

**FISHERIES INFORMATION NETWORK (FIN)
MINUTES
Tuesday, October 17, 2023
New Orleans, LA**

APPROVED BY: 
COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

Chair **Beverly Sauls** called the meeting to order at 8:35 a.m. The following members, staff, and others were present either in person or via the webinar:

Members

Chris Bradshaw, FFWCC, Charleston, SC
Beverly Sauls, FFWCC, St. Petersburg, FL
Marie Head, AMRD, Gulf Shores, AL
Nicole Beckham, AMRD, Gulf Shores, AL
Megan Fleming, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Darrin Stewart, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Nicole Smith, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Mike Harden, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Joel Anderson, TPWD, Palacios, TX
Justin Esslinger, TPWD, Rockport, TX
Lisa Hollensead, GMFMC, Tampa, FL

Virtual Attendees

Katherine Papacostas (proxy for Richard Cody), NOAA/ NMFS, Silver Spring, MD
Jessica Stephen, NOAA/SERO, St. Petersburg, FL
Rob Cheshire (proxy for Ken Brennan), NOAA/SEFSC, Beaufort, NC
Alan Lowther, NOAA/SEFSC, Miami, FL

Staff

David Donaldson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Gregg Bray, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Donna Bellais, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Joe Ferrer, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Deanna Valentine, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS

Others

James Swarthout, ALDCNR, Gulf Shores, AL
Allan Brown, USFWS, Atlanta, GA
Eric Gigli, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Ted Switzer, FLFWC, St. Petersburg, FL
Andrew Petersen, Bluefin Data, New Orleans, LA
Brett Pierce, Bluefin Data, Miami, FL
Kevin Anson, ALDCNR, Gulf Shores, AL
Kevin Bland, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Melissa Longman, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Trevor Moncrief, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Darin Topping, TPWD, Rockport, TX
Kym Walsh, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Doug Boyd, Boerne, TX
JD Dugas, GMFMC, Lafayette, LA
Tom Sminkey, St. Petersburg, FL
Jason Adriance, LDWF, New Orleans, LA
Jason Rider, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Sarah Lazo, NOAA/ NMFS, Silver Spring, MD

Approval of Agenda

N. Beckham moved to approve the amended agenda as written. **N. Smith** seconded.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the Fisheries Information Network (FIN) meeting held on March 15, 2022 in Panama City, FL were approved as presented.

Review of MRIP Transition Team Research Plan

G. Bray discussed the status of the Gulf State Survey Transition Plan. The plan is a living document that outlines the current path for utilizing state recreational survey data in science and management. The plan describes a transition path regarding how to use the data in the short term using a calibration process. The second aspect of the plan is a research track that identifies research that identifies drivers for differences between state and federal recreational survey estimates. The research track has been in development by a workgroup of state and federal partners but a recent emerging priority will likely require an update to the overall transition plan. Alabama and Mississippi are preparing to test the LA Creel effort survey design in their respective states in 2024. This could potentially provide some standardization in survey efforts among three Gulf states. **B. Sauls** asked how the LA Creel effort survey works to determine effort estimates from all three fishing modes, private boat, for-hire and shore fishing. **N. Smith** explained the effort survey targets recreational anglers to determine the number of fishing trips taken weekly and they use the dockside survey to partition landings into specific modes of fishing. **K. Bland** also explained they use two separate surveys for for-hire captains and private/shore recreational anglers. One single effort estimate is generated for private and shore mode combined. **K. Papacostas** asked if the pilot survey would target weekly estimates like Louisiana and if the capture/recapture programs both states currently use will be discontinued. **Bray** mentioned the pilot study in 2024 is proposed to generate weekly estimates and be deployed as Louisiana designed it and there are no plans in 2024 to stop data collection for either capture/recapture program. **Papacostas** also asked if the desire is to combine the pilot study effort estimates with APAIS in 2024 to produce landings estimates. **Bray** stated at this point the only desire is to compare effort estimates without produced expanded landing estimates. **M. Head** and **E. Gigli** stated they currently have not had discussions regarding combining effort data with APAIS but the topic could be discussed in more detail in the future. The Gulf States Transition Team is scheduled to meet on October 30, 2023 and the group will discuss this emerging priority and how it potentially impacts the overall transition plan. GulfFIN committee members will revisit the transition plan and pertinent future research projects at their next meeting if appropriate.

