

Sixty-Sixth
Annual Report of the
Gulf States Marine
Fisheries Commission

For the Year 2015



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(Order of listing – administrator, legislator, Governor’s appointee)

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GULF STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION

SIXTY-SIXTH ANNUAL REPORT (2015)

*to the
Congress of the United States
and to the
Governors and Legislators
of
Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas*

Presented in compliance with the terms of the Compact and State Enabling Acts creating such Commission and Public Law 66-81st Congress assenting thereto.



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Preserving the Past ▪ Planning the Future ▪ A Cooperative Effort

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In submitting this Sixty-Sixth Annual Report, we the Commissioners, wish to express our most sincere appreciation for the splendid cooperation of the members of Congress and the Governors and Legislators of our Compact states. We fully appreciate that success in the management of the public's fishery resources would not be possible without your valued assistance. This acknowledgement is also extended to the directors of the federal, state, and interstate agencies and their respective staff, and to representatives of all organizations and individuals who have contributed to the realization of the objectives of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission.

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Randy Pausina, Immediate Past Chairman
Kelly Lucas, Chairman's Appointee
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ACTIVE COMMITTEES

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TCC Habitat Subcommittee

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TCC SEAMAP Subcommittee

John Mareska, Chairman

TCC Outreach Subcommittee

James Ballard, Facilitator

INTRODUCTION

The Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) is an organization of the five states whose coastal waters are the Gulf of Mexico. The Commission was established by an act of Congress (P.L. 81-66) in 1949 as a compact of the five Gulf States and signed by the representatives of the Governors of the five Gulf States on July 16, 1949, at Mobile, Alabama.

THE PURPOSE

The Commission was formed specifically to provide interstate and state/federal coordination of interjurisdictional programs. The general purpose of the Commission is "...to promote the better utilization of the fisheries, marine, shell, and anadromous, of the seaboard of the Gulf of Mexico, by the development of a joint program for the promotion and protection of such fisheries and the prevention of the physical waste of the fisheries from any cause." While this statement of purpose is broad, it is clear that cooperative programs involving its member states to assist in managing coastal and marine resources constitute appropriate and legislatively authorized activities. Coordination and management of data collection programs for coastal and marine fisheries constitute appropriate programmatic activities to be conducted under the auspices of the Commission.

COMMISSIONERS

Fifteen Commissioners, three from each of the five Gulf States, work to set policy, approve the Commission's budget, and provide direction for Commission activities. Of these voting members, one-third are appointed by the state legislatures, one-third are private citizens with a knowledge of and interest in marine fisheries who are appointed by the states' governors, and the remaining third are state fishery resource agency directors. The offices of chairman, first vice-chairman, and second vice-chairman of the Commission are rotated annually among the states.

One of the most important functions of the Commission is to serve as a forum for the discussion of various problems and programs of marine management, industry, research, etc., and to develop a coordinated policy to address those issues for the betterment of the resource and all who are concerned. The annual meeting of the Commission is held each year during the third week in the month of October. The spring meeting is held each year during the third week in the month of March. Upon written request of a majority of the Commissioners of each state from three or more states, the Chairman shall call a special meeting of the Commission. The regular meetings are rotated among the states in order that the Commission may better familiarize themselves with the fisheries and coastal areas of the entire Gulf of Mexico.

STAFF

Located in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, the Commission staff administers Commission programs, participation in public forums and other councils, commissions, and committees, and inter-organizational efforts. When the Commission is joined by the Atlantic States and Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commissions on national fisheries issues, a 24-state voice is raised in unison to foster the needs of coastal fisheries.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Executive Director – David M. Donaldson

As I sat down to write this report for the year 2015, I realized that this is the first year in quite some time that there was not some type of major event affecting the marine resources in the Gulf of Mexico. There were no catastrophic hurricanes, oil spills, or key changes in leadership. It was just a normal year in the world of marine fisheries....which is a good thing.

Like the natural environment where we work, there are ebbs and flows in marine fishery coordination and administration which allow us to get a break every now and then. If we were constantly inundated with disastrous events, we would quickly become overwhelmed and not be able to effectively do our jobs. That is not to say that there were not major issues that needed to be addressed (such as red snapper), but 2015 was a fairly calm year relative to the recent past.

Throughout all the ups and downs in the fisheries arena, it is important to have a venue for discussing and addressing the current issues and problems facing the marine resources of the Gulf of Mexico. In order to effectively tackle these issues, there must be open and frank deliberations so that solutions can be reached and the Commission will always serve as a platform to provide that forum and facilitate those dialogs.

FISHERIES INFORMATION NETWORK (FIN)

Program Manager – Gregg Bray

In the 1980s and 1990s, state and federal fishery managers in the southeast region (the region) agreed that there was an urgent and compelling need for coordinated collection of comprehensive data on the region's marine commercial and recreational fisheries resources, and recommendations were made through a series of workshops and meetings. These recommendations of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) led to the development of the Fisheries Information Network (FIN). The purpose of this state-federal cooperative program is to collect, manage, and disseminate statistical data and information on the commercial and recreational fisheries of the region. The programs are the result of combined efforts of program partners which include states and territories of the region, the national marine fisheries service (NMFS), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service (USFW), the National Park Service, the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean fishery management councils, and the commission. The program manager, Gregg Bray, is assisted by Ashley Lott.

