



Dwarf Seahorse

Final Public Hearing

February 10, 2016

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 2

This document summarizes proposed final rules to amend the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) dwarf seahorse regulations in the Marine Life Chapter, 68B-42, Florida Administrative Code (FAC). The proposed final rules would establish an allowable harvest area for dwarf seahorses, modify recreational and commercial bag limits, and establish an annual commercial quota.

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Photo credit: Dr. Heather Masonjones

Background

- NOAA Fisheries received a petition to list the dwarf seahorse under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)
 - 90-day finding: further consideration of listing was warranted
 - NOAA Fisheries is conducting a status review of the species
- Harvest reductions and strategic conservation measures could improve the population status
 - May prevent the need for listing
- November 2015: Commission directed staff to develop final rules
 - Closing harvest in northern portions of the state
 - Reducing recreational and commercial limits
 - Implementing a commercial quota



Photo courtesy of Ken Neidinger

In 2011, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries received a petition to list the dwarf seahorse (*Hippocampus zosterae*) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 2012, NOAA Fisheries released its 90-day finding, concluding that the petition provided enough information to warrant further consideration of possible listing. As required by federal law, NOAA Fisheries is now conducting a thorough status review for this species and the FWC has provided all of our available data to assist with this review.

While the Marine Life industry and the FWC, working together as co-managers of the Marine Life fishery, have already substantially reduced commercial harvest of this species, staff believe additional management measures may be appropriate. The recommended measures are expected to stabilize and improve dwarf seahorse populations throughout the state and may help prevent the need to list this species under the ESA.

At the November 2015 FWC meeting, staff presented the Commission with proposed regulatory changes, developed in coordination with the industry. The Commission directed staff to return with final rules that would eliminate harvest pressure in the northern portions of the state by implementing an allowable harvest in the southern portion of the state where abundance is believed to be higher, reduce recreational and commercial trip limits, and implement an annual commercial quota.

Proposed Final Rules

68B-42.0036 Closed Areas

- Prohibit harvest of dwarf seahorses north of Anclote Key State Park Lighthouse on the Gulf coast and north of Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse on the Atlantic coast

68B-42.005 Recreational Bag Limit, Recreational Closed Seasons

- Reduce bag limit to 5 total seahorses, within the 20-organism aggregate Marine Life bag limit
- Close the recreational fishery if the commercial quota is reached

68B-42.006 Commercial Season, Harvest Limits

- Reduce daily limit to 200 dwarf seahorses per person or per vessel per day
- Create an annual quota of 25,000 dwarf seahorses



Photo courtesy of NOAA

The proposed final rules would modify 68B-42.0036, FAC, to include an area closed to the harvest of dwarf seahorses north of Anclote Key State Park Lighthouse on the Gulf coast and north of Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse on the Atlantic coast.

The proposed rules would also modify 68B-42.005, FAC, to reduce the recreational bag limit to five total seahorses of any species, within the 20-organism aggregate Marine Life bag limit, and close the recreational fishery for the remainder of the fishing year (Oct. 1 – Sept. 30), if the commercial quota is projected to be reached.

Additionally, the final rules would modify 68B-42.006, FAC, to reduce the daily commercial bag limit from 400 to 200 dwarf seahorses per person or per vessel, whichever is less. The final rules would also create an annual commercial quota of 25,000 individual dwarf seahorses and close the harvest of this species if the quota is projected to be met in any fishing year. If the harvest of dwarf is closed prior to September 30 in any year, recreational and commercial harvest reopen at the start the next fishing year (October 1).

Staff Recommendation

Approve the proposed final rules to eliminate harvest pressure in high quality habitat at the northern extent of the species' range and reduce harvest by as much as one third:

- Prohibit harvest north of Anclote Key State Park Lighthouse on the Gulf coast and north of Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse on the Atlantic coast
- Reduce the recreational bag limit to 5 seahorses total
- Reduce the daily commercial trip limit to 200 dwarf seahorses per person or vessel, whichever is less
- Create an annual commercial quota of 25,000 dwarf seahorses
- Close the recreational and commercial fisheries if the quota is reached



If approved, make rules effective April 1, 2016

Photo courtesy of Emily Walker

Staff recommend approving the proposed final rules establishing an allowable harvest area, reducing the recreational bag limit to five total seahorses per day, reducing the daily commercial trip and vessel limit to 200 dwarf seahorses, creating an annual commercial quota of 25,000 dwarf seahorses, and closing both the recreational and commercial fisheries for the remainder of the fishing year if the commercial quota is reached.

If approved, staff recommend making the rules effective April 1, 2016.

Staff have evaluated the proposed rules under the standards of 68-1.004, FAC, and found them to be in compliance.