

# Gulf Red Snapper



Final Public Hearing  
February 19, 2020



**Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**

This presentation provides a summary of proposed final rules to amend the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) red snapper regulations [68B-14, Florida Administrative Code (FAC)], in order to allow FWC to manage harvest of red snapper by private recreational anglers in Gulf federal waters. Commission direction is also requested on final approval of the 2020 Gulf recreational red snapper season.

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Unless otherwise noted, images throughout the presentation are by FWC.

Cover photo courtesy of Zachary Truong.

## Outline

- 2019 season update

### Direction Requested

- Final rule — state management of Gulf federal waters
- Finalize 2020 Gulf recreational season



This presentation will provide the following for Commission consideration:

1. An update on harvest from the 2019 Gulf red snapper season.
2. A proposed final rule to extend state regulations for recreational red snapper harvest in the Gulf of Mexico into adjacent federal waters for 2020 and beyond.
3. A proposed final rule for the 2020 Gulf recreational red snapper season.

Staff seek Commission approval of the proposed final rules for red snapper state management in Gulf federal waters and the 2020 Gulf recreational red snapper season dates.

## 2019 Recreational Red Snapper Season

- 2019 season: 40 days total
  - June 11 – July 12
  - Oct. 12-13, 19-20, 26-27
  - Nov. 2-3
- Preliminary estimate: 75% of Florida quota caught through October
  - Does not include November data



In total, the Gulf red snapper season was open for 40 days in 2019. The season was initially set by the Commission as June 11 through July 12 (32 days). Estimates from Florida's Gulf Reef Fish Survey (GRFS) indicated 64% of Florida's quota was harvested during the summer season in state and federal waters off Florida. Given that quota was still available for harvest, FWC and Governor Ron DeSantis announced multiple fall weekend season openings to allow anglers additional harvest opportunities for Gulf red snapper. Using GRFS data, staff determined that a fall season of six weekend days would provide harvest opportunities without resulting in a quota overage. Harvest was open for three weekends: Oct. 12-13, 19-20, and 26-27. Because of poor weather conditions from Tropical Storm Nestor, which resulted in lost fishing opportunities, FWC added an additional weekend of Nov. 2-3.

Based on preliminary data from GRFS, FWC estimated that 75% of Florida's 2019 quota was caught through the end of October. November landings will not be available until mid-February.

## Proposed Final Rules for State Management in Gulf

- *Extend state waters bag limit, size limit, and season into federal waters for private recreational anglers*
- *Streamline process for setting recreational season*
  - Seasons would be discussed and advertised by FWC as usual
- *Allow federally-permitted for-hire vessels to possess red snapper in state waters while their federal season is open but state waters are closed*
  - Harvest prohibited in state waters during state closed season
- *Remove redundant definitions from reef fish rule*



The U.S. Secretary of Commerce recently approved delegating authority to manage private recreational red snapper harvest from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council)/NOAA Fisheries to the states long-term, starting in 2020. To extend state rules into federal waters for Gulf red snapper harvest by private recreational anglers, FWC must outline this delegation in state rule.

The proposed final rules would extend Florida's current two-fish recreational bag limit and 16-inch total length size limit for Gulf red snapper into adjacent federal waters for private recreational anglers. These are consistent with the bag and size limit requirements that have been in place in federal waters for both private anglers and federally-permitted for-hire vessels. The proposed final rule would also streamline the process used to set the private recreational season in accordance with the provisions of 120.81(5) Florida Statutes. This would provide FWC flexibility to set and adjust the red snapper season without undergoing additional rulemaking or issuing Executive Orders. However, staff would still seek Commission direction on season dates and FWC would continue to notify the public of red snapper seasons via MyFWC.com, press releases, and other means.

The proposed final rules would also allow federally-permitted for-hire vessels, which have a separate season set by NOAA Fisheries, to possess (but not harvest) red snapper in state waters while the federal for-hire season is open but state waters are closed. This was a request of several federal for-hire captains in the Florida Panhandle that fish for red snapper in federal waters, then come to state waters to fish for other species like king mackerel. In both 2018 and 2019, FWC issued Executive Orders to allow this, as the federal for-hire season differed from the state season. Lastly, the proposed final rule would remove rule language (several definitions) from the reef fish rule that is unnecessary, because it is redundant with language elsewhere in FWC rule.

