

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: November 18, 2015
Subject: Draft Rule – Dwarf Seahorse

Purpose:

Staff is proposing draft rules to establish additional management measures to address dwarf seahorse population concerns.

Summary:

The dwarf seahorse is managed as part of the Marine Life (aquarium trade/tropical ornamental) fishery and therefore benefits from several long-term management measures, including statewide gear regulations, bag limits, and an endorsement program that limits participation in the commercial fishery. Stakeholders have expressed concerns about the population status of the dwarf seahorse and NOAA Fisheries has received a petition recommending the species for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Available data suggest abundance may be low, particularly in northern portions of the state, and that this species may be slow to rebound from temporary seagrass loss.

Dwarf seahorses are abundant only in peninsular Florida and, to a lesser extent, along parts of the Texas coast and Mexico's Gulf coast. The largest populations are in south Florida, especially Florida Bay. Due to the dwarf seahorse's limited geographic range, dependence on seagrass habitat, and concerns about its population status, staff believe implementing additional management measures is appropriate for this species and could prevent the need for more drastic measures, such as listing under the ESA, in the future.

The proposed rules will establish the following:

- Recreational bag limit: reduce the current limit of five (5) of each species of seahorse (within the 20 organism aggregate bag limit for all Marine Life species) to five (5) seahorses total per person per day
- Commercial trip limit: reduce the current daily commercial limit from 400 dwarf seahorses to 200 per person or per vessel (whichever is less)
- Establish an annual commercial quota of 25,000 individual dwarf seahorses and provide for closure of the recreational and commercial seasons when the quota is projected to be met
- Establish a statewide seasonal closure from July through September each year
- Establish an allowable harvest area ranging from Tarpon Springs on the Gulf coast, around the peninsula to Jupiter Inlet on the Atlantic and prohibit dwarf seahorse harvest year-round north of this allowable harvest area

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommend approval to advertise the proposed rule amendments and return in February, 2016 for a final public hearing.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Melissa Recks, Section Leader, Analysis and Rulemaking, Division of Marine Fisheries Management