

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Updated List of Fishery Monitoring and Research Priorities for 2020-2024

The following list of research and monitoring priorities is organized in four main sections: (i) broad multi-purpose research, monitoring, and survey programs; (ii) fish biology and stock status concerns; (iii) social, cultural, and economic concerns; and (iv) ecosystem considerations. The first section contains recommendations for research, monitoring and survey programs, socioeconomic issues, and ecosystem-based management concerns. Additional priorities for socioeconomics are in **Section III**, and those for ecosystem management are in **Section IV**. As per the request from NOAA/NMFS, the research and monitoring priorities indicated in **Section I** are ranked and labeled using the following priority code:

Priority Codes:

- A:** Highest Priority – Surveys to meet critical needs for stock assessments and management.
- B:** 2nd Priority – Surveys to improve indices of abundance, life history, or human dimension data that complements priority A.
- C:** 3rd Priority – Surveys to characterize stocks or parameters for assessments.

I. Priorities associated with broad, multi-purpose research and monitoring programs aimed at collecting a variety of data for a number of species.

- a. Fishery-Independent Sampling:** Expand Gulf-wide, fisheries-independent monitoring programs to enhance the capacity to associate fisheries data with: environmental data, habitat quality and abundance, and physical oceanographic parameters. Particular emphasis should be placed on the expansion and enhancement of the SEAMAP Reef Fish Video Survey, the NMFS Panama City Laboratory Reef Fish Video Survey, and the SEAMAP Groundfish Trawl Survey in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. Additional Gulf-wide vertical, bottom longline, video, visual, and larval survey efforts are needed to better inform stock-recruit relationship determination efforts in stock assessments. Moreover, expanded sampling efforts should be implemented to enhance physical and biological sampling that allows development of long-term time series of physical, biological, and chemical oceanographic data for use in future ecosystem-based modeling approaches. **Priority Code: A**
- b. Fishery Monitoring and Research – Socioeconomic Parameters:** Develop a longitudinal human dimensions study to examine and monitor change over time among recreational and commercial fishermen and communities, including a comprehensive survey of individuals (or fishermen panel studies) throughout the Gulf of Mexico which should be repeated periodically (e.g., as an add-on survey to MRIP, for the recreational sector). By providing a series of snapshots over time, socioeconomic change can be studied, understood, and applied to management. In addition to basic socio-demographic characteristics of commercial and recreational fishermen (such as age, gender, income, boat ownership, fishing mode, and experience), additional components to evaluate include:

- Angler attitudes, motivations and satisfaction, management preferences, attitudes toward catch and release, expenditures, and perceptions of resource health.
 - Survey of engagement and reliance/dependence on marine fisheries. For commercial fishermen, indicators include information about the proportions of their household incomes derived from marine fisheries. For recreational fishermen, indicators include information about how often they participate in marine fishing compared to other recreational activities.
 - Census of employees at fish dealers and processors.
 - Census of captains and crew of reef fish and CMP commercial permitted vessels.
 - Census of captains and crew of federally permitted for-hire vessels.
 - Update census, landings, and permit data included in fishing community profiles.
 - Identify potential populations of Environmental Justice concern. **Priority Code: A**
- c. **Fishery-Dependent Monitoring and Sampling:** Enhance existing recreational (i.e., for-hire and private/rental components) and commercial fishery-dependent sampling programs. Specifically, improve temporal/spatial coverage (ideally Gulf-wide and potentially including international fisheries such as Mexico), distribution of ex-vessel prices by size class, increase collection of ageing structures and tissues to support life history studies and catch-at-age analyses, particularly for data-poor stocks. Develop and implement an effective and efficient electronic data reporting system for the recreational components of the fishing community, specifically the charter for-hire vessels. **Priority Code: A**
- d. **Estimation of Bycatch:** To improve stock assessments, implement more comprehensive species identification and abundance information for reef fish and CMPs harvested as shrimp trawl bycatch. Continue collecting information on bycatch from reef fish and CMP fisheries for all vertical line and bottom longline gear types in order to disseminate practical methods for minimizing bycatch, including through state-facilitated recreational landings and effort surveys. Observers and observer coverage continues to be a critical part of monitoring fishing effort, shrimp-trawl bycatch estimation, interactions with endangered species, and fishing gears. As such, this plays an important role for *in situ* data collection and validation, discard mortality estimates, and catch-per-unit-effort estimations. **Priority Code: A**
- e. **Estimation of Discards:** Develop research and monitoring programs to evaluate the magnitude and effects of discard mortality rates (both commercial and recreational), and disseminate practical methods for minimizing mortality. The estimation of the total number of discards requires a continued expansion of fishery observer programs, in some cases by adding observer personnel and in others (small or unsafe vessels) by use of innovative technologies (cameras, phone/tablet applications). Better information regarding discard estimation is a priority across all components of the commercial and for-hire industries and the private recreational sector. Continue development of methodologies to improve the accuracy of discard data for all relevant fleets. **Priority Code: A**
- f. **Ecosystem-Based Management – Data Collection Priorities:** As the Council moves toward incorporating an ecosystem-based approach to management, the following data collection and analyses are needed.

