



**NOAA  
FISHERIES**

# **National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Implementation Plan**

**2015-2018**

# A Note from the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries

**Saltwater recreational fishing is an enormously popular American pastime, economic force, and contributor to conservation.** Millions access America's great outdoors through recreational fishing each year, strengthening families, friendships, and communities while contributing billions to the national economy.

NOAA Fisheries believes that saltwater recreational fisheries hold great promise for introducing and connecting the next generation to the natural world while simultaneously presenting complex stewardship challenges, including balancing ecosystem conservation with social and economic benefits for the nation.

Since 2010, the Agency has made substantial progress in developing an internal culture supporting recreational fisheries that recognizes and values recreational fisheries and fishermen. Substantial commitments of staff, time, and budget have led to regular productive dialogue at the national and regional levels and facilitated action on important issues such as barotrauma and data collection. Most recently, in February 2015, we established a formal National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy, which sets forth goals and guiding principles for our activities to ensure that saltwater recreational fisheries issues are fully considered in our deliberations.

This implementation plan is NOAA Fisheries' first step under the policy, making recreational fisheries a key focus of Agency action. The implementation plan will serve as a basic roadmap for Agency action on recreational fisheries at the national level through 2018. It should be considered a living document, able to accommodate new challenges and opportunities as they arise.

The implementation plan is not an endpoint for our work with the recreational community; it is an additional waypoint on the continuing journey to improve stewardship. NOAA Fisheries will take another important step in 2016 with the release of our regional recreational implementation plans. Finally, the Agency is committed to expanding our capacity to engage the recreational community, including adding new full-time regional recreational fisheries coordinators to help execute the policy while providing an informed representative where people live, work, and fish.

Through this implementation plan and other work, we look forward to continuing constructive dialogue and collaboration with the recreational fishing community to foster, support, and enhance a broadly accessible and diverse array of sustainable saltwater recreational fisheries.

Sincerely,  
Eileen Sobeck  
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries

# Introduction

**NOAA Fisheries is responsible for maintaining healthy marine and coastal ecosystems capable of supporting sustainable and productive fishery resources for the long-term use and benefit of the nation.** In February 2015, NOAA Fisheries released the National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy which recognized the importance of saltwater recreational fishing to the nation. Development and issuance of the policy was an important and substantive step toward better understanding the needs of the recreational fishing community and positioning the Agency to address the priorities of recreational anglers across the nation.

The policy identifies goals and guiding principles with respect to the commitment to foster, support, and enhance a broadly accessible and diverse array of sustainable saltwater recreational fisheries.

## **The goals of the policy include:**

- Support and maintain sustainable saltwater recreational fisheries resources, including healthy marine and estuarine habitats.
- Promote saltwater recreational fishing for the social, cultural, and economic benefit of the nation.
- Enable enduring participation in, and enjoyment of, saltwater recreational fisheries through science-based conservation and management.

To fulfill this commitment, the Agency will integrate the policy's goals and guiding principles into our activities and deliberations, as with all Agency-wide policies. Recognizing that the value of the policy will come through effective implementation, we see the necessity and benefits of a focused Implementation Plan. This implementation plan describes work NOAA Fisheries will perform in the period 2015 through 2018.

## **Implementation Plan Structure and Content**

NOAA Fisheries will implement the National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy through focused actions using its six guiding principles as an organizational framework. The policy goals are supported by the guiding principles, and the specific actions identified in this plan support and link to one or more of the principles. In short, this document focuses on tangible actions to advance the six guiding principles. This format facilitates tracking and evaluating implementation progress. Successfully implementing the actions identified in this plan will move the Agency incrementally and strategically closer to the policy's overall vision and goals.



**The six guiding principles are:**

1. Support ecosystem conservation and enhancement.
2. Promote public access to quality recreational fishing opportunities.
3. Coordinate with state and federal management entities.
4. Advance innovative solutions to evolving science, management, and environmental challenges.
5. Provide scientifically sound and trusted social, cultural, economic, and ecological information.
6. Communicate and engage with the recreational fishing public.

Guided by input from fishermen, the general public, management partners, NOAA Fisheries’ staff, participants in the National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Summit (2014), and the policy development process, this document identifies Agency commitments over the next 4 years. It includes currently identifiable Agency commitments for action, primarily from national-level programs, which are within existing budgetary constraints and stewardship mandates. Many of the specific actions support more than one of the six guiding principles, and each of the guiding principles in turn supports more than one of the policy goals.

