

Blackfin Tuna



Draft Rule
July 17, 2019



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This presentation provides a summary of available data and stakeholder feedback gathered on the status of Florida's blackfin tuna fishery. This presentation also summarizes a proposed draft rule, which will create species-specific regulations in a new chapter for blackfin tuna, Chapter 68B-62, Florida Administrative Code (FAC), within the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) marine fisheries regulations.

Division: Marine Fisheries Management
Authors: Hannah Hart, Krista Shipley, and Melissa Recks
Contact Phone Number: 850-487-0554
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Photo courtesy of Paige Presnell.

Unless otherwise noted, images throughout the presentation are by FWC.

Background

- No stock assessment
- Fast-growing
 - Mature within first year
 - Males mature at ~16 in.; females at ~14 in.
- Distribution: Massachusetts to Brazil
- Not highly-migratory
 - Do not transit across Atlantic
 - Potentially multiple stocks
- Seasonal movements and behaviors not well understood
- Peak spawning season: May – June



Map courtesy of Florida Museum of Natural History

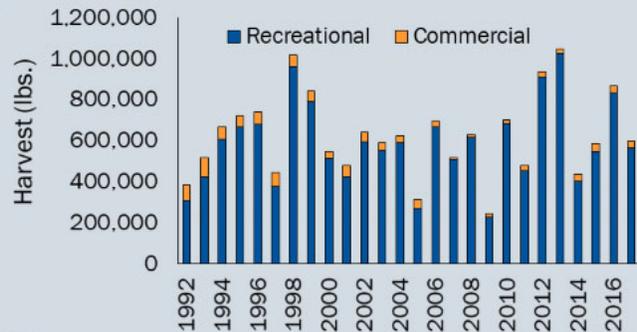
There is limited research available exploring the biology and behavior of blackfin tuna and, largely because of this, there is no stock assessment for this species. The few studies that have been completed report that blackfin tuna are a relatively fast-growing species. A study on blackfin tuna in southeast Florida found that 50% maturity for males is around 16 inches and for females is around 14 inches.

Blackfin tuna can be found in the western Atlantic from Massachusetts to Brazil, including the Gulf of Mexico. Unlike other tuna species, blackfin tuna are not highly migratory and are not known to make trans-Atlantic migrations. One study found genetic differences between blackfin tuna in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, which may mean they are different stocks. Seasonal movements of this species are not well understood, but some studies have suggested that their seasonal migration may be linked to reproduction. Within Florida, research indicates that peak spawning occurs from May through June in the southeast and during late spring and summer in the Gulf of Mexico.

Fishery



- Varies throughout the state
 - Targeted by trolling, vertical jigging, or chumming
 - Bycatch when targeting other pelagic fish like dolphin and billfish
 - Harvested for bait and food
- Recreational landings account for 92-95% of total harvest
 - 60% private boats, 40% for-hire
- Harvest from both state and federal waters



The blackfin tuna fishery operates differently and varies seasonally throughout the state. Blackfin tuna are targeted by trolling, vertical jigging, or chumming. However, outside of southeast Florida and the Keys, blackfin tuna are more commonly harvested as bycatch when targeting other pelagic fish, such as dolphin and billfish. This species is harvested for use as both bait and food.

The fishery is predominately recreational, with the recreational sector accounting for 92-95% of the harvest, as seen in the graph on the slide. Additionally, over the last five years, 60% of the recreational landings have been from private vessels while the remaining 40% have been from for-hire vessels.

Blackfin tuna are harvested from both state and federal waters and, while the proportion varies from year to year, more than 50% of the annual harvest is from federal waters in most years.

Current Management

State

- No species-specific regulations
- “Default” recreational bag limit of 100 pounds per day

Federal: none

- Not managed by Gulf or South Atlantic councils
- Not managed through NOAA Highly Migratory Species Division (HMS) like other tunas



Stakeholder requests for species-specific management

Photo courtesy of Jose Juncadella

There are currently no species-specific regulations for blackfin tuna in state waters. However, the statutory “default” recreational bag limit of 100 pounds per person per day for species without specific regulations does apply.

There is also no species-specific regulations for blackfin tuna in federal waters. Blackfin tuna are not managed by the federal fishery management councils. Because they are not highly migratory like other tunas, they are not managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Highly Migratory Species Division (HMS). Because there is no federal fisheries management plan, FWC has the authority to extend our regulations into federal waters off Florida.

Staff have heard requests from the public for species-specific management of this fishery.