YEAR IN REVIEW

In 2015, FIN continued the coordination of the MRIP survey in Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida for shore, for-hire, and private modes. FIN provided for coordination of the survey, a field-intercept survey of shore, for-hire and private boat anglers to estimate angler catch using the existing MRIP methodology, and entry of the data. In 2015, over 45,000 angler interviews were collected across Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. In addition, the states conducted supplemental sampling of the intercept portion for the MRIP for charter boats in Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida (east and west coasts). The states also conducted weekly telephone calls to a 10% random sample of the Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida (east and west coasts) charter boat captains to obtain estimates of charter boat fishing effort. In 2000, NMFS adopted this method as the official methodology for estimation of charter boat effort. FIN also assisted with a benchmarking study comparing LA Creel data with MRIP survey data in Louisiana. Samplers in Louisiana performed the dockside intercept portion of the MRIP survey to allow for comparison with LA Creel field survey data.

The FIN program provided funding for collection of biological data from the recreational and commercial fisheries. Funding was provided late by NOAA Fisheries so FIN was only able to support sampling August through December of 2015. These data are essential to accurately assess the status of commercial and recreational species. FIN provided funding for collection, processing, and analysis of these data. The primary target species include black drum, gag, gray snapper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, king mackerel, red drum, red grouper, red snapper, sheepshead, flounders (Gulf & southern), spotted seatrout, striped mullet, and vermilion snapper. The secondary target species include Spanish mackerel, scamp, yellowtail snapper, cobia, black

grouper, black sea bass, red porgy, snowy grouper, speckled hind, and Warsaw grouper. In 2015, the states were able to collect over 35,000 age structures from the primary species list.

Coordination of commercial trip ticket programs continued in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. This task provided for collection of components for a commercial trip ticket system to census the commercial fisheries landings using the data elements and standards. In addition, FIN provided funding to contract for continued operation of electronic reporting for the trip ticket systems as well as reporting of data for the quota monitoring and IFQ programs. For 2015, there were 1,018 commercial dealers and processors in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas who were utilizing this program.

FIN continued to support the development and implementation of the FIN Data Management System. This provided funding for continued work on developing more data modules for FIN. Responsibilities included further development of data module structures, routine loading of all five states' commercial catch and effort data, Gulf biological data, Gulf recreational data, and maintenance of the Data Management System.

Coordination was provided by the FIN program for the sampling of catches, collection of catch reports from head boat personnel, and gathering effort data on head boats which operated primarily in the Exclusive Economic Zone from ports along the coasts of Texas, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. FIN also provided support for sampling of Gulf menhaden catches from menhaden purse-seine vessels that operated in Louisiana and Mississippi. The samples were processed for size and age composition for use in coast-wide stock assessments which were incorporated into the Fisheries Management Plan for the species, and also utilized by the Gulf Coast states, the Commission, the menhaden industry, and the NMFS. In 2015, three menhaden factories were active in the northern Gulf of Mexico at Moss Point, Mississippi, and Empire and Abbeville, Louisiana.

In 2015, FIN assisted in the administration of funds to support three additional research programs:

- Survey of Recreational Boat Fishers in the U.S. Virgin Islands – This task will determine if the U.S. Virgin Islands boat registration lists can be used to efficiently contact regional anglers and obtain information regarding the boat-based recreational fishery.
- Internet-based Angler Logs as a Source of Fishery-dependent Data – This task will provide guidelines for the establishment and upkeep of panel-based e-logs that are consistent with MRIP goals and augment rather than compete with MRIP data.
- Pilot Study of Queen Conch and Spiny Lobster Recreational Fishery in Puerto Rico – This task will collect information on the recreational harvest of queen conch and spiny lobster in Puerto Rico to address several issues including magnitude (total and by location) of the recreational fishery for these species; determination if conch and lobster are target species or retained/discarded when harvesting finfishes; characterization of the catch for undersized queen conch and spiny lobster; location and time of year when queen conch and spiny lobster are harvested; number of recreational anglers harvesting queen conch and spiny lobster; and types of methods used to harvest queen conch/lobster.

HABITAT PROGRAM

Program Coordinator – Jeffrey K. Rester

The Habitat Program works with the Commission's Habitat Subcommittee which is composed of two representatives from each Gulf state, along with members from the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Habitat Subcommittee works closely with the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Program (IJF) in the review, updating, and formulation of the habitat sections of the Commission's Fishery Management Plans. The Habitat Program Coordinator is Jeffrey K. Rester who is assisted by Ashley Lott.

YEAR IN REVIEW

The final version of the science plan for the NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program was released in May. The plan established ten long-term research priorities which will guide how the program invests its funds and explains how prior needs assessments for the Gulf of Mexico region and earlier stakeholder input were used to determine these areas of investment.

The Habitat Program Coordinator participated in a RESTORE Act Science Advisory Panel Work Group Meeting in June. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the metrics the Science Program should use in measuring its performance and the Science Program's approach to coordination and its coordination plan.

In September, the NOAA RESTORE Act Science Program completed its first funding competition and awarded approximately \$2.7M for seven research projects. Each project will address one or more of the Science Program's short-term priorities which focus on assessing ecosystem modeling, evaluating indicators for ecosystem conditions, and assessing and developing recommendations for monitoring and observing in the Gulf of Mexico. The results from these projects will also form the development of management strategies to support the sustainability of the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem, including its fisheries.

On July 2, 2015, an agreement in principle was reached to settle for \$18.732B all federal and state claims against BP arising from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. This included \$7.332B for natural resources damages, \$5.5B (\$4.4B will flow through the RESTORE Act) for Clean Water Act civil penalties, and \$5.9M for economic claims.