The Agency will provide biennial reports on implementation status beginning in 2017, allowing for improved accountability and an opportunity to update the implementation plan as appropriate. NOAA Fisheries’ work to implement the policy will be expanded in 2016 through the development of region-specific recreational implementation plans using this national framework.

# Support ecosystem conservation and enhancement

## **America's coastal and ocean waters provide an astounding abundance of sustainable living marine resources, which support the most well developed and diverse recreational fisheries in the world.**

Healthy ecosystems are foundational to the sustainability of these resources and the fisheries that depend upon them. Marine and coastal ecosystems are under pressure from an array of factors such as habitat degradation and loss, invasive species, overfishing, pollution, ocean acidification, and energy development, among others. Building and maintaining high-quality recreational fisheries requires a thoughtful and effective science-based conservation, management, and enhancement approach. Actions supporting this guiding principle include:

### **Focus on watershed-scale habitat activities that leverage partnerships and directly benefit important recreational fisheries and the communities that depend on them.**

- Increase angler engagement in the National Fish Habitat Partnership and NOAA's regional Habitat Focus Areas to better reflect recreational fishing priorities.
- Support angler habitat conservation efforts by increasing awareness of potential federal funding and partnership opportunities.
- Host a workshop to assess the current state of the science, best practices, and potential impacts of artificial reefs.

### **Take an ecosystem approach to ensuring sustainable fisheries.**

- Support research to improve knowledge of ecosystem linkages between inshore habitats and offshore production of recreationally important fishes.
- Advance adoption of release survival techniques and best practices to reduce impacts of recreational fisheries on marine ecosystems by communicating research findings to fishery managers and fishermen.
- Conserve forage fish through targeted habitat restoration projects and by working with partners to provide passage for diadromous forage fish at hydropower dams.
- Conduct surveys at fishing piers to collect data regarding the incidental catch of non-target species, including sea turtles.

### **Empower anglers as resource stewards.**

- Develop angler-friendly guidelines facilitating non-lethal deterrence of marine mammals and safe methods for de-hooking sea turtles and other protected species to reduce angler impacts to NOAA Fisheries' trust resources.
- Enhance public education efforts and partnerships with states and other federal entities (e.g., NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries) to increase angler awareness of invasive species threats and support angler-based control efforts (e.g., taking lionfish).

# Promote public access to quality recreational fishing opportunities

**Access to quality fishing opportunities is a prerequisite to recreational fishing.** Working with management partners, fishing access is collectively determined through the Regional Fishery Management Council process. Promoting and supporting access can take many forms, from establishing healthy and abundant stocks of recreationally important fish, to improving the quota allocation process, to accounting for conservation gains when developing regulatory measures. In addition to supporting access to fishing opportunities through participation in the Council process, the Agency will take additional actions to support fishing access. Actions supporting this guiding principle include:

## **Balance conservation, public access, and economic and social benefits.**

- Engage Regional Fishery Management Councils to review harvest allocations on a regular basis to ensure fishery management is achieving goals set forth in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), including issuing guidance developed in partnership with the Council Coordination Committee.
- Present information on conservation gains (e.g., improved post-release survival) to Councils, fostering consideration of expanded recreational fishing opportunities, when appropriate.
- Engage the recreational fishing community in habitat restoration projects (e.g., reef restoration) in NOAA Habitat Focus Areas and other areas to preserve and enhance fishing opportunities and improve ecosystem health.
- Evaluate whether revisions are needed to current regulations under National Standard 10 of the MSA to promote safe recreational access to fisheries.
- Promote the legitimacy and recognition of the economic importance of recreational fisheries within international fisheries management bodies, and seek to maintain and, where feasible and appropriate, expand U.S. recreational fishing opportunities on internationally managed fish stocks.

## **Promote awareness of quality fishing opportunities through new information and tools.**

- Identify and evaluate fishery-focused additions to NOAA electronic nautical charts to assist anglers in accessing fishery resources.
- Collaborate with NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries to identify and highlight recreational fishing opportunities in national marine sanctuaries.
- Support conservation education and local fishing opportunities for children and non-traditional fishery participants.

