

**TECHNICAL COORDINATING COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

**Wednesday, October 18, 2023
New Orleans, LA**

APPROVED BY: 
COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

On Wednesday, October 18, 2022, the Technical Coordinating Committee Chair, **Beverly Sauls**, called the meeting to order at approximately 8:30 a.m. The meeting took place in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the following were in attendance:

Members

Beverly Sauls, FL FWC/FWRI, St. Petersburg, FL
Christopher Mace, TPWD, Rockport, TX
Dan Ellinor, FL FWC, Tallahassee, FL
Darin Topping, TPWD, Rockport, TX
Glenn Constant, USFWS, Baton Rouge, LA
Jason Froeba, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
John Mareska, ADCNR/MRD, Dauphin Island, AL
Matt Hill, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Nicole Beckham, ADCNR/MRD, Gulf Shores, AL
Patrick Banks, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Rick Burris, MDMR, Biloxi, MS

Staff

Ali Wilhelm, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Charlie Robertson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Dave Donaldson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Gregg Bray, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Jeff Rester, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Joe Ferrer, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Sarah Wakefield, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS

Others

Alexis Sabine, TX Sea Grant, Corpus Christi, TX
Andrew Peterson, Bluefin Data, Baton Rouge, LA
Andy Distrubell, Florida International University, Miami, FL
Angela Collins, University of Florida/FL Sea Grant, Gainesville, FL
Audrey Baetz, LDWF, Grand Isle, LA
Carey Gelpi, TPWD, Port Arthur, TX
Chris Bradshaw, FL FWC, St. Petersburg, FL
Daniel Burke, LDWF, Grand Isle, LA
Denise Kinsey, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Ellen Coffin, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Eric Gigli, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Erik Broussard, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Gray Turnage, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS
Jaclyn Higgins, TRCP, Washington D.C.
James Swarthout, ADCNR, Gulf Shores, AL
Jason Herrmann, ADCNR-MRD, Dauphin Island, AL

Jason Rider, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Jason Saucier, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Jeff Plumlee, LA Sea Grant, Baton Rouge, LA
Jim Brown, GSMFC, Vero Beach, FL
John Stieditz, University of Miami, Miami, FL
John Valentine, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Dauphin Island, AL
Julie Lively, LA Sea Grant, Baton Rouge, LA
Justin Esslinger, TPWD, Rockport, TX
Leslie Sturmer, University of Florida, Cedar Key, FL
Marie Head, ADCNR-MRD, Gulf Shores, AL
Melissa Longman, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Nicole Kirchhoff, Live Advantage Bait LLC, West Palm Beach, FL
Patrick Rice, The College of the Florida Keys, Key West, FL
Portia Sapp, FDACS, Tallahassee, FL
Ralph Turnigan, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, FL
Rebecca Hillebrandt, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Russell Grice, Auburn University, Dauphin Island, AL
Travis Williams, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Trevor Moncrief, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Zach Zuckerman, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA

Adoption of Agenda

Nicole Beckham moved and it was seconded by Rick Burris to adopt the agenda. Motion passed with no opposition.

Approval of Minutes

Jason Froeba moved and it was seconded by Nicole Beckham to approve the minutes as written for the October 18, 2022 meeting. Motion passed with no opposition.

General Session – GSMFC 2023 Aquaculture Overview

This session highlighted six on-going and completed aquaculture projects in the region that are supported through the NOAA and Commission' Aquaculture Program. The projects were selected because they are either multi-year or have had multiple stages of research. The ability of the Commission's Aquaculture Program to fund additional work after a successful pilot study is one of the major benefits of the program. Projects include the culture of finfish, mollusks, and seaweed, an outreach tool in support of regional aquaculture, as well as two integrated multitrophic aquaculture (IMTA) projects. A full report and overview of each of the projects can be found on the GSMFC's website at <https://www.gsmfc.org/publications/General%20Sessions/General%20Session%202023-10-18%20--%20GSMFC%20Aquaculture%20Overview.pdf> .

Update on the Status of Gulf of Mexico Wind Energy

Mike Celata provided an update on the status of Gulf of Mexico Wind Energy. He expressed hope that the lease for Lake Charles would be finalized within the next month. Once finalized, there will be a 120-day window to develop plans, communication strategies, and stakeholder engagement plans. He mentioned ongoing collaboration with the Department of Energy (DOE) to gain insights into electrical transmission from future leases, facilitating the mapping of future transmission lines. Additionally, he highlighted that the state of Louisiana is exploring interest in Wind Energy Areas (WEA) within its state waters. The update reflects progress in advancing wind energy initiatives in

the Gulf of Mexico and emphasizes collaboration with relevant stakeholders and governmental agencies.