INTERJURISDICTIONAL FISHERIES PROGRAM (IJF)

Program Coordinator – Steven J. VanderKooy

Since the 1970s, the Commission has had the responsibility of administrative support and coordination of the Gulf State-Federal Fisheries Management Program. This program was designed to develop management plans for trans-boundary stocks that migrate freely through state and federal jurisdictions. In 1986, that program was replaced with the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Program. This program promotes interjurisdictional fisheries management among the Gulf states through the cooperative development of fishery management plans (FMPs). The states are requested to implement FMP recommendations through consistent regulations wherever possible and to address research and data needs with cooperative collection efforts. The Commission has completed FMPs for menhaden, flounder, spotted seatrout, Spanish mackerel, striped bass, blue crab, oyster, black drum, and striped mullet. The IJF Program Coordinator, Steven VanderKooy, is assisted by Debora McIntyre.

YEAR IN REVIEW

In early 2015, the Commission approved the final format of the IJF Program's development process for regional management documents. The new format includes three levels of publication: a full Fishery Management Plan (FMP) including a regional stock assessment, a Management Profile which has no assessment but provides some management considerations, and a Biological Profile which includes only the background information on a species that may not currently be under state or federal management. As a result of these changes, the IJF staff was able to finalize the FMPs for Gulf Menhaden and Blue Crabs and also get approval of the Management Profile for Gulf and Southern Flounder. As those documents were approved by the Commission, the staff was able to begin Biological Profiles for two new species, Atlantic tripletail (*Lobotes surinamensis*) and Atlantic croaker (*Micropogonias undulatus*). Both newly formed technical task forces (TTFs) met in 2015 and began pulling together available literature.

The Tripletail TTF met three times in 2015 and completed the majority of the work on their draft. At their meeting in December, the TTF agreed that adding a representative from Georgia (GADNR) to the roster would help flesh out the available information along the south Atlantic since much of the U.S. fishery was based in Georgia and east Florida. In addition, the GADNR has extensive tagging work which could shed light on the migration patterns being observed in the Gulf by using the Gulf Coast Research Lab's tripletail tagging efforts.

The Atlantic croaker TTF members had their first meeting in the fall of 2015 and spent considerable time examining the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's unpublished draft of the Groundfish FMP that had never been completed in the mid-1980s. This document served as the starting point for the TTF to begin adding more recent research, publications, and data. The history of the croaker fishery in the Gulf is well-documented while the more recent development of a live bait market for

croaker is less so. When complete, the profile should provide a useful resource for fisheries managers in the region.

Work continued in 2015 to revise the Otolith Manual which now includes a number of species and techniques from the Atlantic Coast. The joint effort between the GSMFC and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission resulted in a combined meeting at NOAA's Woods Hole Laboratory in Massachusetts late in 2015. Because of the extensive additions, the manual was completely reformatted and restructured into independent technique chapters covering otoliths, scales, vertebrae, rays and spines, and opercle bones. The manual is slowly making progress as time and funding permit. It is hoped that significant progress will occur in the coming year.

OIL DISASTER RECOVERY PROGRAM

Program Coordinator – Ralph Hode

The Oil Disaster Recovery Program (ODRP) evolved from the receipt of \$15M in October of 2010 and is aimed at improving the public perception and confidence in Gulf of Mexico seafood following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil disaster. Funding for this program, like that of the post-Katrina recovery program (EDRP), came from the U.S. Congress following fishery disaster declarations by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. Scheduled to be completed in September of 2015, the activities under the program are identified through an ad-hoc advisory committee consisting of the marine resource directors from each of the five Gulf of Mexico states. Under this component, multiple post-disaster recovery elements have been executed to address issues relative to improving both the perception of and confidence in Gulf of Mexico seafood products. Ralph Hode, ODRP Program Coordinator, is assisted by Ashley Lott.

YEAR IN REVIEW

The Oil Disaster Recovery Program (ODRP) was fully completed in 2015, wrapping up five years of response to the BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster. The program included significant accomplishments in the seafood partnerships developed through the program, the seafood testing, the sustainability efforts, and the marketing work, all completed in an effort to 'rebrand' the Gulf following the disaster.



As reported last year, by the end of 2014, nearly 99.4% of the \$14,985,000 budget had been obligated and approximately 86% or nearly \$14.9M had already been spent. Entering the 2015 calendar year, approximately \$2.0M remained in ODRP to be expended by the program end-date of June 30, 2015. As of the end of September 2015, the program left about \$59,000

in the Federal Treasury unspent. The Coordinator of the ODRP Program, Ralph Hode, retired from the Commission on December 31, 2015 to take up his fishing rod and enjoy some time on the water.



SOUTHEAST AREA MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Program Coordinator – Jeffrey K. Rester

The Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP) is a state/federal/university program for the collection, management, and dissemination of fishery-independent data and information in the southeastern United States. The overall program consists of three operational components: SEAMAP-Gulf of Mexico (began in 1981); SEAMAP-South Atlantic (implemented in 1983); and SEAMAP-Caribbean (formed in 1988). The SEAMAP-Gulf component is coordinated through the Commission. SEAMAP resource surveys include the Fall Shrimp/Groundfish Survey, Spring Plankton Survey, Reef Fish Survey, Summer Shrimp/Groundfish Survey, Fall Plankton Survey, and plankton and environmental surveys. Publications of the SEAMAP program include environmental and biological atlases of the Gulf of Mexico for each year from 1983 through present. The SEAMAP Program Coordinator, Jeff Rester, is assisted by Ashley Lott.

YEAR IN REVIEW

In 2015, SEAMAP operations continued for the thirty-fourth consecutive year. SEAMAP resource surveys in 2015 included the Spring Plankton Survey, Summer Shrimp/Groundfish Survey, Reef Fish Survey, Bottom Longline Survey, Vertical Line Survey, Fall Plankton Survey, Fall Shrimp/Groundfish Survey and plankton and environmental data surveys. Several states received National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) funding to conduct additional fishery independent sampling work. Since the NFWF projects used SEAMAP gear and protocols, the collected data was managed by the Commission. NFWF funds allowed SEAMAP to fill in spatial and temporal gaps in current SEAMAP surveys since current funding levels did not allow for expansion of existing surveys.