Public Feedback

- Staff has heard concerns in recent years
 - Particularly from SE Florida and the Keys
- 7 public workshops
- Online comments and emails

General feedback

- Increased participation
- Primarily bycatch outside of south Florida
- Mixed reports on fishery status
- Many anglers support implementing “reasonable” regulations
- For-hire captains concerned about being disproportionately affected by regulations



In recent years, staff has heard a variety of concerns from anglers and for-hire captains regarding blackfin tuna, especially from areas within southeast Florida and the Keys. To learn more about the fishery and stakeholder perspectives, staff held seven in-person public workshops around the state in April and May 2019, and also solicited blackfin tuna-specific feedback through the FWC Saltwater Comments webpage.

In general, anglers expressed that they have seen an increase in participation in the fishery in recent years and that the operation of this fishery varies regionally. Outside of south Florida, the fishery primarily operates as a bycatch fishery. In these areas of the state, anglers reported that the fishery is doing well and that they have been catching large fish. In southeast Florida and the Keys, staff heard mixed views on how the fishery is doing. Some anglers reported that the fishery has declined while others expressed that the fishery is doing well. Some anglers that believe the fishery is doing well did note concern for the future of the fishery because of the increased participation.

Although general feedback varied, the majority of stakeholders staff heard from were in favor of FWC implementing “reasonable” species-specific regulations. There were many Gulf coast anglers who felt that species-specific regulations for this fishery are not needed. For-hire captains did express concern about being disproportionately affected by potential bag or vessel limit regulations.

Public Feedback on Management Options

Bag/vessel limit: Considerable support for a reasonable bag and/or vessel limit

- Suggestions ranged from 2-10 fish/person and 6-30 fish/vessel
- Mixed feedback from for-hire sector
- Opposition from many Gulf coast anglers

Size limit: Mixed feedback

- Those in support suggested it be based on size at maturity
- Those opposed cited unknown release mortality and use as bait



Staff gathered public input on a variety of blackfin tuna management options. Of the different management options discussed, implementing a reasonable bag and/or vessel limit was the most broadly supported. Angler suggestions for appropriate bag limits ranged from two to 10 fish per person per day and vessel limit suggestions ranged from six to 30 fish per vessel per day. Although staff heard support for implementing a species-specific vessel limit, the for-hire sector expressed concern that a vessel limit may be too restrictive during certain times of the year, especially when fisheries for other species are closed. There was also opposition expressed by many Gulf coast anglers who felt blackfin tuna regulations in general are not necessary.

Staff heard mixed feedback on implementing a size limit for this fishery. Most anglers who supported this management option suggested a minimum size based on the size at maturity. There were also suggestions of a minimum size limit that is comparable to a 6- to 8-pound fish or a 20-pound fish. Those that were opposed to a size limit expressed concern about release mortality, which is unknown for this species, as well as concern that a size limit may affect the ability to use blackfin tuna as bait when fishing for larger pelagic fish.

Public Feedback on Management Options Cont'd

Extending regulations into federal waters

- Considerable support
- Opposition from anglers who were opposed to any additional regulations

Regional regulations

- Outside of SE Florida: Supported
 - Apply regulations to SE Florida and Keys only
- SE Florida: Opposed
 - Concern about migrations in and out of regulated area

Seasonal closure: Not supported



Staff heard considerable support for extending any future FWC blackfin tuna regulations into federal waters. Many stakeholders believe this is necessary in order for management measures to be effective since much of the fishery operates in federal waters. Anglers that were opposed to FWC managing the fishery in federal waters were also generally opposed to any regulatory changes.

Staff also solicited feedback on whether regional regulations are appropriate or desirable for this fishery given that the majority of the concerns were limited to southeast Florida and the Keys. Outside of southeast Florida, some stakeholders supported only applying regulations for this fishery to southeast Florida and the Keys. However, stakeholders within southeast Florida and the Keys were opposed to regional regulations based on the belief that it would be ineffective since blackfin tuna would move in and out of the regulated area.

Many anglers expressed opposition to a seasonal closure. The anglers and guides staff heard from did not indicate a season closure was needed. A spawning season closure is particularly undesirable for those who provided input because some of the best blackfin tuna fishing occurs during the spring and summer months, which overlaps with peak spawning.

Proposed Draft Rule

- *Create a recreational limit of 2 blackfin per person or 10 blackfin per vessel per day, whichever is greater*
- *Apply limits in state and federal waters*



Photo courtesy of Ronnie Appleton

In order to proactively provide additional conservation measures for blackfin tuna, and considering the feedback received from the fishery, the proposed draft rule would create a new chapter for blackfin tuna, Chapter 68B-62, FAC; create bag and vessel limits of two blackfin tuna per person per day or 10 blackfin tuna per vessel per day, whichever is greater, statewide; and extend these proposed bag and vessel limits into federal waters.