A Statewide Survey of Pharmaceutical Exposure: Red Drum Across Florida Estuaries

Andy Distrubell gave an overview of a recent statewide survey assessing pharmaceutical exposure in red drum across nine Florida estuaries. Globally, hundreds of pharmaceuticals have been detected in aquatic environments that pose a risk to aquatic biota. This issue, recognized as a global threat, sees the rate of production and release far outpacing the ability to assess safety. The study aimed to determine if pharmaceutical pollution is a problem in Florida, particularly regarding evidence of human exposure. Fish were tested in nine estuaries across the state, with varying levels of exposure. Tampa Bay and Apalachicola showed the highest pharmaceutical levels, while Florida Bay and Indian River Lagoon had the lowest. Notably, 25% of sampled fish exceeded the threshold for experiencing drug effects, with five specific pharmaceuticals causing the most concern. Although there is minimal exposure to humans through fish consumption, the report emphasizes the need to address chronic risks from mixtures at low levels. Proposed solutions include integrating environmental risk assessment into pharmaceutical authorization processes, promoting the production of green pharmaceuticals, reducing the need for and optimizing pharmaceutical use, implementing best practices for disposal, upgrading wastewater treatment for removal, and reconsidering wastewater as a valuable resource for energy, fertilizer, and clean water through recycling processes.

Discussion of Creating a Universal State-managed Recreational Fishing Permit

Trevor Moncrief provided an overview presentation highlighting federal private recreational management approaches and insights from several states' current approaches. Louisiana employs a Recreational Offshore Landing Permit (ROLP) for specific offshore species, operating separately from fishing licenses. Mississippi plans to adopt a similar permit system by January 2024. Florida utilizes a State Reef Fish Survey designation for reef fish species, potentially causing oversubscription due to its integration with the general fishing license. Alabama implements a Reef Fish Endorsement, automatically enrolling anglers in the National Saltwater Angler Registry (NSAR). Texas currently lacks a separate offshore permit, expressing concerns about data use and enforcement if such a program were initiated.

Key themes highlighted from the TCC discussion encompassed the identification of offshore anglers' universe, with variations in exemptions across states from general fishing licenses. The concept of no-cost permits through commissions versus fee-required licenses was discussed, focusing on quantifying serious offshore anglers. A potential approach suggested a no-cost offshore permit with a separate signup webpage or fee imposition for specific offshore species, albeit a lengthier legislative process. Exploring species representative of offshore effort and enforcement strategies for compliance emerged as crucial aspects, suggesting small fines initially for violations. The meeting underlined the need for angler-level data collection, distinct from vessel-based methods, aligning with current state programs. **Lisa Hollinshead** with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) was involved in the discussions and planned to report back to the GMFMC at their regularly scheduled meeting the next week.

Inflation Reduction Act Update

Gregg Bray presented on the Inflation Reduction Act Funding Activities, outlining the goals and objectives of the program. The primary aim is to enhance the quality and timeliness of recreational fishery-dependent data to aid in managing red snapper, with broader benefits for various managed species. Efforts will be directed towards improving state and commission data management systems,

implementing better quality control methods, and establishing the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) as a centralized warehouse for regional fishery-dependent data. The plan includes evaluating ways to validate recreational fishing effort estimates and improving discard data. In the first year (2024), activities involve developing recreational data standards, evaluating data management systems, and implementing improvements. Workshops, such as the Effort Validation Planning Workshop and Recreational Discards Workshop, are planned. The following years (2025-2027) will focus on improving state data management systems through individual contracts with IT specialists, security experts, survey statisticians, and programmers. Funding is allocated for hardware, network, and communication improvements. The overall award, if fully obtained, amounts to \$6.6 million, with plans to address ongoing support costs in the future. The strategy emphasizes collaboration with each state to ensure the delivery of high-quality data to GulfFIN. **State representatives agreed to send the GSMFC point of contact for the TCC, Charlie Robertson, information that is being collected in their permits that will be used in this registry.** The National Saltwater Angler Registry could be referenced for minimum elements needed to develop a survey frame.

