

# State Reef Fish Survey



Draft Rule  
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**Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**

Version 1

This is a draft rule hearing to modify reporting requirements in 68B-14.009, Florida Administrative Code (FAC), by creating a State Reef Fish Survey to replace and expand the Gulf Reef Fish Survey, requiring recreational harvesters to sign up 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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# Outline

- Gulf Reef Fish Survey (GRFS)
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- State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) proposal
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- Staff recommendation



Photo courtesy of Tanya Register

This presentation will provide an overview of the Gulf Reef Fish Survey (GRFS) and highlight successes of the dedicated reef fish recreational data collection program. It will outline a proposal 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Commission consideration, to approve advertisement of a draft rule that would replace GRFS with SRFS, as well as remove outdated rule language.

# Overview of the Gulf Reef Fish Survey

- **Goal:** Improve reef fish recreational data collection
  - Began in 2015, grant funded through June 2020
  - Focuses on private recreational, offshore reef fish harvest in the Gulf
  - Received NOAA Fisheries certification in 2019
- GRFS components
  - Mail survey of Gulf reef fish harvesters
  - In-person surveys
  - At-sea observer program



The Gulf Reef Fish Survey was created to improve data on private recreational harvest of reef fish off Florida's Gulf coast, excluding Monroe County. GRFS launched in 2015 with grant funding from Gulf Oil Spill Restoration money administered through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). The grant covers the cost of implementing through June 2020.

GRFS supplements recreational data collection 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. In 2019, GRFS received official certification from NOAA Fisheries, which means the data it produces can be used in federal stock assessments.

FWC requires all private recreational harvesters who fish for or possess certain reef fish when on board a private vessel in Florida Gulf waters to sign up for GRFS. GRFS has three components. The first is a targeted, monthly mail survey of fishers who signed up for GRFS, which directly estimates the number of private boat trips that target reef fish. The second component is targeted recreational harvester interviews at offshore access points (boat ramps, marinas, etc.) to provide catch per trip estimates. The final component is an at-sea observer program in which FWC biologists accompany charter captains on fishing trips and collect data on harvest and discards.

## GRFS

- Mandatory for recreational fishers aboard a private vessel in Florida Gulf waters fishing for or possessing any of the following reef fish
  - Red or vermilion snapper
  - Black, gag, or red grouper
  - Greater or lesser amberjack
  - Banded rudderfish
  - Almaco jack
  - Gray triggerfish
- No cost, annual sign-up and renewal
- Exemptions include
  - Children under 16 years of age
  - Persons aboard for-hire fishing vessels



Photo courtesy of Renee Ellington



As previously mentioned, recreational harvesters who fish for or possess certain reef fish while aboard a private vessel in Florida Gulf waters must sign up for GRFS. These reef fish 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 (FWC website or app, tackle shops, etc.).

Recreational fishers must sign up for GRFS each year they intend to target these specific Gulf reef fish. Once signed up, harvesters are eligible to receive the GRFS monthly 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. These individuals must still sign up for GRFS if they fish for or possess the 10 reef fish species listed above when aboard a private recreational vessel. Requiring these fishers to sign up for GRFS ensures that these harvesters can contribute data and FWC has a complete database for GRFS surveys. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 American Community Survey, 20% of Floridians are 65 years or older. Therefore, by including this group of fishers, FWC can collect data for the actual population of people who fish for Gulf reef fish.



# Successes of the Gulf Reef Fish Survey

## FWC provides better scientific advice for recreational reef fish fisheries

- Precise, timely estimates facilitate responsive management
- Greater confidence in tracking harvest against quotas
- Necessary for state management of Gulf red snapper in federal waters
  - Improves guidance for setting seasons

## Supported by recreational stakeholders in Florida

- Longer Gulf red snapper seasons demonstrate benefits of improved data
- In favor of reporting when it enhances data
- Requests to expand statewide



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 timelier 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. FWC has used the improved data from GRFS to monitor recreational harvest against the federal Gulf red snapper quota. This was critical for FWC to be delegated authority for the Gulf red snapper recreational fishery in federal waters off Florida.

