

FLORIDA REEF FISH ENDORSEMENT PROPOSAL

Offered by

CONSERVATION COOPERATIVE of GULF FISHERMEN

P.O.BOX 53
ORANGE BEACH, AL 36561
850-814-8001
FAX: 850-763-3558
EMAIL: CCGF@ATT.NET

Florida saltwater recreational anglers are faced with continued fishing restrictions and shorter fishing seasons for several key reef fish species. These restrictions and shorter seasons are being forced on the State by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) due to requirements of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery and Conservation Management Act (MSA) as reauthorized in 2006. A critical reason for the increased restrictions and shorter seasons is the lack of accurate and dependable saltwater recreational, including for-hire, fishing effort and harvest data. This data is collected through the NMFS Marine Recreational Fishing Statistical Survey (MRFSS) which includes the For-Hire Survey (FHS).

While there is an ongoing effort to improve the MRFSS and FHS by the federal government called the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), this process is slow and will require years of study and comparison with the current data system before any change is affected. As a result, many saltwater recreational anglers and for-hire vessel owners are looking for new ways to improve the data and improve the accountability of saltwater recreational angling. This proposed reef fish stamp is one effort to do this.

The Florida Reef Fish Endorsement (FRFE) would be required as an addition to the Florida saltwater recreational fishing license and saltwater for hire license and could be purchased at all locations and by all methods that the current licenses are purchased. The FRFE would be required if a saltwater recreational angler and/or for-hire vessel intended to harvest reef fish off Florida. Since Florida's federal fisheries are managed by two different councils with two different sets of federal requirements, the FRFE may need to be identified as FL east coast and FL west coast and may also need to have both purchased if the saltwater recreational angler and for-hire vessel owner intends to harvest reef fish off both coasts.

The FRFE should also have a place to check for the major reef fish species to harvest. Examples are RS (red snapper), GG (gag Grouper), RG (red grouper), GA (greater amberjack), and VS (vermillion snapper). You could also just check G (groupers) instead of the individual species. The purpose of the species checks is to help identify the effort on those species. The cost of the endorsement should be minimum as the purpose is to help identify the effort and harvest also to create a data base for survey uses that will be limited to the actual people who intend to harvest reef fish. Since the state can dedicate funds received from the issuance of a stamp/endorsement,

we suggest that the funds be used for administrative costs (minimal), enforcement (minimal), artificial reef development (minimal), improved effort and harvest data (maximum), dedicated research for enhancement of the species (maximum).

Since the stamp will be purchased and added to the saltwater recreational fishing and for-hire fishing vessel licenses, the data base will include the contact information for the angler and the for-hire vessel owner. By placing the species sought, the data base can be further reduced to include only those anglers and vessel owners who wish to harvest the particular species. This will provide more accurate and timelier data for the particular species. Since saltwater recreational anglers and for-hire vessel owners fishing off Florida are required to obtain a state license regardless of where they are fishing this will provide data from all areas fished, state waters and/or EEZ.

A web based saltwater recreational angler and for-hire vessel owner fishing data reporting system is in a pilot study now. Anglers and for-hire vessel owners should be required to report their fishing experience (for-hire vessel owners would be required to report the number of angler fishing), license number, hours fished, area fished, harvest information with disposition, and any other data deemed necessary. This web based system should include other voluntary data sets that will be helpful to the anglers and for-hire vessel owners such as being able to keep their own records (private), on the site.

While this proposal is very simple and we believe it should be kept as simple as possible, there may be other data requirements that the state resource managers may need. This proposal is provided for discussion and we are willing to work with the FWC staff and other interested parties to further develop this endorsement. We will also be presenting this concept to the other Gulf States as we feel that a compatible system created by each Gulf state will further enhance the accurate effort and harvest data for the reef fish species in the Gulf.

[For any questions or comments on this issue, please contact Pam Anderson, Operations Manager of Capt. Anderson Marina at pamheartsofhope@aol.com]