

# MEMORANDUM



**To:** Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

**From:** Gil McRae, Director, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute  
Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management

**Date:** September 26, 2018

**Subject:** Staff Review – Red Tide Event of 2017/2018

---

## **Purpose:**

Review and discuss the red tide event occurring in Southwest Florida during 2017 and 2018 including information on the characteristics of red tides, FWC efforts to respond to the event, impacts of the event on fish and wildlife, an overview of management actions taken by FWC to date, and a request for direction on further management actions.

## **Summary:**

Red tide is a naturally-occurring microscopic alga that has been documented along Florida's Gulf Coast since the 1840's. Blooms, or higher-than-normal concentrations, of the Florida red tide alga, *Karenia brevis*, occur nearly every year in the Gulf of Mexico. Red tide begins in the Gulf of Mexico 10 to 40 miles offshore and can be transported inshore by winds and currents. FWC continues to respond to a red tide event that started in November 2017 offshore of southwest Florida. In summer 2018, the red tide expanded, moved inshore, and has affected a number of counties in the region. As of this writing, the bloom spans approximately 145 miles along the coast of southwest Florida. As of Aug. 29, FWC's Fish Kill Hotline had received over 873 reports and requests for information associated with this ongoing bloom. FWC staff has processed over 8,525 water samples during this bloom that were collected as part of our statewide monitoring network, which includes partners and citizen volunteers. Fish kills have been reported in Pinellas, Manatee, Sarasota, Charlotte, Lee, Collier, and Monroe counties. Some of the affected species include: snook, red drum, grouper, trout, eel, tarpon, hardhead catfish, goliath grouper, and baitfish. FWC staff has been in the field to confirm fish kill reports and obtain samples from fish carcasses. FWC has documented 115 manatee and 318 sea turtle deaths in southwest Florida suspected to be related to red tide in 2018.

Eric Sutton and FWC leadership staff visited affected areas and met with local government officials, community leaders, fishing guides and anglers to better understand local impacts from red tide.

Stakeholders expressed concerns about the status of the red drum and snook fisheries in southwest Florida prior to impacts from this red tide. In an abundance of caution, proactive short-term changes were made to these fisheries by Executive Order to reduce fishing pressure on stressed populations. On August 30, 2018, Executive Order 18-38 was issued to temporarily make the red drum and snook fisheries catch-and-release only in the portion of southwest Florida where red tide-related fish kills have been most prevalent.

## **Staff Recommendation:**

Extend Executive Order 18-38 until the extent of impacts to fish populations in the region can be evaluated and extend the boundary of the temporary restriction. Staff welcomes input from the Commission on existing red tide programs and priorities.

## **Staff Contact and/or Presenter:**

Gil McRae, Director, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute  
Jessica McCawley, Director, Division of Marine Fisheries Management