



## Red Drum

Draft Rule

June 23, 2016

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission  
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This presentation provides an overview of the innovative methods used to gather feedback on the status of the red drum fishery in the Northwest and Northeast management zones and a summary of the input received. This presentation also summarizes a proposed draft rule to amend the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) red drum regulations in Red Drum Chapter, 68B-22, Florida Administrative Code. The proposed draft rule would reduce the recreational bag limit in the Northwest red drum management zone.

This presentation will be updated when the stakeholder engagement project is complete.

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## Background



- 2015 red drum stock assessment results indicated all management zones were
  - Not overfished
  - Not experiencing overfishing
  - Exceeding 40% escapement management goal
- *Included data through 2013*
- Stakeholders from various parts of the state expressed concerns about red drum
- **Feb. 2016:** Commission directed staff to proceed with stakeholder engagement on the status of red drum in the Northwest and Northeast management zones
- **April 2016**
  - Reduced the bag limit in the NW management zone to 1 fish through Nov. 1, 2016, via an Executive Order
  - Directed staff to continue engagement effort and return in June with final report and a draft rule



Based on the results of the 2015 Florida red drum stock assessment, which included data through 2013, Florida's red drum stock is healthy. Biomass and fishing mortality estimates indicate that red drum were not overfished and overfishing was not occurring in any of the state's four red drum management zones. Additionally, all management zones were exceeding the Commission's management goal of 40% escapement.

While the results of the 2015 stock assessment were very positive, there was a marked decline in the escapement rate in the Northeast zone during the last three years of the assessment, with escapement in 2013 still exceeding, but approaching, the 40% management goal. Staff have also heard concerns about the status of red drum from stakeholders in various locations around the state. Concerns expressed include declines in local populations, declines in the average size of red drum, difficulty catching fish in the upper portion of the slot limit, and increases in pressure associated with a shift to participation in inshore fisheries due to closures of offshore species and an increasing number of red drum tournaments in some areas of the state.

In response to these stakeholder concerns, the Commission directed staff to begin a stakeholder engagement effort at the February Commission meeting. This engagement effort was intended to provide a more thorough picture of angler feedback on the status of red drum in the Northwest and Northeast management zones. At the April 2016 Commission meeting, staff updated the Commission on the progress of the engagement effort and the feedback that had been received. Following this update and taking into account concerns expressed by anglers as well as red drum's value for both sportfishing and food, the Commission reduced the red drum bag limit from two fish to one fish per person throughout the Northwest management zone (Escambia through Pasco counties) for a period of six months beginning on May 1, 2016, via an Executive Order. The Commission also directed staff to continue gathering input from stakeholders in both the Northwest and Northeast management zones and return to the June Commission meeting with a final report and a draft rule to implement long-term management measures.

## Stakeholder Engagement

- Focused on the Northwest and Northeast management zones
- Went to the angler
  - 13 fishing club meetings
  - 2 boat shows
  - 3 tackle/outdoor shop events
  - 6 dockside angler intercepts
- ~1,500 in-person angler contacts
- >8,000 responses to a statewide online survey
- Initiated discussions through an “FWC Red Drum Forum” Facebook page



At the direction of the Commission, the stakeholder engagement plan focused primarily on the Northwest and Northeast red drum management zones. Staff used this opportunity to employ innovative methods of stakeholder outreach that involved staff going to the angler instead of asking anglers to come to us. Staff attended 13 fishing club meetings, two boat shows, three tackle shop events, a visited six popular boat launches in order to gather feedback from anglers. In total, staff had in-person conversations with approximately 1,500 anglers.

Staff also prepared an online survey to gather information about angler observations and opinions statewide as well as to gather feedback from anglers in the northern management zones who were not be able to attend one of the in-person feedback opportunities. The online survey received more than 8,000 responses from around the state.

Finally, staff reached out to stakeholders by using social media, which had been requested by anglers. The “FWC Red Drum Forum” Facebook page was created as a place where anglers could go to discuss what they see on the water in different areas and discuss their opinions of the current bag limit. Anglers that wanted to discuss their thoughts in person could also find out where staff would be for in-person comment opportunities through the Facebook page.

