

State Reef Fish Survey



Final Public Hearing
May 14, 2020



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This is a final public hearing to modify reporting requirements in 68B-14.009, Florida Administrative Code (FAC), by creating a State Reef Fish Survey to replace the Gulf Reef Fish Survey. The rule amendment would require recreational harvesters to sign up for the State Reef Fish Survey if they intend to harvest, attempt to harvest, or possess certain reef fish while aboard a private vessel in or on Florida waters.

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

Photo courtesy of Michael Sipos.

Outline

- Gulf Reef Fish Survey (GRFS)
 - Review and successes
- State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS)
 - Proposed final rule
 - Expected benefits
 - GRFS to SRFS transition
- Staff recommendation



Photo courtesy of Tanya Register



This presentation will provide a review of the Gulf Reef Fish Survey (GRFS) and highlight the success of this dedicated reef fish recreational data collection program. It will outline the proposed final rule to establish a State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS), review expected benefits of a statewide reef fish recreational data collection program, and outline the transition process from GRFS to SRFS. The presentation will end with the staff recommendation, for Commission consideration, to approve a final rule that would replace GRFS with SRFS, as well as remove outdated rule language.

Gulf Reef Fish Survey

Goal: Improve data collection for private recreational reef fish harvest in the Gulf

- Three-pronged data collection
 - Mail survey
 - In-person surveys
 - At-sea observer program
- Mandatory for those on private vessels in Gulf waters fishing for or possessing select reef fish



Grant funded through June 2020

Photo courtesy of Matthew Batchelor

Launched in 2015, the goal of the Gulf Reef Fish Survey is to improve data collection for private recreational fishers harvesting reef fish off Florida's Gulf Coast, excluding Monroe County. Funding for GRFS has been administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation with Gulf Oil Spill restoration funds and expires June 30, 2020.

GRFS supplements recreational data collected through the federal Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) by focusing surveys and data collection on recreational harvesters who fish from private vessels for reef fish in the Gulf. GRFS has three components: mail surveys of Gulf reef fish harvesters, in-person dockside interviews at offshore access points, and at-sea observers on charter fishing trips. This approach captures information vital for estimating number of boat trips, catches per trip, and catch and discard rates for select reef fish species. GRFS is certified by NOAA Fisheries, so the data it produces can be used in federal stock assessments.

All recreational harvesters who fish for or possess certain reef fishes while aboard a private vessel in Florida Gulf waters are required to sign up for GRFS annually. These reef fishes are red snapper, vermilion snapper, black grouper, gag grouper, red grouper, greater amberjack, lesser amberjack, banded rudderfish, almaco jack, and gray triggerfish. Recreational Gulf reef fish harvesters may sign up for GRFS at no cost anywhere FWC licenses are sold. Once signed up, harvesters may be selected for a GRFS mail survey.

There are limited exemptions from the sign-up requirement: children under the age of 16, persons fishing for or possessing reef fish aboard a licensed for-hire vessel or aboard a licensed recreational fishing vessel, and persons authorized by FWC to harvest reef fish for scientific or educational purposes. The exemptions do not apply to other individuals who are exempt from the requirement to have a recreational fishing license. Requiring these fishers to sign up for GRFS annually if they fish for or possess reef fish species on a private vessel ensures these harvesters can contribute data and FWC has a complete database of Florida's population of Gulf reef fish harvesters.

Success of GRFS

FWC provides better scientific advice for recreational reef fish fisheries

- Precise, timely estimates of harvest
- Greater confidence in tracking harvest
- Necessary for state management of Gulf red snapper

Supported by recreational stakeholders



Photo courtesy of Renee Ellington

Data produced by GRFS enable FWC staff to provide the Commission with better scientific advice for recreational Gulf reef fish fisheries. Since implementation of GRFS, FWC has gained greater understanding of when and where recreational harvesters fish, and how fishing effort is impacted by changes in fishing regulations, weather, red tide blooms, and other large-scale events. This is possible because each month, 7,000 GRFS harvesters are selected to report how many reef fish trips they have taken and where fishing took place. This direct survey approach provides more precise estimates of fishing effort compared to the general recreational survey, MRIP. Also, because GRFS produces monthly data (as opposed to bi-monthly for MRIP), estimates are more timely, and fishers are better able to accurately recall their fishing activity.