# Coordinate with state and federal management entities

**The complexity of natural resource stewardship requires effective coordination both with the public and also between involved management entities.** Strengthening partnerships with federal and state natural resource entities can provide insight and opportunities for effective and alternative approaches to many issues. Sharing scientific, communications, management and enforcement expertise along with aligning management priorities and goals can better leverage resources, eliminate waste, and improve recreational fishing overall. Actions supporting this guiding principle include:

## **Improve delivery of services to fishermen through strengthened state–federal collaboration.**

- Evaluate annually Regional Fishery Management Council balance and communicate findings to state governors to advance equitable stakeholder representation.
- Conduct annual discussions with states to identify shared goals and collaborative opportunities benefiting recreational fisheries.
- Undertake joint state-federal recreational angler education projects to improve understanding of fishery regulations and the importance of compliance.
- Incorporate recreational fisheries issues as a priority in state-federal Joint Enforcement Agreements.
- Engage state and federal agencies through Habitat Focus Areas, Fish Habitat Partnerships, and Landscape Conservation Cooperatives to identify shared habitat objectives and execution strategies (e.g., ESA section 6 agreements) benefiting recreationally important species.

## **Bolster connections and collaboration with federal partners.**

- Establish regular high-level and staff-level dialogue between NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to strengthen working relationships, explore partnership opportunities, and identify mutual priorities.
- Develop a strategy to expand collaboration between NOAA Fisheries and Sea Grant.
- Work with National Sea Grant Office to incorporate a recreational fisheries focus area into the National Sea Grant Strategic Plans.
- Enhance coordination with the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, including in identification of potential Sanctuary Advisory Council nominees and focused outreach to recreational fishing interests, to increase angler participation in the Sanctuary management process.
- Develop materials addressing important fisheries science and management issues for recreational fisheries to support improved understanding by Regional Fishery Management Council members.

# Advance innovative solutions to evolving science, management, and environmental challenges

**NOAA develops and applies cutting-edge techniques to address some of the most pressing environmental issues facing the world today.** NOAA Fisheries recognizes our responsibility to lead, support, and serve as a catalyst for private sector innovation to solve the challenging issues of today and tomorrow. Innovation can occur in any area. The range of actions identified below should not be considered constraining; rather it includes areas of interest to the recreational community that are ripe for innovation and action. Actions supporting this guiding principle include:

## **Support research and technology to benefit recreational fisheries.**

- Support scientifically rigorous projects to investigate bycatch and release mortality reduction tools and handling techniques, including through cooperative research and federal grant programs.
- Develop Marine Recreational Information Program certified methods for electronic trip reporting with validation sampling in for-hire fisheries through pilot projects.
- Work in cooperation with the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program and the Gulf Fisheries Information Network to develop the necessary operational and funding plans for implementing for-hire electronic trip reporting programs in the sub-regions where partners desire to implement them.
- Prepare a white paper assessing existing marine, freshwater, and terrestrial natural resource self-reporting applications to understand current uses, limitations, and potential applications in fisheries science and management.
- Pursue electronic reporting through implementation of regionally based NOAA Fisheries electronic monitoring and reporting plans.

## **Lead scientific efforts to better understand recreational fisheries.**

- Develop and implement a Bio-economic Length Structured Angler Simulation Tool (BLAST model) to assess the effects of management actions on angler participation in West Coast recreational fisheries.
- Complete the Main Hawaiian Islands component of National Angler Attitudes and Perspectives Survey, and analyze and distribute the findings to the public and management partners.
- Refine and expand the use of cutting-edge acoustic and hi-definition video survey methods to improve data collection from untrawlable habitat (e.g., reefs) and support fish stock assessments.
- Conduct acoustic tagging and telemetry studies to better understand site fidelity, habitat use, migration, and other behaviors of fish species commonly targeted by recreational anglers (e.g., pilot project at Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, using volunteer recreational anglers to catch, tag, and release target species).





- Execute an economic study of Atlantic highly migratory species fishing tournaments to improve the understanding of their economic impacts and for consideration in management.
- Produce an action plan for discard and release mortality science to guide NOAA Fisheries science efforts related to mortality estimates, improve estimates of mortality, and better incorporate improved mortality estimates into stock assessments.

**Pursue management approaches that may better support recreational fisheries.**

- Investigate alternative management approaches to recreational fisheries management and satisfaction, specifically including methods based on fishing mortality rates.
- Issue revised guidelines for National Standard 1, addressing management flexibility and fishery stability and including guidelines for implementation of annual catch limits, ecosystem component stocks, and other issues.

