

Blue Star Fishing Guide Program Framework:

Partnering with Charter Fishing Operators to Encourage Responsible Angling Practices in Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

I. Program Mission

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.

II. Program Goal 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 Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS).

Program objectives include:

- A.** Increase the awareness, knowledge, and stewardship of the marine ecosystem and Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary among the angling community
- B.** Provide fishing guides and customers with tools that allow them to enjoy the marine ecosystem resources now while making choices that will protect and conserve them for the future
- C.** Promoted adoption of best practices that reduce the negative impacts fishing trips can have on the historic, biological, and cultural resources within Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary
- D.** Recognize and support fishing businesses participating in stewardship and conservation of Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary;
- E.** Increase communication and partnership opportunities between FKNMS and the charter fishing community

III. Background

The Blue Star Fishing Guide program is a voluntary program with no regulatory component, implemented and coordinated through the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, in partnership with local charter fishing ventures and local and state agencies. The initial framework was released in 2018 after a several year long development period 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).

IV. Benefits of Blue Star Participation

A. 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:

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

B. Eligibility for Exclusive Participation in Conservation Programs

Different organizations provide opportunities to test new gear or receive gear cheaply such as barotrauma prevention, garbage collection/debris retention, coolers, measuring devices, etc.

V. 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.

Note 1: Some charter businesses may combine fishing trips with other water-based activities (i.e. kayaking, snorkeling/diving, wildlife viewing). Blue Star recognized operators agree to follow all program criteria, including providing a modified version of the Blue Star briefing to their customers, regardless of the type of charter they are running on a given day. The full Blue Star briefing should be provided on all fishing charters.

Note 2: Recognition by the Blue Star program does not create any right to renewal and does not represent a waiver by NOAA to seek penalties that are provided by law if violations are discovered.

Note 3: Recognition by the Blue Star program does not ensure that the vessel complies with U.S. Coast Guard safety inspection or other applicable safety and insurance requirements. Patrons are encouraged to ask businesses if they maintain current inspection, license, and insurance documentation.

VI. Program Criteria

As referenced below, operators include business owner or manager and staff, program coordinator refers to FKNMS staff program lead, and representatives 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.
3. Act as a responsible role model for guests.
4. Immediately correct behavior of guests that are witnessed to be violating laws, regulations, or best practices.

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. Provide adequate facilities on-board vessels to dispose of waste responsibly without allowing it to enter the marine environment. Properly dispose of or recycle all waste including, but not limited to: trash, fish waste, fishing gear, and engine oil. Work towards eliminating single-use plastics onboard vessels unless required for safety reasons.
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

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

During the charter, and before any lines enter the water, conduct a Blue Star educational briefing onboard. Participants will be provided with a waterproof card to assist in the briefing. The briefing should include, but is not limited to:

1. Responsible Angling Practices
2. Set expectations of catch: what to take home and what to release
3. South Florida Ecosystem
4. Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary
5. 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 elements prominently on the homepage of the

charter fishing business website, email correspondence, and advertisements. Include a link from your business, 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

Examples include: reef cleanups, mangrove cleanups, REEF field station, participation in coral restoration, etc. Activities not listed may be approved by the Blue Star Program Coordinator. Conservation-related activities may occur after the operator is recognized, but must be completed within the calendar year. Initial recognition will be awarded on an operator's commitment to offer a conservation-related activity by the end of the year.

I. Attend a Continuing Education Opportunity Once per Year

In order to continuously stay informed of environmental issues in the Florida Keys and to impart additional stewardship information to customers, participating businesses are required to attend any one of the marine conservation lectures or presentations offered every year by Florida Keys agencies and nonprofits, most of which are provided at no cost.

Examples include, but are not limited to: Agency council meetings (FKNMS/FWC/SAFMC/GFMC), Mote's BleachWatch training, REEF's lionfish safe handling/collection training, REEF Fish n' Friends lectures, History of Diving Museum lectures, Coral Restoration Foundation training, Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Museum, and Florida Keys Community College's sanctuary seminar series. Program coordinator will provide participants with notice of applicable presentations when possible. Presentations not on the list may be approved by the Blue Star Program Coordinator. Lectures or presentations must be marine/conservation related. The continuing education requirement may be fulfilled after the operator is recognized, but must be completed within the calendar year. Recognition will be awarded on the operator's commitment that all staff will complete the continuing education requirement by the end of the year.

J. Maintain open and frequent communication with Blue Star Program Coordinator and Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and respond to requests in a timely manner.

Open and frequent communication is essential to ensuring the effectiveness and success of the Blue Star program. If a Blue Star operator has not responded to a request made via email from the Blue Star Coordinator, the Blue Star Coordinator will take the following steps:

1. Send two separate emails to the Blue Star operator requesting response and follow up.
2. Call the Blue Star operator and leave a message, requesting a response, if the owner or Blue Star liaison is not available.