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A. Data Needs

- Human components (social and economic inputs), including land use and environmental change.
- Simulation or prioritization exercise for changes in fishing behaviors (such as changes in response to stock size, regulation, profitability).
- Biotic components (coastal habitat, coral, algal/zooplankton, fishery, etc.).
- Ecosystem components (valuation of ecosystem services, nutrient cycling, ecosystem management, ecosystem restoration, marine spatial planning).
- Physical components (GIS database development/mapping of habitat, climatology, geographic and oceanographic variables). **Priority Code: B**

B. Ecological Relationships, Linkages and Networks

- Habitat mapping, quality assessment, species utilization and alterations
- Community structure/fish assemblage analysis and resilience
- **Understanding of predator-prey and competitive interactions for ecosystem-based management**
- Analysis of ecosystem network and interactions
- Monitoring and research on Marine Protected Areas
- Development of biological and physical indicators including:
 - fish recruitment, distribution, and migration;
 - ecosystem community structure;
 - annual fish growth patterns from length-at-age data;
 - fishery production and other mortalities;
 - primary and secondary production;
 - invasive species (e.g., lionfish, orange cup coral, Asian tiger prawns) distribution, and interactions and effects;
 - remote sensing and oceanographic measurements;
 - large-scale atmospheric and oceanic fields (both time series and derived products); and
 - climate and environmental variability.
- Development of social and economic indicators including assessment methodologies for the potential social and economic effects of an ecosystem-based fisheries management plan. **Priority Code: B**

g. Discard Mortality Changes: Determine changes in regulatory discards or catch-and-release fishing of target species and subsequent deviations in discard mortalities resulting from changes in fishermen's behavior from regulatory modifications such as seasonal closures, area closures, industry quotas, trip limits, minimum size limits, etc. This research recommendation is related to research recommendation number 4 under Economic and Socio-cultural Recommendations, except that the emphasis is on how the changes in fishermen's behavior affect discard mortality rates, rather than how supply and production functions are affected. **Priority Code: B**

h. Episodic Mortality Events: Determine effects of episodic mortality events on specific species and groups. Examples of known events include red tide (2005, 2014, 2017-18), atypical weather conditions (2010 cold weather period), and the *Deepwater Horizon* MC252 oil spill (2010). Develop metrics for incorporating the effects of such events into abundance index calculations (e.g., 2005 red tide input into models as a discard fleet). Work towards refining predictive abilities to generally estimate the

potential effects of such events in the future. **Priority Code: B**

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- i. **Large-scale Tagging Program:** Continue support of large-scale tagging programs (conventional external tags, PIT tags, telemetry, and genetic tagging methods) aiming to better quantify fishing mortality rates, movements, and improve estimates of natural mortality. **Priority Code: C**

II. Priorities associated with individual species or specific research topics.

Each species listed in this section has identified research needs provided by SEDAR workshop panel recommendations or peer-reviewed literature and is assigned a priority code as indicated below. Priority was given to species currently in a rebuilding plan. This list includes some species jointly assessed across the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils' jurisdictions, but is not a comprehensive list of all species managed by the Gulf Council. In some cases research needs for each species are to be addressed by the broad-based research and monitoring programs described in **Section I** above. Additional research needs are listed individually under each species, when applicable.

