

# SAFMC Staff Report

September 2025

## Best Fishing Practices (BFP)

- Staff attended ICAST, with a portion of the booth focusing on best fishing practices. Staff participated in Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)'s Donuts and Descending Devices event for the fourth year and led an interactive trivia component to engage attendees further. The BFP Outreach Specialist (OS) coordinated with the eight participating booths (FWC, SAFMC, Return 'Em Right, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR), Guy Harvey Foundation, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Sea Grant, and The Nature Conservancy) by creating a list of trivia questions for each booth, providing them with the needed instructions and gear, and ensuring the trivia portion of the two-hour event went smoothly.
- The BFP OS coordinated a visit with the U.S. Coast Guard Southeast Regional Fisheries Training Center Commanding Officer, Executive Officer, Chief, and boarding officer instructors. BFP, Citizen Science, and outreach staff provided a presentation including information on the Council process and information specific to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, outreach strategies, the Best Fishing Practices Campaign, and the Citizen Science Program. Council staff and Coast Guard personnel discussed opportunities to collaborate, including an invitation for Council staff to sit in on a training session with new boarding officers.
- The BFP OS and Sea Grant Reef Fish Fellow produced a [Best Fishing Practices FAQ](#) to address commonly asked questions relating to best fishing and release practices and provided scientific research papers in many of the answers.
- BFP staff continue to participate in collaboration meetings with the Descending Device Core Team which consists of partners from FWC, Return 'Em Right, SCDNR, North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF), and The Nature Conservancy.

## *Sea Grant Reef Fish Fellowship*

- Greyson Webb wrapped up her year as the South Atlantic Reef Fish Extension and Communication Fellow at the end of August 2025. A new fellow will be hired for a six-month term in the coming weeks. The grant funding the Fellowship will officially come to an end in August 2026. Below is a summary of Greyson's achievements over the last year of the fellowship:
  - Reviewed the existing tackle shop database and identified high priority areas in the South Atlantic that had tackle shops which had not been visited in 2-4 years for outreach. The fellow personally visited **25 tackle shops** throughout SC and NC with the high priority tackle shop list providing guidance for outreach conducted by other staff members in GA and FL.

- Assisted Council staff with in-person outreach efforts including giving presentations on best fishing practices and fisheries management at eleven different fishing clubs and industry events across the South Atlantic states.
- Produced nine articles, with two more in press, relevant to the objectives of the position, highlighting best fishing practices, citizen science projects, and South Atlantic fisheries management. **A list of the articles with links to online content can be found at the end of the staff report.**
- Provided support to projects in the SAFMC’s citizen science program, particularly the SAFMC Release project, including continuing the SAFMC Release Participant Recognition Program and the developing the new Sea Grant South Atlantic Release Rodeo (further details under the Citizen Science section below).
- Coordinated Sea Grant media trips that highlighted best fishing practices and citizen science in action, arranging opportunities for community leaders to participate in offshore fishing trips while documenting their engagement with these initiatives. **This included a partnered media with the well-known lure and tackle company Z-Man Fishing Products and professional videographers from Keen Eye Marketing.** The final cut of the video from that day is currently being wrapped up and will be distributed across Z-Man channels (397K Instagram followers, 400K Facebook followers, 34K YouTube followers) shortly with further promotion by Sea Grant, Keen Eye Marketing, and Captain Mike Illig.

### “What It Means to Me”

The BFP OS and Digital Media and Communications Specialist continue filming, editing, and releasing videos for the ‘What It Means to Me’ series. Haley Stephens of the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel was filmed for the series in June, and staff will begin editing the video soon. **A fifth video featuring Council member Robert Spottswood Jr. is set to be released prior to the September Council meeting** and can be found here once released: <https://safmc.net/what-it-means-to-me-video-project/>.

### Website and Digital Communications Updates

- Finalized FishRules/FishBrain contract
- Commenced work on developing a logo for the MSA 50th Anniversary
- Working on a multi-organizational team to coordinate outreach for ongoing SSMZ research.
- Planned and attended ICAST
- Website development:
  - Developed [Executive Order webpage](#)
  - Continued general website maintenance, posting meetings, pages, and news.
  - Continued public comment upkeep.
  - Continued social media management.
  - Continued FishRules updates and management including regulations review and overhaul.

