

Lyles-Simpson Award Recipient



2026

Jerry H. Sansom

It is with great pleasure that the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission presents this year's Lyles-Simpson Award to Jerry Sansom. This prestigious award is presented annually to an individual, agency, or organization which has contributed to the betterment of the fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico through significant biological, industrial, legislative, enforcement, or administrative activities.

Jerry H. Sansom devoted nearly half a century to Florida's commercial fishing industry, marine resources, and coastal communities. A marine scientist, government relations consultant, advocate, sailor, pilot, and lifelong student of the water, Sansom became one of the most influential voices for Florida's individual commercial fishermen during a period of enormous change in the state's fisheries and coastal communities.

Born in Gadsden, Alabama, in 1947, Jerry moved with his parents, Wilburn "Red" Sansom and Maxine Searles Sansom, to Pensacola before his first birthday. He grew up along the bayous and around the waters of Pensacola, an experience that fostered his lifelong interest in fishing, boating, sailing, and the marine environment. He graduated from Escambia High School in 1965 and attended Pensacola Junior College, where he earned an associate degree in 1967. He was active on the college sailing team and met his future wife, Dixie Newton, through the sailing club. He subsequently attended Florida State University, earning a bachelor's degree in biology in 1969.

Jerry and Dixie moved to Brevard County after his graduation from Florida State. He began his professional career as a marine science and research instructor at Satellite High School while earning a master's degree in Marine Science Education from the Florida Institute of Technology. He also played a role in establishing the first Earth Day activities in Brevard County. His scientific education would remain an important part of his career,

giving him an unusual ability to communicate with both commercial fishermen and scientists, resource managers, legislators, and government officials.

Before entering fisheries advocacy full time, Sansom worked in marine industries and government affairs. He eventually became involved in lobbying and governmental affairs for Florida's marine interests. In 1978, he accepted the position of executive director of the Organized Fishermen of Florida (OFF). What he initially expected might be a relatively short-term career proved to be the defining work of his life.

For more than four decades, Sansom represented individual commercial fishermen and fishing communities throughout Florida. A 1995 international fisheries publication noted that, during his first 17 years with OFF, he had been appointed to two terms on the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and had helped develop many of the original federal fishery management plans affecting Florida waters. The same account stated that he had drafted or participated in the implementation of virtually every Florida fisheries law or agency rule enacted since he joined OFF in 1978.

Sansom's approach to fisheries advocacy was grounded in both science and practical experience. He repeatedly emphasized that conservation and access to the resource were not mutually exclusive. As he later explained, his objective was to "protect the resource so you always have it there, and guarantee access to the commercial side and consumers." He also maintained a simple rule for OFF: "We won't go for anything that's not biologically sound." His scientific background allowed him to translate between fishermen and the agencies responsible for managing fisheries.

During the 1980s, Sansom and OFF became involved in efforts to address crowding and competition in Florida's

spiny lobster fishery. Working with fishermen, scientists, and other stakeholders, they helped develop a transferable trap-reduction system. Fisheries policy scholar Michael Orbach later described the effort as an early example of collaborative fisheries management. The program ultimately reduced the number of traps in the fishery by approximately two-thirds over a decade while maintaining the catch. Orbach credited Sansom with helping bring fishermen, scientists, and policymakers together to develop a workable solution.

The most difficult period of Sansom's career came in the 1990s during Florida's battle over entanglement nets. In November 1994, Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment banning entanglement nets in nearshore and inshore waters. The measure profoundly affected commercial fishermen, particularly those participating in the traditional mullet fishery. Sansom became one of the principal advocates for fishermen facing the economic consequences of the new restrictions. He warned that many full-time fishermen had few alternatives for supporting their families and worked to obtain assistance for those displaced by the ban. According to Sansom, OFF successfully advocated for a \$40 million state program for job training and gear buy-backs during the transition.

Sansom's influence extended well beyond commercial fishing. He served on the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, the Florida Ocean Policy Board, the Governor's Coastal Resources Citizens Advisory Committee, and the Florida Inland Navigation District, including service as chairman. He served more than 18 years as a trustee of the Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute and was involved with the Brevard Cultural Alliance and Marine Resources Council of East Central Florida. He also served on the Titusville-Cocoa Airport Authority, including as chairman, and worked as a governmental affairs consultant for municipalities, aerospace organizations, universities, and private companies throughout Florida.

His interests outside of work reflected the same connection to the water and the outdoors that characterized his professional life. Jerry was an accomplished sailor and pilot. He and Dixie spent five years living aboard a 32-foot wooden ketch with their three cats. He later earned his pilot's license and instrument rating and owned a Piper Arrow, which he used to travel throughout Florida to meet fishermen, clients, and government officials. He was also a motorcycle enthusiast, enjoyed restoring old houses, and remained fascinated by boats and marine technology.

In 2022, Sansom was selected as a National Fisherman Highliner, an honor recognizing his decades of service to the commercial fishing industry. By then, he had spent nearly half a century as the public face and voice of Florida's independent commercial fishermen. He retired from the executive director position in 2022, but continued to provide institutional knowledge and guidance to OFF and remained active in Florida ocean and coastal affairs.