The research and monitoring priorities indicated in **Section II** are ranked by the priority code that follows:

Priority Codes:

A: Highest Priority – Stocks designated as overfished AND undergoing overfishing or in critical need of an assessment.

B: 2nd Priority – Stocks designated as overfished OR undergoing overfishing or in need of an assessment.

C: 3rd Priority – Stocks with SEDAR assessments scheduled but not classified A or B.

D: Not yet prioritized – Criteria needed to prioritize non-SEDAR recommendations

1. Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper – Priority Code: A

- Research to characterize the effects of the *Deepwater Horizon* MC252 oil spill is recommended to better inform episodic mortality estimates for future stock assessments.
- Continued research is recommended to estimate the use and effect of artificial reef structures in the Gulf of Mexico on red snapper population abundance, age and length composition, and spatial distribution.
- Research on the ecological effects of population expansion in the eastern Gulf of Mexico focusing on interactions with other species such as gag and vermilion snapper.
- Investigate sampling methodology and index standardization methods for the NMFS Bottom Longline Survey, along with a hook-type comparison to explore hook-type effects.
- Clarify regional reproductive and demographic differences and, as importantly, trends over time.
- Improve recreational discard estimates and obtain age composition samples to help estimate selectivity patterns in the assessment.
- Explore the use of the relative magnitude of estimated charter and private boat discards to appropriately weight available length composition data from FWC observer survey program within the combined charter-private boat fleet.
- Explore removal of CPUE indices from the red snapper assessment.
- Evaluate the use of the SEAMAP vertical line survey in the red snapper assessment as the time series expands.

- Explore and update the modal analysis methods used to determine the age composition of the SEAMAP groundfish trawl survey length frequency and the shrimp bycatch observer length frequency.
- Investigate fitting length composition data directly within the SS3 model as opposed to developing age-length keys and converting length frequency to age composition external to the modeling process.
- Explore alternate parametrizations of the stock-recruit function and/or develop informative priors for these parameters.
- Incorporate the Connectivity Modeling Simulation recruitment index into the base model and investigate ways to use the index to improve recruitment forecasting in the projections.
- Explore the potential for developing a fully spatial model of red snapper that can account for differential recruitment and life history patterns across the Gulf of Mexico including differential dynamics on and around artificial versus natural reef habitat.

2. **Gulf of Mexico Greater Amberjack - Priority Code: A**

- Additional age and growth studies using validation methods such as mark-recapture to verify annuli and size-at-age composition.
- Continued work on reproductive biology including size of females at maturity using consistent techniques Gulf-wide.
- Continued work on discard mortality Gulf-wide comparing the use of artificial versus live baits using consistent techniques.
- Investigate the potential for including a new GLM factor that accounts for management regulations, which have resulted in shortened greater amberjack fishing seasons.
- Remote sensing or other survey methods of determining spatiotemporal variations of Sargassum coverage in the Gulf of Mexico, particularly during the spawning season, and any correlations to recruitment success for greater amberjack.

3. **Gulf of Mexico Gray Triggerfish - Priority Code: A**

- Additional aging studies that possibly include radiocarbon dating or mark-recapture with staining to verify annuli formation in spines.
- Studies on the catchability of the dominant males during spawning season when they are in harem groups, and potential reproductive limitations if the dominant males are removed.
- Movement studies, particularly during the spawning season, to better understand spawning behaviors. For example, it is unknown whether fish return to particular reef sites during the spawning season.
- Remote sensing or other survey methods of determining spatiotemporal variations of Sargassum coverage in the Gulf of Mexico, particularly during the spawning season, and any correlations to recruitment success for gray triggerfish.

