

# New study triples estimate of red snapper in Gulf of Mexico

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In this Sept. 14, 2012 file photo, the haul of Red Snapper and Triggerfish from the fishing boat Waterproof hang on the rack at the Critter Fleet in Ponce Inlet, Fla. A new study estimates there are three times the number of red snapper previously thought to swim in the Gulf of Mexico. Congress appropriated \$9.5 million for the study in 2016, as arguments grew heated between recreational anglers and federal regulators. (David Massey/The Daytona Beach News-Journal via AP)

There are about three times as many red snapper as previously estimated in the Gulf of Mexico, according to a study released Wednesday about the popular game and table fish over which recreational anglers and federal regulators have fought for years.

The \$12 million [Great Red Snapper Count](#) estimated that the Gulf holds about 110 million adult red snapper—those at least 2 years old. A 2018 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration marine fisheries' estimate was about 36 million.

"This new information should translate into greater access and longer fishing seasons for families," Republican U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy said in a news release Wednesday.

Clay Porch, director of NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Science Center Director in Miami, said peer reviewers will be going over the science for the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council, which is likely to consider revising quotas in April, Porch said Tuesday.

For various reasons, the quotas are unlikely to be tripled, he said.

The increased population estimate is almost entirely because federal scientists previously have relied on information from a fishery concentrated on natural and artificial reefs, while the new study also looks at the immense spaces in between, Porch said.

More than 60% of the red snapper were in areas that previously had not been checked, according to the study by 20 scientists from 14 universities and NOAA.

"Sand and mud makes up the vastness of the Gulf of Mexico," but it is

dotted with remnant oyster reefs, salt domes, holes scoured out by currents, shipwrecks, fallen shipping containers and other bottom features that would attract red snapper, lead researcher [Greg Stunz](#) of Texas A&M-Corpus Christi said Monday.

Suspended sediment makes the area west of the Mississippi River so murky that researchers designed new acoustic equipment for the project, Stunz said.

The report [estimated](#) that about 48 million adult red snapper swim off Florida, 29 million off Louisiana, 23 million off Texas and 10 million off Mississippi and Alabama.

That included about 31 million in previously unchecked areas off Florida. An estimated 17 million live in such areas off Louisiana, 16 million off Texas and 4 million off Mississippi and Alabama.

That means "we have a reserve that is not directly targeted" for fishing, Stunz said.

Will White, a fisheries population expert at Oregon State University, said that although he hadn't been able to study the report in depth, "it uses standard methods and takes appropriate precautions with the data."

Porch said the population estimate increase wasn't surprising. "Some of the highliner commercial fishermen have been telling us for years there are fish 'out on the mud,'" he said. He noted that the red snapper count received twice as much funding as all of the studies he oversees at the Southeast Fisheries Science Center.

Congress appropriated \$9.5 million for the study, and 14 universities provided about \$2.5 million in matching funds.

Congress voted for the study in 2016, as red snapper recreational seasons got shorter and shorter while anglers kept seeing more and bigger fish. Anglers contended the government was seriously undercounting the species.

In 2017, NOAA Fisheries set the recreational season in the Gulf at three days. The Trump administration added 39 days.

Under an experimental plan, the five Gulf states were allowed to regulate recreational fishing seasons, and they ramped up their checks on the numbers caught. That arrangement became permanent in 2019.

Each state manages its quota differently. Meredith Moore, director of fish conservation at the Ocean Conservancy, said she believes that is allowing overfishing because their statistics aren't directly comparable. States could fix that with available tools, she said.

The federal government still regulates commercial and charter boat catches; this year's [charter boat season](#) will run from June 1 until Aug. 3.

The new estimate doesn't replace the NOAA's 2018 assessment but will supplement and enhance continuing analyses, the report said.

Because an overestimate might damage the fishery, researchers took a conservative approach that likely underestimates the total, the report said.

"That is the choice you want to make in precautionary fishery management—just like in your personal finances, it's better to actually have more money than you think you do in your bank account, rather than having less than you think you do," said Oregon State's White.

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