Federal law requires recreational harvest of federally-managed species, like reef fish, remain within federal quotas. More precise, timely estimates give fishery managers confidence that recreational harvest is within the federal quota. For example, FWC has used the improved data from GRFS to monitor recreational harvest against the federal Gulf red snapper quota allocated to Florida. This was critical for FWC to receive long-term delegated authority to manage the Gulf red snapper private recreational fishery in federal waters off Florida. This tangible benefit demonstrates the value of FWC recreational data collection programs dedicated to reef fish.

Many recreational fishers appreciate that the Commission is responsive to their concerns, and they believe GRFS provides FWC a sound scientific basis to guide decisions. Because of this, they support providing FWC information about their fishing activities and have requested FWC expand GRFS statewide.

State Reef Fish Survey

Proposal: Replace GRFS with SRFS

- Expand success of GRFS statewide
 - Strong support from stakeholders on both coasts
- Add important south Florida reef fish: mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, and hogfish
- Funded by 2020 Legislature
 - Continue no-cost sign-up



As grant funding for the Gulf Reef Fish Survey comes to an end, the Commission has supported the concept of building upon the proven success of GRFS by replacing it with the State Reef Fish Survey. The proven success of GRFS has generated strong public support for FWC to implement the survey on both coasts for the long-term.

The reef fish tracked using GRFS can be caught offshore in most regions of the state so the SRFS proposal includes the GRFS species. In addition, this proposal would add socially- and economically-important reef fish common in south Florida: mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, and hogfish.

With Commission approval, FWC requested Legislative funding for implementation of SRFS. The 2020 Legislature approved SRFS funding, providing \$3 million in annual operating funds to continue SRFS long-term. With this funding, as with GRFS, signing up for SRFS would be at no cost to the fisher.

Proposed Final Rule

Replace GRFS with SRFS

- Mandatory for recreational fishers who fish for or possess any of the following reef fish when on a private vessel in Florida waters
 - **Mutton**, red, vermilion, or **yellowtail** snapper
 - Black, gag, or red grouper
 - Greater or lesser amberjack, banded rudderfish, or almaco jack
 - Gray triggerfish
 - **Hogfish**

Remove outdated reference to Gulf Reef Fish State For-hire Pilot Program



Photo courtesy of Brock Mason

The proposed final rule would replace the Gulf Reef Fish Survey with the State Reef Fish Survey, and create a requirement for recreational fishers in all Florida waters who fish for or possess the following reef fish while aboard a private vessel to sign up annually for SRFS:

- Mutton, red, vermilion, or yellowtail snapper;
- Black, gag, or red grouper;
- Greater amberjack, lesser amberjack, banded rudderfish, or almaco jack;
- Gray triggerfish, and
- Hogfish.

The newly added species are noted in bold, blue text on the slide above.

Requiring recreational fishers to sign up for SRFS is critical to improving recreational data because it creates a database of harvesters to contact for the dedicated reef fish mail survey. This database is an important component that sets SRFS apart from MRIP, since it allows FWC to focus the reef fish surveys on reef fish harvesters instead of surveying all saltwater license holders.

The proposed final rule would also remove an outdated reference to the 2018 and 2019 Gulf Reef Fish State For-hire Pilot Program. The pilot program was part of the 2018 and 2019 Gulf red snapper exempted fishing permit (EFP), which has ended.

Expected Benefits

Expand benefits of better data collection statewide

- Enhanced data collection for economically-important and “data-poor” fisheries

Improve data for stock assessments

- Continuous long-term, accurate data on landings and discards
- Enhanced data on size and age of recreationally-caught fishes

Long-term, sustainable management of Gulf red snapper

- Required for successful state management
- Continuation critical for tracking harvest



Once replaced with SRFS, the successes of GRFS on the Gulf coast will be expanded statewide, benefiting important reef fish fisheries throughout the state. Although Atlantic reef fish stocks have high social and economic importance, they are among the most “data-poor” fisheries in the country. In many cases, we lack precise estimates of recreational effort and catch, as well as vital statistics on the size and age distribution of catch, which are critical data needs for stock assessments. Implementation of SRFS will benefit harvesters who fish for reef fish, like red snapper, along the Atlantic coast of Florida, and other species important to south Florida. FWC leads stock assessments and often times management of yellowtail snapper, mutton snapper, and hogfish. Higher resolution data for these important South Florida species will be especially beneficial for FWC’s assessment and management of these reef fish stocks.