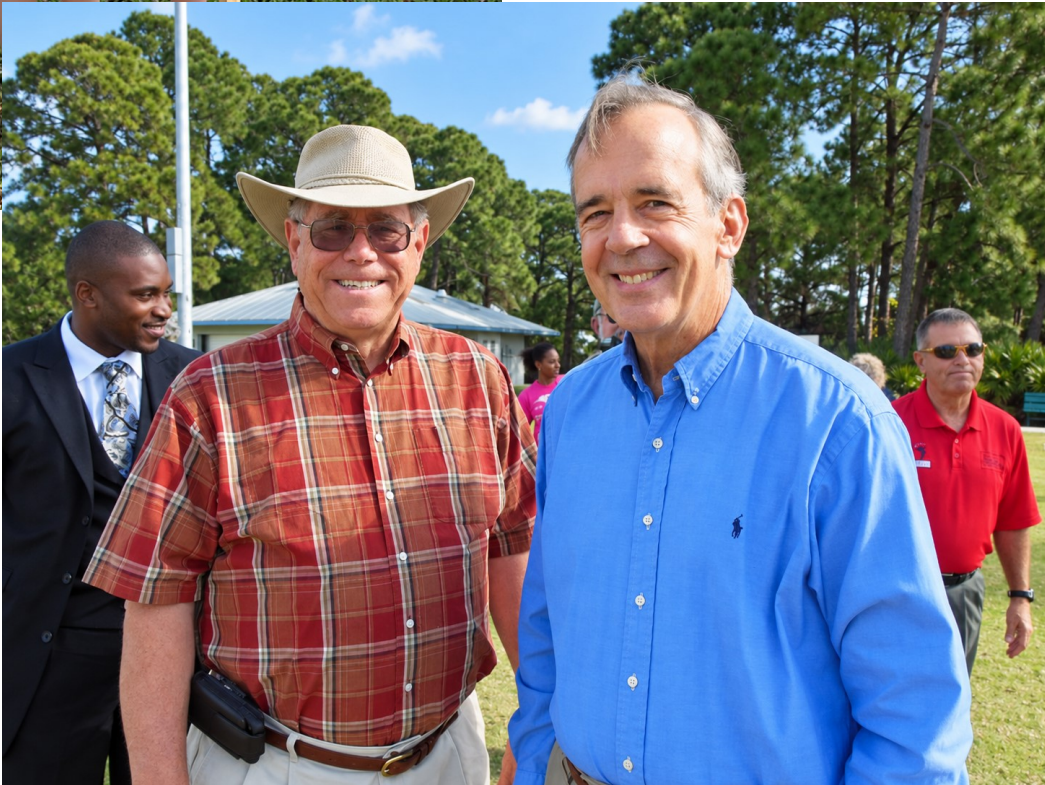
Jerry's career coincided with some of the most consequential changes in Florida's commercial fisheries. Through decades of legislation, regulation, political conflict, conservation debates, and changes in coastal communities, he remained committed to the idea that commercial fishermen were an important part of Florida's heritage and economy and that fisheries management should be grounded in sound science. His legacy is found not simply in the policies he helped shape, but in the generations of fishermen, scientists, managers, legislators, and coastal communities with whom he worked. For those who knew him, Jerry Sansom was much more than an advocate for fishermen. He was a bridge between the people who made their living on the water and the institutions responsible for managing the resources on which they depended.

For all of these accomplishments and his years of service the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission is proud to present this year's Lyles-Simpson Award to such a worthy recipient.













Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission Past Lyles-Simpson Award Recipients

<i>Charles H. Lyles</i>	<i>1984</i>
<i>Theodore B. Ford</i>	<i>1985</i>
<i>J.Y. Christmas</i>	<i>1986</i>
<i>John Breaux</i>	<i>1987</i>
<i>John Ray Nelson</i>	<i>1988</i>
<i>I.B. "Buck" Byrd</i>	<i>1989</i>
<i>Hugh A. Swingle</i>	<i>1990</i>
<i>John A. Mehos</i>	<i>1991</i>
<i>J. Burton Angelle</i>	<i>1992</i>
<i>Louis A. Villanova</i>	<i>1993</i>
<i>Theodore H. Shepard</i>	<i>1994</i>
<i>Edwin A. Joyce, Jr.</i>	<i>1995</i>
<i>Tommy D. Candies</i>	<i>1996</i>
<i>Walter M. Tatum</i>	<i>1997</i>
<i>Thomas L. Heffernan</i>	<i>1998</i>
<i>Trent Lott</i>	<i>1999</i>
<i>James M. Barkuloo</i>	<i>2000</i>
<i>Walter W. Fondren, III</i>	<i>2001</i>
<i>Jerald K. Waller</i>	<i>2002</i>
<i>Andrew J. Kemmerer</i>	<i>2003</i>
<i>Hal R. Osborn</i>	<i>2004</i>
<i>Leroy Kiffe</i>	<i>2005</i>
<i>Robert P. Jones</i>	<i>2006</i>
<i>Wayne E. Swingle</i>	<i>2007</i>
<i>Ralph Rayburn</i>	<i>2008</i>
<i>William S. "Corky" Perret</i>	<i>2009</i>
<i>Albert L. King</i>	<i>2010</i>
<i>Virginia A. Vail</i>	<i>2011</i>
<i>R. Vernon Minton</i>	<i>2012</i>
<i>Larry B. Simpson</i>	<i>2013</i>
<i>Michael C. Voisin</i>	<i>2014</i>
<i>Ellie Francisco Roche</i>	<i>2015</i>
<i>Michael S. Ray</i>	<i>2016</i>
<i>Joseph I. Gill, Jr.</i>	<i>2017</i>
<i>Christopher M. Blankenship</i>	<i>2018</i>
<i>William Borden Wallace</i>	<i>2019</i>
<i>Harriet M. Perry</i>	<i>2020</i>
<i>Thomas D. McIlwain</i>	<i>2022</i>
<i>Joseph A. Shepard</i>	<i>2023</i>
<i>Gary L. Graham</i>	<i>2024</i>
<i>Lance Robinson</i>	<i>2025</i>