

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jon Fury, Director, Freshwater Fisheries Management
Date: October 3, 2019
Subject: Shoal Bass – Draft Rule

Purpose:

Obtain approval for a draft rule amendment to 68A-23.005, Florida Administrative Code (FAC), that will modify the existing regulations to provide increased protection for Shoal bass.

Summary:

Shoal bass are one of five black bass species occurring in Florida, and they have a more limited range than the other four black bass species. Shoal bass are a riverine species that require shoal habitat for reproduction. The Chipola River, a tributary of the Apalachicola River in the panhandle of Florida, contains the only known reproducing population of shoal bass in the State. While also occurring in Georgia and Alabama, Chipola River shoal bass are one of the most genetically pure populations of shoal bass in existence. Like the other black bass species, shoal bass are a sportfish and sought after by anglers. Adult shoal bass typically range from 12 – 18 inches. The state record for Florida was broken in 2017 when a 22.4-inch shoal bass was caught weighing 5.95 lbs.

On October 10, 2018 Hurricane Michael made landfall near Mexico Beach causing widespread destruction and heavy impacts to the canopy covered Chipola River. The damage to the upland forest and canopy cover resulted in a large influx of woody debris and increased sedimentation run-off into the river. Additionally, sewage spills occurred in the river and a combination of all these factors resulted in several fish kills. A post-hurricane fish assessment in May 2019 showed more than a 90% decrease in shoal bass collected compared to pre-hurricane sampling in 2017.

Current rules for shoal bass allow a 5 fish bag limit, all of which must be at least 12 inches in length, and only one of which may be greater than 16 inches. There is also a catch-and-release zone on a 6.5 mile stretch of the river between Peacock Bridge and Johnny Boy Landing. However, due to the low number of shoal bass found, Executive Order 19-21 was issued in June to suspend harvest and possession of shoal bass in the Chipola River and its tributaries. Staff also collected shoal bass from the river and transported them to the Blackwater Hatchery to hold as brood fish for potential restocking purposes.

Based on the limited range of shoal bass in Florida, the significant long-term habitat changes in the Chipola River watershed, and the low numbers of shoal bass found after Hurricane Michael, staff proposes to codify the Executive Order. This would result in shoal bass being a catch and release only fishery. Staff propose to return in two years to update the Commission and review the rule.

Staff Recommendation:

Approval of the proposed draft rule with permission to publish and file the rule for adoption without further hearing unless requested.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Jon Fury, Director, Freshwater Fisheries Management