MRIP Update

K. Papacostas from NOAA Office of Science and Technology (OST) provided an update on recent MRIP activities. She highlighted their existing research to evaluate and improve federal recreational surveys including the FES pilot that will execute the new question order design while also testing the impacts of moving to one-month estimation periods. They are completing an analysis a Large Pelagics Survey redesign, completing a report on a study evaluating the impacts of fishing activity reporting when also asked about possessing a fishing license, working on a peer review for a for-hire logbook program framework developed by the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP), and working with national and regional transition teams to continue to discuss mitigating potential disruptions to fisheries management caused by continuous survey improvements. OST staff are working on a meeting to discuss survey implementation issues and evaluate new methods for estimation review with Gulf and Atlantic partners. Both state and federal partners see this as a way to strengthen partner relationships and trust. OST staff are working to complete an updated MRIP Strategic Plan that prioritizes data-use and customer needs for all regional partners. She also mentioned the GulfFIN Regional Implementation Plan was in final review and comments will be sent to **G. Bray** for review and plan updating. MRIP staff are also

compiling results from a customer satisfaction assessment and preliminary results will be available soon. These results will be compared with the 2019 benchmark survey and results will inform strategic planning efforts and other possible program initiatives. **B. Sauls** asked where interested partners could find information regarding MRIP team structures. **Papacostas** provided a link to the current MRIP team structures and GSMFC staff would make sure that information was provided to the committee members. She mentioned partners are welcomed to provide feedback on the construction of pertinent work groups. **Sauls** asked if the team of scientists that are working on measurement or sampling error issues with federal general surveys is just a NOAA Fisheries team and how state partners with ideas for improvement could participate in that process. **Papacostas** stated the research and evaluation team is completely internal to NOAA Fisheries and input from state partners could be an improvement. She also mentioned the annual estimate review meeting that is being planned by NOAA Fisheries and Gulf State partners could be another opportunity to discuss survey design and implementation topics. **E. Gigli** asked for more information about the research regarding the impact of angler responses when asked about holding a valid fishing license. She asked they were trying to determine if asking anglers if they hold a valid fishing license is a sensitive question and somehow negatively impacts reporting. The survey has just recently been completed and data analysis has not begun yet.

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Funding Update

G. Bray provided a presentation regarding the IRA funding that has been received by GSMFC. The goals and objectives of this funding is to improve the quality and timeliness of recreational fishery dependent data to assist in managing red snapper. **Bray** mentioned that all of the improvements will benefit the management of all managed species because we do not deal with single species when it comes to data collection, storage, management, and dissemination. Specific goals are to improve both commission and state data management systems and develop better methods of quality controls with the ultimate goal of making the GulfFIN Data Management System the centralized warehouse for the regions fishery dependent data. There are also monies provided to hold two workshops, one evaluating new methods to validate recreational fishing effort estimates and another that would evaluate methods for improving recreational discard data for both the for-hire and private boat modes. This work will begin in 2024 and is projected to be a 4-year project. The total amount of the award is \$6.6M. **Bray** mentioned this is one-time money and needs for ongoing support costs will need to be determined and presented to hopefully obtain long term funding support. **Head** asked about GulfFIN providing funding support to assist states already collecting at-sea observer data as current funding sources potentially expire. **Bray** mentioned the current IRA funding obtained is not intended for this purpose but additional IRA monies might be able to support for a short period of time when current funding sources are spent out. Unfortunately, all IRA funding is one-time money and will likely be spent in the next 4-6 years so long-term funding to support at-sea observer programs will need to be established. **Sauls** stated Florida found additional funding sources like NFWF to keep them established until long term funding could be obtained through the state and she encouraged others states to strive to find ways to keep their programs running in the absence of dedicated GulfFIN funding. **Bray** mentioned with three workshops planned in 2024 GulfFIN staff will be reaching out to state and federal partners to start planning, finding available dates and making sure the appropriate partner staff are participating in the workshops. **Sauls** asked if a steering committee would be developed to create terms of reference for each workshop. **Bray** stated steering committees would be needed and he would be reaching out to create those working groups in the near future.

