

# Summary Report

## Outreach and Communications Advisory Panel Meeting

### May 5-6, 2026

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Outreach and Communications Advisory Panel (AP) convened in North Charleston, SC on May 5-6, 2026.

The meeting began with each AP member and Council member in attendance introducing themselves. The AP approved the agenda for the May 2026 meeting and provided opportunities for public comment at the beginning and end of the meeting. No public comments were received.

#### 1. AP Members Share

AP Members had the opportunity to share outreach and communication efforts related to federal fisheries.

- *North Carolina Sea Grant (Scott Baker)*  
Scott provided North Carolina Sea Grant's [Local Seafood Guide](#) pamphlet. The pamphlet highlights where North Carolina's seafood comes from, a top landed species and consumer favorites calendar, and other statistics such as jobs created and shellfish landings.
- *Florida Sea Grant (Shelly Krueger)*  
Shelly provided an update for the Return 'Em Right (RER) program. Over 50,000 anglers have completed the education module on best fishing practices and received free descending gear. Beginning May 13, 2026, the program will transition to a cost sharing model where anglers who complete the education module will cover the shipping and handling cost. Additionally, RER was approved for expansion via the [Open Ocean Restoration Plan 4](#), allowing the program to provide some support to the South Atlantic and Caribbean, as well as to expand to other species for discard mortality education. Timing of the South Atlantic expansion is still to be determined but will likely be the summer of 2026.
- *Caribbean Fishery Management Council (Cristina Olán Martínez)*  
Cristina provided a presentation on the Caribbean Fishery Management Council's (CFMC) outreach and communication efforts since the AP last met. The presentation included social media analytics, collaboration efforts, the [Big Fish Initiative](#), and the roll out of their [new website](#). Cristina also shared the CFMC's new book, *Beneath the Moon*, and the outreach they are doing on descending devices, or *salvapeje*. Other outreach events included a fish fry to promote Caribbean seafood, Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture Fair, ST. Croix Agrifest, and the Marine Resource Education Program. Upcoming projects include a 2027 seasonal closure calendar, an Island-Based Fishery Management Plans species Catalog, a new sticker, and a Magnuson Stevens Act 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary video.

- *Gulf Fishery Management Council (Emily Muehlstein)*  
Emily highlighted the Gulf Fishery Management Council’s (Gulf Council) new anonymous voicemail public comment, which has received almost 100 calls since the implementation in June 2025. Emily noted that this method allows stakeholders to provide comments they may otherwise not talk about on the record, is low cost (\$58/month) and low staff commitment. Next, Emily shared the challenges of providing management areas and boundaries on mapping tools. The Gulf Council will be working on a webtool to display these boundaries and areas and will work on the best way to make these areas downloadable on personal devices.
- *McIntosh County Schools (Robert Todd)*  
Robert shared that the McIntosh County Academy SkillsUSA team presented the MCA Commercial Fisheries Pathway at the National Leadership and Skills Conference. Charles “Luke” Todd won the National Championship in Marine Service Technology. The team also participated in Darien's annual Blessing of the Fleet parade, placing first in the Decorated Car, Truck, and Golf Cart category with their shrimp boat side-by-side.
- *Georgia Sea Grant (Bryan Fluech)*  
Bryan presented on the Fishermen First Aid and Safety Training (FFAST) for commercial fishermen. A pilot training was held in March 2026 and focused on basic first aid and CPR but also injuries and emergencies that may happen while commercial fishing. The first FFAST was successful, and there are plans for a second pilot training later this year and to potentially expand the program, pending funding availability.
- *Wild Ocean Seafood (Jeanna Merrifield)*  
Jeanna shared that Wild Ocean Seafood, based out of Port Canaveral, Florida, is working to educate schools and local businesses on the importance of commercial fishing, the domestic food chain supply, working waterfronts, and food security. Additionally, Jeanna shared flyers on Farming vs. Fishing which shares information on economic impact, health benefits, and consumer education,
- *Other:* AP member BeBe Dalton Harrison shared that the South Carolina Wildlife Federation recently partnered with Z-Man Fishing Products to create a custom color lure called Uncle Harry DNR Time which is given to youth anglers. If the lure gets enough attention on social media, Z-Man will begin selling the lure and donating a portion of the funds to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