Considerations

- For-hire captains report variable catch rates
 - Some report 10-20 fish on a “good” day
 - Trips to federal waters can take large numbers of fish
 - Blackfin important when other fisheries are closed
- Traditional vessel limits may disproportionately affect for-hire sector
- Regional differences in timing of fishery
- Peak spawn may correspond with height of fishery
- Scale of migratory behavior unknown
- Commercial fishery small portion of total harvest



Photo courtesy of Rosemary White



There are a variety of considerations relative to potential regulations for this fishery. For-hire captains report variable catch rates for blackfin tuna. Some relayed that a successful fishing day is 10-20 blackfin tuna, while others reported that long, especially overnight, trips allow their clients the opportunity to harvest large numbers. Blackfin tuna is an important fishery for the for-hire sector, especially during times of the year when a number of other fisheries are closed. Traditional bag and vessel limits have the potential to disproportionately affect for-hire trips since those trips often have more anglers aboard than many private recreational trips. With this in mind, staff's proposal is an effort to allow all anglers, whether private recreational or on a for-hire trip, to harvest a minimum of two fish per trip while still reducing overall harvest.

The timing of this fishery varies regionally and in many areas peak spawn corresponds with the best months to target blackfin tuna. Because of this, a spawning season closure would likely have little conservation benefit in portions of the state where the fishery does not operate during the spawning season and significant impact on anglers in areas where the fishery is popular during the spawning months.

Blackfin tuna are not highly migratory but do migrate seasonally, although the scale of the migration is not well understood. Creating statewide regulations that extend into federal waters provides an added level of conservation for this fishery since it is unknown whether the fish are moving large distances or between both state and federal waters.

The commercial fishery for blackfin tuna is a small portion of the total annual harvest. Blackfin tuna is generally caught as bycatch when fishing for other commercial species. Therefore, limitations on the commercial fishery would provide little conservation value and could impact the fishery's opportunity to sell the fish they catch.

Staff Recommendation

Approve the proposed draft rule to provide species-specific management for blackfin tuna

- Create a recreational limit of 2 fish per person or 10 fish per vessel per day, whichever is greater
- Extend FWC's proposed regulations into federal waters

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



Photo courtesy of Tommy Twyford



Staff recommends approving the proposed draft rule to provide species-specific management for blackfin tuna. Staff recommends creating statewide recreational bag and vessel limits of two fish per person per day or 10 fish per vessel per day, whichever is greater. Staff also recommends extending these proposed regulations into federal waters.

Staff have notified the South Atlantic and Gulf councils, as well as NOAA Fisheries, of our intention to extend our regulatory authority for this species into federal waters.

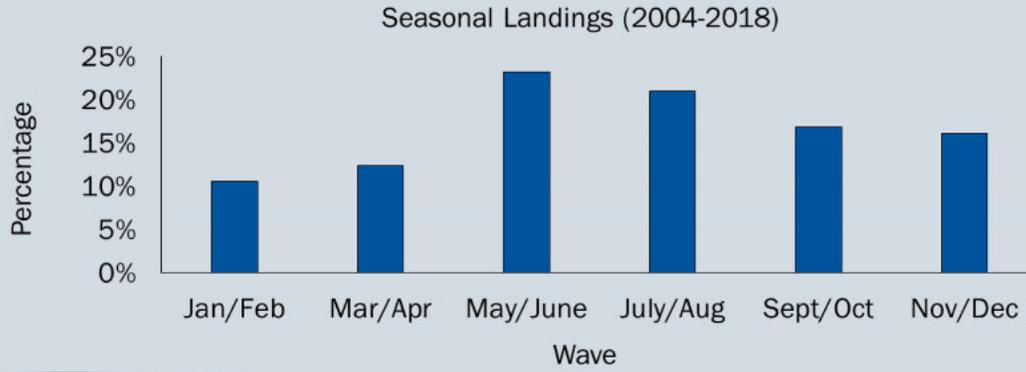
If approved and directed, staff will return for a final public hearing at the October 2019 Commission meeting.

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



Fishery

- Fishery occurs year-round, but peaks seasonally in different parts of state
- Statewide, harvest peaks between May-Aug



Size Limit Considerations

- Often set so that $\frac{1}{2}$ of the fish have a chance to spawn at least once before being harvestable
 - Females: 50% maturity around 14 in.
 - Males: 50% maturity around 16 in.
- May be influenced by other factors
 - Desirable harvest size – food, sport, etc
 - Used as bait in some areas
 - Availability of different sizes
 - Application to recreational and commercial fisheries
- Release mortality rate unknown for this species