Next Species for FMP Development

Steve VanderKooy updated the group on the ongoing mangrove snapper profile and requested feedback for the next species profile. Some responses highlighted the need for updates on Black Drum and other species, while additional suggestions included kingfishes, bluefish, red porgy, anchovies, ladyfish, rays, and barracuda, which were not initially listed as priorities. Plans are in place to potentially start the next profile around mid-2024 following the completion of the mangrove snapper profile. Increased pressure on Black Drum in Texas prompted a request for the species profile to move up in the priority list, considering its status as one of the top landed fish in the state, second only to red snapper. Support for prioritizing Black Drum came from Louisiana and Mississippi, with a suggestion to consider anchovies or ground mullet (kingfish) as the next profile.

SuRF Updates

Steve VanderKooy provided a table with dollar amounts for each state and project. In 2024, the total amounts for each state will be \$187,460.

Subcommittee Reports

Artificial Reef

Travis Williams reported the Subcommittee met over two days and provided insights into the artificial reef activities and challenges faced by various Gulf states, as well as discussions on partnerships, critical habitat designation, permitting challenges, and monitoring efforts.

Texas reported combined teams working on artificial reefs, emphasizing difficulties with the "rigs to reef" program concerning asset ownership. They are hoping to deploy some artificial reefs in 2023. Bob Hall pier, demolished during a hurricane, has been rebuilt, with materials placed outside of permitted areas, requiring after-the-fact permits from USACE. Lessons learned included contractor compliance with permit and contract terms, and funding restoration taking four years to settle, resulting in deploying only half the anticipated number. They are also working on monitoring connectivity between artificial and natural reefs, facing challenges with NMFS consultations.

After a moratorium on reef sites, Louisiana has resumed building reefs, completing 19 with more finished last year. They also had issues with materials placed outside permitted areas. The state received about \$5 million in donations this year and is willing to negotiate prices if BOEM and

company prices differ significantly.

Mississippi: Mississippi is involved in inshore monitoring, sampling, and the compilation of materials for deployment. They are working on permits for inshore artificial reefs and are awaiting NMFS's biological opinion for offshore sites. GEBF funding is allocated for various projects, including extending Katrina Key.

Alabama is at the end of the second round of NFWF funds and is expecting additional funding. They are building new inshore reefs and have successfully implemented "rigs to reef" with large donations. Private citizens continue deploying various materials, which are inspected by AL staff.

Florida reported deploying more vessels in 2023 than in the previous 10 years. They emphasized the variety of reef types being developed, including innovative designs printed with 3D printing. However, Florida faces challenges in permitting and staffing issues to stay ahead of their projects.

Partnerships were discussed, with a focus on whether nonprofits contributed more financially or in labor/manpower. Different states provided insights on partnerships working well and the benefits they bring, particularly in coordination with contractors. Each state discussed its specific arrangements and how these partnerships contribute to artificial reef projects.

A brief update was provided by NOAA regarding the restoration efforts for deep benthic communities affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

States discussed the designation of critical habitat for endangered and threatened species such as the Green Sea Turtle and Rice's Whale. Concerns were raised about the consultation times required for permits and questions and concerns about vessel speed limits.

Permitting challenges were raised, including cultural resource surveys and navigational buoy placement requirements. They shared experiences and potential solutions, such as keeping a portion of the water column open to waive certain requirements.

States provided insights into their monitoring efforts, including surveys, ROV dives, and coral surveys. The need for better coordination and information sharing among states for research projects was emphasized.

Lastly, the group was updated on the GARMAP Water Quality Monitoring Pilot Study before wrapping up with discussing the possibility of meeting with Atlantic states and considering the timing and location for the next meeting. No plans were made as options need to be scoped out.

GulfFIN

Beverly Sauls outlined discussions from the GulfFIN Committee, which convened with a full agenda. One key focus was the ongoing development of the Research Plan as part of the Gulf States Recreational Survey Transition Plan. A significant development emerged in Alabama and Mississippi, where state agencies expressed interest in testing the LA Creel effort survey alongside FES for potential implementation. This comparative research aims to be completed by 2024, prompting the Gulf Transition Team's meeting on October 30, 2023, to assess whether this new direction warrants restructuring the Transition Plan document.