## Northwest Zone Feedback

### Panhandle – both survey and in-person comments mixed

- In-person interactions with guides indicate that they are seeing fewer redfish in the area from West Bay near Panama City to Apalachicola Bay
- Outside of that area, survey and in-person feedback generally report red drum fishing is good

### Big Bend – survey and in-person feedback indicate fishery is doing very well

- Seeing and catching many red drum
  - More large and small fish
- A few requests for adjustments to the slot limit or an increase in the bag limit



In the Northwest management zone, stakeholder feedback has been somewhat variable both between areas and among anglers in the same area. Although the Northwest management zone includes both the Panhandle and Big Bend, these regions are split in this presentation. For the purpose of this presentation, the Panhandle is defined by Escambia County through Ochlockonee Bay in Wakulla County (light blue on the map) and the Big Bend is Apalachee Bay through Pasco County (dark blue on the map). This delineation coincides with both differences in red drum habitat and some of the angler feedback on the status of red drum.

Many anglers and guides in the Panhandle, particularly those from Panama City in Bay County through Apalachicola in Franklin County (identified on the map with stars), reported seeing declines both in red drum populations and size of fish over the past 2-3 years. Anglers outside of this area, many Panhandle anglers reported red drum in their area are doing well and there has not been a decline. Some anglers that have not seen a decline stated that they would still support the bag limit being reduced to one fish, despite the fishery doing well, while others were opposed to a reduction. Making the slot limit more narrow and splitting the Northwest management zone into two zones were also suggestions made by Panhandle anglers.

In general, Big Bend anglers feel that their red drum fishery is strong. Most anglers that staff talked to from the Big Bend report both seeing and catching many red drum and that they are encountering large fish, both in the slot and above the slot. The online survey results from this area support what staff has heard at in-person events with most respondents stating that they are encountering more red drum of all sizes in recent years. A few anglers expressed the desire to keep larger fish and requested either shifting the slot limit up a couple of inches or allowing for harvest of one fish over the slot within the bag limit. There were also a few requests from anglers in the Big Bend to increase the bag limit to at least three fish per person per day.

## Northeast Zone Feedback

### Most anglers report the fishery is doing well

- Survey
  - Seeing more red drum in the past two years
  - Majority report the fishery is better now than in the recent past
- In-person
  - A few anglers reported a decline in recent years
  - Majority reported fishery is strong
  - A few anglers reported last year as the best red drum fishing year they could remember
  - Some requests for a bag limit increase
  - Some supported a bag limit decrease
  - A few requests for adjustments to the slot limit or an allowance to harvest one fish above the slot



Anglers in the Northeast management zone, which includes Nassau through Flagler counties, were often surprised to hear that the stock assessment showed a potential decline in their area. They generally expressed that the red drum fishery is currently very strong in their region. This sentiment was supported by the online survey results for this management zone, which indicated that anglers are seeing more red drum and the fishery is better now than in the recent past.

While a few anglers that staff spoke with in person did report that the fishery has declined somewhat in recent years, the majority of anglers in this region reported not seeing a decline and a few reported that the fishery is better than they can ever remember it being and advocated for an increase in the bag limit. As with the Northwest management zone, there were some anglers that expressed support for reducing the bag limit even though they have not noticed a decline in the fishery. There were also requests for various other management changes in this region, including adjusting the slot limit to allow for harvest of larger or smaller fish, reducing the vessel limit, and allowing for the harvest of one fish over the slot per vessel.

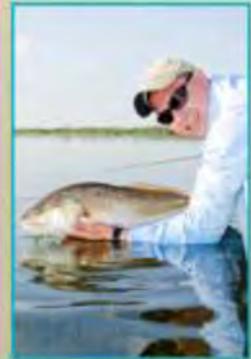
## Summary

### Feedback

- Anglers concerned about the fishery in portions of the Panhandle
  - Feedback mixed in other parts of the Panhandle
- Condition of the fishery reportedly very good in Big Bend and NE Florida
- Some anglers support a 1-fish bag limit statewide even if the fishery is doing well

### Considerations

- Iconic fishery, historically managed for abundance
- Popular for both sport and food
- Previous Commission and stakeholder interest in reducing the complexity of regulations



To summarize, a large proportion of the guides and anglers in part of the Panhandle continue to express concern about the status of the red drum fishery in their area. However, west of the Panama City area and east of Apalachicola Bay, feedback from Panhandle anglers is mixed. On the other hand, most anglers report that the fishery is in very good condition throughout the Big Bend and the Northeast management zone. There are anglers in all the various parts of north Florida that would support lowering the bag limit to one fish per day statewide even if the fishery is doing well.