The SEAMAP Subcommittee continued to work towards standardizing gears, station selection, protocols, and techniques in all SEAMAP surveys as much as possible. The Subcommittee worked with a contractor to review the current Bottom Longline Survey sampling design, the data collected, the sample sizes and the uses of the data (e.g. model based estimation vs trend analysis), in order to make recommendations for modifications that would provide consistency in design, spatial representativeness, and robustness to funding changes. As part of the analyses, the contractor provided recommendations as to the number of observations needed to obtain different levels of precision for data collected from the survey. Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama all sampled waters off their coasts in 3-10m during three time periods: spring (April-May), summer (June-July), and fall (August-September).

SEAMAP began work on standardizing station selection in the Vertical Line Survey. A Vertical Line Work Group meeting was held in August to discuss station selection and how to develop a standardized sampling universe when most of the bottom type around the Gulf of Mexico is unknown. The Work Group decided to divide the Gulf of Mexico into three depth zones (10-20m,

20-40m, and 40-150m) and develop 150m x 150m grids in these water depths. Each grid would be classified as unknown habitat, known natural reef, presumed reef (natural or artificial), an artificial reef within the grid, or an oil/gas platform within the grid. Station selection would be proportionally allocated based upon habitat type.

The Commission handled the data management responsibilities for SEAMAP in the Gulf of Mexico. All data collected during 2015 were uploaded to the appropriate SEAMAP database and made available to the public via the Commission's website. SEAMAP data were used for a variety of purposes during 2015. These include:

- evaluating the abundance and size distribution of penaeid shrimp in federal and state waters to assist in determining opening and closing dates for commercial fisheries;
- evaluating and plotting the size of the hypoxic (Dead Zone) area off of Louisiana;
- assessing shrimp and groundfish abundance and distribution and their relationship to such environmental parameters as temperature, salinity, and dissolved oxygen;
- identifying environmental parameters associated with concentrations of larval finfish;
- assessing the potential impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on marine fish stocks; and
- compiling the 2015 SEAMAP Environmental and Biological Atlas.

SPORT FISH RESTORATION ADMINISTRATIVE PROGRAM (SFRP)

Program Coordinator – James R. Ballard

The Sport Fish Restoration Administrative Program (SFRP) was established by the Commission in 1987, under the authority of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Program through the administrative portion of that program's enabling legislation. The primary goal of the program is to provide coordination of the recreational fisheries programs in the five Gulf States. Historically, there were three major categories of this program, including anadromous fish restoration, artificial reefs, and fisheries data, all of which supported interstate fisheries management. As these individual components developed and expanded, the fisheries data portion became a new and separate program within the Commission called the Fisheries Information Network (FIN). The original efforts conducted through the SFRP with respect to anadromous fish focused on recovery work for Gulf sturgeon and Gulf race striped bass restoration. The striped bass work resulted in the development of an FMP, a regulatory amendment, establishment of sampling guidelines for all life stages of striped bass, and a strategic plan for restoration which encompasses regulatory, database development, habitat, research, and enhancement issues. The Anadromous Fish component was later incorporated into the Commission's Interjurisdictional Fisheries Program (IJF). Today, the primary focus of the SFRP pertains to artificial reefs and has established regional policies and planning documents, including a regional database on all permitted artificial reef sites in the Gulf of Mexico. These documents are available from the Commission office and can be accessed from this site under Publications. The Sport Fish Restoration Administrative Program Coordinator is James Ballard, assisted by Alyce Ryan.

YEAR IN REVIEW

The SFRP Coordinator worked with the state Artificial Reef Program coordinators to develop a standardized monitoring protocol for artificial reef habitat across the Gulf of Mexico, incorporating vertical line, side-scan/multi-beam sonar, chevron traps with GoPro cameras, and water quality sampling. This protocol was modeled after existing long-term monitoring programs that focused on natural reef habitats, utilizing comparable gear types and methodologies where possible. In 2016, the draft protocol will be tested through a pilot study with the state of Mississippi. By the end of this reporting period, all necessary gear to be utilized in the project had been purchased and/or built and a data entry program that will be used to collect and distribute all the project data back to the Commission where it will be housed, had been developed.

The goal of this pilot study will be to test the protocol's functionality, including site selection procedures, best order to deploy the selected gear types, usability of the selected gear types on the vessels available to the state agencies, average amount of time required to carry out the sampling procedures outlined in the protocol per site, etc. Once all aspects of the protocol have

been tested and modified where necessary, the protocol will be finalized, and the remainder of the pilot study will be focused on collecting standardized data on Mississippi's artificial reefs.

The long-term goal of this effort is to develop a program that will provide standardized baseline data for artificial reefs across the Gulf of Mexico. This will allow states to assess impacts from natural and man-made disasters in the future, and to understand how their reefs are functioning over time, compared to natural reefs.

The GSMFC's and ASMFC's Artificial Reef Subcommittees continued to revise their 2004 publication of "Guidelines for Marine Artificial Reef Materials: Second Edition". Once all revisions are received, a complete revised draft will be compiled by the Program Coordinator and distributed back to both Subcommittees for a final review. The new third edition will include updates to the reef materials covered in the second edition, as well as, new materials that have been implemented in recent years. The intent of this document is to provide any group interested in developing artificial reefs in the marine environment, with the necessary information about all the available material types to make informed decisions which will produce the best outcome for their project and benefit to the environment.