4. **Gulf of Mexico Gag - Priority Code: B**

- Additional research on the number, location, and persistence of spawning aggregations should be obtained and presented in future assessments to identify essential habitat.
- Continue genetics research to determine connectivity among different regions.
- Environmental factors (when possible) should be considered in future index standardization procedures, particularly for spawner-recruit relationships regarding the 2014 red tide event.

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- The mature sex ratio needs to be observed, from which it may also be possible to calculate information about male fertility and the number of sperm required for successful fertilization. Methods to estimate “skip spawning” by female gag should also be further investigated.
- Continue studies to evaluate the efficacy of marine reserves located on the west Florida shelf (i.e., Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps) focusing on sex ratios and movement inside and outside the reserves.

5. Hogfish - Priority Code: B

- Improve data collection techniques that focus on the three-stock nature of hogfish in the southeastern United States; specifically, include fishery-dependent sampling methodologies that would intercept landed fish to achieve better estimates of age and length observations.
- Continue improving fishery-independent survey design to better estimate indices of abundance, particularly for juveniles.
- Continue studies on reproductive behavior and contribution of males to the spawning potential of the stocks.
- Explore differences in growth, maturity, and fecundity between the Florida Keys/East Florida and West Florida stocks, and how these may be influenced by fishing pressure.
- Improve biostatistical sampling of hogfish from fishery-dependent sources for both length and age observations.
- Develop a life history study to ascertain the contribution of males to spawning reproductive potential (SRP). Appropriate determination of male contribution will provide more certainty in modeling reproduction, which has a strong influence on stock status and could be instrumental in designing appropriate management regulations with respect to size limits to protect the spawning biomass.

6. Tilefishes - Priority Code: C

- Studies on the catchability of the dominant males during spawning.
- All basic biological and fishery data to improve the ability to assess both golden tilefish and blueline (gray) tilefish.

7. South Atlantic/Gulf of Mexico Goliath Grouper - Priority Code: C

- Better geographic information on indices of abundance outside the State of Florida (historical Gulf-wide range versus south Florida).
- Research and monitoring of stock structure of the population, particularly age composition and close-kin genetic analyses.
- Obtaining and quantifying information on historical abundance, perhaps via old logbooks.
- Additional research and quantification of sources of discard mortality including illegal harvest.
- Research on abundance and distribution in mangroves over several years, documenting changes in available nursery habitat and annual variation (goliath grouper spend their first 6-7 years in mangrove areas - sometimes attaining as much as 50 lbs).
- Evaluate whether goliath grouper change sex.
- Research on the number, location, and persistence of spawning aggregations in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Evaluate the level of toxins such as methylmercury in adults.

8. Gulf of Mexico Red Grouper - Priority Code: C

- Continue studies on fecundity and spawning frequency by age.
- Incorporate a spatial-temporal design to improve estimates of reproductive potential and spawning patterns to better understand and discriminate between annual asynchrony in spawning (skipped spawning) and seasonal asynchrony in spawning.
- Length/age composition data are needed for determining lengths/ages susceptibility to red tide severity. Existing indices of red tide severity should be updated. Procedures for incorporating red tide indices into Stock Synthesis should be critically evaluated. The statistical properties of red tide indices should be characterized for use in simulations and assessment projections.
- Future modeling efforts should aim to address whether red grouper moves in response to red tide events or if elevated natural mortality is experienced during these episodic events.
- The CMS index should be extended to cover 2014 to provide insight into potential recruitment for the first year of projections.
- Enhance fish kill reporting, particularly in offshore regions.

9. South Atlantic/Gulf of Mexico Yellowtail Snapper - Priority Code: C

- Continue research and development on the reef visual census before use as a fishery-independent abundance index.
- Studies on discard mortality comparing the use of circle hooks versus J-hooks.