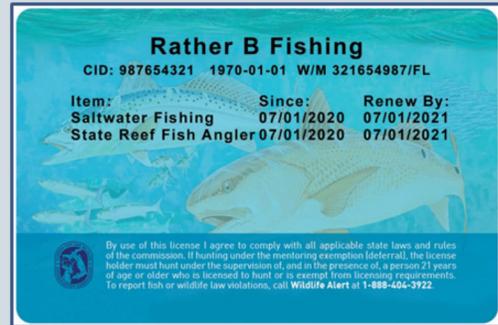
Data from SRFS are expected to contribute to stock assessments for all the species in the reef fish survey. For upcoming stock assessments of several Gulf reef fish (e.g., greater amberjack, gag grouper, and red snapper), FWC is developing a method to calibrate estimates of recreational landings and discards from GRFS with the historic MRIP timeseries that dates back to the 1980s. Calibration will facilitate incorporation of GRFS (and eventually SRFS) catch estimates into the continuous, long-term data sets required by stock assessments. The reef fish surveys will also provide data on the size and age composition of harvested and released fish, which is necessary for age-based stock assessments.

SRFS will enable FWC to continue sustainable management of the private recreational Gulf red snapper fishery in state and federal waters. FWC’s delegated authority for long-term management of Gulf red snapper in federal waters recently began in 2020. Like GRFS, data from SRFS will reduce uncertainty in setting Gulf red snapper seasons and are necessary for effectively tracking recreational harvest against Florida’s quota.

GRFS to SRFS Transition

Proposed effective date for SRFS: July 1, 2020

- Extensive outreach to the public and licensing vendors
- Current GRFS designations will remain valid for one year after sign-up
- SRFS sign-up available on July 1, 2020
- FWC LE will initially take an educational approach to enforcement



If approved by the Commission and with the funding provided by the Legislature, staff propose making the requirement to sign up for SRFS effective July 1, 2020. Once approved, staff would conduct extensive outreach to the public and licensing vendors, so they are aware of who is required to sign up for SRFS, how to sign up, and anticipated benefits of the survey.

As FWC transitions from GRFS to SRFS on July 1, recreational harvesters who are already signed up for GRFS would be able to use their GRFS designation to meet the requirement to sign up for SRFS until that GRFS designation expires. Sign up for SRFS would be available beginning July 1, 2020, anywhere FWC licenses are sold.

FWC law enforcement officers play a key role in agency customer service and serve as ambassadors of conservation. They also have a unique opportunity to educate the public about SRFS. As with all new Commission rules, the Division of Law Enforcement would first use an educational approach in enforcement of SRFS.

Staff Recommendation

Approve final rule to replace GRFS with SRFS

- Recreational harvesters fishing for or possessing select reef fish while aboard a private vessel required to sign up for SRFS
 - Add mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, and hogfish
- Remove outdated reference to Gulf Reef Fish State For-hire Pilot Program



Photo courtesy of Joey Cabrera



Proposed effective date: July 1, 2020

Staff recommends the Commission approve the proposed final rule to replace the Gulf Reef Fish Survey with the State Reef Fish Survey. Recreational harvesters fishing for or possessing certain reef fish while aboard a private vessel in Florida waters would be required to sign up for SRFS annually. The proposed final rule would add mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, and hogfish to the list of reef fish species included in SRFS. Finally, the proposed final rule would remove an outdated reference to the 2018 and 2019 Gulf Reef Fish State For-hire Pilot Program.

If approved and directed, staff recommends an effective date of July 1, 2020, to ensure that SRFS begins immediately after GRFS ends on June 30, 2020.

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