The Program Coordinator continued to maintain and update the FINFO website. FINFO was designed to complement NOAA's FishWatch.gov and provide easy-to-understand, science-based information and facts about Gulf of Mexico state fisheries. A new news crawler was added to the site and a new program was developed by the Commission's Computer System Administrator that automatically updates the catch data on the site so that it stays consistent with the data provided on NOAA's website.

The Program Coordinator continued to work in conjunction with the National Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force (ANSTF) to determine appropriate actions and roles for the Commission and its member states in addressing invasive species issues. In addition, the Commission provided administration for, and participated in, the Gulf and South Atlantic Regional Panel on Aquatic Invasive Species (GSARP). During this reporting period, the SFRP helped support meetings of the GSARP, its associated work groups, and its steering committee.

AQUATIC NUISANCE SPECIES (ANS)

Program Coordinator – James R. Ballard

The Sport Fish Restoration Administrative Program (SFRP) has begun to address issues related to fisheries habitat and nonindigenous/invasive aquatic species. The SFRP coordinator also provides coordination for the Aquatic Invasive Species Program which includes oversight of the Gulf and South Atlantic Regional Panel (GSARP) on aquatic invasive species and participation in the National Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force. The Sport Fish Restoration Administrative Program Coordinator is James R. Ballard who is assisted by Alyce Ryan.

YEAR IN REVIEW

The GSARP met twice in 2015 and the minutes for those meetings are available on the Panel website (www.gsarp.org). The GSARP drafted, reviewed, and adopted a Guidance Document for 2015–2019, an update of its 2010–2014 Strategic Plan. The group also conducted a review and update of their Research and Management Priorities lists. These newly revised lists were provided to the ANSTF for consideration when they develop the national ANS research priorities list.

The Program Coordinator took over administration of the region 4 USFWS AIS small grants program in 2014. The 11 projects that were selected for funding in 2014 were all progressing well. The majority of the field work associated with those projects took place in the spring/summer of 2015 and about half of the projects were closed out. The Coordinator worked with the USFWS on the 2015 funding opportunity; the RFP for 2015 was revised by the review committee made up of GSARP members and the Program Coordinator and provided to the USFWS for distribution. A total of 41 proposals were received totaling about \$1M in requested funds. The review committee ranked all proposals and the Coordinator provided the final averaged rankings to the USFWS. Eight projects were selected for funding totaling \$185,182. The regional office of the USFWS was pleased with how smoothly this new partnership was working and plans to continue it in subsequent years if funding allows.

The Invasive Lionfish Control Ad-Hoc Committee (ILCAC) finished development of the “National Invasive Lionfish Prevention and Management Plan” (NILPMP), and the Program Coordinator presented the final draft to the ANSTF at their 2014 fall meeting. Following that meeting, the NILPMP was placed in the Federal Register for a 45-day public review, and all comments were forwarded to the Program Coordinator. Approximately 50 comments were received from 16 different entities. All comments received were addressed by the ILCAC, and the revised NILPMP was provided to the ANSTF for review prior to their 2015 spring meeting. At that meeting, the ANSTF voted to approve the plan which is now available on their website (http://anstaskforce.gov/Documents/Lionfish_Plan-Final_Approved.pdf).

Since the Invasive Species Traveling Trunks were made available in July of 2012, they have been utilized for a total of 720 days by over 30 different organizations, ranging from federal and state agencies to universities, schools, and NGOs that have presented the enclosed material to thousands of people across the U.S. The reviews received were very positive, and the few suggested changes were incorporated. These trunks were provided to the borrower at no cost, with the ANS program covering the shipping to and from the borrowers' locations.

ANNUAL MEETINGS

The annual meeting of the GSMFC is held each year during the third week in the month of October. The spring meeting is held each year during the third week in the month of March. Upon written request of a majority of the Commissioners of each state from three or more states, the chairman shall call a special meeting of the GSMFC. The regular meetings are rotated among the states in order that the GSMFC may better familiarize themselves with the fisheries and coastal areas of the entire Gulf of Mexico.

MARCH 2015

The 65th Spring Meeting of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) was held at the Grand Hotel Marriott Resort in Point Clear, Alabama. Below is a summary of some of the topics and actions taken by the various subcommittees. The complete minutes of all Commission meetings are available on the Commission's website at www.gsmfc.org.

The FIN committee received a presentation from Leah Sharpe with NOAA Fisheries who also presented the need for a Gulf Regional Communication and Education Team. The goal of this team is to improve engagement and understanding of MRIP for internal and external constituents in the Gulf region and develop regionally specific communication materials. The FIN Committee made motion to the TCC to form a subcommittee made up of representatives from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, NOAA Southeast Regional Office (SERO), NOAA Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC), and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC). Andrew Peterson stated that development is ongoing for a unified trip ticket system. Recent work has focused on development of the web portal that allows states to manage their lookup tables. Peterson also stated that work has started on a web tool for end users that will meet the increasing demands for providing trip ticket data across multiple operating systems (i.e., Windows and Mac) and allow for multiple hardware options (i.e., computer, tablet, smartphone). GulfFIN also received funding from NOAA Fisheries Information System (FIS) to fund a facilitated strategic planning session in response to their desire to assist the regional FIN programs in developing updated strategic plans. The meeting was scheduled for the summer of 2015.

Mr. Joseph Smith attended his last Menhaden Advisory Committee (MAC) representing the NOAA Fisheries Beaufort Lab. Joe had been involved with federal commercial fisheries since 1983 and an active member of the MAC for nearly 25 years. Joe retired the following June and was succeeded by Ray Mroch. The MAC crafted a resolution honoring Joe which was approved by the full Commission.

The Crab Subcommittee met in a separate meeting in February in conjunction with the Gulf Coast Diamondback Terrapin Working Group to discuss the role of commercial crab fishing in terrapin restoration. The group shared their own experiences and ongoing research related to terrapins/trap interactions and plan to attend the Meeting of the National Terrapin Work Group in 2015.