# Provide scientifically sound and trusted social, cultural, economic, and ecological information

**The basis of effective natural resource management is sound scientific information.** NOAA and its management partners have developed some of the world's most comprehensive and sophisticated recreational fisheries data collection and analysis systems. However, good science is not enough; for the public to have confidence in management there must be confidence in the underlying science. NOAA Fisheries will continue improving the science that underpins management decisions, while working to improve public understanding and confidence. Actions supporting this guiding principle include:

## **Provide recreational catch and effort information supporting stock assessments and informing management.**

- Initiate a National Research Council review of the Marine Recreational Information Program to evaluate current recreational fisheries catch and effort data and science.
- Execute directed projects to improve recreational catch and effort data for pulse and other rare event fisheries, specifically including Gulf of Mexico red snapper and Atlantic highly migratory species (Large Pelagic Survey).
- Transition to the use of new mail-based recreational fishing effort surveys on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, including incorporation of new data into stock assessments.
- Identify key areas for habitat mapping to foster improved characterization and assessment of recreational fish habitats.
- Conduct research to evaluate the benefits of natural habitat conservation projects to the health of the ecosystem and their importance to recreationally important fish species.

## **Bolster understanding of the social and economic importance of recreational fishing.**

- Incorporate recreational fisheries as a science priority in Agency and regional science center strategic plans.
- Develop a national strategic plan to guide socio-economic research on recreational fisheries.
- Annually evaluate the status and progress of recreational fishing expenditure, impact, and valuation data collections and assessments for each region through the Recreational Fishing Economic Assessment Index (RFEAI), an internal performance metric.
- Execute a fishing trip expenditure survey in all coastal states to refine understanding of socio-economic impacts of saltwater recreational fishing.



#### **Empower others to collect, share, and use data.**

- Convene recreational fishing groups, states, NGOs, and others to explore potential additional uses of information provided by NOAA observing platforms (e.g. Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System Update), which may benefit anglers and provide other benefits.
- Engage recreational fishermen in data collection to benefit protected resources recovery and conservation, including: establishing citizen science programs to apply tags and/or report tagged protected species, DNA swabs for stock ID, and photo ID of marine mammals and sea turtles.
- Work with the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries to consider recreational fisheries management issues in science needs assessments for the National Marine Sanctuary System.
- Assess the utility of angler reported electronic data as a supplement to existing data collections.
- Promote improved recreational fisheries data collection and reporting for shared resources within international management bodies, and enhance management of such fisheries where needed.
- Identify avenues to engage recreational fishermen in habitat research, such as through community monitoring groups or cooperative research on habitat issues such as limitations to recreational fish productivity.

# Communicate and engage with the recreational fishing public

**One of NOAA Fisheries' most important responsibilities is to involve interested members of the public in our fact-finding, evaluation, and decision-making processes.** Industry, anglers, and others are affected by these actions and decisions and want to have a voice in shaping outcomes. It is important to ensure that interested stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to the science and decision-making in a meaningful way. An engaged and informed constituency results in better science, decision-making, and buy-in, which facilitates effective solutions that make the best use of taxpayer dollars and best serve the public. Actions supporting this guiding principle include:

## **Listen, respond, and seek to improve understanding.**

- Create formal and informal opportunities to communicate with anglers and gain feedback about messages, products, and channels of distribution. Seek to better understand what anglers want to know and how they would prefer to receive that information. This will include hosting bi-annual webinars with the recreational community and attending major community events.
- Increase the amount of content (e.g., feature stories, videos, alerts) relevant to anglers.
- Make information more readily available by tapping into new and existing resources for distributing content (e.g., social media, fishing publications) and creating new partnerships (e.g., with states, fishing organizations).
- Maintain strong working relationships and open lines of communication with community leaders to ensure regular dialogue and a policy of “no surprises.”
- Work with interested stakeholder groups to host regular roundtable discussions in each region to strengthen relationships and share information.

## **Provide opportunities for meaningful engagement.**

- Identify opportunities for angler engagement in major NOAA Fisheries actions and decision-making that affect recreational fishing.
- Improve coordination with NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries to increase angler participation in marine protected resources regulatory processes and data collection opportunities.
- Utilize the full suite of available tools (e.g., webinars, in-person meetings, online comments) to provide opportunities for all who wish to engage.
- Follow up with anglers about resulting agency actions or decisions.

## **Provide relevant NOAA information in an efficient and consistent manner.**

- Test and implement mobile platforms as a way to communicate fishery regulations.
- Improve coordination among NOAA line offices by strengthening relationships and improving communication processes.
- Pull together NOAA Fisheries staff and our state and Council partners to create recreational fishing data communications teams in each region to improve stakeholder understanding and access to catch and effort information.
- Strengthen internal communication and outreach capacity by providing training to regional recreational fisheries coordinators.



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