State Recreational Survey Data Warehousing Discussion

G. Bray discussed work has begun for warehousing state recreational data at the GulfFIN Data Management System. This was the most important priority from the recent GulfFIN Strategic Planning Session. LDWF and TPWD already have provided all of their uncalibrated estimates

and raw dockside field data along with their survey documentation to GSMFC. The short-term goal would be to warehouse data from all five Gulf States in the same manner. The IRA funding previously discussed will help move us to a standardized database for warehousing state recreational survey estimates and develop methods for easily disseminating data and providing simple queries and reports to summarize landings and effort estimates. The development of GulfFIN Data Standards will help inform that process as well. **Bray** mentioned receiving survey documentation from Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi would be a good first step as they also work toward delivering datasets in the future. **D. Bellais** offered to share the data elements currently being received from LA and TX if that would help other states in decided what they should send. The short-term goal of warehousing state data as they currently store it would be to reduce burden for NOAA Fisheries scientists to be able to receive it from one location. **J. Stephen** stated their goal is to directly receive datasets in Oracle from GulfFIN servers to avoid having to request data and manually transmit it and streamline the process.

For-Hire Survey Status and Next Step

G. Bray stated the MRIP For-Hire Telephone Survey (FHS) is used in Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi to collect fishing effort data from the for-hire sector. Recently the survey was reviewed by MRIP consultants and the base sampling method was certified but the validation component was not. He stated there's a great deal of confusion as to the future of this survey and what are the next steps for making survey improvements. **Papacostas** stated the decision made was that probability-based methods that rely on a probability sampling design do not need a validation component the way census methods do. At this point nothing has changed with the implementation of the survey and the production of estimates. Validation data continues to be collected and used in estimation. She stated the need for transition planning for for-hire data collection is evident but when to start that process is difficult to determine as there are additional impacts such as the redesign and implementation of another SEFHIER program. Any methodological changes to the FHS would be disruptive and potentially result in new estimates that could impact calibrations that impacts science and management. She stated the National Transition Planning meeting suggested waiting to coordinate the overall for-hire changes at one single time when they can be accomplished in unison. **Sauls** asked if a minor methodological change to the FHS should actually trigger a transition plan and she worried about slowing down making survey improvements for minor changes. **Papacostas** stated the change to the survey design would be minor but the impact to the estimates could be significant enough to trigger a transition plan. **Sauls** suggested it would be good to have a more comprehensive conversation regarding the design of the FHS before a transition plan is created because state partners also have some ideas regarding needed improvements. **Papacostas** suggested possibly the need to create a for-hire transition workgroup to help provide a forum for discussions like this. **Bray** asked how we explain the reason for continuing to collection dockside validation data if that component of the survey is not needed or cannot be certified. **Papacostas** stated it simply to remain consistent with methods and estimation and not making changes without instigating a transition plan. Changes in methods will result in changes to estimates and feeding that into assessments will result in trends from changes in methods instead of real changes in the fisheries. She mentioned they do not envision doing the current validation survey indefinitely but work needs to be done before changes can be implemented. **Sauls** asked what NOAA Fisheries envisions as the next steps regarding for-hire transition planning. **Papacostas** suggested a plan is on hold until a comprehensive for-hire transition can be started that would be informed by other for-hire surveys in development not just the FHS to minimize multiple disruptions in multiple survey design changes. This work would start with the National Transition Planning Team which has state representation to offer ideas and concerns.