In an effort to standardize SEAMAP surveys as much as possible, the SEAMAP Subcommittee decided to standardize the Bottom Longline Survey by sampling during three seasons, (April-May, June-July, and August-September) in 3-10m off the coasts of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.

The Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) discussed the two recommendations made by the FIN Committee. Following discussion, the TCC made two recommendations to the Commission: 1) to form an Ad-hoc Subcommittee under FIN made up of representatives from FL, AL, MS, NOAA SERO, NOAA SEFSC, and GMFMC to address the need for an MRIP regional communication and education team and 2) to send a letter to Dr. Ponwith at the Southeast Fishery Science Center (SEFSC) providing feedback from FIN regarding the 2013 SEFSC peer review of the data collection and data management programs that feed assessments and scientific advice for stocks managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

The TCC also discussed the possibility of establishing a new subcommittee to address ecosystem-based fisheries management, including modeling, identifying data gaps, and the roles it could serve for the Gulf states. At the end of discussion, the TCC decided to take no action.

At the Commission Business Meeting, the LEC presented information related to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. One of the most prevalent IUU offenses is related to Mexican incursions in U.S. waters to illegally harvest red snapper and sharks. Jim Landon from NOAA OLE provided an excerpt from the “Improving International Fisheries Management” report to Congress in February 2015. Behind the scenes, NOAA and the White House have been in talks with Mexico pressuring them to address these IUU problems. In response, the Commission agreed to send a letter to the United States Secretary of Commerce stating concern on IUU fishing and request additional support to the states in an effort to combat IUU fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. Following a request from the Data Management Subcommittee, the Commission approved the formation of an ad-hoc subcommittee under FIN made up of representatives from FL, AL, MS, LA, TX, NOAA SERO, NOAA SEFSC, and GMFMC to address the need for an MRIP regional communication and education team.

November 2015

The Commission’s 66th Annual Fall Meeting was held in St. Augustine, Florida, at the World Golf Village Renaissance Resort. Below is a summary of some of the topics and actions taken by the various subcommittees as well as the full Commission. Complete minutes of all Commission meetings are available on the Commission’s website at www.gsmfc.org.

The Crab Subcommittee met in conjunction with the ASMFC’s SEAMAP Crustacean Workgroup Meeting in St. Augustine. The two groups shared information regarding options that are available for conducting a stock assessment of blue crabs. The ASMFC provided an overview of the horseshoe crab fishery along the east coast of Florida and reported on the recent developments related to a biomedical ‘bleeding’ operation which was beginning to harvest in their waters.

The SEAMAP Subcommittee decided to standardize sampling within the Vertical Line Survey by developing three depth zones (10-20m, 20-40m and 40-150m) and proportionally allocating stations based upon area within the depth zone. The group proposed to develop 150m x 150m grid system within each depth zone and classify the habitat within the grid as one of five categories: unknown habitat, known natural reef, presumed reef (natural or artificial), an oil and gas platform, or an artificial reef. Stations would then be selected to sample during the Vertical Line Survey.

The Technical Coordinating Committee (TCC) heard an update from James Ballard on the status of the Gulf FINFO website and the activities that have taken place since the Commission took delivery of the site at the end of June. Ballard also expressed the importance of the states keeping their information on the site up-to-date and stated that he will keep a Gulf FINFO update as a permanent TCC agenda item to remind the state partners about this importance.

The Commission's Law Enforcement Committee (LEC) met jointly with the ASMFC's LEC and covered a wide array of topics including the use and need for aerial assets in JEA patrols, issues with NOAA's current TED enforcement checks, state licensing in federal waters, and illegal, under-reported and unreported (IUU) fishing issues in the Gulf of Mexico at the U.S./Mexico border. The joint session went very well and there was great communication between the nearly 25 Gulf and Atlantic states and federal agencies from multiple regions who attended.

At the Commission Business Meeting, the Commission approved the Gulf and Southern Flounder Management Profile and the new review process for future profiles which only requires TCC approval now for anything less than a full Fisheries Management Plan (FMP). The Commissioners expressed their gratitude to Ralph Hode for the fantastic job he has done over the last ten years coordinating the various disaster programs at the Commission. Hode retired in December 2015.

STATE AGENCY PARTNERS

Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida

The five Gulf state agencies continued to work through the Commission in 2015 on projects such as the FIN Data Program, IJF, and SEAMAP. In addition, there were several state-specific activities ongoing in each of the states through the ODRP Program in response to the hurricanes in 2004/2005 and the British Petroleum Oil Disaster in 2010. Below are some of the highlights of those various Commission related activities in 2015.

YEAR IN REVIEW

FIN: In 2015, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida in coordinated the MRIP survey for recreational harvest and effort estimation. Louisiana participated in MRIP dockside survey methods to support a one-year benchmarking study comparing MRIP to LA Creel methods. All states in the Gulf of Mexico assisted with collection of ageing structures for the biological sampling program. The commercial trip ticket program was developed and is ongoing for all states in the Gulf of Mexico.

SEAMAP: SEAMAP operations continued for the thirty-fourth consecutive year. All five state partners participated in the SEAMAP resource surveys in 2015 including the Spring Plankton Survey, Summer Shrimp/Groundfish, Reefish, Bottom Longline, Vertical Line, Fall Plankton, Fall Shrimp/Groundfish, and plankton and environmental data surveys.

IJF: The five state agencies provided representation on two new task forces: tripletail and Atlantic croaker. The states continued to support the revision to the Otolith Manual by sending representatives to the joint ASMF and GSMFC meeting in Woods Hole, Massachusetts.