There are several other things that the Commission may wish to consider when determining how to move forward with long-term management of this fishery. Red drum is an iconic north Florida fishery that is critically important to the inshore fishery. For this reason, red drum has traditionally been managed very conservatively in order to ensure an abundant fishery with high catch rates. However, in addition to being highly valued as a sport fishery, it is also a popular food fish and many anglers desire to be able harvest a reasonable number for that purpose.

While the majority of the negative feedback on the status of the fishery has been isolated to the central portion of the Panhandle, reducing the bag limit only in that area would create additional regulatory complexity. While many anglers currently appear to be willing to support the idea of a bag limit change in only a portion of the Northwest management zone, both the Commission and stakeholders have previously expressed a desire to see the fishery regulations streamlined so that they are easier for anglers to follow. Reducing the bag limit to one across the entire Northwest management zone would prevent the creation of additional management boundaries and regulatory complexity while continuing to ensure the long-term stability of this important fishery. It is also unlikely that FWRI will be able to assess the status of red drum population at a finer scale than is currently done within the Northwest management zone.

## Proposed Draft Rules

### 68B-22.005 Bag and Vessel Limits; Sale Prohibited

- *Reduce bag limit to 1 red drum per person per day throughout the entire Northwest red drum management zone*



In order to address concerns about observed declines in the red drum population in portions of the Panhandle and to proactively ensure the continued abundance of this important inshore fishery throughout northwest Florida, the proposed draft rule would modify 68B-22.005, FAC, to reduce the bag limit to one red drum per person per day throughout the entire Northwest red drum management zone. This proposed rule would also simplify the regulations by creating a consistent one-fish bag limit for red drum along Florida's entire Gulf coast.

## Staff Recommendation

Approve the proposed draft rules applying consistent red drum regulations along the entire Gulf coast:

- Reduce the bag limit to 1 red drum per person per day throughout the entire Northwest management zone

*If approved and directed, return for a final public hearing at the September Commission meeting*



Staff recommend approving the proposed draft rules to create a consistent one-fish bag limit along Florida's entire Gulf coast, by reducing the bag limit in all of the Northwest management zone from two red drum per person per day to one red drum per person per day.

If approved and directed, staff will return for a final public hearing at the September Commission meeting in St. Augustine.

The following slides are considered backup material and are not anticipated to be part of the actual presentation to the Commission



## Current State Regulations

- Commercial harvest prohibited
- Slot size limit: 18 to 27 inches total length
- Regional bag limits
  - Southeast and Southwest: 1 per person per day
  - Northeast and Northwest: 2 per person per day
    - *Northwest reduced to 1 per person May 1*
- Vessel limit: 8
- Off-the-water possession limit: 6 per person



