Spotted Seatrout

Draft Rule

October 2, 2019

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This presentation provides a summary of proposed draft rules to amend the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) spotted seatrout (seatrout) regulations [68B-37, Florida Administrative Code (FAC)] in order to improve the status of seatrout stocks and angler satisfaction throughout the state.

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Unless otherwise noted, images throughout the presentation are by FWC.
Photo courtesy of Jeff Naylor

Recent Timeline

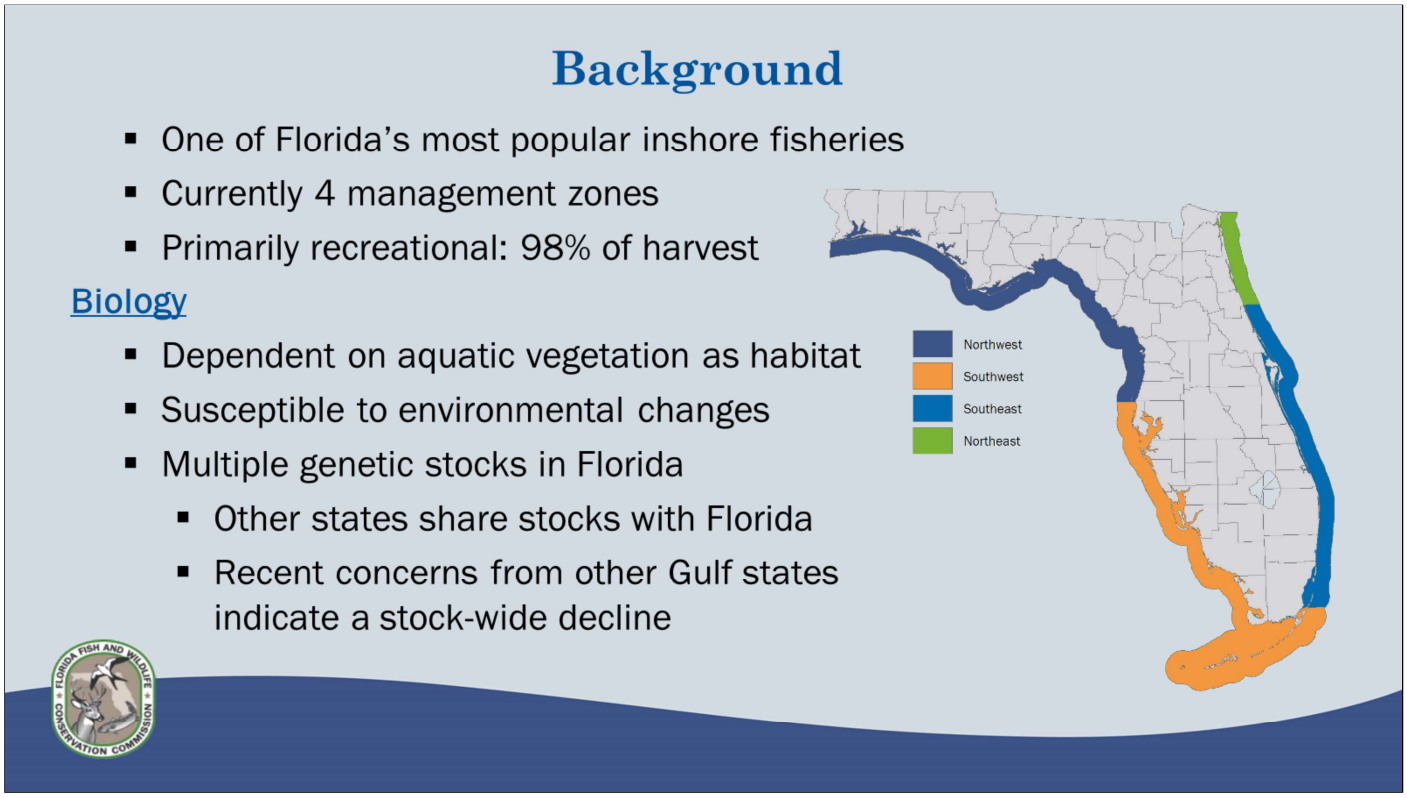
- Localized concerns from anglers in recent years
- July – Aug. 2017: 12 public workshops
- Nov. – Dec. 2018: Angler satisfaction survey
  - Over 2,600 responses
- 2019: Updated stock assessment finalized
- May 2019: Draft rule hearing for recreational management changes
  - Commission directed staff to continue working with public and bring back an updated proposal
- July – Aug. 2019: Workshops and additional public input
- Today: Draft rule hearing on updated proposal

Photo courtesy of Amy Bueschel

In recent years, staff has heard localized concerns about the status of the seatrout fishery from several areas around the state. Following a draft stock assessment by FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) in 2017, staff held public workshops to gather feedback on the fishery. In late 2018, staff gathered additional feedback by conducting an online angler satisfaction survey, with over 2,600 responses.

FWRI finalized an updated stock assessment in early 2019. In May 2019, staff presented a series of proposed recreational management changes for Commission consideration. Based on input received at that meeting, the Commission directed staff to continue working with the public and bring back an updated proposal that would reverse the current downward trends shown by the stock assessment.

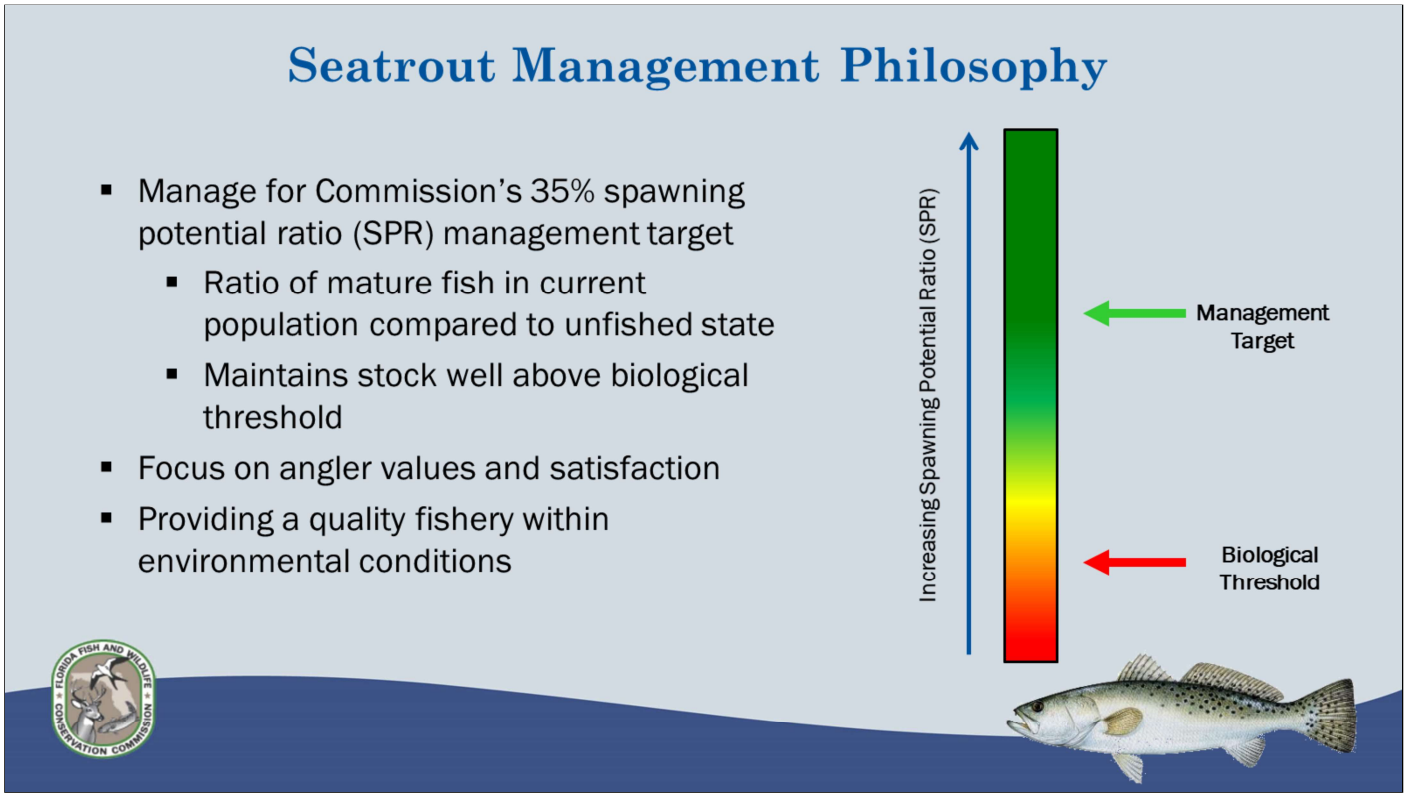
In July and August 2019, staff solicited input on a new proposal for seatrout management changes through public workshops, small group meetings with various stakeholder groups, and through the Saltwater Comments webpage. Today, staff is presenting an updated proposal for management of recreational and commercial seatrout fisheries.



Spotted seatrout is one of Florida's most popular inshore fisheries. This fishery is currently managed in four zones and regulations vary by region. Although the seatrout fishery is primarily recreational (averaging 98% of harvest statewide), the species also supports small commercial fisheries throughout the state.

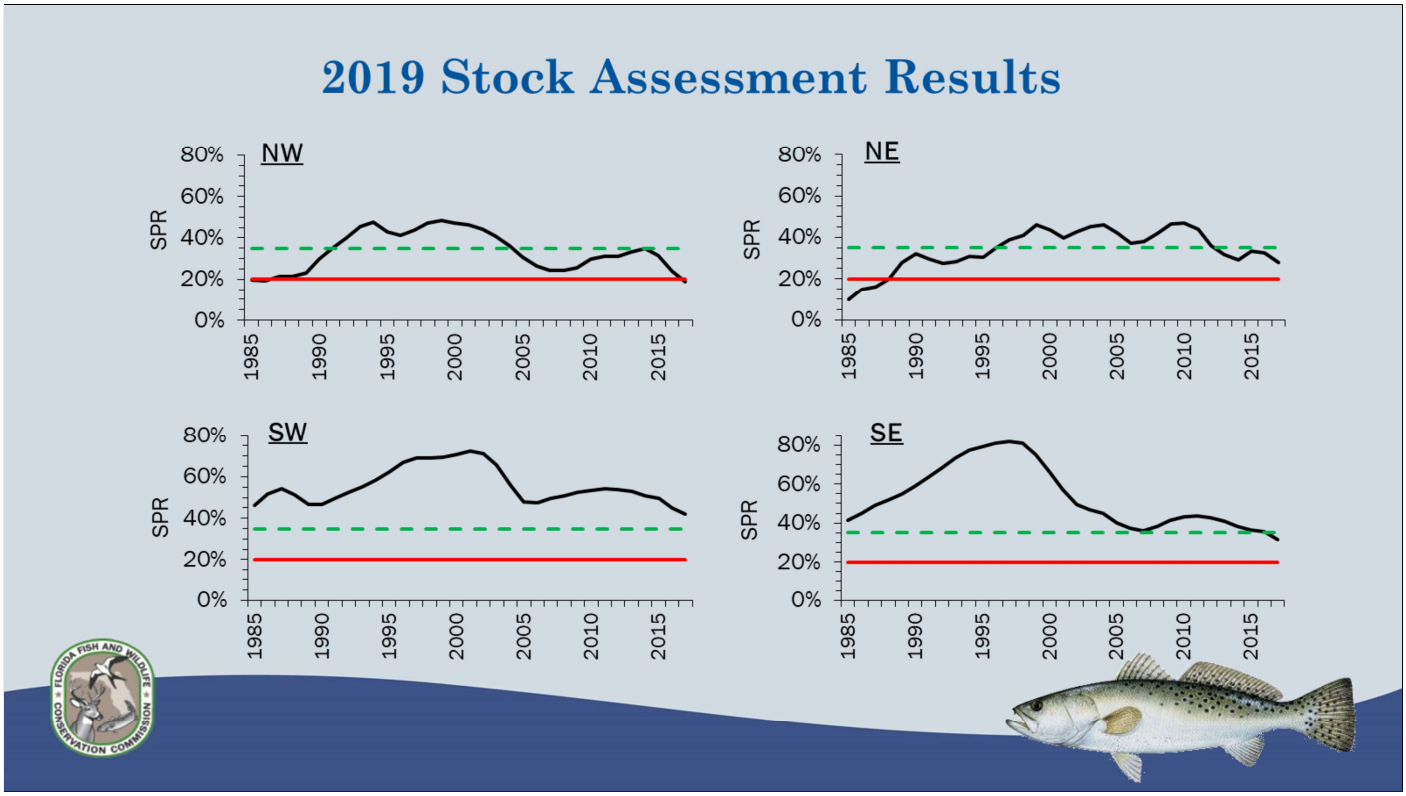
Compared to some of Florida's other inshore fisheries, seatrout are particularly dependent on aquatic vegetation, such as seagrasses, for juvenile nurseries and foraging sites throughout their life. In the absence of seagrasses, seatrout will also use the submerged portion of other vegetation types such as marsh grasses or mangroves. Seatrout move very little between estuaries, making them susceptible to local environmental changes like seagrass loss, declining water quality, and harmful algal blooms (HABs) that impact individual estuaries. However, their limited movement also means they tend to be responsive to regionally-specific management.

Research published in 2018 indicates that multiple genetic stocks of seatrout are found in Florida. While one stock occurs solely in Florida, two additional stocks are shared with other states. The genetic stock that occurs along the majority of Florida's Atlantic coast extends up to North Carolina. In the Gulf of Mexico, seatrout from approximately Cape San Blas through Texas are part of a single stock. In recent years, other Gulf states have noted concern for seatrout populations which, combined with FWRI's assessment 2019 assessment results, may indicate a stock-wide decline in this Texas-to-Florida Panhandle stock.



FWC manages seatrout with a management target of 35% Spawning Potential Ratio (SPR). SPR is the ratio of mature fish in the population under the current amount of fishing pressure compared to the mature fish expected for the same population with no fishing, and provides a metric for the impact of fishing on a stock. In general, staff is not concerned about compromising the sustainability of seatrout populations unless the SPR falls below the biological threshold of 20% SPR, at which point there may not be enough eggs produced to sustain the population. However, the Commission chose a management target of 35% SPR in order to maintain the stocks well above that biological threshold. This target provides a healthy fishery, while still allowing ample opportunity to harvest seatrout as food. Since the SPR metric may not account for non-fishing impacts, the higher management target also provides for a cushion against uncertainty and periodic environmental events such as red tides and habitat losses.

In addition to the SPR target, seatrout management also focuses on maximizing angler satisfaction in a fishery with diverse angler values. Recreational anglers target seatrout for both food and sport and different anglers prefer either high catch and retention rates or catching large fish. In many areas of the state, habitat and water quality limitations challenge FWC's ability to ensure seatrout populations reach high abundances. However, using the fisheries management tools available, staff strive to provide a quality fishery within the available environmental conditions.



The 2019 seatrout stock assessment includes data through 2017 and evaluates the status of the stock in each of the four current management zones relative to the Commission's 35% SPR management target. The figures on this slide show the estimated SPR for each of the four management zones over time, allowing us to see trends in the stock status. The dashed green lines show the 35% SPR management target and the solid red lines show the 20% biological threshold.

The top two figures on this slide indicate that both the NW and NE zones have been at or below the Commission's management target for multiple years. The bottom two figures show that while both the SW and SE zones have been above the management target throughout most or all of the time series, the SE zone has dropped below the target in recent years.

The recent downward trend in SPR in all regions signals management changes are needed to ensure a high quality fishery that meets FWC's targets throughout the state in the future.

2019 Workshop Proposal – Considerations

- May Commission direction
  - Consider adjusting management zones
  - Re-evaluate bag limit changes
- Staff reviewed
  - Regional differences in fishery and habitat
  - Genetic information
- Additional data analysis
  - Conservation benefit of various management options
  - Slot limit options likely to achieve management target

Photo courtesy of Shawn Waite

At the May Commission meeting, staff presented a series of draft rules based on the stock assessment results and public feedback on the fishery to that point. The Commission considered that proposal, but directed staff to consider changes to the proposed draft rules given the public feedback and to gather additional public input on the specifics of that new proposal. Specifically, the Commission directed staff to consider modifying the current management zones and re-evaluate previously proposed bag limit changes. Based on this direction, staff reviewed regional differences in fishery practices, regional differences in habitat, and recent genetic information.