## Proposed Final 2020 Gulf Recreational Season

**June 11 – July 25 (45 days)**

- Reopening fall weekends if quota is available

*Direction requested to finalize the 2020 Gulf red snapper season*



Photo courtesy of Travis Anderson

Staff recommends setting the 2020 Gulf recreational red snapper season to open June 11 through July 25 (45 continuous days). This follows the same season structure used to set the 2018 and 2019 seasons, which would open harvest June 11 for a continuous summer season. Staff estimate the season can stay open through July 25 with relatively low risk of exceeding Florida's quota for 2020, which is 1,913,451 pounds. This quota is slightly higher than the 2018 and 2019 quotas. If there is adequate quota available after the summer season, FWC would reopen over fall weekends for a limited harvest similar to 2019.

The proposed final season of June 11 through July 25 was designed to optimize harvest opportunities for recreational anglers during summer, which is when most anglers prefer to fish for red snapper. June 11 was chosen as the start date to help maximize the number of harvest days during summer. Harvest and effort tend to be higher during June than July, so a season starting June 11 yields a longer season than one that begins on June 1. Many anglers support starting the season later in June, recognizing that a longer season provides more harvest opportunities and added flexibility to plan fishing trips around weather. Some stakeholders (including the Board of County Commissioners of Escambia County, Florida) have requested that FWC consider opening harvest starting June 1, which is the same date the federal for-hire season begins. However, starting the season earlier in June would result in a shorter season, because as mentioned fishing effort is higher in June.

Commission direction is requested to finalize the 2020 Gulf recreational red snapper season.

## Considerations for 2020 Red Snapper Season

- Continuous summer season designed to optimize harvest opportunities
  - Structure similar to 2018, 2019 seasons
  - Effort is highest on weekends
- Possible fall reopening if quota is available
- Includes private anglers, as well as for-hire operators not permitted to fish in federal waters
- Any overage must be paid back in 2021
- FWC responsible for monitoring harvest



There are several other factors to consider when setting the season for recreational red snapper in Gulf state and federal waters for 2020. The proposed June 11 through July 25 continuous season is designed to optimize harvest opportunities for recreational anglers during summer. The proposed season structure is similar to the 2018 and 2019 seasons, which also opened June 11. While some anglers support a 3-day weekends-only season, it is important to remember that fishing effort is higher on weekends compared to weekdays. This means Florida's quota would be reached in fewer days during a weekends-only season than a continuous season. If sufficient quota remains after the 45-day continuous season, FWC would reopen in the fall for a limited harvest on weekends. The proposed 2020 season would apply to private recreational anglers in Gulf state and federal waters, and to state for-hire operations, which are limited to only fishing in state waters, because they do not have the federal permit required to run for-hire trips in federal waters.

It is imperative to prevent a quota overage in 2020, because any overage must be paid back in 2021. FWC will be responsible for monitoring harvest and will take measures to ensure that the quota is not exceeded.

## Staff Recommendation

Approve final rule establishing FWC management of red snapper for private recreational anglers in Gulf federal waters

- Extend season, size limit, and bag limit into federal waters
- Streamline process for setting season
- Allow possession in state waters by federally-permitted for-hire vessels during their season

Finalize 2020 Gulf red snapper season: June 11 – July 25 (45 days)

- Fall reopening if quota available



*Make rules effective April 1, 2020*



Staff recommends approving the proposed final rules that would:

1. Extend FWC's Gulf red snapper season, size limit, and bag limit into federal waters for private recreational anglers.
2. Streamline the process for setting the Gulf recreational red snapper season.
3. Allow possession of red snapper by federally-permitted for-hire vessels in state waters when the federal for-hire season is open, but the state season is closed.
4. Remove redundant definitions from the reef fish rule.

In addition, staff recommends finalizing the 2020 red snapper season to open June 11 and continue through July 25 (45 days), with the possibility of a fall reopening if quota is available.

If approved and directed, staff recommends making the rules effective April 1, 2020, in order to be in place for the 2020 recreational red snapper season.

Staff has evaluated the proposed final rules under the standards of 68-1.004, FAC, and found them to be in compliance.