



Red Drum

Final Public Hearing
September 8, 2016

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This presentation provides a summary of the feedback gathered on the status of the red drum fishery in the Northwest and Northeast management zones. This presentation also summarizes a proposed final 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 final rule would reduce the recreational bag limit in the Northwest red drum management zone.

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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*
- Despite being above the management goal, escapement in the NE red drum management zone showed a declining trend
- Stakeholders from parts of the NW management zone have expressed concerns about red drum



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. Stakeholders in portions of the Northwest management zone have expressed the greatest amount of concern about the red drum population in their area, which prompted the Commission to direct staff to gather additional stakeholder feedback about the status of the fishery.

Timeline

- **February 2016:** Commission directed staff to proceed with stakeholder engagement on the status of red drum in the NW and NE management zones
- **March - May 2016:** Stakeholder engagement project
- **April 2016:** Commission reduced the bag limit in the NW management zone to 1 fish through Oct. 31, 2016, via an Executive Order
- **June 2016:** Commission approved a draft rule reducing the red drum bag limit in the NW management zone to 1 fish
- **Today:** Final public hearing



In response to stakeholder concerns, the Commission directed staff to begin a stakeholder engagement effort at the February 2016 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 and took place between March and May 2016. 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. At the June Commission meeting, staff presented the final report on feedback received from this fishery in the Northwest and Northeast management zones and the Commission approved a draft rule reducing the red drum bag limit in the Northwest management zone to one fish per person per day as a long-term management measure.

Northwest Zone Feedback

Panhandle – both survey and in-person comments mixed

- In-person interactions with guides indicate that they are seeing fewer red drum 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 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 as 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 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. 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 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 have 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. Similar to the Panhandle, some Big Bend anglers suggested splitting the Northwest management zone into two zones.

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.

Considerations

- Florida's red drum fishery is
 - A management success story
 - An iconic fishery, historically managed for abundance
 - Popular for both sport and food
- Previous Commission and stakeholder interest in reducing the complexity of regulations



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 truly a management success story. The emergency fishery closures implemented in the 1980s, coupled with the conservative regulations that followed, brought this species back from a state of being severely overfished to becoming the abundant, iconic inshore Florida fishery that it is today. The fishery remains critically important throughout north Florida and in other parts of the state. For this reason, the Commission has continued to manage red drum 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 of red drum 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 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.

Proposed Final Rule

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 ensure the continued abundance of this important inshore fishery throughout northwest Florida, the proposed final 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 final 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 final rule 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, make rules effective no later than Nov. 1, 2016



Staff recommend approving the proposed final rule 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, staff recommend making the rule effective prior to Nov. 1, 2016, when the Executive Order currently reducing the bag limit in the Northwest management zone expires.

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

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



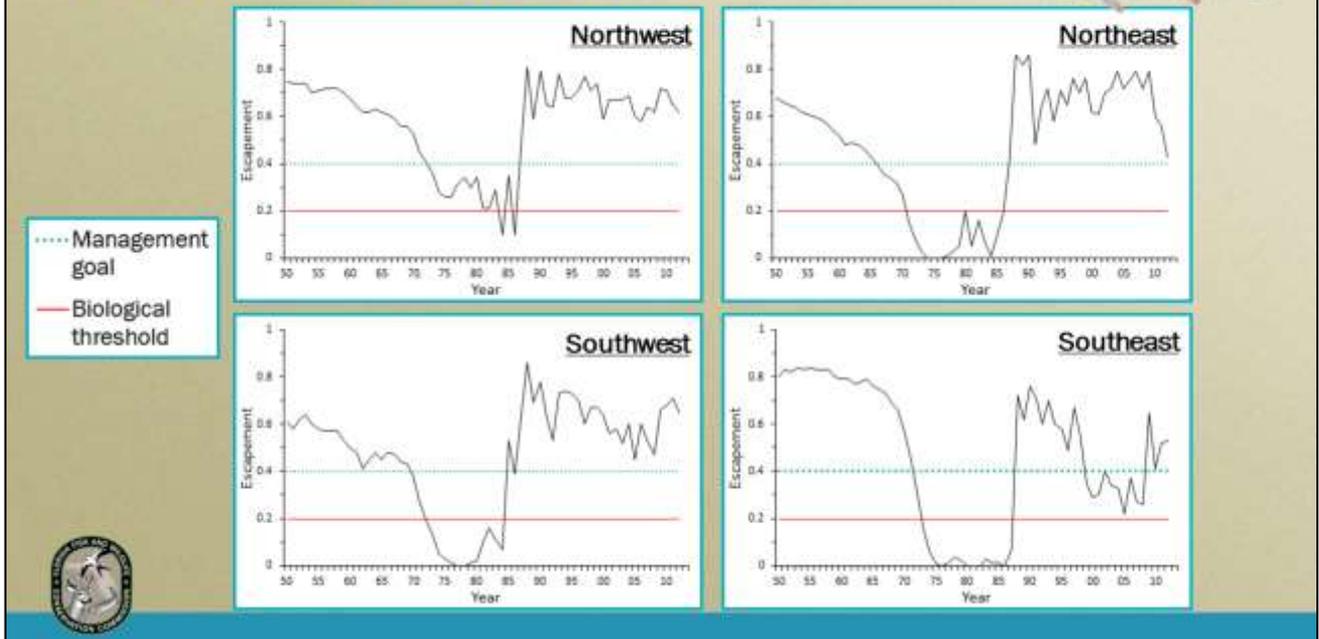
Harvest of red drum from federal waters is prohibited

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 – Oct. 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 2015 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.