

Blue Star Fishing Guide Program Framework: Partnering with Charter Fishing Operators to Encourage Responsible Angling Practices in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

I Mission of the Program

The mission of the Blue Star Fishing Guide program is to encourage responsible angling in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary through education, communication, and partnership.

The purpose of this program is to:

1. Reduce the negative impact that visitors on fishing trips can have on the historic, biological, and cultural resources within Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS or sanctuary);
2. Recognize charter fishing operators who meet set criteria to educate their customers to conserve the special ecosystem of the Florida Keys;
3. Increase awareness and stewardship of the angling community in FKNMS;
4. Increase communication and partnership opportunities between FKNMS and the charter fishing community;
5. Promote FKNMS as a multiple-use recreational area.

The Blue Star Fishing Guide program is a voluntary program with no regulatory component, implemented and coordinated through the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation (NMSF) and FKNMS, in partnership with local charter fishing ventures and local and state agencies. The framework that follows was developed in partnership with charter fishing captains, FKNMS staff, and local stakeholders.

The Blue Star Fishing Guide program fulfills strategy E.4, activity 6, under the Education and Outreach Plan of the FKNMS Final Management Plan (2007) and fulfills goal 1, objective 1.3 and goal 4, objective 4.3 under the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) Strategic Plan (2017).

II Program Goals and Objectives

The goal of the program is to develop a voluntary education, recognition, and endorsement program for charter fishing operators to expand their awareness and knowledge, and, ultimately, that of their clients, about responsible angling practices, the South Florida ecosystem, and FKNMS.

Objectives in support of this goal include:

- A. Develop a framework with set criteria for program participation, recognition materials for charter operators, and a list of best practices for ethical angling;
- B. Develop training, recruitment, advertising, and outreach plans to support this framework;

- C. Develop education and outreach materials, and distribute to charter operators to provide to their customers;
- D. Develop evaluation tools to determine efficacy of program.

III Eligibility for Program Recognition

Captains, guides, or businesses licensed to conduct for-hire charter fishing operations originating in FKNMS are eligible to participate. Captains must show their valid Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Charter Captain or Charter Boat license (or other state equivalent), as well as a Monroe County Occupational License, if applicable.

IV Required Program Criteria for Blue Star Fishing Guide Operators

As referenced below, operators include business owner or manager and staff, program coordinator refers to FKNMS staff program lead, and representative can include FKNMS staff, volunteers, or program coordinator.

A. Comply with Applicable Laws and Regulations

1. Comply with all current, applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations, including respecting no-take zones. See Operator Handbook for additional information regarding applicable laws.
2. Report suspected fisheries or resource violations to the appropriate authority including marine mammal strandings, vessel groundings, and illegal fishing activities.

B. Follow Established Policies, Recommendations, and Guidelines for Responsible Angling (adapted from FishSmart)

1. Expect to release fish on any given trip and prepare the necessary equipment to do so.
2. Use gear suited to the size of fish targeted, including properly-sized hooks, bait, line strength, and tackle. Use barbless, circle hooks whenever practical/possible.
3. Limit fight times to avoid playing the fish to exhaustion. Land the fish as quickly as possible.
4. Use knotless, rubberized landing nets and rubberized gloves or wet hands to handle fish to avoid removing the slime layer from their body.
5. Keep fish horizontal and support their body weight when lifting large fish.
6. Take care to not drop the fish onto hard surfaces or long distances.
7. If preparing for release, leave fish in the water rather than bringing them out of water. If it is not possible to have fish remain in the water, limit air exposure as much as possible.
8. Take time to revive fish to ensure a successful release. If necessary, use a recompression device to successfully release barotrauma-affected fish.

C. Voluntarily Exceed Standards Specified by Law, Policies, and Guidelines to Promote Responsible Stewardship of Fisheries Resources

1. Limit your catch; do not keep more fish than your clients want/need for private use.
2. Ensure humane conditions for fish, including, but not limited to: avoid gaffing a fish intended for release, avoid holding fish by gill cover or jaw, and immediately anaesthetize fish intended for harvest (place in cooler, stun, pith).
3. Only attempt hook removal if hook is superficially embedded, otherwise, cut line as close to deep hook as possible.

4. Use mooring buoys when feasible, available, and practical or anchor safely and in accordance with sanctuary regulations.
5. Properly dispose of or recycle all waste including, but not limited to: trash, fish waste, fishing gear, and engine oil.
6. Take care to respect other anglers, and the habitat and resources in the area you are fishing. Do not target fish during their spawn.

