

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: February 10, 2016
Subject: Review and Discussion – Red Drum Stock Assessment

Purpose:

To provide an overview of the 2015 Florida red drum stock assessment. The assessment analyzed data through 2013 to determine the status of the red drum population in Florida's four management zones.

Summary:

Red drum is among Florida's most popular recreational fisheries and is targeted for both food and sport. Commercial harvest and sale of native red drum has been prohibited since 1989. The last full stock assessment for red drum was completed in 2008. In 2011, the stock assessment was updated to include data through 2010. Based on the 2008 assessment and 2011 update, the Commission divided the fishery into four management zones and increased the bag limit from 1 fish to 2 fish per person per day in the Northeast and Northwest zones. There is a statewide slot-size limit of 18 to 27 inches total length, a statewide vessel limit of 8 red drum, and an off-the-water possession limit of 6 red drum per person.

The Commission's management goal for red drum is based on escapement rate, which is the percentage of fish surviving through age four compared to the number that would have survived if there was no fishery. Fish that reach this age are said to escape the fishery because they generally exceed the maximum harvestable size under the slot limit and are no longer subject to harvest. The Commission's established management goal for red drum is 40% escapement. Averaged over the last three years of the assessment, the rates were: 66%, 68%, 58%, and 48% in the Northwest, Southwest, Northeast, and Southeast zones respectively. Additionally, biomass estimates and fishing mortality estimates indicate that red drum are not overfished and overfishing is not occurring in any of the state's management zones.

Despite the positive results of the 2015 stock assessment, there are some indications that continued close monitoring of this fishery is needed. There has been a marked decline in the escapement rate in the Northeast zone over the last three years of the assessment, with escapement in 2013 still exceeding, but approaching the 40% management goal. Escapement in the Southeast zone continues to be variable, with some years estimated to barely exceed the management goal. Staff have also recently heard concerns about the status of red drum from stakeholders in various locations around the state including: reported declines in local populations, declines in the average size of red drum and difficulty catching fish in the upper portion of the slot limit, increased fishing pressure on inshore fisheries due to closures of offshore species, and concerns over an increase in the number of red drum tournaments in some areas of the state. Finally, the impacts of the recent red tide in northwest Florida, a rare occurrence in the region, are unknown.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommend gathering additional public input regarding stakeholder observations and concerns related to the red drum fishery, as well as information about how red drum anglers would like to see this fishery managed before making any management recommendations. Staff proposes to return with a draft rule in June 2013.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

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