Katherine Papacostas from NOAA OST provided a comprehensive MRIP update, covering national and regional priorities. Notable points included the evaluation and improvement of federal surveys, collaboration with Atlantic and Gulf commissions for survey implementation trials, and efforts to enhance MRIP team structures. Strengthening relationships with partners and addressing potential disruptions in management efforts due to continuous survey improvements were also discussed.

The Committee delved into the status of the MRIP For-Hire Survey, emphasizing the need for transition planning and a desire for GulfFIN committee members to actively contribute to survey design and implementation. The meeting also included an update on the Gulf Council's considerations to reinstate logbook reporting requirements for federally permitted charter vessels (SEFHIER program). Committee recommendations highlighted the importance of clear data needs, minimizing reporting burden, and ensuring effective coordination with existing surveys.

A presentation by **Marie Head** from ALDCNR showcased the use of BigFIN electronic measuring boards for at-sea observer programs, leading to increased data availability and productivity. Development efforts for the VESL Trip Ticket reporting systems were also discussed, with Florida, Texas, and Mississippi in full production and Louisiana in beta testing.

The Committee honored the late Charles "Charlie" Gardner, a dedicated field sampler for over 30 years, with a motion to forward a draft resolution to the GSMFC Technical Coordinating Committee for approval. The motion passed without opposition.

MOTION: Darrin Topping moved and it was seconded by Dan Ellinor that the Technical Coordinating Committee moves forwarding the draft resolution honoring Charles "Charlie" Gardner to the Commission for their consideration to approve.

Lastly, the Committee discussed the election of officers, considering a deferral to align with the timing of officers' elections for other GSMFC committees. It was suggested that the current chair and vice-chair serve one more term, with new officer elections slated for 2024, pending the decision of the current officers.

Crab

Jason Saucier reported on behalf of the Crab Subcommittee, offering a concise update with no action items. State representatives informed the committee about their work related to crabs using SuRF funds, with highlights provided by **VanderKooy**.

The NOAA Office of Protected Resources presented findings on stranded and dead sea turtles in the region. They sought input on potential interactions with blue crab trap gear, citing anecdotal accounts of sea turtles being encountered in traps. The subcommittee reassured them that, except for possibly hatchlings, the chance of Kemp's Ridley or others being encountered by crab fishermen was minimal. Reports of buoy lines along the Florida coast were noted, but members confirmed no known gear interactions with blue crab traps.

FWC reported potential changes to trap regulations concerning terrapins, including prohibiting take from the wild, requiring permits for possession, and mandating bycatch reduction devices (BRD). The department's decision involved requiring a permit and all recreational traps to include a 2x6 BRD/TED, backed by a study along the northeast Florida coast with promising results using a narrower and taller BRD design (2-2.5" x 3").

USM/GCRL presented an ongoing project focusing on quantifying and reducing discard mortality of undersized and ovigerous Blue Crabs in the Gulf. Another project aims to predict climate change impacts on Blue Crab growth, size at maturity, and reproductive output, with preliminary results indicating changes in growth and reproduction under higher temperatures. Both projects are set to run for two years.

State representatives provided summaries of derelict trap removals and future plans, with each state receiving a GOMA grant through GSMFC for trap removal in 2024. They also touched on landings, effort, and any regulatory changes since the last meeting.

In other business, **Harriet Perry** requested help recreating indices of abundance used for the GDAR01 stock assessment in 2011. Due to turnover in the committee and state agencies, the original data/index methodology is not readily available, and she hopes to revise the indices through 2023, with state representatives committed to assisting in the search for the needed information.

Molluscan Shellfish

Portia Sapp explained the group discussed comprehensive updates from each Gulf state on the status of public oyster resources, ongoing restoration efforts, and on- and off-bottom leasing activities.

In Texas, commercial oyster landings exhibited significant fluctuations over the past two decades, reaching a peak in 2020, but experiencing a recent record low in 2023. The number of active oyster vessels decreased from 485 in 2020 to 368 in 2023, with a notable 77% decrease in public reef landings in 2023 compared to the five-year average. Oyster restoration efforts included the restoration of 611 acres of oyster reef habitat through contracted cultch placement. Dealers are required to return 30% of harvested oysters or pay a \$1.32 per sack fee, resulting in \$1.2M in fees and 45,070 cubic yards of cultch placed in the bays by dealers as of September 2023.

