

## **Moving Toward Ecosystem-Based Management Approaches in Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management**

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The concept of ecosystem-based management has been advanced as an option to better manage our nation's valuable fisheries. While not a new concept, ecosystem-based management is now a more frequent part of the dialogue on how to improve a fisheries management system largely based on a "single species" approach. For example, a call for ecosystem-based approaches to management has been recently recommended by the United States Commission on Ocean Policy, the Pew Oceans Commission and the United Nations. The Bush Administration has responded by issuing an Ocean Action Plan that includes provisions to move towards this management approach. In order to implement this action plan, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has recently established goals and strategies for ecosystem-based management of our oceans.

Identified hurdles to implementation of an ecosystem-based management approach include the lack of agreed upon goals and purposes, the science needed to support this policy and the jurisdictional boundaries that exist within the identified regional ecosystem. These issues will likely take some time to address before a full fledged move to ecosystem-based management can begin.

In order to begin addressing these issues, Congress provided funding to conduct pilot studies on ecosystem-based management in four regions including the Gulf of Mexico. The lead entities for executing this pilot approach include NOAA Fisheries, the lead federal agency for fisheries management in the Gulf of Mexico, and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, a regional advisory body to NOAA Fisheries. They have developed a work plan to identify technical needs and synthesize public input on the goals and objectives of ecosystem-based management.

From a fisheries perspective, The Ocean Conservancy believes that managers currently have the legal authority and information necessary to implement many of the major tenets of an ecosystem-based approach. Provisions in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to end overfishing, minimize bycatch and protect habitat essential to sustainable fisheries give NOAA fisheries and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council the tools they need to address a number of existing problems impacting the Gulf ecosystem. Stronger implementation of current provisions in the law can result in significant progress towards an established ecosystem-based approach to management.