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. GRFS data improve the advice FWC staff can provide the Commission for setting the Gulf red snapper season length or identifying when adjustments to seasons are warranted. For example, following poor weather, including Hurricane Barry, during summer 2019, staff were able to provide Commissioners information to determine how many days the recreational Gulf red snapper season could be re-opened in the fall.

GRFS has resulted in longer Gulf red snapper seasons for recreational anglers in Florida. In regions of the state where red snapper are only abundant in federal waters, state management greatly increased recreational fishing opportunities. This tangible benefit demonstrates the value of 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 the State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS)

- Expand the success of GRFS statewide
  - Strong support from stakeholders on both coasts
- Add important south Florida reef fish species: mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper and hogfish
- Implementation funds pending Legislative approval
  - 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 the 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 that are tracked using GRFS can be caught offshore in most regions of the state. This proposal would add socially- and economically-important reef fish species common in south Florida: mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, and hogfish.

With Commission approval, FWC has requested Legislative funding for implementation of SRFS. The survey would require \$3 million in operating funds annually. With this funding, as with GRFS, sign up for SRFS would be no cost.

# Proposed Draft Rule

## *Replace GRFS with SRFS*

- Mandatory for private recreational fishers who target or possess any of the following reef fish when on a 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 Kyle Leonard

The proposed draft 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 new 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 piece for setting SRFS apart from MRIP, since it allows FWC to focus the reef fish surveys on reef fish anglers instead of surveying all saltwater license holders.

The proposed draft 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 Gulf red snapper 2018 and 2019 Gulf red snapper exempted fishing permit (EFP), which has ended.



## Expected Benefits

### Long-term, sustainable management of Gulf red snapper

- Required for successful state management
- Continuing reef fish survey critical for tracking harvest



### Improve data for stock assessments

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

### Expand benefits of better data collection statewide

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



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

Data from SRFS is also expected to contribute to stock assessments for all the species in the reef fish survey. For upcoming stock assessments of several Gulf reef fish (greater amberjack, gag grouper, and red snapper), FWC is developing a method to calibrate GRFS’ estimates of recreational landings and discards with the historic MRIP timeseries that dates 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.

Once replaced with SRFS, the successes of GRFS on the Gulf coast would be expanded statewide, benefiting important 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. For 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 would benefit anglers that fish for reef fish like red snapper along the Atlantic coast of Florida, and other species important to south Florida. FWC leads assessment and often times management yellowtail snapper, mutton snapper, and hogfish. Higher resolution data for these South Florida species would be especially beneficial for FWC’s assessment and management of these reef fish stocks.

# 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

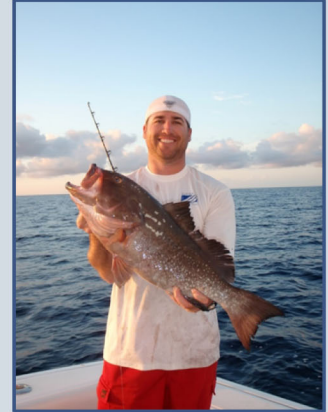


Photo courtesy of Devin Sanderson



If approved by the Commission and funded through 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 plays 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 draft rule to replace Gulf Reef Fish Survey with State Reef Fish Survey

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



*Propose effective July 1, 2020*

Photo courtesy of Michael Sipos

Staff recommends the Commission approve the proposed draft rule to replace the Gulf Reef Fish Survey with the State Reef Fish Survey. Recreational harvesters targeting or possessing certain reef fish while aboard a private vessel in Florida waters would be required to sign up for SRFS. The proposed rule would add mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, and hogfish to the list of reef fish species included in SRFS. Finally, the proposed rule would remove an outdated reference to the 2018 and 2019 Gulf Reef Fish State For-hire Pilot Program. Staff recommend an effective date of July 1, 2020, so SRFS begins immediately after GRFS ends on June 30, 2020.

If approved and directed, staff will return for a final public hearing at the May 2020 Commission Meeting.