler and the Environment*. American Fisheries Society, Bethesda, MD.

Previously, the SEFSC embarked on a number of projects focused on improving estimates of angler fishing value. This has involved estimating changes in sport-fishing harvest through the use of hedonic valuation models in the Gulf of Mexico for-hire industry (e.g., Carter and Liese, 2010⁴) as well as through stated preference experiments on private and for-hire vessels.

Timing ▶▶ Ongoing throughout 2011

Goal 4: Improve Communication

Objective ▶▶ Provide regular opportunities for informal public question and answer sessions with the Regional Administrator and Science Center Director during fishery management council meetings

Project ▶▶ Informal question and answer sessions at council meetings.

Informal Q&A sessions are conducted at both the Gulf Council and South Atlantic Council meetings. These Q&A sessions are held the night before public comment testimony so all constituents have a chance to ask questions of the SERO Regional Administrator and staff, SEFSC Director and staff, law enforcement, and Council members and staff. All discussions are off the record and approximately 50 to 100 constituents attend each session. These sessions began in 2007 and have been well-received by the public.

Timing ▶▶ Ongoing throughout 2011 and 2012

Objective ▶▶ Meet with constituent groups about current fisheries issues

Project ▶▶ Constituent meetings

Meet with recreational constituents upon request. Staff from SERO and the SEFSC regularly meet with recreational groups upon request and will continue to do so. These meetings provide a direct line to regional NMFS staff to discuss recreational fisheries issues.

Timing ▶▶ Ongoing throughout 2011 and 2012

Objective ▶▶ Expand engagement of the recreational fishing community in data collection programs

Project ▶▶ Expand engagement of the recreational fishing community in data collection programs

The Adopt-A-Billfish tagging program is being coordinated by a team of experienced scientists who work with the NMFS SEFSC and SWFSC, University of Miami Center for Sustainable Fisheries, the Billfish Foundation, the Bermuda Department of Environmental Protection, and the International Game Fish Association. The program enlists the help of billfish anglers who are interested in learning more about the billfish they pursue and who also want to play an important role in ensuring their stocks are healthy for future generations. Tagging operations are currently underway throughout the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea, including the waters off south Florida, the Bahamas, and Bermuda. In the Pacific, NMFS is collaborating with a network of researchers, including those affiliated with the Presidential Challenge Tournament Series off the coast of Central America. NMFS is looking to expand this network of researchers and billfish anglers to assist with these data collection efforts.

Timing ▶▶ Ongoing throughout 2011 and 2012

⁴ Carter, D.W. and C. Liese. 2010. Hedonic Valuation of Sport-fishing Harvest. Marine Resource Economics 25(4): 391-407.

Objective ▶ Improve communications with the recreational fishing industry on the issue of bottlenose dolphin interactions with recreational fishing gear**Project ▶ Improve communications with the recreational fishing industry on the issue of bottlenose dolphin interactions with recreational fishing gear.**

The SERO Protected Resources Division is conducting targeted outreach efforts related to bottlenose dolphin stranding events and disentanglement of dolphins in recreational fishing gear. Targeted outreach is conducted with NMFS partners and includes press releases, in-person educational visits, direct mailings of educational materials and letters, and development of FAQs. Outreach materials are geared toward providing information on how fishermen and the public can help prevent these interactions and steps to take when an interaction may occur (e.g., reporting). The SERO Protected Resources staff also participated in a Facts & Fishing workshop with local fishermen in Orange Beach, Alabama, in May 2011 to discuss dolphin–recreational fishery interactions and potential mitigation measures. Targeted outreach efforts to recreational fishermen continue.

Timing ▶ Ongoing throughout 2011 and 2012

Goal 5: Institutional Orientation**Objective ▶ Improve understanding of the SEDAR (Southeast Data, Assessment and Review) stock assessment process through increased recreational representation and involvement****Project ▶ Improve understanding of stock assessment process**

The SEDAR process provides a means for developing and reviewing complex fisheries stock assessment analyses. It is also a public process, which provides an opportunity for data collectors, fisheries researchers, and constituents to take part in the stock assessment. SEDAR strives to improve the quality of assessment advice provided for managing fisheries resources in the Southeast by increasing and expanding participation in the assessment process, ensuring the assessment process is transparent and open, improving documentation of assessment methods and input data, and providing a robust and independent review of assessment products.

Timing ▶ Ongoing throughout 2011 and 2012

Objective ▶ Improve understanding of the federal fishery management process**Project ▶ Marine Resource Education Program**

The Gulf of Maine Research Institute (GMRI)—in collaboration with the NMFS Southeast Region, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, and South Atlantic Fishery Management Council—propose to adapt the Marine Resources Education Program's outreach and science education process, originally developed in New England, to the Southeast Region. The Marine Resources Education Program educates fisheries stakeholders in the fundamentals of fisheries science and management. This education enables fishermen and others to participate productively in the fisheries management process, and leads to improve cooperation and trust between fishermen, scientists, and fishery managers. This program will help lay the foundation for the regions to fully engage diverse stakeholders, as envisioned by the reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Act, and promote trust. One of the Southeast Region's recreational fishing coordinators, along with representatives from the Gulf of Maine Research Institute and the Gulf Council, are currently investigating opportunities to fund this program.

Timing ▶▶ If funding can be, an executive steering committee will be assembled in 2012 to plan the curriculum. This committee will consist of NMFS and Council staff, fishing constituents, and other experts in the field of fisheries management and research. The first educational workshops could be held within a year of securing funding.

Objective ▶▶ **Define recreational allocation in Puerto Rico**

Project ▶▶ **Caribbean Fishery Management Council and NOAA Fisheries Service are working together on amendments to implement separate recreational and commercial catch limits in Puerto Rico**

Currently stocks in the U.S. Caribbean are managed without differentiation between the commercial and recreational sectors. As a result of the implementation of both the 2010 and 2011 annual catch limit amendments for the Caribbean, the commercial and recreational sectors in Puerto Rico will be separated and have their own annual catch limits.

Timing ▶▶ 2012

Summary

In an effort to shape a more productive partnership between NOAA Fisheries Service and the recreational fishing community in the southeast region, this plan has identified several key issues facing fisheries managers and stakeholders in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic.

Based upon feedback received from participants of the 2010 Recreational Saltwater Fishing Summit, we have listed specific goals and objectives as well as the actions which have been (and are currently being) undertaken by both SERO and SEFSC staff. These actions are designed to involve constituents at the local and regional level and provide an opportunity for recreational fishermen to collaborate with scientists, economists and managers in an ongoing effort to address the complex issues facing the region.

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