

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

From: Jessica McCawley, Division Director, Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Date: September 2, 2015

Subject: Stone Crab Trap Gear Specifications

Purpose:

The proposed final rule would modify stone crab trap construction requirements in Collier, Monroe, and Miami-Dade counties to ensure the stone crab traps in that region are designed to target stone crab and not lobster.

Summary:

At the April Commission meeting, the Commission approved a draft rule that would modify the stone crab trap construction requirements in Collier, Monroe, and Miami-Dade counties by reducing the allowable size of the traps and trap entrances and prohibiting the use of round entrances (also known as throats or funnels). The proposed final rule would modify this previously approved draft rule by only prohibiting the use of round entrances and reducing the allowable size for rectangular entrances to stone crab traps in the three-county region. Any possible changes to the allowable dimensions for the traps themselves would be considered as part of future rulemaking associated with the stone crab fishery.

The increase in the value of lobster, recent declines in the stone crab fishery, the limited availability of the lobster trap tags that fishermen must use when deploying traps, and the respective trap tag values for both stone crab (low value) and lobster (high value) fisheries have resulted in fishermen modifying stone crab traps in south Florida in order to target lobster. These non-traditional stone crab traps with round or larger entrances and larger overall trap volume are reported to be very effective for harvesting lobster. The use of these traps gives lobster fishermen who also fish stone crab traps and who are willing to circumvent the original intentions of the trap regulations an unfair advantage over other lobster trap fishers by allowing them to fish traps that closely resemble lobster traps under their stone crab trap tag allotment.

Since the draft rule hearing, staff has continued to work with the industry to determine the most appropriate allowable configuration for stone crab traps in the affected region. This continued collaboration has resulted in a new staff recommendation that would only prohibit the use of round entrances and reduce the allowable entrance size in stone crab traps in the three south Florida counties. Staff is continuing to work with the industry to determine if further modifications to the overall trap configurations are needed in future years.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends filing a Notice of Change to remove the previously proposed changes to trap dimensions and only prohibit the use of round entrances and reduce the allowable entrance size for stone crab traps in Florida's three most-southern counties. Due to the compact timeline, staff also recommend authorizing the issuance of an Executive Order to ensure that the new regulations will be in place for the beginning of the stone crab trap soak period beginning on October 5, 2015.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Melissa Recks, Section Leader, Analysis and Rulemaking, Division of Marine Fisheries Management (this item is currently scheduled to be heard as part of the consent agenda)