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June 15, 2026

Mr. Andrew Strelcheck  
Regional Administrator  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
263 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue South  
St. Petersburg, Florida 33710

Dear Mr. Strelcheck:

During its June 2026 meeting, the Gulf Council (Council) received feedback on the efficacy and need for the current sea turtle release gear requirements for federally permitted charter for-hire and commercial reef fish vessels. Specifically, the Council's Ad Hoc Red Snapper / Grouper-Tilefish Individual Fishing Quota Advisory Panel (AP) recommended that the Council revisit the requirement for sea turtle gear on commercial and federally permitted for-hire vessels, as the release gears and protocols currently required are overly burdensome. Additionally, these gears are rarely if ever used due to the low occurrence of sea turtle interactions while fishing for reef fish. The Council discussed this issue further and heard public testimony in support of revisiting these requirements. Testimony and discussion included comments on the dangers to vessels and crew for adhering to the regulations as specified, which include bringing a hooked sea turtle aboard a vessel. Captains noted these sea turtles are often well over 100 pounds in weight, and bringing these live and stressed animals on board represents a risk to the animal, the crew, the vessel, and in the case of for-hire operations, the passengers. Given the AP's recommendation, public testimony, and Council discussion, the Council requests that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reconsider these regulations, thereby streamlining the regulatory burden on these fleets, including a simplified gear kit that represents the most recent research on interactions with sea turtles when fishing for reef fish species. The Council thinks such a reconsideration is in keeping with recent Executive Orders (14192: *Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation*; and 14276: *Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness*).

The Council respectfully requests that NMFS initiate this review as soon as practical and coordinate with Dr. John Froeschke during this process. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

Mr. Jonathan "JD" Dugas  
Council Chair

cc: Gulf Council / Council Staff / Heather Blough / Frank Helies / Jennifer Lee / Clay  
Porch, Ph.D. / John F. Walter, Ph.D. / John Carmichael / Myra Brouwer