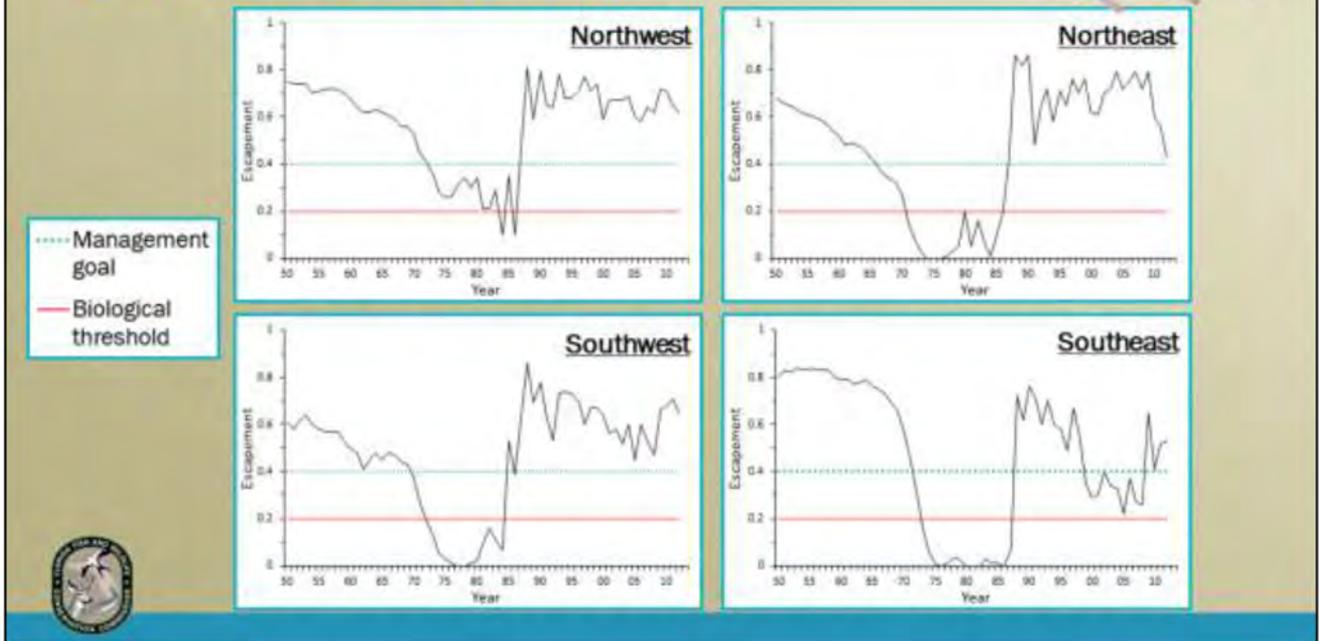
*Harvest of red drum from federal waters is prohibited*

Commercial harvest and sale of native red drum has been prohibited in state waters since 1989.

FWC has divided the management of red drum into four management zones (as shown with the map on the slide). In all zones, there is a slot size limit of 18 to 27 inches total length. The bag limit in the Southeast and Southwest zones is one red drum per person per day while in the Northeast and Northwest zones the limit is two red drum per person per day. However, the limit in the Northwest management zone was reduced to one fish effective May – October 31, 2016. Statewide, there is a vessel limit of eight red drum. There is also an off-the-water possession limit of six red drum per person for anglers transporting multiple days catch.

Harvest of red drum is prohibited from all federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean.

## 2015 Assessment Results



These graphs show the escapement rates estimated by the stock assessment for each of the Commission's four management zones through 2013. The green dotted line at 0.4 represents the Commission's management goal of 40% escapement and the red solid line at 0.2 represents the biological threshold.

Before being managed aggressively in the mid-1980s, escapement rates were well below the then escapement goal of 30%. However, these rates increased rapidly in response to strict regulations placed on red drum in the mid- to late-1980s. Although the escapement rate varies among zones, it has been consistently exceeding the management goal in the Northwest, Northeast, and Southwest zones since the late 1980s. The Southeast management zone has been generally more variable than the other zones and did not consistently meet the Commission's management goal from 2000 to 2008. However, according to the 2015 assessment, the Southeast zone has also exceeded the management goal every year since 2008. Averaged over the last three years of the assessment, escapement rates were 66%, 68%, 58%, and 48% in the Northwest, Southwest, Northeast, and Southeast zones respectively.

## South Regions Online Survey Feedback

### Southwest zone - Pinellas through Sarasota counties

- Majority of anglers report that the fishery is doing well
- More fish, especially small ones

### Southwest zone - Charlotte through Monroe counties

- Mixed responses on the status of the fishery, a large portion stated it is either doing poorly or has been better in the past
- Less fish, especially large ones
- Fish not found in areas where they used to be found

### Southeast zone

- Mixed responses
  - Slightly skewed toward okay to poor fishery
- Less fish and smaller, not found in areas where they used to be found