Sportfish: The Commission continued to work in conjunction with the National Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force to determine appropriate actions and roles in addressing invasive species issues. In addition, the Commission provided administration and participation in the GSARP on which all of the Gulf states have representation.

Artificial Reefs: The Commission's TCC Artificial Reef Subcommittee, made up of the state Artificial Reef Coordinators from the five Gulf states, worked to develop a standardized sampling protocol for artificial reefs in the Gulf of Mexico, modeled after existing long-term monitoring programs that focus on natural reef habitats, utilizing comparable gear types/methodologies where possible. This protocol will be used in the new Gulf Artificial Reef Monitoring and Assessment Program (GARMAP) if funding can be secured. The goal of GARMAP is to provide baseline data for artificial reefs to allow states to assess impacts from natural and man-made disasters in the future, and to understand how their reefs are functioning over time, compared to natural reefs. In addition, the subcommittee worked with ASMF's Artificial Reef Subcommittee to provide the opportunity to address issues of national scope and importance. The two subcommittees are working on revising their 2004 publication, *Guidelines for Marine Artificial Reef Materials: Second Edition*.

LYLES-SIMPSON AWARD

The original Charles H. Lyles Award was presented annually by the Commission to an individual, agency, or organization recognized for contributing to the betterment of the fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico through significant biological, industrial, legislative, enforcement, or administrative activities. In 2014, this award was renamed the Lyles-Simpson Award to include and honor the late Larry B. Simpson, long-time Executive Director of the Commission.

The recipient is selected by the full Commission from open nominations at the spring March meeting. The selection is by secret ballot with the highest number of votes being named the recipient. The recipient is awarded this honor at the Commission's annual meeting in October of each year. The 2015 award was presented to Ellie Roche. Ellie retired in 2014 after 43 years of service with NOAA Fisheries. She truly enjoyed helping the state partners throughout her career with NOAA. She was always willing to go that extra mile and her dedication and commitment to fostering the state/federal relationship will be greatly missed by those who had the pleasure of working with her.

LYLES-SIMPSON AWARD RECIPIENTS

Charles H. Lyles	1984	James Barkuloo	2000
Theodore B. Ford	1985	Walter Fondren, III	2001
J.Y. Christmas	1986	Jerald K. Waller	2002
John Breaux	1987	Andrew J. Kemmerer	2003
John Ray Nelson	1988	Hal Osburn	2004
I.B. "Buck" Byrd	1989	Leroy Kiffe	2005
Hugh A. Swingle	1990	Robert P. Jones	2006
John A. Mehos	1991	Wayne E. Swingle	2007
J. Burton Angelle	1992	Ralph Rayburn	2008
Louis A Villanova	1993	W. "Corky" Perret	2009
Theodore H. Shepard	1994	Albert L. King, Sr.	2010
Edwin A. Joyce, Jr.	1995	Virginia "Ginny" Vail	2011
Tommy D. Candies	1996	R. Vernon Minton	2012
Walter M. Tatum	1997	Larry B. Simpson	2013
Thomas L. Heffernan	1998	Michael C. Voisin	2014
Trent Lott	1999	Ellie F. Roche	2015

COMMONLY USED ACRONYMS

ADCNR/MRD	Alabama Department of Conservation Natural Resources/Marine Resources Division
ANS	Aquatic Nuisance Species
ASMFC	Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
ComFIN	Commercial Fisheries Information Network
CRFAP	Commercial/Recreational Fisheries Advisory Panel
DMS	Data Management Subcommittee
EDRP	Emergency Disaster Recovery Program
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EFH	Essential Fish Habitat
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
FDD	Fishery-Dependent Data
FID	Fishery-Independent Data
FIN	Fisheries Information Network
FMP	Fishery Management Plan
FWC	Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
FWRI	Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute
GCRL	Gulf Coast Research Laboratory
GMFMC	Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Committee
GSMFC	Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission
IFA	Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act
IJF	Interjurisdictional Fisheries Program
JEA	Joint Enforcement Agreement
LDWF	Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
LEC	Law Enforcement Committee
MAC	Menhaden Advisory Committee
MDMR	Mississippi Department of Marine Resources
Mag-Stevens	Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Management
MMPA	Marine Mammal Protection Act
MOA	Memorandum of Agreement
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRFSS	Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistical Survey
MRIP	Marine Recreational Information Program
NMFS	National Marine Fisheries Service
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
ODRP	Oil Disaster Recovery Program
PSMFC	Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission
RecFIN	Recreational Fisheries Information Network
SAT	Stock Assessment Team
SEAMAP	Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program
SERO	Southeast Regional Office (NOAA Fisheries)
SFFMC	State-Federal Fisheries Management Committee
SFRP	Sport Fish Restoration Administrative Program
TCC	Technical Coordinating Committee
TED	Turtle Exclusion Device
TPWD	Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
TTF	Technical Task Force
TTS	Texas Territorial Sea
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service

PUBLICATIONS

The Commission staff accumulates data, research papers, and other materials critical to the further development of publications of the Commission including those from the Profiles and FMPs in progress. An electronic repository for papers referenced in these documents is continually expanded as additional literature from outside sources as well as the Commission is added. The database is searchable from the Commission website and provides keywords and complete abstracts when available. All Commission publications are housed electronically and limited paper copies are available upon request. Below is a list of the publications completed by the Commission in 2015.

No. 248 March 2015. Annual Report of the Fisheries Information Network in the Southeast Region (FIN). January 1, 2014 - December 31, 2014. Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission.

No. 247 November 2015. Management Profile for the Gulf and Southern Flounder Fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. Steven J VanderKooy, Editor. Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (online only).

