

Stone crab season opens Oct. 15 with new regs in place



Florida's annual stone crab season opens Oct. 15, 2020, marking a new chapter in the history of the stone crab fishery. The season opens on the Gulf of Mexico coast and will extend to the Atlantic Ocean by the end of the season. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) has implemented new regulations for the fishery to ensure a long and healthy season. The new rules, along with other changes to the fishery, will be implemented on Monday, Oct. 15, 2020.

For roughly a week, new arrivals of Florida's stone crabs and their descendants have headed inland offshore into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean by their traps on the depths.

Come Thursday, Oct. 15, 2020, these crabs will venture out again to launch Florida's stone crab season, hauling in anticipated hauls of terrapin merchandise and their treasured claws.



A stone crab.

"We're putting them out right now," Richard Slight, owner of the Homosassa based Sully Brown Fisheries, said about 600 of his 10,000 traps.

It's take some time before crabbing crews know what kind of season they'll have.

"It's this point, it's hard to say," said Kelly Kuhlert, co-owner of The Crab Place restaurant and seafood market in Crystal River. "We're just getting our traps overboard."

This stone crab season, however, will be a little different for the recreational and commercial fishermen looking for a meal or profit.

A slew of new and updated rules approved by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) last week will go into effect for the 2020-21 stone crab fisheries in the Gulf and Atlantic.

FWC commissioners OK'd these measures at their July 2020 meeting to help ease fishing impacts on a 20% to 25% decline in stone crab harvests since the late 1990s.

"We want to make sure participants in this fishery are aware of the new regulations as the season begins," said the FWC.

FWC votes to shorten stone crab season by 14 days, approves other rule changes

Slight, agency spokeswoman Amanda Hickey said.

Two big stone-crabbing regs to be aware of: a shorter season by two weeks, from May 15 to May 2, and an eight-of-ten-inch increase to the minimum claw-harvesting size, to ten and seven-eighths inches.

Stone crab claws are removed before the crabs are returned to the water.



"We also encourage anyone new to the fishery to learn about the best ways to remove stone crab claws," Hickey said. "We want the stone crab to be the best choice of seafood after being released."

Other rules FWC approved: a limit of whole crab possession to two checked boxes, or a volume of 24 cubic feet, and requiring escape rings on all traps by the 2023-24 season.

Violating these second-degree misdemeanors for the first time could lead to a fine of up to \$500 and/or up to 60 days in jail.

For information about stone crab harvesting, visit myfwc.com/landshell for recreational rules; myfwc.com/seafood for commercial.

These modifications, FWC fisheries experts claim, will help reduce harvesting rates, increase survival of undersized crabs and protect egg-bearing females.

FWC marine biologists will reassess stone crab populations three years from now. Kuhlert, whose family has crabbled out of Kings Bay since 1968, said he and other local crabbers asked FWC in its public workshops to hold off on enacting new rules until after COVID-19 dies down.

If new laws did have to be enforced, Kuhlert added, don't make them custom.

For example, as FWC does with scallop seasons, create regulations specific to areas facing different issues and crab populations.

Kuhlert said FWC's new rules would work leaving crab populations near South Florida — where pollutants, Red Tide and overfishing are abundant — but not in waters off Citrus County.

"If they're having trouble," he said, "then let them deal with their problems."

Slight, who was a commercial crabber in Key West for 23 years before starting his crabbing operations a year ago in local waters, said the 2019-20 season wasn't great. "Fishermen are gamblers," he said about trying crabbers trying to capitalize on an up-and-down product.

Stone crab season off to slow start, red tide not a factor

Slight said he has a handful of the upcoming season's traps out.

"We've seen how it ends up, I'm always optimistic," he said. "If it had been thought it was going to be bad one, I wouldn't even put traps out."

Slight said he's OK with a shorter season as future crab generations can flourish, but losing more product because of a larger claw-size minimum is going to be hard on his business line.

"We're definitely going to be down with some money, but we're going to stay positive," he said. "When you fish, it's just what you do."

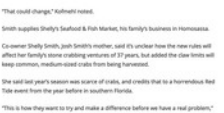
If there were fewer traps in the water, Slight said, there wouldn't be a need for more fishing lines.

Due to the higher claw size limits, Kuhlert said he expects to lose between 15-20% of his traditional springtime crab catch since smaller stone crabs venture out more in warmer waters.

Jack Smith, owner of the Wild Fish Company out of Homosassa, said "nobody seems happy with the rules."

"I don't think they're anything to put you out of business, necessarily," he added.

Smith said the bigger question is: how is COVID-19 going to hit the crabbing industry with its ongoing impacts to seafood eaters?



Stone crab season opens Oct. 15.

"Most of our product goes to restaurants so that's a big worry," said Smith, who's been crabbing locally for eight years. "We're kind of fortunate Florida has opened up their restaurant scene."

"That could change," Kuhlert noted.

Smith supplies Shell's Seafood & Fish Market, his family's business in Homosassa.

Co-owner Shelly Smith, Jack Smith's mother, said it's unclear how the new rules will affect her family's stone-crabbing ventures of 37 years, but added the claw limits will keep common, medium-sized crabs from being harvested.

The last few years' seasons saw scarce crabs, and credits that to a horrendous Red Tide event from the year before in northern Florida.

"This is how they want to try and make a difference before we have a real problem," Shelly Smith about FWC's precautionary regulations. "It remains to be seen, but we're definitely going to be OK."

In the meantime, Shelly Smith said, communities can support their area's seafood industry by buying local.

"It would really help," she said. "It's good for everyone."

BUSTER THOMPSON

Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission

Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission