

Blackfin Tuna



Final Public Hearing
October 2, 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 proposed final rules, 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.

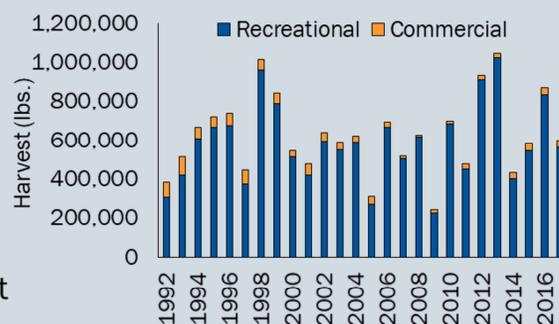
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Report date: August 29, 2019

Photo courtesy of Paige Presnell.

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

Background

- No stock assessment
- Fast-growing, mature early
 - Males mature at ~16 in.
 - Females mature at ~14 in.
- Not highly-migratory
- Recreational landings: 92-95% of harvest
 - 60% private boats, 40% for-hire
- Harvest from both state and federal waters



No state or federal species-specific regulations



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. In southeast Florida, a study found that 50% maturity for males is around 16 inches and for females is around 14 inches. Many fish reach this size during their first year.

Blackfin tuna can be found in the western Atlantic from Massachusetts to Brazil, and in 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 suggest they may be different stocks. 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.

The blackfin tuna 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.

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 are also no species-specific regulations for blackfin tuna in federal waters. Because of this, FWC has the authority to extend regulations into federal waters off Florida.

Public Feedback

- Increased participation in the fishery
- Considerable support for a reasonable bag and/or vessel limit
- Mixed feedback on size limit
 - Those in support suggested it be based on size at maturity
 - Those opposed cited unknown release mortality and use as bait
- Significant support for extending state regulations into federal waters



Photo courtesy of Jose Juncadella

In general, anglers expressed that they have seen an increase in participation in the blackfin tuna fishery in recent years and that the operation of this fishery varies regionally. Although feedback on how the fishery operates and is perceived to be doing varied, the majority of stakeholders staff heard from were in favor of FWC implementing “reasonable” species-specific regulations. Of the different management options discussed at public workshops, implementing a reasonable bag and/or vessel limit was the most broadly supported. Angler suggestions for appropriate bag limits ranged from 2 to 10 fish per person per day and vessel limit suggestions ranged from 6 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 fishing opportunities for other species are closed.

Staff heard mixed feedback on implementing a size limit for this fishery. Most anglers who supported this management option suggested the minimum size should be 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-inch 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 would affect anglers’ ability to use blackfin tuna as bait when fishing for larger pelagic fish.

Considerable support was heard for extending any 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.

Proposed Final Rule

Adopt recreational regulations approved as draft rules in July

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



Photo courtesy of Ronnie Appleton



At the July 2019 Commission meeting, the Commission approved draft rules that would establish species-specific recreational bag and vessel limits for blackfin tuna. In order to proactively provide additional conservation measures for this species, and considering the feedback received from the fishery, the proposed final rules would implement those same measures as a new chapter for blackfin tuna, Chapter 68B-62, FAC. The proposed final rules would 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 bag and vessel limits into federal waters.

Staff Recommendation

Approve the proposed final rules 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, make rule effective Jan. 1, 2020

Photo courtesy of Tommy Twyford

Staff recommends approving the final rules 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 has notified the South Atlantic and Gulf councils, as well as NOAA Fisheries, of FWC's intention to extend its regulatory authority for this species into federal waters.

If approved and directed, staff recommends making the rule effective Jan. 1, 2020.

Staff has evaluated the proposed final 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



Timeline

- Staff has heard concerns in recent years
- **April – May 2019:** Public workshops and other input opportunities
- **July 2019:** Commission approved draft rule for recreational bag and vessel limits
- **Today:** Final public hearing



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 and email. Based on such feedback, staff presented a draft proposal at the July 2019 Commission meeting. The Commission approved the draft rule presented, and today we are here for a final public hearing that would create species-specific regulations for blackfin tuna.

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
- Commercial fishery small portion of total harvest
- Majority of feedback on proposal has been positive



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 anglers, 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.

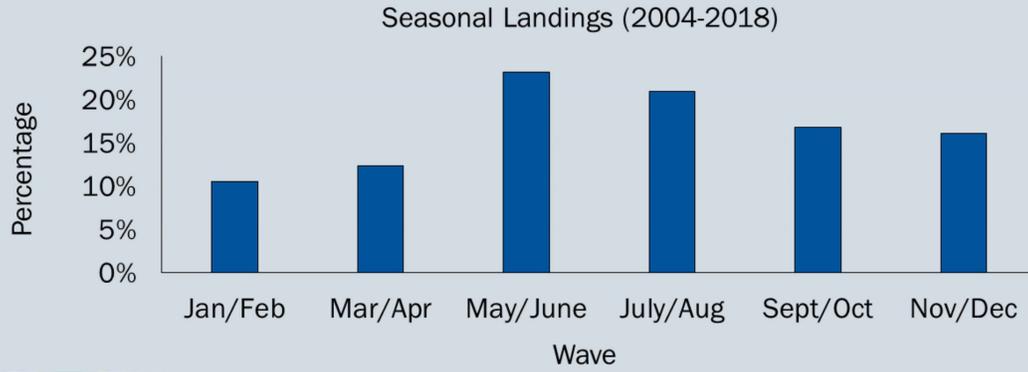
Seasonal closures were generally not supported by anglers. The timing of this fishery varies regionally and in many areas peak spawn corresponds with the best months to target blackfin tuna. Because of this, a spawning season closure would likely have little conservation benefit in portions of the state 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.

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.

Since details of the proposed draft rule have been available to the public, the majority of feedback received has been positive.

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

