

## 1. AWARD NAME: INNOVATIVE PROGRAM AWARD

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**3. NOMINEE:** “Florida Sea Grant Leverages Catch-and-Release Outreach for Long-term Positive Impact on Saltwater Anglers”

### **Florida Sea Grant (FSG) Fisheries Extension Work Action Group Members**

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\*=*no longer with extension, but was a FANREP member during this project*

## 4. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

**The Issue:** Fishing effort in Florida has increased dramatically over the last decade, and is expected to continue growing. Increased recreational angling pressure on nearshore and pelagic fish species has prompted more stringent state and federal fishing regulations such as size limits, bag limits, and closed seasons to sustain local and regional fisheries. As a result, more undersized fish caught by recreational anglers are being let go. Catch-and-release angling is a valuable conservation tool, but its effectiveness is diminished if fishermen do not know the proper handling techniques that minimize stress to the fish and improve chances it will survive after being released.

**Target Audience:** One principal focus of Florida Sea Grant’s fisheries research and extension efforts over the years has been teaching recreational anglers how to reduce release mortality in prized game species such as red snapper and grouper. In 2007, new reef fishing gear requirements formulated through legislation at federal and state levels created an urgent need to educate an estimated 3.3 million anglers in Florida and across the Gulf of Mexico on proper sustainable handling techniques. This gave Sea Grant’s Fisheries Extension Work Action Group (WAG) a new opportunity to develop training materials, leverage and extend its outreach efforts, and ensure the work action team’s potential for long-term, positive impact on recreational anglers in Florida and the Gulf region. A catch-and-release education program was envisioned that would mobilize a more expansive Extension effort that would multiply through an active network of fishery management agencies, researchers, and extension professionals in Florida and the Gulf of Mexico.

**Objectives:** The goal was to demonstrate and encourage sustainable fishing practices that reduce the negative impacts of human activity on marine fish populations. Specific objectives were to (1) help saltwater anglers in Florida and the Gulf comply with the new state and federal rules mandating the use of new kinds of fishing gear, and (2) help fishermen adopt fishing techniques that lead to a reduction in the mortality of fish caught and released.

**Educational Methods and Materials:** The group used numerous methods and materials to achieve its program goals.

(1) A Solutions for Your Life web site was created at <http://catchandrelease.org> to serve as a one-stop shop of trusted, standardized, and media-rich content about sustainable fishing. Individuals who access catchandrelease.org will find multimedia materials such as videos, PowerPoint presentations, photos and publications, packaged to facilitate delivery through train-the-trainer efforts on a wide range of topics related to sustainable fishing.

(2) Twenty-five eye-catching “toolkit” tackle boxes, filled with samples of the specified fishing gear, were developed and distributed to county-based Sea Grant extension faculty to stimulate interaction with audience members. The kit consisted of a large orange tackle box emblazoned with the Sea Grant logo. It contained resources like fish-friendly circle hooks, dehooking tools, fish venting tools, grips, and measuring sticks to demonstrate and inform anglers about handling techniques that reduce mortality of fish caught on hook and line, then released. One kit was also distributed to each Sea Grant program in the Gulf of Mexico.

(3) Several workshops, meetings, and demonstrations were held at strategic locations around the state during 2008, including a number of boat, sport and vacation shows, to provide training on sustainable fishing methods, as well as provide a forum to discuss the implementation of the new federal and state rules for the use of sustainable fishing techniques.

(4) Project leaders delivered a sustainable fishing practices presentation at the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) in Galveston, TX in March, 2008 to promote training about the new reef gear regulations to counterparts in the other four states of the Gulf region – Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. The presentation was attended by representatives from all the Gulf region Sea Grant programs, the GSMFC, the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation, and other agencies and organizations.

(5) Team members provided demonstrations, set up a table-top display, and handed out literature on catch-and-release practices at the Florida Outdoors Writers Association annual meeting to generate stories about sustainable fishing practices and the new fishing regulations to the highly-targeted audiences that read fishing magazines and outdoor columns in newspapers.