Louisiana reported a historic low in oyster landings in 2020 but experienced a 78.2% increase in 2021 and further growth in 2022. Public seed grounds declined over the years, but recent cultch plantings led to an uptick in oyster numbers in 2023. The state initiated a new eReporting system providing real-time harvest data. Alternative off-bottom culture faced challenges due to market saturation, as outlined in a report from Louisiana Sea Grant.

Mississippi emphasized rebuilding the local oyster population impacted by environmental disasters, focusing on restoring oyster reefs for sustainable public harvesting. Projects, including oyster aquaculture, aim to increase production, support coastal communities, and ensure compliance with environmental requirements.

Alabama actively monitored oyster densities on public reefs, with data collected through SCUBA quadrat samples. Harvest began on October 2, 2023, using a grid system managed by the AMRD. Various projects, such as side scan mapping and cultch deployment studies, were funded to aid in the restoration of public oyster reefs. AMRD planted 5,390 cubic yards of #4 limestone in August 2023, supported by the Alabama Wildlife Federation.

In Florida, Apalachicola Bay remains closed until December 2025 due to ongoing depletion, but signs of recovery are observed in areas restored with Kentucky Limestone. The Florida Trustee Implementation Group is developing tools for restoration along the West coast, and aquaculture leases

are approaching 3,000 acres. The State Marine Aquaculture Coordinators Network collaborates with NOAA on a database summarizing state leasing information.

The meeting's final discussion focused on standardizing oyster reef assessment metrics and protocols across the Gulf states. Participants aimed to identify variations in data collection methods and emphasized the need for common metrics to assess oyster reef health. The group is considering a collaborative exercise to create universal metrics and a consistent reporting format for evaluating oyster reef health and potential for restoration and harvest.

SEAMAP

Ted Switzer started by explaining in FY2023, SEAMAP received an overall \$1.6 million increase in funding. The Gulf received approximately \$813K and has directed the funding towards expanding the SEAMAP Bottom Longline Survey off Florida, increased sampling in the Fall Shrimp/Groundfish Survey, and increased state participation in the Reef Fish Survey.

The Subcommittee spent the majority of their time reviewing all FY2023 sampling. A detailed review of all FY2023 sampling is contained within the SEAMAP Annual Report to the TCC that was emailed to TCC members prior to the meeting.

The Subcommittee also began planning 2024 sampling. SEAMAP Bottom Longline Survey will begin sampling off Florida in 2024. Next year, SEAMAP will use standardized bottom longline gear and protocols to sample the entire Gulf from Florida Bay to Brownsville, Texas during the three bottom longline sampling seasons. Other state partners began habitat mapping and reef fish video sampling this summer. Due to the different habitats that the state partners are sampling primarily standing and toppled oil platforms and artificial reefs, they used 2023 to determine the best camera configuration to sample reef fish off their coast. Several SEAMAP work group meetings will be scheduled in the next few months to finalize plans for 2024 sampling.

A major concern over the past few years has been the inability of NOAA's Office of Marine and Aviation Operations (OMAO) to deploy the NOAA vessels during scheduled NMFS research surveys. A significant number of days at sea have been lost due to unavailable crew, staffing issues, and lack of general ship readiness. These lost days at sea are having serious impacts on NMFS's ability to collect data needed to help manage Gulf of Mexico fisheries. This is not just a Gulf of Mexico issue as several NMFS surveys nationwide have been cancelled over the past few years. The SEAMAP Subcommittee is currently drafting a letter to OMAO detailing our concerns. The SEAMAP Subcommittee is seeking the TCC's approval to send the letter to OMAO. Once the letter has been finalized by the Subcommittee, the Subcommittee will send it to the Commissioner's for their review and approval before sending it to OMAO.

MOTION: Jason Froeba moved and it was seconded by Rick Burris to approve the SEAMAP Subcommittee to draft a letter to the Rear Admiral of the OMAO concerning lost days at-sea over the past several years for review by the Technical Coordinating Committee prior to forwarding to the Commission. Motion passed with no opposition.

State/Federal Highlights

With little time to provide detailed highlights from each state, the Chair referred members to the detailed state reports that were emailed to members prior to the meeting and encouraged members to read through those.

Other Business

No other business was discussed during this section of the meeting.

MOTION: Chris Mace moved and it was seconded by Jason Froeba to adjourn the meeting at approximately 5:00 p.m. Motion passed with no opposition.