## 2. Habitat and Ecosystem FAQ Update

Council staff provided an update on the Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel’s (HEAP) outreach efforts since October 2023. The Habitat and Ecosystem webpage was revamped to reduce text and incorporate links, dropdowns, and an embedded Essential Fish Habitat Mapper with a full-screen option. One habitat-focused article was released in October 2024, with another planned for March 2027. Staff are updating the [“Flow Policy”](#) to incorporate new developments

and water quality standards and plan to promote the approved updates through social media in late 2026. A detailed Habitat FAQ is also in development for the Council website, along with a public-facing infographic based on the FAQ. Additionally, staff are planning public, non-decisional habitat webinars based on HEAP recommendations.

**AP Feedback:**

- The AP supported the informational webinars and suggested that a sargassum-focused one would be of interest.
- There was also interest in how the state agencies were integrated into the HEAP process and what effect the policies have on the Council’s work.
- The AP was supportive of the HEAP’s work to gather information on space exploration activities occurring off Cape Canaveral.

**3. Digital Communications Analytics Update**

Council staff provided an analytics report presentation for Council digital communications efforts including social media, the website, and email distribution.

**AP Feedback:**

- There was support for continuing the small, quick snippets of the South Atlantic Bite newsletter.
- An AP member asked if the South Atlantic Council analytics were compared to other Councils in the region. It was noted by another AP member that it can be difficult to compare on a national scale due to regional differences, but the South Atlantic Council could discuss routinely tracking analytics similarly to the Gulf Council.
- An AP member from the Gulf Council noted that when the Gulf states took over management of red snapper, their pageviews dropped. It was noted by the same AP member that the South Atlantic Council’s click through rates and open rates for email distribution are good in comparison to the average government and NGO percentages.
- It was suggested to present FishRules analytics at the next AP meeting.

**4. Discussion on the Draft SAFMC Outreach and Communications Goals, Objectives, and Strategies**

Council staff shared the draft outreach and communications goals, objectives, and strategies, which is the first attempt to better define the scope and purpose of Council’s outreach activities.

**AP Feedback:**

- Strong support for having a clear outreach and communications structure.

- Several AP members noted the draft focuses on increasing participation and accessibility but should also address improving the quality and usefulness of public comments through informed engagement and education.
  - Suggested tools included seminar series, decision summaries, and simplified supporting documents for public scoping and hearings.
- Members discussed the importance of defining what makes a “useful” public comment and improving understanding of how decision makers review and use comments in the process.
- The AP discussed the importance of mobile-friendly outreach and communication tools.
- Members emphasized the value of personal testimony and storytelling as outreach and evaluation tools.
  - Suggestions included interviewing participants following seminars and using testimonials or videos on social media.
  - One AP member cautioned that highlighting individual stories may unintentionally appear to favor a particular sector, state, or stakeholder group.
- Continued collaboration with local captains for seminars and outreach efforts was encouraged, with members emphasizing that building trust with stakeholders should remain a primary goal.
- One member suggested using the South Atlantic Red Snapper Exempted Fishing Permits as an opportunity to demonstrate that stakeholder comments are heard and considered.
- Members encouraged staff to explore evaluation methods and outreach approaches used by outside organizations in addition to internal efforts.
- Additional evaluation methods were suggested, including post-event surveys and text-based feedback tools such as Qualtrics (*note: the Council is unable to conduct survey work without approval from the Office of Management and Budget due to the Paperwork Reduction Act*).
- An AP member from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) suggested exploring an agency page on FishBrain, noting FWC has around 2,000 followers with little additional effort.