Recommendations for Restoring SEFHIER Program

L. Hollensead explained that GMFMC is receiving presentations at the October Gulf Council meeting regarding current for-hire data collection methods and some data analyses and summary results from the previous attempt to implement the SEFHIER program in the Gulf of Mexico. The plan is to have a discussion to potentially develop a new for-hire data collection program to replace the old SEFHIER program in the Gulf of Mexico. The Council is also putting together an Ad Hoc Advisory panel to help provide recommendations from an industry perspective. **Stephen** also mentioned the goal is to get as much input early in the process because once an amendment is in place it gets harder to make changes in data collection methods. **Stephen** mentioned managing respondent burden with data needs for management are the biggest struggle in developing a new system. **N. Smith** asked if the plan was to start from scratch or to try and implement a version of the same program as before. She suggested knowing what the primary goal is and designing something that accomplishes that with the least amount of burden to the respondents as possible. She also stated that without access to data in real-time captains would need to still report to LA Creel which increases the amount of burden to the industry. **M. Fleming** agreed about minimizing respondent burden as their small fleet still experience fatigue due to the need for captains to be responding to multiple differing surveys. **Stephen** stated the hope is that the Council would narrow their scope of purpose and need for this new program. More conversations are needed about sharing data between partners and overcoming some of the obstacles that would prevent data sharing. She agreed that a for-hire transition plan will be necessary to help inform captains the need for duplicative reporting and when that burden could be eliminated. **Sauls** stated GulfFIN testing a mandatory logbook program back in 2007 and our only legal requirement was data needed to be submitted before federal permits could be renewed. That legal authority likely needs to be much stronger to help improve compliance in a timely manner since a new federal for-hire data collection program falls under the same legal reporting requirement. She also suggested an extended period of allowance for non-compliant owner/operators to make sure no permits are terminated as operators learn of their new reporting requirements. **Stephen** asked to receive a copy of the 2007 pilot study and **Sauls** agreed to share that with SERO staff. **Bray** asked about the amount of discomfort with the economic variables in the logbook factor into potential decisions to minimize burden to the industry. **Stephen** stated NOAA Fisheries economists have stated that some questions are extremely useful for the industry and SERO needs to do a better job of explaining that going forward. The goal would be to narrow down the economic variables to just the most desirable. **Stephen** stated it is not clear what the Council will decide regarding VMS requirements as that was another controversial aspect of the program. If the plans are to use these data for quota monitoring then the value of VMS data and monitoring trips is significant. Identifying the purpose and needs for the intended use of these data will be essential. **Sauls** wondered if this would provide an opportunity to standardize what is being implemented in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. NOAA Fisheries would prefer to have standardized programs in each region but each Council makes individual decisions which makes standardization difficult sometimes. **Bray** suggested if the committee members have additional recommendations after watching the Gulf Council presentations they could send them to him and he would forward them onto Hollensead for dissemination to the advisory panel and council staff. **Stephen** asked if GulfFIN had an opinion on what the primary purpose and need should be. **Bray** stated he always felt the primary purpose was originally improving the accuracy of landings estimates. **Sauls** added it was also to give the Gulf Council flexibility on how they manage the federal for-hire fishery. Our goal is to help provide the data needed to accomplish better management. Unfortunately, during the first attempt at SEFHIER the benchmarking plan was unclear and left participants frustrated so our next attempt should be very clear in how long benchmarking would take.

Alabama BigFIN Electronic Measuring Board Presentation.

M. Head stated Alabama has participated in a previous at-sea observer program for 5 years that was paper based collection with the lengths being obtained on a traditional measuring boards and the data being hand entered into an internal database. She mentioned the use of the BigFIN electronic measuring board has helped to streamline the data processes at-sea, reduce personnel time and reduce data entry errors during post data processes. This hardware provides access to electronic data the same day it is collected and improves efficiency by integrating electronic technology use. Alabama has fully transitioned to the BigFIN boards in March of 2023 after customizations were implemented for the board and the tablet application. **Head** demonstrated the use of the BigFIN board and application showing the pre-setup of the trip specifics for the day, measuring board calibration, real time data collection and tagging of fish in 30 seconds or less. They are pleased with this technology and are considering its use in other fishery dependent programs. **J. Hendon** asked about misreads on the board during rough seas. **Head** stated if a misread was entered, you can quickly re-enter a reading by re-tapping on the board and the corrected reading will overwrite the previous reading. **M. Harden** inquired how long the board software has been running. **C. Carroll** stated the software is approximately 8 years old. **Hendon** asked if there is an option for a scale input for obtaining fish weight. **Carroll** stated currently there is not a built-in scale option but an external Bluetooth scale could be linked into the board application to obtain fish weight. **Bellais** asked about the timeframe for data quality assurance and control. **Head** stated the data could be quality assured and controlled along with data analysis and ready for use on a daily basis. **R. Cheshire** stated NOAA's head boat port agents have been using these boards for a while and consider them extremely efficient in data collection and data upload.

