

SAFMC Staff Report

March 2026

Sea Grant Reef Fish Extension Fellowship

The Sea Grant Fellow has been working closely with staff at SC Sea Grant to develop a series of hypnoViD (custom animation) videos that will help explain SARSRP methods, results, and next steps. Those videos should be available for use in outreach in the coming weeks. The Fellow has also been developing a seminar series that will feature researchers conducting research on fisheries within the South Atlantic. More information, including dates and times, will be made available once finalized.

The Fellow has also collaborated with Council staff on several efforts including tackle shop outreach throughout the Outer Banks in December and a seminar with local captain, Mark Phelps, at the Haddrell's Fishing Expo in Charleston, SC. Additionally, the Fellow is working closely with the Citizen Science Program on a second year of the South Atlantic Release Rodeo.

Website and Digital Communications Updates

- Promoted internally to take on duties left from the retirement of Public Information Officer- writing and distributing news products (South Atlantic Bite, Feature Articles, News Releases, and Announcements) and POC for regulations and fisherman questions.
- Continued planning for SAFMC 50th Anniversary including a planning and scheduling document.
- Planning and developing a photo gallery to commemorate MSA's 50th anniversary alongside communication representatives from each of the regional Councils.
- Working on a multi-organizational team to coordinate outreach for ongoing SSMZ research.
- Ongoing communication and recruitment for the North Carolina Lines of Communication meetings.
- Website development and design:
 - Continued general website maintenance, posting meetings, pages, amendments, news, and more.
 - Continued development and distribution of news publications.
 - Continued public comment upkeep.
 - Continued social media management.
 - Continued FishRules updates and management including routine regulation review.
 - Continued design work to support Council initiatives.

Outreach and Education

- Council and Sea Grant staff conducted outreach visits to eight tackle shops in the Outer Banks, disseminating educational materials on best fishing practices (BFP), SAFMC Release, and Lines of Communication efforts.

- An Outreach Event and Evaluation Tracking system was developed to systematically monitor outreach activities and establish baseline performance metrics for event effectiveness.
- Staff attended the Haddrell's Tackle Fishing Expo in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina on January 18th and 19th with a 10 x 20 ft booth focused on BFP, SAFMC Release, and general Council information.
 - Council and Sea Grant staff co-presented a seminar with local charter captain, Mark Phelps. Staff focused their portion of the seminar on BFP and SAFMC Release.
 - Using defined criteria for meaningful engagement, (i.e., conversations that included a two-way exchange where information is shared and understanding is gained) staff engaged approximately 75 attendees on best fishing practices and descending devices, 44 on SAFMC Release, and 18 on general Council information.
- Staff are currently preparing outreach materials and exhibit logistics for participation in Georgia's Coast Fest on March 21.
- Additionally, outreach staff continue preparations for ICAST, including development of an updated booth design and planning for the fifth annual Donuts and Descending Devices initiative.

Marine Resources Education Program (MREP) Southeast

The MREP Southeast Steering Committee held their annual meeting on January 13th and 14th in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Discussion topics included a debrief from the National Steering Committee meeting held last fall, workshop planning for 2026 and 2027, curriculum additions, and continued engagement of MREP alumni. The next MREP Workshop will be held March 9th through March 13th in Saint Petersburg, Florida. The 2027 MREP Workshop will be held in Charleston, South Carolina (early in the year, exact dates TBD).

South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Program

The South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Project (SARSRP) underwent a comprehensive review from January 13–15, 2026. The review panel included three subject matter experts from the Center for Independent Experts (CIE) and two representatives from the South Atlantic Scientific and Statistical Committee. The project team comprised more than thirty collaborators representing seven universities and agencies. During the review workshop, the project team delivered four presentations to supplement the preliminary report submitted to Sea Grant. The review panel evaluated data inputs, sampling methodologies, analytical modeling, and sources of scientific uncertainty, and provided critical feedback in each of these areas. Independent reports from the CIE reviewers are currently being drafted and will be circulated to the SARSRP project team for integration into the final report. Final abundance estimates with quantified uncertainty and project conclusions will be available following completion of this process later this spring.

Citizen Science Program

The Council's Citizen Science Program has had a busy few months. Program and project activities are highlighted below.

