

“Project Tampa Bay”

Stocking Florida Redfish in Tampa Bay



Fingerling redfish were released as part of Project Tampa Bays' research phase.



Anglers that catch visibly tagged redfish such as the one pictured can assist researchers by calling the Fish Tag Hot Line.



A Project Tampa Bay staff member tags a young redfish.

The Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI), in partnership with Mote Marine Laboratory, are in the midst of a large-scale redfish (red drum) stock enhancement project in Tampa Bay. Our goal is to increase the number of redfish in Tampa Bay, and to experimentally determine the best sizes and locations for stocking in order to meet that goal in the most cost-effective manner.

Before this project began, an in-depth process was designed and implemented by scientists to identify and prioritize potential candidate stock enhancement species. The process included a survey of many saltwater fishing license holders as well as others with an interest or involvement in recreational saltwater fishing.

Using a variety of criteria, scientists ranked the list of fish developed from the survey. The top three candidates were red drum, snook and spotted seatrout.

Tampa Bay was selected as the pilot stock enhancement site for several reasons. First, it already has an existing redfish fishery as well as an abundance of redfish nursery habitat. Our marine hatchery, called the Stock Enhancement Research Facility (SERF), is located near the shore of Tampa Bay in northwest Manatee County and has been culturing redfish since it opened in April 1988. Also, the FWRI Fisheries Independent Monitoring (FIM) program currently monitors wild fish populations in Tampa Bay and many of its contributing river systems.

The Alafia River is the primary study area and the Little Manatee River is a secondary study area for Project Tampa Bay. These rivers were selected because the majority of juvenile redfish documented in Tampa Bay by FIM monitoring teams over the past 10 years were

captured within these two river systems.

FIM's monitoring efforts provide data on the abundance of redfish in these locations before and after hatchery fish are stocked. This information is important for assessing the effect of the stocking as well as determining what size fish is most cost-effective to release.

The staff at SERF began raising redfish for Project Tampa Bay in August 1999. Stocking for the research phase of the project began in the spring of 2000 and was completed last December. More than 4 million redfish of five different sizes were released.

The test of concept phase of the project involves the release of several million fish of the size or sizes determined by the research phase to be the most cost-effective.

Because our goal is to increase the number of redfish, it is important to stock fish where many people already fish for them. Anglers can help track these fish by taking a fin clip from any redfish caught in Tampa Bay and by cooperating with scientists conducting creel surveys.

We believe that stocking hatchery-reared fish, if done responsibly, can be a cost-effective addition to fisheries management tools such as regulations and habitat protection. It is believed that hatchery-reared fish can be used to restore populations that have been depleted by man-made or natural disasters such as chemical spills or freezes and to supplement weak year classes.

If hatchery fish can enhance existing populations or help restore stocks that have been depleted, future generations will still be able to call Florida the Fishing Capital of the World.

If you catch a tagged fish or need information concerning the fin clip project you may call the Fish Tag Hot Line at 1-800-367-4461.