## **5. Engaging Marine Resource Education Program (MREP) Alumni and Council Workshop Participants in the Council Process**

Council staff provided a brief overview of MREP and in-person Council engagement efforts, how participants are currently being engaged, and ideas on other engagement options.

### **AP Feedback:**

- Ask meeting attendees for phone numbers so that text messages can be used for reminders, updates, and meeting invitations (with permission).

- Simplify sign-up processes through online forms and digital sign-in tools such as SurveyMonkey or similar platforms.
- A member noted concerns that email engagement may continue to decline and discussed the need to diversify communication methods.
- Personalized outreach was encouraged, including targeted emails and utilizing “champions” or trusted community contacts to help disseminate information.
- It was emphasized the importance of coordinating staff communications to avoid sending duplicate messages to stakeholders.
- Use attention-grabbing language and messaging that encourages recipients to open and read information.
- It was suggested that stakeholders have the ability to select topics or areas of interest when signing up for email communications.
  - One of the check boxes should be for meeting-specific press releases.
- The AP discussed conducting periodic surveys of listserv subscribers to evaluate the frequency and effectiveness of communications and assess stakeholder preferences (*note: the Council is unable to conduct survey work without approval from the Office of Management and Budget due to the Paperwork Reduction Act*).
- Segmenting listservs by “news type” (e.g., fishery management plan, topic area, or interest group) was recommended to improve correspondence relevance.
- A member noted that the stakeholders that attend meetings such as MREP or Lines should be automatically signed up for e-news since they already showed interest in getting more involved by being there.
- It was noted that stakeholders often require regular reminders to stay engaged.
- The AP discussed the need to clarify email opt-in procedures and stakeholder permission requirements for communications.
- Informal polling and acknowledgement or incentives for signing up to mailing lists were suggested as ways to encourage engagement.
- It was suggested to provide ambassadors or participants with simple “next steps” materials following meetings or workshops, including actions they can share within their communities.
- The AP discussed evaluating geographic representation within listservs and outreach databases.
- A member suggested looking into how the younger generation communicates, noting TikTok and Snapchat as potential options.
  - It was noted that texting and podcasts may be becoming more obsolete for younger generations.

## 6. Lines of Communication: Conversations with the Council (Lines) Discussion

Council staff provided an update on Lines of Communication: Conversations with the Council and lessons learned during the first meetings in Georgia and North Carolina.

**AP Feedback:**

- It was noted that attendance can be influenced by external events. For example, the 2024 Dolphin MSE meetings in Hatteras, NC were well attended most likely due to poor weather and confusion over the purpose of the meeting. This could have possibly been why the 2026 Lines meeting in Hatteras was well attended.
- Members suggested encouraging registered participants to invite additional stakeholders to attend meetings to capitalize on word-of-mouth recruitment.
- The AP discussed adjusting meeting structure and timing, including shortening meetings to ninety minutes and moving the tabling session earlier in the agenda before participants become fatigued. Members recommended collecting additional participant feedback through comment cards, sticky notes, or other open-ended evaluation methods.
- Hosting meetings in locations familiar to stakeholders, such as tackle shops or fishing clubs, was discussed, while also recognizing the importance of maintaining neutral meeting locations.
- The AP discussed the importance of continued engagement beyond a single meeting through personalized follow-up communications, summaries, and mailing list sign-ups.
- Members emphasized managing expectations regarding the frequency of meetings and maintaining stakeholder engagement between events.
- The AP discussed evaluating participant demographics and geographic representation, including participation from inland stakeholders.
- The AP discussed highlighting the presence and availability of Council members at meetings and encouraging follow-up engagement between stakeholders and Council members after meetings.
- Members expressed support for continuing the Lines of Communication meetings and outreach approaches.

**7. Increasing Public Comment Attendance, Engagement, and Accessibility Discussion**

Council staff presented an overview of the Council’s current public comment practices, engagement challenges, and potential strategies to improve attendance, participation, and comment effectiveness.

**AP Feedback:**

- AP members discussed barriers to public comment participation, including lack of trust in the process, perceptions that comments do not influence decisions, and challenges with navigating online comment forms.

- Members recommended simplifying and streamlining public comment tools and materials through clear language, reduced use of acronyms, simplified forms, and concise informational products such as short videos, summaries, guide booklets, QR codes, and social media content.
- It was suggested to break down management decision points into more accessible, “bite-sized” information to make meetings and the public comment process less intimidating.
- Members suggested experimenting with alternative outreach and engagement methods, including radio shows, anonymous voicemail systems, voice-recording applications, and social media reels.
- Trusted community ambassadors and local voices were identified as important for improving credibility, engagement, and outreach effectiveness.
- The AP discussed the importance of consistency, patience, and continued engagement to build long-term participation in the public comment process.
- Members discussed providing examples of effective public comments while avoiding approaches that could resemble voting or coordinated campaigns.
- The AP discussed the need to evaluate both quantitative and qualitative public comment data, assess outreach gaps, and use multiple communication methods to reach different audiences.
- Members emphasized the importance of summarizing information and demonstrating how public comments inform Council discussions and decisions.

## **8. Update on State Outreach Efforts on the South Atlantic Red Snapper Exempted Fishing Permits**

Staff from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources provided presentations on planned outreach efforts for the red snapper exempted fishing permits.

## **9. Update on the Magnuson-Stevens Act 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Efforts**

Council staff provided an overview of the regional efforts to recognize the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

## **10. Sea Grant Reef Fish Fellowship**

### **a. Current Reef Fish Fellowship Update**

The Sea Grant Reef Fish Fellow presented a summary of their time in this role. Updates included seminars at tackle shops and high school fishing clubs, Citizen Science collaborations, animated videos for the South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Program, and the Sea Grant Reef Fish Webinar Series.

**AP Feedback:**

- AP members discussed how discard data by state could help target best fishing practices outreach efforts in areas with the highest discard rates. When asked about what locations could be targeted now, Jacksonville, FL, coastal Georgia, and Morehead City, NC were suggested.
- Members emphasized the importance of storytelling and webinars as outreach tools and noted that additional data in the future will help strengthen outreach messaging.
- Members recommended improving and maintaining tackle shop databases and outreach contact lists, and that this is important to include in the Community Preferences of South Atlantic Anglers report (CPSAA).
- The AP discussed photo contest submissions and recommended exploring photo permission or opt-in/opt-out language so images may be shared by partners and used in future outreach efforts.
- Members discussed opportunities to share outreach videos and materials more broadly, including through the Council YouTube channel and partner organizations, and encouraged development of additional outreach video content.

**b. Overall Sea Grant Reef Fish Extension and Communication Fellowship Impact and Improvements Update**

Council and Sea Grant staff presented an overview of the Fellowship, focusing on the positive effects the Fellowship has had on Council and Sea Grant goals. Additionally, staff highlighted lessons learned during the Fellowship and future opportunities.

**AP Feedback:**

- Sea Grant partners shared that the fellowship was a very positive and rewarding experience, and they would continue with a collaborative fellowship structure in the future.
- The AP emphasized the importance of recreational fisheries in the South Atlantic region and noted that increasing management challenges support the value of fellowship positions focused on outreach and engagement throughout the region.
- A member noted they were originally skeptical of four separate fellows with one-year terms, but commended Sea Grant and Council staff for effectively preparing fellows to quickly transition into the role once hired.
- The AP discussed the Fellowship as a successful collaborative model that could be replicated by other regions or organizations through shared resources and partnerships.
- The AP discussed potential future Fellowship topic areas, including improving public comment accessibility, increasing long-term community engagement, conducting social science and interview-based outreach, and improving the use of angler-collected data in the fisheries management process.

### **c. Discussion on the Sea Grant South Atlantic Release Rodeo**

Council and Sea Grant staff introduced the Sea Grant South Atlantic Release Rodeo (Rodeo) that was implemented in 2025 and the plans to continue in 2026.