Final Discussion of Reef Fish Conversion Factor Research

G. Bray stated the data analysis and final report from the current reef fish conversion factor research should be drafted by the end of the year with a completion date of March 2024. **Bellais** asked the states participating in this project to give a status update. **Harden** stated Louisiana has completed the red snapper and black drum acquisition, processing, data analysis and is currently working on the final report. **N. Beckham** mentioned Alabama has completed sampling, processing and data analysis of red snapper and vermillion snapper and is currently working on the final report. **D. Topping** reported Texas completed species sampling, processing and data analysis for red snapper, vermillion snapper and yellow-edge grouper. **Topping** mentioned Texas A & M University provided additional red snapper data from a 5-year project that used the same processing methods as this current project. **C. Bradshaw** stated Florida has processed samples for red snapper, red grouper, gag grouper, and snowy grouper and are working to acquire a few more samples for some of the species. **Topping** informed the committee he would gather the raw data from each of the states, run it through his analysis program, and disseminate the results to the states for discussions and decisions from each state to use the conversion factor numbers from the project. **Bray** stated individual state reports that summarize the work completed are needed to fulfill the requirement of the sub-awards. **A. Lowther** stated at the recent Shrimp SEDAR the shrimp conversion factors from the Gulf project were used in data workshop as there was a final report that documented the conversion factor findings. **Bray** mentioned the budget for the 2024 conversion factor project will be presented to State-Federal Committee for approval. If the budget is approved, each state will need statements of work with detailed budgets in place prior to December 31, 2023.

VESL Development Updates

A. Petersen mentioned Louisiana is now in the beta environment for VESL and has provided feedback and comments. He stated summary reports are in the beta environment for Florida and Texas with Mississippi close to being in beta. **Petersen** reported the Alabama form configuration has been completed in the development environment with minor adjustments made for federal requirements and should be moved to beta in the next few weeks. **Petersen** stated for 2024

deduction reports will be developed, the integration of the LA Wallet app will begin, and the development of the Louisiana and Alabama forms for production will continue. **Bray** mentioned each state should be working on a transition plan to move dealers from PC Trip Ticket to VESL once VESL is deployed in production for both State and Federal dealers. **Harden** briefly explained how the LA Wallet app will work using a QR code along with the app containing vessel and license information. This is another potential tool that could help in completely moving away from paper reporting options. The Committee will hear future updates on the VESL development and the LA Wallet pilot project.

Discussion of Commercial Landings Non-Disclosure Agreement Process

D. Bellais mentioned the need for GSMFC to create a statement of non-disclosure form and update the current form for user access requests to GulfFIN's data warehouse. She presented two draft forms as a starting point to the committee for comments and suggestions. **J. Simpson** suggested automating the request and approval process of confidential data access would be beneficial and stated ACCSP would share their automation code with GulfFIN. **Bray** suggested adding this topic to the next Comtech Workgroup conference call regarding design, modification of forms, and automation of the request process for summary level confidential data, user access to GulfFIN's data warehouse and a demo of ACCSP's automation process.

Discussion of Approval of Resolution to Honor Charlie Gardner

B. Sauls presented a draft resolution developed in collaboration with GSMFC staff to honor the dedication of past recreational sampler Charlie Gardner. Charlie worked for FLFWC from 1998-2023 but worked on the federal recreational survey as a field sampler for over 30 years. His dedication to the natural resources of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico and his love for the people that enjoy those resources was remarkable. Charlie passed away in the summer of 2023 and GSMFC thought it appropriate to honor his commitment to recreational data collection efforts. The committee made the following motion.

MOTION: The GulfFIN Committee moves to forward the draft resolution honoring Charles "Charlie" Gardner to the GSMFC Technical Coordinating Committee for their consideration for approval.

The motion passed with no opposition.

Election of Officers

G. Bray discussed GSMFC is trying to synchronize the process of electing new officers across all GSMFC committees. This would mean that GulfFIN would need to elect officers on even years. **Bray** suggested that the current officers could serve one more term and elections could be held in 2024. The committee agreed that would be acceptable. The current chair and vice-chair are evaluating that possibility and GulfFIN will decide via email vote in the near future.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:15pm.