Additional data analysis was also completed by FWRI and research partners at University of Florida. These analyses evaluated the expected conservation benefit of different management options, like bag limit reductions, as well as combinations of management options. Additional data analysis looked at what potential slot limits are most likely to lead to achieving FWC's 35% SPR management target based on the biology and life history of spotted seatrout.

All available fishery data and data analyses were considered when drafting the proposal for public input.

The first part of the management proposal that staff presented at public workshops was to modify the current management zones. The updates to management zones that staff presented were based on differences in the fishery, habitat, and public input as well as spotted seatrout genetics.

As directed at the May Commission meeting, staff proposed splitting the current Northwest zone into Western Panhandle and Big Bend zones. The location of the proposed boundary between these zones is based largely on the location of a genetic break in seatrout populations. In addition, the proposed boundary coincides with differences in the fishery and current boundaries for other fisheries which will simplify overall fisheries regulations.

Staff also proposed moving the border between the current Southwest and Southeast zones from the Miami-Dade/Monroe county line to the Broward/Palm Beach county line. This update was recommended based on spotted seatrout genetics and should have relatively little impact on the fishery due to the limited nature of the seatrout fishery in the area. Based on this update, staff also recommended renaming these zones as the South zone and the Central East zone to more closely align with the geographic extents of the proposed zones.

This slide summarizes the rest of the proposed regulation changes on which staff gathered public feedback between June and August 2019. Changes shown in blue on the slide differ from those proposed at the May 2019 Commission meeting.

The proposal included a variety of changes affecting recreational harvesters, including reducing recreational bag limits throughout the state with specific proposals addressing each zone; reducing from five to three fish in the Western Panhandle zone, five to four in the Big Bend zone, four to three in the South zone, six to five in the Northeast zone, and four to two in the Central East zone. The proposal also included an update to the recreational size limit, from current 15-20 inch slot to a 15-19 inch slot and prohibiting harvest above the slot. (Anglers are currently allowed to keep one seatrout over the slot limit within their bag limit.) Additionally, staff proposed prohibiting the harvest of a personal bag limit by captain and crew when on a for-hire trip statewide and re-establish the previous February winter closure in the new Western Panhandle zone.

The final proposed change presented at the 2019 workshops would align the commercial slot limit (currently 15-24 inches with no harvest over 24 inches) with the proposed 15-19 inch recreational slot limit and. This would make harvest of fish over 19 inches prohibited for both sectors.

Public Input Since May 2019

- Engaged stakeholders through multiple methods
- Inconsistent feedback on fishery status and proposed changes
- Considerable opposition to change for Big Bend
  - Many feel fishery is doing well
- Outside Big Bend, majority of anglers supported some management changes

Management zones: Support for proposed management zones

Size limit

- Recreational: Many anglers support adjusting
  - No specific size limit consistently supported
- Commercial: Significant opposition from industry
  - Requests to modify harvest limits instead

Photo courtesy of Matt Smith

In order to gather public input on the proposal, staff engaged stakeholder from all sectors through a variety of methods in addition to public workshops, including small group meetings, and by soliciting input via phone calls, emails, and the FWC Saltwater Comments webpage. Overall, we received inconsistent feedback on both the fishery status and desired management both within and among zones. However, there was considerable opposition to the proposal, and to rule changes in general, from the Big Bend zone. Big Bend anglers reported that the fishery is doing well in their area and believe that the proposed changes would cause significant economic hardship to communities who's economies are based on fishing. Outside of the Big Bend, the majority of anglers supported some management changes, but not necessarily staff's proposal. Some anglers who supported staff proposal overall believe it does not go far enough.

Throughout the regions, there was broad support for the proposed updates to management zones. There were some requests for additional adjustments to boundaries and a few requests for further regionalizing the regulations.

Feedback on the proposed slot limit varied greatly. Many recreational anglers support adjusting the size limit. However, no specific size limit was consistently supported. Some anglers prefer to shift the current size limit to allow harvest of either smaller or larger fish and others prefer to either narrow (similar to staff proposal) or widen the current 15-20 inch slot size limit. Staff received considerable opposition to the proposal's commercial slot limit change from the commercial industry and from some recreational anglers. Commercial harvesters report that the majority of the seatrout they harvest would not be allowable under the proposal and that it would effectively eliminate the commercial seatrout fishery because trips would no longer be profitable. The commercial industry suggested modifying commercial trip or vessel limits as an alternative if changes to management of their fishery are needed.