D. Participate in Trainings

1. Operator will participate in annual training provided by FKNMS to attain a program standard of knowledge on responsible angling practices, the South Florida ecosystem, and FKNMS, and ensure all operator staff are trained according to program standards, including new employees hired after the initial training.

E. Conduct an Onboard Educational Briefing

1. During the charter, and before any lines enter the water, conduct an educational briefing onboard about the Blue Star Fishing Guide program. Operators can be provided a script to assist in the briefing. The briefing should include, but is not limited to:
 - (1) Responsible Angling Practices
 - (a) Set expectations of catch: what to take home and what to release
 - (2) South Florida Ecosystem
 - (3) Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary
 - (4) Blue Star Fishing Guide program: what it is, why it's important, and the criteria operators agree to follow

F. Provide Outreach and Education Materials

1. Provide customers with Blue Star Fishing Guide brochures and other outreach materials that promote the program mission and purpose. FKNMS will provide these materials at no cost and by request.
2. Provide additional materials by request of customers (i.e., educational script, additional FKNMS brochures, fact sheets)

G. Promote the Blue Star Fishing Guide Program

1. Where feasible, promote the Blue Star Fishing Guide program by including Blue Star Fishing Guide graphic element on charter fishing business website, email correspondence, and advertisements. Include a link from your business website, if applicable, to the Blue Star Fishing Guide program website. Operators are not required to create a website for this program.
2. Where feasible, display Blue Star Fishing Guide program materials such as poster, decal, flag, and/or sticker in or around your business, vessel, or vehicle.

H. Participate in at Least One Conservation-Related Activity per Year

I. Attend a Continuing Education Opportunity Once per Year

V Process for Program Participation

A. Initial Evaluation

1. Business owner or manager contacts Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator indicating desire to participate.
2. Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator provides business owner or manager with a checklist of Blue Star Fishing Guide components and criteria (hereby called the Operator Agreement), as

- well as materials to help the business prepare for an evaluation before participation and recognition are confirmed.
3. Business owner or manager reviews Operator Agreement and ensures their practices comply.
 4. Business owner or manager completes an initial Blue Star Fishing Guide training (see paragraph B below). The owner or manager ensures that all employees are trained to program standards before the evaluation.
 5. Following the training, business owner or manager contacts the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator to request an evaluation to verify their business is following program criteria.
 - (1) Evaluation, including a site visit and review of relevant materials, occurs within four weeks of request.
 - (2) Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator requests copies of company brochures and other advertising materials, reviews the operator's webpage, and conducts a web search to ensure all business information aligns with program criteria.
 - (3) Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator meets with operator at the business site on a mutually convenient date to review the evaluation checklist.
 - (4) If feasible, Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator observes a complete charter to ensure the briefing includes educational information and that the captain (or other applicable staff) is following program criteria. If not feasible, coordinator will observe a simulated briefing by captain or staff during evaluation.
 - (5) Coordinator provides evaluation results to business owner or manager within four weeks of completing the evaluation.
 6. Following successful completion of the evaluation, the business owner or manager becomes an official Blue Star Fishing Guide operator by signing the Operator Agreement to voluntarily follow Blue Star program criteria for the calendar year in which the business was initially evaluated. The operator also receives recognition materials (see paragraph C below) from FKNMS and is included on all Blue Star Fishing Guide materials as appropriate.
 7. If the business owner or manager does not meet all program criteria following the evaluation, the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator provides a letter describing how best to revise their practices to conform. The Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator provides technical assistance, when possible. After reviewing the evaluation and making suggested changes, the business owner or manager contacts the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator to arrange for re-evaluation.

Note: If the re-evaluation request is made within six months of the initial evaluation, only those areas which the criteria are not being met will be re-evaluated. If the re-evaluation request is made more than six months after the initial evaluation, a full evaluation will be conducted.

B. Initial Training

1. FKNMS will provide an online training workshop designed to ensure operators understand the framework, including regulations, and to assist them in meeting program criteria. The business owners or managers must ensure that employees complete the initial training.
2. FKNMS will provide operators with free education and outreach materials that are necessary for program participation and training. These may include, but are not limited to:
 - (1) Operator handbook
 - (a) Blue Star Fishing Guide program framework

- (b) Examples of continuing education opportunities and conservation activities
- (c) Handouts of applicable laws, and list of appropriate reporting numbers
- (d) List of pertinent websites
- (e) Educational products, such as FKNMS brochures
- (2) DVD or PDF copies of training workshop, as available
- (3) Interactive website for training:

This training module provides all employees with standardized program training by providing an explanation of all components of the framework and how to adhere to them. It also provides a consistent means of training new employees. After successful completion of the online course, an automatic email notification will be sent to the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator and the operator to certify that the operator successfully completed the course.