10. Vermilion Snapper - Priority Code: C

- Early life history information for juveniles, such as size and age at recruitment to benthic habitat.
- Reproductive behavior, productivity, and habitat association are needed.
- Movement and diet studies are an important part of understanding this species role within the ecosystem in the Gulf of Mexico. Understanding predator-prey and competitive interactions with red snapper will be critical as the Council moves forward with ecosystem-based management.

11. Yellowedge Grouper - Priority Code: C

- Continued studies on early life history information for juveniles.
- Adult distribution and associated habitat.
- Studies on spawning aggregations, reproductive behavior, and locations.

12. South Atlantic/Gulf of Mexico Black Grouper - Priority Code: B

- Juvenile habitat associations, and size and age of recruitment.
- Identify locations of spawning aggregations, reproductive behavior, and associated habitat.
- Characterize species identification issues within landings, discards, observer data, and other data streams. Develop methods for discerning black grouper from gag grouper in these datasets.

13. Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico King Mackerel - Priority Code: C

- Field studies are needed to develop or improve batch fecundity, spawning frequency, and age specific fecundity estimates.
- Continued studies on stock mixing including mark-recapture efforts and analyses of

- otolith shape and microchemistry.
- Need to increase collaboration with international stakeholders. Data from Mexican catches should be obtained and quantified for better understanding of eastern and western stock components.

14. Red Drum - Priority Code: C

- Studies are needed to determine age composition for spawning red drum in federal waters.
- Indices of abundance are needed to provide abundance estimates of the adult stock, with consideration given to mark-recapture and/or close-kin analyses.
- Implement a Gulf-wide tagging program with 20,000 tags and 30 satellite tags.

15. Royal Red Shrimp - Priority Code: D

- Habitat and distribution of adults and, to the extent possible, juveniles.
- Reproductive patterns of adults such as spawning seasons and productivity.
- Research to characterize the effects of the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill on distribution and populations.

Research and monitoring priorities indicated in **Sections III** and **IV** are ranked and labeled using the following priority codes:

Priority Codes:

A: Highest Priority – Critical research and data needs for socio-economic analyses.

B: 2nd Priority – Supplementary data collection and research needs.

C: 3rd Priority – Longer term data needs and research efforts.

III. Economic and Social Recommendations

Over the next 5 years and beyond, fishery management challenges will increasingly pertain to the human environment resulting in social and economic effects. Addressing socio-economic issues such as maximizing fishing opportunities under finite quotas and allocating scarce resources among competing user groups requires a better understanding of the human environment.

- (1) Estimate the effect of proposed management alternatives on recreational fishing. Estimate suitable recreational benefit functions and participation rates by fishery and mode of fishing (private boats, charter boats, headboats) to evaluate the economic effects of regulations for recreational fisheries such as (but not necessarily limited to): minimum size limits, bag limits, quotas, seasonal closures, and marine reserves. Economic effects include changes in economic surpluses (consumer surplus for fishermen, producer surplus for charter and headboats), levels of fishing effort and catch, and switching behavior among target species and other forms of recreational activities in response to regulation. **Priority Code: A**
- (2) Development of regional input-output models and the data needed to make them operational. Economic impact models characterize the linkages between industries in regional economies and can be used to estimate the effects of fishery regulations or environmental events such as major hurricanes or red tides as they ripple through state and regional economies for all sectors of the fishery. A research priority is to make the models operational by conducting an economic survey of fishing-related businesses to quantify the linkages between them. Fishing-related businesses include suppliers of inputs to fishermen and marketing channels for commercially landed fish. The data collection should focus on revenues,

expenditures, employment data, and firm characteristics. These data become the inputs to regional impact models that calculate the direct and indirect effects of changes in allowable harvests or environmental events on employment and income. **Priority Code: A**