No. 246 October 2015. SEAMAP Subcommittee Annual Report to the Technical Coordinating Committee of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission October 1, 2014 to September 30, 2015. Jeffrey K. Rester, Editor. Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission.

No. 245 September 2015. Law Summary 2015. A Summary of Marine Fishing Laws & Regulations for the Gulf States. Debbie McIntyre (Editor). Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (online only).

No. 244 September 2015. Licenses and Fees for Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas in Their Marine Waters for the Year 2014. Debbie McIntyre (Editor). Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission.

No. 243 June 2015. The Blue Crab Fishery of the Gulf of Mexico, United States: A Regional Management Plan. Harriet Perry and Steve VanderKooy, Editors. Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (online only).

No. 242 July 2015. Joint Annual Report of the Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program October 1, 2013 – September 30, 2014 (online only).

No. 241 July 2015. Rules and Regulations: Officers' Pocket Guide 2015-2016. Debbie McIntyre (Editor). Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission.

No. 240 March 2015. The Gulf Menhaden Fishery of the Gulf of Mexico, United States: A Regional Management Plan. Steve VanderKooy and Joseph W. Smith, Editors. Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (online only).

FINANCIAL REPORT

The Commission has a Single Audit conducted annually in compliance with the Single Audit Act and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-133. The audit is performed by an independent certified public accounting firm and encompasses both financial and compliance components. A segment of the audited financial statements is published below. The full audit report is available by request from the Commission.

YEAR IN REVIEW

The following presents a summary of the Commission's net position for the years ended December 31, 2015 and 2014. Detailed financial statements are available from the Commission office by request from Ms. Angela Rabideau.

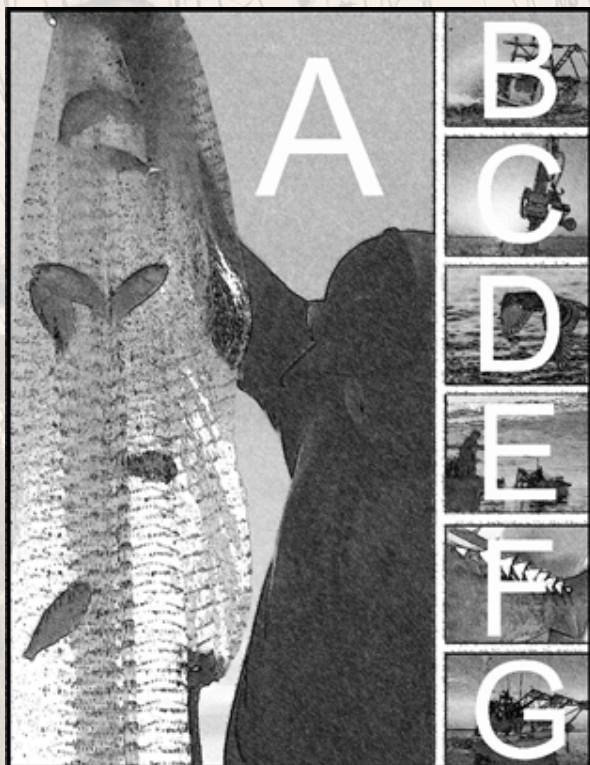
Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission
Condensed Statement of Activities
for the Years Ended December 31, 2015 and 2014

	DECEMBER 31,	
	<u>2015</u>	<u>2014</u>
Current Assets	\$642,307	\$592,331
Noncurrent Assets		
Post-Employment Health Plan investment account	\$175,602	\$176,080
Property and Equipment, net of accumulated depreciation	\$212,496	\$193,002
Total Noncurrent Assets	\$388,098	\$369,082
Total Assets	\$1,030,405	\$961,413
Current Liabilities	<u>\$727</u>	<u>\$3,583</u>
Net Position		
Investment in Capital Assets	\$212,496	\$193,002
Unrestricted	<u>817,182</u>	<u>764,828</u>
Total Net Position	<u>\$1,029,678</u>	<u>\$957,830</u>

Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission
Condensed Statement of Activities
for the Years Ended December 31, 2015 and 2014

	DECEMBER 31,	
	<u>2015</u>	<u>2014</u>
Revenues:		
General Revenues		
Member State Appropriation	\$112,500	\$67,500
Council Activities	122,300	45,000
Other Income	198	50,800
Interest Income	779	755
Dividend Income	5,712	7,244
Post-Employment Health Plan Revenue	4,339	9,222
Registration Fees	23,275	18,995
Unrealized Gain (Loss) on Investments	(8,221)	(1,375)
Program Revenues		
Collection & Dissemination of Recreational and Commercial Fisheries Information Network	7,102,289	7,017,066
Interjurisdictional Fisheries Management	234,455	196,408
Coordination of Recreational Fisheries Programs	218,277	143,225
Collection & Dissemination of Fishery-Independent Data And Information	254,802	232,122
Study of Aquatic Nuisances	263,304	64,737
Emergency Disaster Recovery Program I	-	-
Emergency Disaster Recovery Program II	-	-
Economic Data Program	(5,582)	295,855
Oil Disaster Recovery Program	2,558,072	3,492,029
Stock Assessment Enhancement	1	190,963
Fisheries Development and Utilization Research and Development Grants and Cooperative Agreements Program	250,268	230,000
Other	<u>5,356</u>	<u>-</u>
Total Revenues	\$11,142,124	\$12,060,546
Expenses:		
Programs		
General and Administrative	<u>245,363</u>	<u>167,939</u>
Total Expenses	\$11,070,276	\$12,025,772
Change in Net Position	71,848	34,774
Net Position, Beginning	<u>957,830</u>	<u>923,056</u>
Net Position, Ending	<u>\$1,029,678</u>	<u>\$957,830</u>

CREDITS



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