C. Recognition

1. Upon successful completion of training, evaluation, and signing of the Operator Agreement, applicant is included on the list of program operators and receives all program materials, as well as a poster, decal, flag, and/or sticker with Blue Star Fishing Guide graphic element.
2. Program operators will be recognized through the ONMS and FKNMS websites, social media platforms, outreach events, and media announcements.

D. Annual Evaluation

Evaluation of operators is essential to gauge the program's effectiveness and success, which relies on operators continuing to follow the program criteria after their initial evaluation and after receiving recognition as a Blue Star Fishing Guide operator. The goal of the annual evaluation is not to eliminate operators from the program but, rather, to ensure that operators are following the Blue Star Fishing Guide program criteria. Therefore, the focus of the annual evaluation process is to provide operators with constructive comments on their operations as related to the Blue Star Fishing Guide program, and work with them to meet program criteria.

1. A trained Blue Star Fishing Guide representative from FKNMS conducts the annual evaluation. Evaluation techniques may include, but are not limited to:
 - (1) In-person or online client evaluations
 - (2) Secret shopper-style evaluations
 - (3) Prearranged, voluntary ride along by the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator, trained representative, or third party, with feedback provided to the business following the end of the trip.
2. All Blue Star Fishing Guide operators are evaluated at least once per year.
3. FKNMS representatives conducting Blue Star Fishing Guide evaluations are trained to ensure objectivity and an accurate assessment.
4. Once the representative submits the evaluation results to the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator, the coordinator will contact the operator to discuss these results and any areas of concern and/or make recommendations. The operator will receive a copy of the evaluation results via mail, fax, or email, whichever is preferred. The operator will have the opportunity to note any areas of disagreement regarding the evaluation and can challenge the findings if they disagree with the FKNMS representative's observations or conclusions. If a FKNMS representative observes what he/she believes may be a violation of the law, he/she or the coordinator will contact the appropriate law enforcement agency to report the incident.

5. If there are any areas of deviation from the program criteria, operators have 30 days to revise their practices. The Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator is available for technical assistance as necessary. Operators are re-evaluated after the 30-day period through techniques described in paragraph 1 above. Operators will not receive any poster, decal, flag, and/or sticker for the new program year until it is determined they have revised their practices to meet the Blue Star Fishing Guide criteria.
6. If a Blue Star Fishing Guide operator disagrees with the representative's evaluation findings, the operator may submit a written description explaining why they disagree with the evaluation findings and demonstrating their full compliance with the program criteria. After reviewing both accounts, the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator will decide whether the operator did not satisfy the criteria, triggering the process in paragraph 5 above. If the coordinator determines that the operator successfully met the program criteria, the coordinator will note this on the evaluation form and notify the operator via email, mail, or fax that no further action is required.
7. Program grant funding or program operator in-kind funding will cover the cost of voluntary trips taken by FKNMS representatives to evaluate program operators, as applicable.
8. Operators are welcome to provide feedback on the evaluation process to the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator at any time.
9. Additional spot checks may be carried out on a random or unannounced basis to ensure that all operators continue to meet program criteria.
10. Complaints from the general public or other program operators that a Blue Star Fishing Guide operator is not following program criteria will be handled according to the procedure described in Section VI below.

E. Refresher Training

1. Prior to renewal, and by December 1 of each year, operators must complete the online refresher training.
2. An automatic email notification will be sent to the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator and the operator to certify that the operator successfully completed the refresher course.

F. Annual Renewal

1. Recognition for all Blue Star Fishing Guide operators automatically expires at the end of each calendar year, requiring annual renewal to continue recognition for the next calendar year.
2. FKNMS will distribute new poster, decal, flag, and/or stickers annually in December to operators who successfully complete the following annual renewal process:
 - (1) Successfully complete the annual evaluation and address the potential problem areas found in accordance with Section V.D. above.
 - (2) Complete the required annual online refresher training prior to December 1. All employees must complete the online refresher.
3. FKNMS will update Blue Star Fishing Guide materials as appropriate to reflect the current list of recognized operators.

VI Complaints Procedure

The following procedure establishes a process to address complaints the FKNMS coordinator receives from the public or program operators about Blue Star Fishing Guide operators who may not be meeting program criteria.