#### **AP Feedback:**

- The AP discussed potential outreach tools, including push notifications through related applications, Fish Rules banners and notifications, instructional videos, and frequent social media promotion.
- Members emphasized the value of fishermen sharing outreach content and photos through their own social media networks to expand participation and visibility.
- The AP discussed partnering with supporting businesses, tackle shops, and fishing clubs to help broaden outreach efforts.
- The AP discussed the importance of providing clear guidance on app use, species identification, and qualifying photo submissions (e.g., what counts as a photo for length validation and could be used to gain double entries into Sea Grant giveaways).

## **11. SAFMC Citizen Science Program**

### **a. Citizen Science Program Update and SAFMC Release Participant Recognition Program Discussion**

Council staff provided an update on Citizen Science Program activities, including progress on the SMILE, FISHstory, and SAFMC Release projects. AP members were asked to provide feedback on the SAFMC Release project's Participant Recognition Program (PRP).

#### **AP Feedback:**

- AP members emphasized the importance of tracking SAFMC Release participant engagement with PRP milestones to inform future efforts.
- Members suggested expanding outreach at tournaments, captains' meetings, and family friendly events as well as developing a video to highlight the PRP.
- The AP discussed participant incentives and recognition opportunities, including the use of custom artwork.
- Members noted that "app fatigue" may present challenges for participation in SAFMC Release and emphasized the importance of strong branding and visibility for the project.
- The AP recommended making annual data summaries and project outcomes more visible on the website.
- Members commended the SEDAR 90 Data Workshop Panel's recommendation to use FISHstory and SAFMC Release data in the red snapper stock assessment.

- The AP discussed the ability to collect additional trip-related metadata through FISHstory photos.
- One member reached out to a contact in the Little River, SC area to potentially get FISHstory photos.

**b. Discussion on the Citizen Science Program Indicators**

The Citizen Science Program recently developed indicators under each of the Program’s goals to help evaluate progress, identify opportunities for improvement, and measure the Program’s ongoing impact. Council staff provided an overview of the indicators developed.

**AP Feedback:**

- Members emphasized the importance of demonstrating how Citizen Science data are being used within the management process to build trust and transparency with participants.
- The AP discussed the importance of tracking meaningful metrics, including funding received, grants applied for, participation, and other indicators tied directly to program goals.
- Members noted that indicators should align closely with program objectives and that collecting a broad range of metrics will be important for long-term evaluation.
- The AP discussed tailoring communications for different audiences, including using audience-specific language when communicating with fishermen, scientists, and other stakeholders.
- Members emphasized the importance of clearly communicating the value and relevance of the Program to different stakeholder groups without overwhelming participants with technical information.

**12. Elect Chair and Vice Chair**

The AP approved the following motions:

**MOTION 1: ELECT SHELLY KRUEGER AS CHAIR OF THE OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS ADVISORY PANEL.**

**APPROVED BY AP**

**MOTION 2: ELECT BRYAN FLUECH AS VICE CHAIR OF THE OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS ADVISORY PANEL.**

**APPROVED BY AP**

### **13. Other Business**

AP members made the following comments under Other Business:

- BeBe Dalton Harrison shared that the new organization, Women in Angling, will be launching during the July 14-17, 2026, ICAST tradeshow.

#### **AP Members in Attendance**

Scott Baker, Chair  
Shelly Krueger, Vice Chair  
Bryan Fluech  
BeBe Dalton Harrison  
Diana Martino  
Jeanna Merrifield  
Emily Muehlstein  
Nicole Nichols  
George Patane  
Matt Perkinson  
Mark Phelps  
Patricia Smith

#### **AP Members Attending via Webinar**

Sean Meehan  
Mary Sabo  
Robert Todd

**Staff Lead:** Ashley Oliver ([ashley.oliver@safmc.net](mailto:ashley.oliver@safmc.net))