

**Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**  
**REDFISH CATCH, HOLD, AND RELEASE**  
**BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES**

The following guidelines outline voluntary management practices for tournament anglers and organizers to use when catching, holding, and releasing redfish during tournaments. These basic guidelines increase the chances of survival of fish caught by hook and line.

**Catch and Release**

- Avoid using stainless hooks. These hooks do not rust out in the event that a fish is gut hooked and you have to cut the line.
- Land your fish quickly.
- If you are not placing your fish in a live well, leave your fish in the water during release.
- Use a de-hooking device to remove hooks. Using needle-nose pliers may injure a fish's mouth.
- If the fish is gut hooked, cut the line and do not attempt to remove the hook.
- When releasing a fish that has been held in a live well, release the fish headfirst. Revive fish by moving them forward (not back and forth) in the water to promote water flow over the gills.

**Handling**

- Avoid picking up fish by the lip or lower jaw or holding the fish vertically.
- Avoid holding a fish by its gill plate or touching its gills.
- Minimize the amount of time that you handle a fish to reduce stress. Release or place your fish in a live well as quickly as possible.
- Always handle fish with bare wet hands and not gloves, towels, etc. to avoid removing a fish's slime. The slime coating protects the fish from disease.

**Live Wells**

- Non-recirculating live wells should be aerated continuously with air (bubble) stones.
- Never fill your live wells in areas of poor water quality (e.g. areas with high water temperatures, muddy areas, etc.). Avoid filling your live well near marinas and boat docks.
- Use large live wells. State regulations require a minimum live well size of 18 gallons. However, a minimum live well size of 25 gallons is recommended. Larger live wells reduce bruising and damage to fins, allow more room for fish to move around, and have more water for the dilution of waste products.
- The water temperature in the live well should be maintained as close to the temperature of the water body from where the fish was harvested. Chilling live well water or allowing live well water to overheat may cause thermal shock if the live well water temperature varies more than 5°F from the water body that the fish was harvested from.

**Catch Bags**

- Some tournament formats require the use of catch bags to transport redfish for measuring and weigh-in. Redfish Tournament Exemption Permits require that only one redfish may be transported in a catch bag at a time. It is important when transporting redfish with a catch bag, the bag should be opened to allow aerated water that is maintained at the appropriate temperature to flow through the bag as much as possible.

## REDFISH Q & A

In response to questions that I have received from tournament anglers, I have put together the following list of questions and answers. Please let me know if you have any questions that you would like for me to add to the list, and keep an eye out for new questions and answers attached to future culling permits.

### **Q. Why isn't there a tagging program to gather information on redfish that are caught and released during redfish tournaments?**

A. There are several reasons why angler-based tagging programs are not the scientific data collection method of choice:

1. Tagging programs are very labor intensive and require a lot of manpower to manage. Not having enough manpower, or money to provide manpower are always issues for research.
2. Anglers (for the most part) do not have enough training to tag fish and can cause more harm than good to the fish during the tagging process.
3. Even though fish may be tagged during a tournament, it is not scientifically possible to directly calculate whether or not a fish died just because of tournament-related activities. More controls are needed to be able to collect solid data on mortality (deaths).
4. On average, a tagging program will get 1% - 5% tag return information. There are other scientific data collection methods that are not as labor intensive and can produce better information.

This is not to say that the FWC has ruled out using angler-based tagging programs as a data collection method. The FWC, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) is considering using angler-based tagging programs in the future but those programs will be subject to very controlled circumstances to preserve the integrity of the data collected.

### **Q. What do redfish eat during their different life cycles?**

A. Redfish eat plankton for approximately their first month and then transition to eating crustaceans such as shrimp, crabs, oysters, worms, etc. that are suited for their size as they grow. Redfish, like many other fish are opportunistic and will eat what is readily available such as smaller fish, but they mainly feed on crustaceans. Adult redfish have a sub-terminal jaw where the upper jaw extends beyond the lower jaw. A sub-terminal jaw structure is the sign of a bottom feeder. Tailing redfish are most likely bottom feeding on crustaceans.

### **Q. Can you over oxygenate a live well?**

A. It is possible to over oxygenate a live well especially when the live well has a lid that is kept closed. Closing the lid to a live well increases the oxygen level which increases respiration by the fish. This will increase the level of carbon dioxide and other gasses expelled by the fish. It is recommended that you leave the live well cracked or open to allow gasses to escape. Keeping the live well lid cracked also has the benefit of allowing light in to allow the fish to orient itself.

Excess oxygen will also excite the fish and cause over activity that may lead to the fish bumping and bruising itself in the live well. We suggest using an adjustable oxygenation system with ceramic air stones. Ceramic air stones produce small bubbles that dissolve quickly. It is important to have a steady, rising stream of bubbles, but the water should not be boiling from the input of oxygen.

The best possible way to avoid over-oxygenating or under-oxygenating a live well is to use a device that measures dissolved oxygen content in the water. It is also possible to tell by observing a fish's behavior if the oxygen level is appropriate. The fish should appear to be relaxed and be opening and closing its

gill covers. If the fish appears overactive, the oxygen level may be too high. If the fish is coming to the surface, they are looking for more oxygen and the oxygen level may be too low.

**Q. Is it better to use medical grade oxygen for the live well?**

A. We have not found that the grade of oxygen makes a difference. Our redfish hatchery uses industrial grade oxygen that is typically used for welding and is much less expensive than medical grade oxygen.

**Q. Is it better to use a boga grip when handling fish during the measuring and weigh-in process?**

A. Yes and no. If used correctly, a boga grip can be a benefit. If the fish is held horizontally and supported at the belly, the boga grip can be helpful by reducing handling and gaining control over the fish to aid transport and measurement. Unfortunately, when using a boga grip the tendency is to hold the fish vertically and the fish may struggle too hard and break its jaw. If you choose to use a boga grip, we emphasize that you keep the fish horizontal and support its weight at the belly.

**Q. If I have the appropriate size live well on board my boat to qualify me to use the culling permit, do I have to put the redfish that I catch during the tournament in the qualifying live well?**

A. Yes. FWC rule and the culling permit require a live well minimum size of 18 gallons (9 gallons per fish) so that up to 2 redfish could be maintained on board a vessel with the minimum needed space to survive. The permit specifically states the following: "All boats used in the tournament must contain recirculating or aerated live wells that are at least 2.4 cubic feet or 18 gallons in capacity. Any fish caught and culled pursuant to this permit must be maintained in the live well that meets these specifications."