Public Input Since May 2019 (Continued)

Bag limit reductions: General support outside of Big Bend

Harvest above slot: Opinions split

- Benefit of conserving large breeders
- Concerns about release mortality and loss of opportunity
  - Requests for 1 over-slot seatrout/vessel

Prohibit harvest by captain and crew: Support throughout most of the state

Seasonal closures

- Support for re-establishing winter closure in Western Panhandle
- Closure requests in other zones, particularly the Indian River Lagoon

The proposed bag limit reductions were generally supported by anglers outside of the Big Bend. Within the Big Bend, there was significant opposition to any bag limit reduction, especially when combined with the other proposed changes.

Public feedback on whether to allow harvest of seatrout above the slot size limit was split. Although some anglers believe that the benefit of conserving large breeding fish outweighs the importance harvesting large fish, many anglers expressed concern about release mortality and losing harvest opportunities, especially during tournaments. Many anglers suggested allowing one over-the-slot seatrout per vessel (instead of the current per person allowance) as an alternative to prohibiting all harvest above the slot.

Prohibiting harvest by captain and crew when on a for-hire trip was generally supported throughout most of the state, including by for-hire captains. The majority of the support was based on philosophical opposition to the practice, while some captains also believe that this action would have positive conservation benefits for seatrout. In the Big Bend, opinions on this option were mixed and there was considerable opposition within portions of the for-hire industry. Many for-hire captains that did not support this option suggested implementing a vessel limit instead.

There was overall support for re-establishing the February winter closure in the Western Panhandle. Staff also received requests for similar closures in many other parts of the state, particularly from the Indian River Lagoon.

Based on public input received during the July – August time period, staff updated the proposal for today's draft rule hearing. Updates made to the proposal (shown as either stricken or underlined text on the slide) include allowing harvest of one over-the-slot seatrout per vessel instead of prohibiting all harvest over the slot; reinstating the November – December winter closure for the Central East zone; maintaining the current 15-24 inch commercial slot size limit; and reducing the commercial trip limit from 75 to 50 seatrout per harvester per day and the commercial vessel limit from 150 to 100 seatrout per vessel per day. (Commercial fishers are held to the lesser of the two limits (per harvester or per vessel) on any given day.)

Staff Recommendation

Approve the proposed draft rules to improve the spotted seatrout fishery throughout the state

- Modify management zones
- Reduce recreational bag limits statewide: Western Panhandle = 3, Big Bend = 4, South = 3, Central East = 2, Northeast = 5
- Modify recreational size limit: 15-19 inches
- Allow 1 over-slot seatrout/vessel
- Prohibit guides from keeping a bag limit when on a for-hire trip
- Re-establish winter closures in Western Panhandle (Feb.) and Central East zone (Nov. – Dec.)
- Reduce commercial limits
  - 50 seatrout/person
  - 100 seatrout/vessel max