SAFMC Release

- Data collection, recruitment, and retention efforts continue for the SAFMC Release project. Staff are finalizing the SAFMC Release 2025 Data Summary which will include the 2025 Participant Recognition Program (PRP) milestone winners. The Data Summary will be shared with project participants in February 2026 and available on the SAFMC Release webpage in March 2026.
- SAFMC Release was excited to announce the 2026 PRP milestones in February. With support from a FY25 ACCSP grant, the PRP has been able to expand recognition opportunities and diversify the items participants can earn when they meet milestones. To learn more, check out the 2026 PRP Milestones document available on the project webpage.
- SAFMC Release focused outreach activities included finalizing a ‘call to action’ video featuring Release participants from a recent content creation trip, as well as ongoing monthly newsletters, and social media.
- Additional outreach collaborations with the BFP team included:
 - Citizen Science and BFP staff visited nine tackle shops/marinas in the Outer Banks in December 2025 to distribute SAFMC Release and BFP materials.
 - The Citizen Science and Outreach team coordinated and participated in the Haddrell’s Fishing Expo in Charleston, SC in January 2026. Council staff manned a booth focused on BFP and SAFMC Release, and Citizen Science and BFP personnel collaborated with local captain, Mark Phelps, on a seminar focused on bottom fishing, BFP, and SAFMC Release.
 - SAFMC Release is collaborating with Sea Grant for a second year of the South Atlantic Release Rodeo. Through this challenge, from May 1 to July 31, anglers can earn a chance to win Sea Grant giveaways by submitting information on their released shallow water grouper and Red Snapper to SAFMC Release. Additional details will be available in the coming weeks.
- Planning is underway with state partners for a SAFMC Release recruitment mailing in SC and GA. The mailing will go out to ~24,000 saltwater licensed or permitted anglers (~12,000 per state) and will incorporate lessons learned from a pilot mailing conducted in 2025. The target timeline is for the mailing to go out in April 2026.
- 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’. The proposal was approved for funding by the ACCSP Coordinating Council at their October 2025 meeting.
- The Citizen Science Program will be hiring a part-time contractor position to assist with the SAFMC Release project. The recruitment announcement was posted in January 2026. Interviews will be conducted in the upcoming weeks, with the hopes of having a new team member on board in March 2026.

FISHstory

- Staff collaborated with FL FWC and the Florida Keys History Center / Monroe County Library to archive ~80 historical photos for the FISHstory project. In addition, Captain Paul Nelson contributed multiple photo albums and Bob Zales shared photos with the project. Staff will digitize, archive, and process these photos for analysis in the upcoming weeks.
- SAFMC is collaborating with SCDNR on a joint undergraduate internship at the College of Charleston (CofC). Taylor Mickey, a sophomore at CofC, was selected for the internship and through this work will assist with archiving and processing photos for FISHstory, as well as identifying and sourcing additional SC photos for the project.
- The Validation Team (VT) begin verifying species identifications and counts in a subset of photos classified by Zooniverse volunteers in September 2025. Currently, there are currently 23 active members on the team - 16 returning from the pilot project and 7 new members. Zooniverse photo classification occurs through multiple workflow “levels,” with volunteers identifying and counting different species at each level. Since fall 2025, VT members have validated 150 Level 2 photos, 150 Level 3 photos, and 100 Level 4 photos.
- The NC State analytical team made substantial progress analyzing the Zooniverse data. A model has been configured that integrates data from both the Zooniverse volunteers and Validation Team, accounting for observer bias and variation in photo difficulty. Validation Team data are critical to this approach and are used to ‘calibrate’ the volunteer data.
- King Mackerel measurements have been completed for all currently archived and processed photos, and updated length compositions have been estimated.

SMILE

- The final Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP) grant report for the three year SMILE pilot project, led by the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF), was submitted in January 2026. Through extensive method development, field validation, and stakeholder engagement, the SMILE pilot project demonstrated that trained divers can collect scientifically reliable length measurements using affordable, laser-equipped cameras. Comparative analyses showed strong agreement between SMILE’s FishSenseLite camera system and professional stereovideo systems, validating the method’s potential for fisheries-independent monitoring. The project also worked to develop an AI-assisted workflow to enable efficient extraction of fork lengths and species identifications from diver images. In addition, online data visualization tools were developed for the SMILE fish length data and REEF’s 30-year Volunteer Fish Survey dataset.

- The SMILE project has received an additional year of CRCP funding. Staff continue to meet monthly with the SMILE core project team, with ongoing efforts focused on refining the camera/laser technology and further developing the AI-assisted workflow. Opportunistic field work has also continued with other REEF sampling programs.

Additional Programmatic Activities

- CitSci staff gave guest lectures on the Council's Citizen Science Program to the College of Charleston Marine Policy & Fisheries Science classes in January and February 2026 and presented on the Program at the Resilient Fisheries' AIM Wreckfish Stakeholder Workshop in November 2025.
- The Council's CitSci Program, in partnership with ASMFC, is developing a proposal with two other leading collaborative fisheries research programs - the Skipper Science Partnership in Alaska and the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation in Rhode Island. Because these programs share similar purposes and goals, the proposal will seek to leverage our combined efforts, working to help ensure the data collection platforms, partnerships, and capacity evolve to support emerging scientific and management needs across our three regions.
- CitSci staff were invited to join an American Fisheries Society - Cooperative Research Stock Assessment Integration Working Group – which will explore pathways for incorporating cooperatively collected data into the formal stock assessment process. The working group brings together groups engaging in cooperative research / citizen science and stock assessment scientists.