### **Lines of Communication: Conversations with the Council**

Stakeholder input has always been a fundamental component of the Magnuson Act and council system. Council staff has begun work to develop a plan for holding stakeholder engagement meetings along the South Atlantic coast, meeting fishermen in their communities. These meetings, now called *Lines of Communication: Conversations with the Council*, will provide an opportunity for Council members to have productive dialogues with fisheries participants. Practice runs of the Lines meetings were held this spring with the Mackerel Cobia, Snapper Grouper, and Dolphin Wahoo Advisory Panels. Staff are currently working on incorporating their feedback into the overall process design. Additionally, draft materials, meeting locations, and a communication plan are all being developed to guide outreach efforts for *Lines*. Large scale outreach will begin the next few months with **the first official round of Lines meetings occurring the week of November 3, 2025, in Georgia and the week of February 2, 2026, in North Carolina**. Meetings in South Carolina and Florida will be planned for Fall 2026/Winter 2027.

### **Marine Resources Education Program (MREP) Southeast**

Plans continue for the **next MREP Workshop scheduled for November 17-21, 2025**, in St. Petersburg, FL. Both the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils have distributed announcements from the Gulf of Maine Research Institute advertising the open application period to attend the workshop. Priority will be given to those who submit applications by June 15, 2025. We will continue to solicit applicants via the SA Bite newsletter. Staff remain involved in both the MREP Steering Committee and Plan Team.

### **Citizen Science Program**

The Council Citizen Science Program had a busy summer. Program and project activities are highlighted below.

#### **SAFMC Release**

- Data collection, recruitment, and retention efforts are ongoing for the SAFMC Release project. SAFMC Release focused outreach activities included monthly and special South Atlantic Release Rodeo newsletters, social media posts, and helping plan and man a booth focused on BFP and SAFMC Release at ICAST 2025.
- Additional outreach collaborations with the BFP team are highlighted below and in the BFP Update section of this report.
  - The Citizen Science and BFP teams had a table and did a brief presentation on SAFMC Release and descending devices at the Savannah Sportfishing Club's Greenwater Shootout captain's meeting in late July. Staff visited tackle shops in Bluffton and Savannah, sharing information on SAFMC Release and BFP, while traveling to the captain's meeting.
  - The [Sea Grant South Atlantic Release Rodeo](#) challenge wrapped up at the end of July. Running from May 1 to July 31, the challenge gave fishermen the opportunity to win Sea Grant giveaways by submitting data on released shallow water grouper and Red Snapper to *SAFMC Release*. The South Atlantic Release Rodeo proved to be a successful collaboration between Sea Grant and SAFMC Release. Compared to the average submissions during the same period (May –

July) in 2023–2024, SAFMC Release submissions increased by 28% in 2025; the number of photos submitted doubled; and the number of photos suitable for length verification nearly tripled. Additionally, Sea Grant distributed best fishing practices gear to fishermen across the South Atlantic region in a new, creative way. Fishermen shared positive feedback on both the challenge format and the gear provided. SAFMC Release was excited to partner with Sea Grant on this initiative and looks forward to future collaborations. A more detailed report on the South Atlantic Release Rodeo will be available in the coming weeks.

- CitSci staff, along with BFP and outreach team members, met with staff from the U.S. Coast Guard Southeast Regional Fisheries Training Center and gave a presentation on the Council, outreach strategies, best fishing practices (BFP), and the Citizen Science Program.
- A SAFMC Release National Saltwater Angler Registry pilot recruitment mailing was sent to 14,000 Georgia and South Carolina saltwater recreational license/permit holders (~7,000 per state) in early July 2025. This mailing was planned and implemented in collaboration with NOAA Fisheries, SCDNR, and GADNR.
- Citizen science staff, in collaboration with state partners developed and submitted a FY26 ACCSP grant proposal, ‘Enhancing Recruitment & Retention for the SAFMC Release Citizen Science Project’ to support the continuation and expansion of this project. The proposal will be reviewed at the upcoming ACCSP Operations and Advisors meeting in late September 2025.

### **FISHstory**

- Analysis of the Zooniverse data, led by partners at NC State University, is ongoing.
- The Validation Team will soon begin verifying species identifications and counts in a subset of photos classified by Zooniverse volunteers. Currently, there are 23 active members on the team - 16 returning from the pilot project and 7 new members. Five training sessions were held in August 2025 and photo validation is scheduled to begin in late August.
- Newly scanned photos are being processed for addition to the Zooniverse project in the upcoming months.
- King Mackerel measurements have been completed for all photos currently archived and estimates of length compositions are now underway.
- In August, staff conducted a FISHstory seminar at the Florence Bluewater Fishing Club’s monthly meeting, sharing project findings and promoting the expansion of the FISHstory photo archive. One club member contributed a photo to the project, and others provided valuable leads on additional contacts and businesses that may have historical fishing photos.
- In collaboration with NC State, Zooniverse/Adler Planetarium, Citsci.org, and SciStarter, staff submitted a proposal ‘Expansion of the FISHstory Citizen Science Project’ to the NOAA Fisheries’ Citizen Science NOFO in November 2024. The review process for this funding opportunity is still underway.