If the Blue Star operator has not responded to requests within one month of the initial contact they will be notified that their Blue Star recognition will be temporarily suspended and their organization will be removed from the Blue Star website until contact is re-established.

Once contacted, the Blue Star Coordinator will work with the Blue Star operator to initiate the re-evaluation process (see page 10, [section VI F](#)). Once program requirements are complete the Blue Star operator will be reinstated and their information will be added to the Blue Star website again.

K. Comply with the logo use policy and agree to immediately remove the Blue Star logo from any materials found by NOAA in violation of the use policy.

Use of the Blue Star logo is given on condition that the operator (1) has completed the current year's program requirements as outlined in the program framework, and (2) uses the logo in a manner that is consistent with and promotes the purposes of the Blue Star Program.



Use of the Blue Star logo must meet the following criteria: Use of the logo (1) must at all times be consistent with and promote the purposes of the Blue Star Program; (2) may not generate controversy or harm public confidence in NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, or the Blue Star Program; (3) may not include partisan political views; (4) may not be used to promote services or products or to endorse companies not participating in Blue Star; and (5) may not be used in association with vulgar language, personal attacks of any kind, or offensive terms/posts that target protected classes. Use of the logo is limited to the Blue Star operators and may not be shared with other companies or entities or be used to endorse any other company or entity that is not currently a recognized Blue Star operator.

Complaints about violation of this logo policy will be processed according to Section VIII of the Framework with the exception of B.5, which provides the operator 30 days to remedy a violation. Any person or entity authorized to use the logo (as described above) found by NOAA to be using the Blue Star logo in violation of these conditions agrees to immediately stop using the logo unless/until arrangements have been made to remedy violations. Process for Program Participation

K. Initial Evaluation

1. Business owner or manager contacts Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator indicating desire to participate.
2. Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator provides the 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 the 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 owners or managers contact the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator to request an evaluation to verify their business is following program criteria.
 - a) Evaluation, including a site visit and review of relevant materials, occurs within four weeks of request.
 - b) 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.
 - c) Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator meets with operators at the business site on a mutually convenient date to review the evaluation checklist.
 - d) 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, the coordinator will observe a simulated briefing by captain or staff during evaluation.
 - e) Coordinator provides evaluation results to the 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.

L. 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 and gather feedback for program improvement. 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:
 - a) In-person or online client evaluations
 - b) Secret shopper-style evaluations
 - c) 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. Prior to renewal, and by December 1 of each year, operators must complete the online refresher training.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. Operators are welcome to provide feedback on the evaluation process to the Blue Star Fishing Guide coordinator at any time.
10. Additional spot checks may be carried out on a random or unannounced basis to ensure that all operators continue to meet program criteria.
11. 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.

M. Re-Evaluation

If a Blue Star operator is unable to meet the program requirements as outlined in this Framework within the timeline above their Blue Star recognition will be suspended, and they will be removed from the Blue Star website, pending re-evaluation.

The Blue Star Liaison is responsible for contacting the Blue Star Coordinator to schedule a meeting to discuss re-evaluation. During this meeting the operator will outline where they failed to comply with the Blue Star framework and what changes they have implemented to ensure future compliance. At this time the operator will schedule a date for a ride along and re-evaluation with the Blue Star Coordinator.

After a ride along evaluation has successfully been completed the Blue Star operator will be re-established and will receive the current year's recognition materials.

VII. 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 the 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.

VIII. Framework Review

An annual review of the framework will ensure that the Blue Star Fishing Guides program is functioning as intended and provide the opportunity to address issues that were not foreseen when the framework was developed initially. Participating operators are encouraged to provide feedback for program improvement throughout the year.

A. June

In June of each year, current Blue Star participants are notified via email or phone call that the annual framework review is beginning, which will include but is not limited to: interviews with and received suggestions from participants, the public, FKNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council members, or other appropriate parties. A webinar may be held, and all Blue Star operators will be encouraged to attend, during which operators can provide feedback on the Blue Star framework and suggestions for program modification and improvement.

B. July

The program coordinator reviews input from participants and others, along with any internal proposals, and completes a new draft of the framework if necessary by the end of July.

C. August

By August, the program coordinator will complete a new draft of the framework if revisions are necessary. The new draft framework is circulated among current operators for comment, with 30 days to respond.

D. September

Comments are reviewed, and the revised final framework provided to current operators and program partners in October. Operators agree to abide by all amendments to Blue Star Fishing Guide criteria.

E. October - December

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, and the online refresher training will be based on the revised criteria. Participants agree to abide by all amendments to the Blue Star criteria. Blue Star operators are responsible for scheduling their annual ride along in order to receive their current year certification sticker. As of January 1st each year participants are recognized for their successful implementation of Blue Star requirements.

For questions about or feedback for the Blue Star Fishing Guides program please contact the Blue Star Program Coordinator at Bluestar.Fishing@noaa.gov or by calling 305-809-4727.