

Building Bridges in the Gulf of Mexico

Commercial Fishermen and Aquaculture Experts Come Together as Partners

Proactive, conservation-minded commercial fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico have come together with leaders in the offshore aquaculture industry to forge a collaborative path forward, and the initial results are incredibly promising.

With critical support from [SeaPact](#), the Reef Fish Conservation and Education Foundation – a partner of the [Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance](#) – brought together six commercial fishing leaders from four Gulf states for a meeting in Biloxi, Mississippi in October 2022 with four experts in the aquaculture world including Dr. Kelly Lucas (University of Southern Mississippi), Paul Zajicek (National Aquaculture Association), Andrew Richard (NOAA Fisheries), and Dave Donaldson (Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission).

This working group met to share information, ask questions, and establish working relationships to tackle mutual threats and opportunities for our nation's coastal communities, the U.S. seafood supply chain, and the American public's access to domestic sustainable seafood. Common themes that emerged included but were not limited to:

- Prioritization of the promotion of domestic seafood over imported seafood.
- Increased domestic seafood production will be necessary to meet and promote increased seafood consumption and demand in the United States.
- Successful seafood businesses depend on the ability to make money, not just growing/harvesting of fish.
- The lack of property rights (e.g., for aquaculture farms and for commercial fishing individual fishing quotas) is a hurdle to long-term stable business planning.
- Incomplete, outdated, and/or outright misinformation often drive the public narrative into a negative space.
- Complex regulatory environments often impede seafood industry progress.
- Working waterfronts are critical to the success and longevity of both industries.

Establishing and building on shared principles like sustainable domestic seafood; robust food security systems; durable working waterfronts; and the humanizing belief that we are more alike than different; this workgroup engaged energetically in a very constructive, truthful, and heartening conversation that set the stage for future collaboration. Everyone wholeheartedly agreed that more opportunities for collaboration and communication would be helpful to each of these components of our nation's collective seafood industry.

This was a great first step towards bringing our nation's domestic seafood providers together and we look forward to working with these experts and others to grow this effort and develop a larger, more comprehensive program in 2023.

Eric Brazer, Deputy Director
Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance
e: eric@shareholdersalliance.org
p: 919-451-1971
w: www.shareholdersalliance.org



Aquaculture and commercial fishing leaders meet in Biloxi, Mississippi.
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