## SMILE

- Progress on the SMILE project continues. Recent efforts have focused on image processing and further development of the AI workflow; data analysis; the data management and archiving process; and development of a data visualization tool.
- The SMILE Core Team, led by REEF, developed a proposal for the FY26 Coral Reef Conservation Fund to continue and expand SMILE project activities. The proposal has been recommended for funding.
- REEF staff are collaborating with social scientists at Colorado State University on a survey to better understand the motivations and barriers for recreational divers to participate in the SMILE project. Data collection is complete and analysis is currently underway.

## Resilient Fisheries Update (click [here](#) for more information)

- **Program Review** – the program review which aims to improve the efficiency and adaptability of the Council's management processes is underway. The objectives have been divided into two separate but coordinated components: management program review and ecosystem information review. Contracts have been developed and projects are underway.
- **Data Limited Projects** – The project oversight team in coordination with the contractors selected Wreckfish as the species for this data limited approach to stakeholder-engaged management measure development. The contractors have been busy talking with stakeholders to gather input and developing a revised stock assessment for the species.
- **Distributions and EFH** – the contractors have been working to gather information on Snapper Grouper, Dolphin Wahoo, and Coastal Migratory Pelagics. Once the data have been collected models will be developed to describe potential changes in distribution and help guide discussion of changes to essential fish habitat.
- **Communities Project** – this project is still in review. This project will put East Coast scenario planning recommendations into practice by identifying and engaging communities that interact with Council-managed species, particularly those that have had limited outreach in the past. The work will both strengthen the Council's understanding of constituent needs and highlight how environmental changes are affecting these communities.
- **Ecosystem Data Workshop** – a webinar workshops series on ecosystem data is being planned for later this fall, with possible dates ranging from November through January. The objectives of the webinar are being developed by a steering committee made up of staff from NOAA Fisheries and South Atlantic, Gulf, and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils along with a facilitator to help ensure productive meetings that result in actionable outcomes. This workshop will also inform the work being done in both the Program Review project and the EFH and Stock Boundaries project.
- **Governance Workshop** - The East Coast Coordination Group has begun planning for a workshop to be held in the summer of 2026, with the purpose of reviewing governance project findings and recommendations and identifying opportunities to bolster individual Council outcomes through collaboration. The primary focus is on managing stocks that cross council jurisdictions and pose challenges to existing governance structures. An initial staff-to-staff planning meeting is planned for January 2026 in Charleston. This will be followed by a workshop in later 2026 including representatives from the 3 Atlantic

Councils and NOAA Fisheries to discuss governance issues, challenges, and Best Practices.

**Sea Grant Media and Press (August 2024 – August 2025):**

Greyson Webb, South Atlantic Reef Fish Extension and Communication Fellow, produced several articles relevant to the objectives of the position, highlighting best fishing practices, citizen science projects, and South Atlantic fisheries management.

- *The Fishing Wire*, [“From Hook To Release: How Gear Can Make A Difference For Fish Survival”](#) (12/1/2024)
- *Coastal Angler St. Augustine Edition* – At the start of 2025, the fellow was connected with the editor of this magazine and regularly made pitches and produced articles for the monthly publication. Each monthly edition of Coastal Angler St. Augustine Edition is available online with the 10,000 copies of the print edition being distributed to over 200 locations throughout St. John’s, Flagler, and Putnam counties in Northeastern FL.
  - [“The F/V Sea Spirit: Honoring the Past, Sustaining the Future”](#) (May Edition – published 04/21/2025)
  - [“Record, Release, Reward: Sea Grant’s South Atlantic Release Rodeo”](#) (June Edition – published 05/20/2025)
  - [“From Hook to Release: How Gear Can Make a Difference in Survival”](#) (August Edition)
  - Upcoming: Florida Fisheries Management (October Edition)
  - Upcoming: FISHstory article (October Edition?)
- *Coastwatch – Coastal Currents*, [“The South Atlantic Release Rodeo Kicks Off”](#) (06/25/2025)
- *Hook, Line, & Science*, [“What kind of gear can you win from the South Atlantic Release Rodeo?”](#) (06/30/2025)
- *NC Sea Grant news release*, [“The South Atlantic Release Rodeo Kicks Off”](#) (06/30/2025)
- *SAFMC Feature Article*, [“Using Best Fishing Practices When Heading Offshore – an FAQ”](#) (07/31/2025 – co-authored with Ashley Oliver)

*Moultrie News*, “FISHstory Seeks Old Dock Photos” (01/25/2025 – fellow pitched this article to Moultrie News writer and facilitated introduction to SAFMC citizen science staff).