(6) Team members also developed publications and created displays to enhance outreach and education efforts at the county level.

**Resources Involved:** To fund new content and an aggressive workshop schedule, the fisheries extension WAG mobilized quickly to apply for a timely \$12,000 Extension Enhancement Program grant. The funding also enabled repackaging of the content for the Solutions for Your Life web site, ensuring that catch-and-release content would channel to a broader audience accessing the site for UF/IFAS Extension information.

The project was a collaborative effort with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries, and key industry partners. Aquatic Release Conservation, Inc., for example, donated more than \$6,000 worth of venting tools and dehooking tools. EastaBoga Tackle supplied fish grip devices at cost. Generous supplies of hooks were provided at steep discounts by Daiichi and Tru-turn Hooks.

**Evaluation and Impact:** Personal communications with colleagues at FWC indicate the agency considers one of the program’s greatest impacts to be the noted lack of controversy during the rule-change implementation period, due to the collaborative effort among FSG, NOAA Fisheries and FWC to

standardize the talking points and communications messages to audiences which would be affected by the new rule changes.

Participant data were collected at 8 of the 11 workshops held during the project period. A total of 207 individuals attended, of which 110 completed post-workshop surveys. The surveys sought to determine the respondents' level of awareness on the recent fishery management rules for reef fish, the level of confidence in using the sustainable fishing tools, and the likelihood of using the tools in the future. A six-month follow-up survey was administered via Survey Monkey to workshop and demonstration attendees. A total of 51 respondents from Charlotte, Lee, Collier, and Monroe counties provided feedback. The findings from the workshop and follow-up surveys suggest that the respondents are very confident in their ability to correctly use the tools and either already use them or are very likely to do so in the future. A majority of the respondents have an awareness of the key concepts relevant to sustainable fishing methods.

The Web site has only recently been launched, but has already received more than 800 page views. To strengthen site visibility, it has been linked to the Florida Sea Grant main site, coastal county websites, the EDIS database and other trusted partners with sustainable fishing outreach efforts, including FWC, NOAA Fisheries, and the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve. A Google search of the term "catch and release fishing" returns the page at ninth, up from sixteenth the date the site went live in October. The content and site are mentioned as "go-to" resources for catch-and-release fishing in the August 2008 edition of "Sport Fishing" magazine.

In addition, the educational materials developed by this effort are being copied and used by other Gulf Sea Grant programs. The materials, especially the tackle box toolkit, have also been requested by fisheries managers as far away as Australia.

**Implications for Future Programs:** The catch-and-release effort is innovative in that:

- FSG leveraged an existing framework of programmatic activity and extension capacity to mobilize a mix of education and outreach strategies quickly and effectively, capitalizing on an opportunity to reach anglers in Florida and other Gulf of Mexico states with new information on state and federal fishing regulations and sustainable handling practices using.
- FSG's efforts brought together regulatory and education agencies in new linkages that were timely and necessary, since both state and federal regulatory agencies were unable solely to provide comprehensive education and outreach programs to address fishing gear rule changes.
- Team members forged new relationships and strengthened existing ties. Due to the successful nature of this effort, FSG and FWC are partnering in 2009 on a communications and outreach strategy for the statewide implementation of a blue crab trap removal effort.
- The WAG maximized the use of existing resources supplemented with a small development grant to reach some 3.3 million anglers across the Gulf-wide region. It funded its effort and materials by identifying and combining existing resources among inter-agency and industry partners. Additional funding was obtained by timely application on short notice for a one-time extension enhancement grant.

The program is unique in that it was the only program for the Gulf of Mexico region to comprehensively address sustainable handling practices and the new federal fishing regulations. It has helped FSG Marine Extension maintain its status as leader in the field of marine fisheries outreach and education for the Gulf of Mexico.

FANREP members actively participated in every aspect of this program. Agents assisted in the writing of the Extension Enhancement Grant proposal, organized and instructed regional workshops, wrote publications and created displays, developed survey tools to assess program impacts, and delivered presentations at professional conferences to promote the efforts of the fisheries WAG's education efforts.