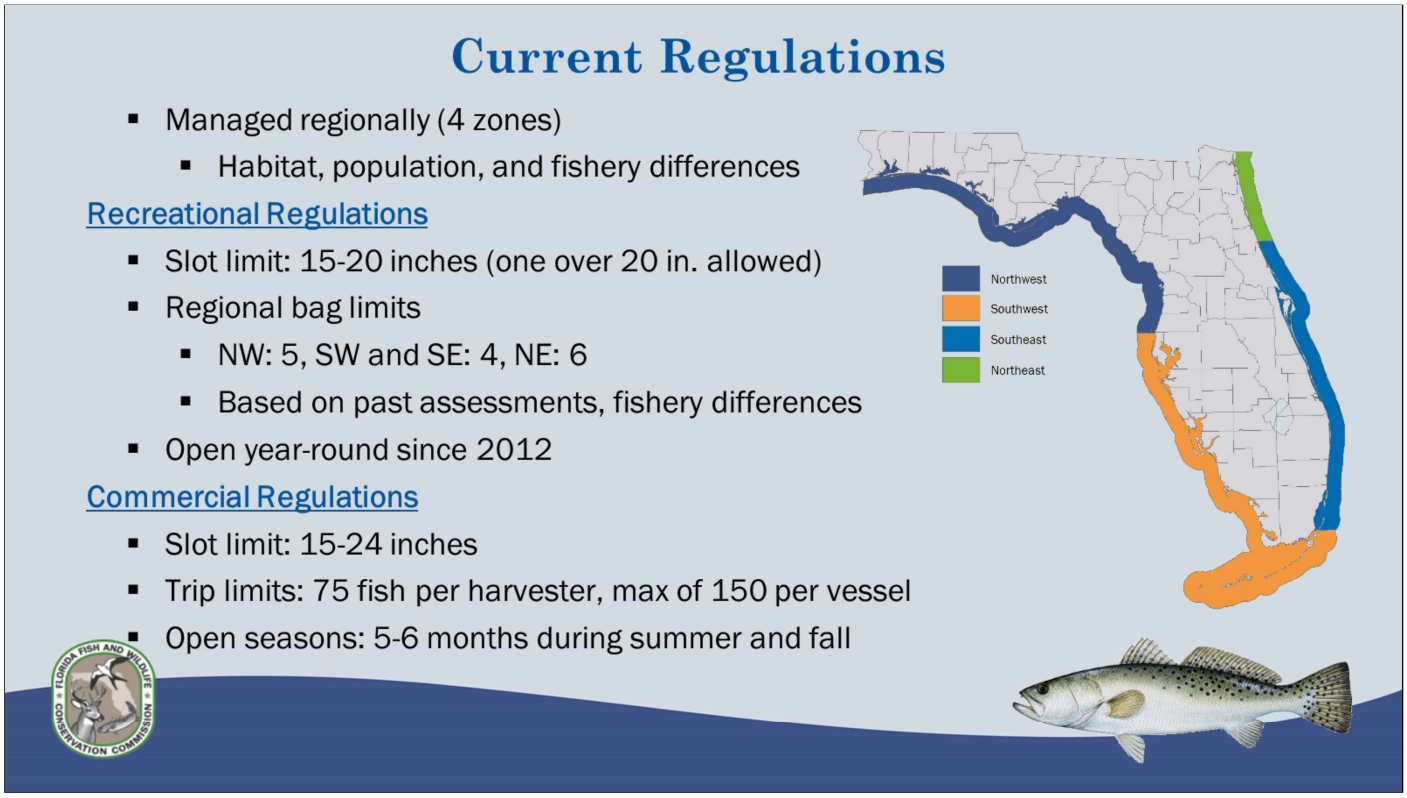
Photo courtesy of Tindl Rainey

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

Staff recommends approving the proposed draft rules to improve the spotted seatrout fishery throughout the state. Specifically, staff recommends splitting the current Northwest zone into the Western Panhandle and Big Bend zones; moving the border between the current Southwest and Southeast zones to the Broward-Palm Beach county line; reducing the recreational bag limits to three fish in the Western Panhandle and South zones, four fish in the Big Bend zone, two fish in the Central East zone, and five fish in the NE zone; modifying the recreational slot size limit to 15-19 inches; allowing harvest of one over-the-slot fish per vessel only; prohibiting guides (captain and crew) from keeping a personal bag limit when on a for-hire trip; re-establishing a February winter closure in the Western Panhandle and a November – December winter closure in the Central East zone; and reducing the commercial trip and vessel limits to 50 seatrout per person with a maximum of 100 seatrout per vessel per day statewide.

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

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



Seatrout are managed regionally in four zones: Northwest (NW), Southwest (SW), Southeast (SE), and Northeast (NE). These zones were created based on differences in seatrout population, local habitat, and how the seatrout fishery operates. The regional regulations are tailored to address the results of past stock assessments and regional biological and social needs.

Recreationally, seatrout have a harvest slot size limit of 15-20 inches, with an allowance for an angler to harvest one fish over 20 inches within their bag limit each day. The daily bag limit differs regionally and is five in the NW, four in the SW and SE, and six in the NE zone. The fishing season has been open year-round since 2012, when previous winter closures were eliminated by the Commission.

The commercial fishery has a harvest slot size limit of 15-24 inches (with no allowance for harvest above the slot limit), and a trip limit of 75 fish per harvester with a maximum of 150 fish per vessel. Commercial seasons are open for 5-6 months during the summer and fall and specific season dates vary between regions.