A. Telephone/verbal complaints

A record of the conversation is made and the complainant(s) is asked to document concerns in writing. The complainant is advised that a copy of the written complaint may be provided to the operator against whom the complaint was made, but complainant may choose to remain anonymous. The procedure for written complaints in section B then applies. No further action will be taken unless the coordinator receives a signed, written complaint from the complainant.

Note: Any complaint from the public that appears to describe a violation of the law will be forwarded to NOAA Office of Law Enforcement or the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for appropriate action.

B. Written complaints

1. Complaints are date stamped and shared with the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator. Before sending the written complaint to the operator, the coordinator reviews the complaint and assesses whether it relates to a deviation in program criteria. Within six (6) weeks of receiving a written complaint, the coordinator will make a determination. If the coordinator determines the complaint does not relate to the program criteria or the operator was following all program criteria, no further action is taken. If the coordinator determines the operator deviated from the program criteria, the coordinator will provide a copy of the written complaint to the operator involved, outlining the main points of the complaint and requesting a response.
2. If separate complaints against the same Blue Star Fishing Guide operator are received and reviewed before the formal complaint is provided to the operator, all complaints will be compiled and sent as one document. Follow-up complaints received against the same operator for the same issue(s) as the original complaint will not be accepted until the original complaint is reviewed, processed, and provided to the operator. This allows the operator the opportunity to become aware of the potential complaint and address the issue(s) prior to additional complaints being shared with the operator.
3. Upon receiving a written complaint, the Blue Star Fishing Guide operator has 30 days to provide the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator with a written response (or rebuttal) to the complaint. The Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator reviews the operator's response to the complaint made against them and determines if the points have been adequately addressed. This may involve the need for a meeting with the operator to clarify any points, a re-evaluation through an unannounced spot check, and/or a prearranged ride along. The coordinator will select the most appropriate method.
4. If a second complaint against the operator is received and upheld within one (1) year after the formal complaint process is complete, the operator undergoes additional evaluation in accordance with procedures described in subsection 3 above. If three (3) complaints are upheld and/or three (3) evaluations are not successfully completed within one (1) recognition year, the operator will be ineligible for the Blue Star Fishing Guide program for one (1) year. The coordinator will remove the operator from Blue Star Fishing Guide program materials and the operator will not receive the annual renewal poster, decal, flag, and/or stickers.
5. The business may request re-evaluation and renewal participation after one (1) full year of nonparticipation.

Note: If any complaint that is investigated by NOAA Office of Law Enforcement or the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission results in a judgment against the

operator, the operator will be removed from the program. Future reinstatement is at the discretion of the coordinator.

VII Framework Review

An annual review of the criteria for participation in Blue Star Fishing Guide program will ensure that the program is functioning as intended and will provide the opportunity to address issues that were not foreseen when the criteria and program were initially developed.

- A. In June of each year, current Blue Star Fishing Guide operators are notified via email or mailed letter that the annual framework review is commencing, which will include, but is not limited to: in-person framework meeting with operators, receiving suggestions from operators, and/or suggestions from ONMS or the Sanctuary Advisory Council.
- B. By August, the program coordinator will complete a new draft of the framework if revisions are necessary.
- C. The new draft framework is circulated among current operators for comment, with 30 days to respond.
- D. Comments are reviewed, and the revised final framework provided to current operators and program partners in October.
- E. Operators agree to abide by all amendments to Blue Star Fishing Guide criteria.
- F. Blue Star Fishing Guide operators have three (3) months (October-December) to ensure their practices meet the revised criteria, if necessary. The revised criteria are used for all operator evaluations in the upcoming renewal year.

VIII Raising Public Awareness About Blue Star Fishing Guide program

To ensure the Blue Star Fishing Guide program is effective in reaching anglers and to create a further incentive for operators to participate in the program, NMSF/FKNMS will pursue the following public awareness activities:

- A. Create Blue Star Fishing Guide page as part of the sanctuary's website, including a complete list of Blue Star Fishing Guide operators.
- B. Use social media channels to advertise Blue Star Fishing Guide program.
- C. Work with fishing, travel, and other relevant media to publicize Blue Star Fishing Guide program.
- D. Present information about the program at relevant consumer trade shows, such as iCAST, science symposiums, and fishing tournaments and various outreach events.
- E. Work with the Monroe County Tourism Development Council, as well as other tourism-related organizations, to increase awareness about the program.
- F. Create outreach materials such as rack cards, presentations, and publications for distribution to appropriate locations, such as hotels and visitors centers.
- G. Provide program poster, decal, flag, and/or stickers to distribute to shops for display and as possible handouts to customers.