- (3) Development of methodologies to assess the cumulative economic and social impacts of individual fishing quota management on Gulf of Mexico fisheries. **Priority Code: A**
- (4) Estimate fishing behavioral models, including effort, supply, and production functions for the commercial and for-hire sectors. Specific attention should be given to species targeting behavior, and seasonal and spatial decisions. The intent of this research is to determine how fishermen change their fishing practice and strategies, including what species to target in response to changes in management tools such as seasonal closures, area closures, industry quotas, trip limits, minimum size limits, etc. This includes switching behavior among fishing activities and the rates at which boats enter or exit the fishery, as well as changes in fishing practice by non-quota holders following implementation of catch share programs. **Priority Code: A**
- (5) Continue the development of social and economic indicators, such as those employing factors of vulnerability and resilience. Develop scales to use socioeconomic indicators as triggers for evaluation of fishery management decisions (e.g., allocation, fishing zones, etc.). **Priority Code: A**
- (6) Evaluate the social and economic impacts of ecosystem management on the various categories of stakeholders to support National Standard 8 of the Magnuson-Stevens Act in regard to the impact of an ecosystem approach on fishing communities. **Priority Code: A**
- (7) Develop quantitative models for evaluating social and economic impacts of allocation or reallocation decisions. Evaluate the appropriateness of various incentive-based approaches for the management of recreational fisheries and assess their socioeconomic effects. **Priority Code: B**
- (8) Identify all ecosystem stakeholders and assess the relationship between the ecosystem (of which fisheries are a part) and these stakeholders (i.e., how the various stakeholder interactions with the broader ecosystem affect the fishery, and conversely, how changes in the ecosystem or fishery will affect stakeholders). Develop a historical model that integrates the array of relevant human activities to ecosystem management in a way that is meaningful. **Priority Code: B**
- (9) Develop methods to assess land-use changes and the impact of land-use change on vulnerable human populations and marine ecosystems. **Priority Code: C**

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IV. Ecosystem-Based Management Recommendations

The short-term goal is the continued development of predictive ecosystem models to project fisheries productivity, assess uncertainty in stock assessments, improve single-species management, and evaluate impacts of proposed management actions from an ecosystem perspective. The long-term goal is to develop data and methods to conduct integrated ecosystem assessments (IEAs) for the Gulf of Mexico, and to provide the necessary information to effectively adapt management to mitigate the ecological, social, and economic impacts of major shifts in the

productivity and mortality of living marine resources.

Ecosystem Model Development: - Priority Code: C

The development of an ecosystem model uses the ranking for the previous three sections' priorities, because this item builds upon the previous data collection and research needs outlined above.

Develop predictive models for ecosystem assessment and to project/forecast fish productivity based on:

- Developing models to conduct IEAs as discussed in NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-NWFSC-92;
- Anthropogenic factors (e.g., current and planned fishing activities, coastal development);
- Physical habitat and natural forcing events (e.g., hurricanes, ocean features, short-term climatic changes/ENSO events, dry/wet years)
- Trophic dynamics/networks, ocean productivity, interaction with protected species, and introduction of invasive species;
- Habitat availability and quality;
- Long-term climate change and its relationship with the interaction of anthropogenic factors, physical habitat, trophic dynamics, and habitat availability;
- Descriptive models that provide a snapshot of the ecosystem (e.g., Ecopath/Ecosim, Atlantis);
- “Nowcasting”/“Forecasting” Models (e.g., Multispecies Virtual Population Analysis (MSVPA), Very Large Individual Based Models (IBMs), and Agent-Based Models) which provide useful interface with stock assessment/fishery management, and a way to evaluate possibilities for policy/decision-making. Components of Ecosystem Forecasting include: Review and evaluation of current tools; tool development and model tuning; and tool application and evaluation. Components of Ecosystem Monitoring include: Data and communication portal development; continuing assessment need for EBM; and incorporating climate change;
- Identifying opportunities and strategies for collaborative management of resources that are outside the jurisdiction of NOAA Fisheries but affect fishery stocks (e.g., freshwater inflows, non-point source pollution, human dimensions, loss of habitat such as marshes);
- Develop methods to incorporate other significant stakeholders (i.e., municipalities, authorities, and state governments) into the ecosystem management process; and
- Identify environmental justice issues related to ecosystem management.