

Florida authorities respond to widespread fish kills with closures

One of the executive orders temporarily extends closed fishing seasons for snook statewide until September...

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By FWC

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The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has issued executive orders to protect Florida's snook, bonefish and tarpon fisheries from further harm caused by the recent prolonged cold weather in the state, which has caused widespread saltwater fish kills. The FWC has received numerous reports from the public and is taking action to address the conservation needs of affected marine fisheries. The orders also will allow people to legally dispose of dead fish in the water and on the shore.

One of the executive orders temporarily extends closed fishing seasons for snook statewide until September. It also establishes temporary statewide closed seasons for bonefish and tarpon until April because of the prolonged natural cold weather event that caused significant, widespread mortality of saltwater fish in Florida. The other order temporarily suspends certain saltwater fishing regulations to allow people to collect and dispose of dead fish killed by the cold weather.

"A proactive, precautionary approach is warranted to preserve our valuable snook, bonefish and tarpon resources, which are among Florida's premier game fish species," said FWC Chairman Rodney Barreto. "Extending the snook closed season and temporarily closing bonefish and tarpon fishing will protect surviving snook that spawn in the spring and will give our research scientists time to evaluate the extent of damage that was done to snook, bonefish and tarpon stocks during the unusual cold-weather period we recently experienced in Florida."

Snook season currently is closed in Florida under regular FWC rules, and there are also regular closed snook seasons that occur in the summer. However, the FWC executive order extends the statewide snook closed seasons continuously through Aug. 31 and provides that no person may harvest or possess snook in state and federal waters off Florida during this period unless the fishery is opened sooner or the closure is extended by subsequent order.

The order also establishes a temporary prohibition on the harvest and possession of bonefish and tarpon from state and federal waters off Florida through March 31, unless these fisheries are opened sooner or the closures are extended by subsequent order. The FWC executive order for the snook, bonefish and tarpon closed seasons takes effect at 12:01 a.m. on Jan. 16.

The other FWC executive order temporarily removes specific harvest regulations for all dead saltwater fish of any species that have died as a result of prolonged exposure to cold weather in Florida waters. It also modifies general methods of taking dead saltwater fish from Florida's shoreline and from the water to allow the collection of saltwater fish by hand, cast net, dip net or seine.

All people taking dead saltwater fish under the provisions of this order may not sell, trade or consume such fish, and the dead fish must immediately be disposed of in compliance with local safety, health and sanitation requirements for such disposal.

In addition, all people taking dead fish under the provisions of this order are not required to possess a saltwater fishing license, and all fish taken under the provisions of this executive order shall be those that have died as a result of prolonged exposure to cold weather.

This FWC executive order takes effect at 12:01 a.m. on Jan. 16 and will expire at 12:01 a.m. on Feb. 1, unless it is repealed sooner or extended by subsequent order.



Photo by Josh Harvel