

Spotted Seatrout



Final Public Hearing
December 12, 2019



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This presentation provides a summary of proposed final 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.

Division: Marine Fisheries Management
Authors: Krista Shipley and Melissa Recks
Contact Phone Number: (850) 487-0554
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Cover photo courtesy of Shawn Waite.

Background

- One of Florida's most popular inshore fisheries
- Localized concerns from anglers in recent years
- Currently 4 management zones
- Primarily recreational: 98% of harvest

Biology

- Dependent on aquatic vegetation
- Susceptible to environmental changes
- Multiple genetic stocks in Florida
 - Other states share stocks with Florida
 - Assessments from other Gulf states suggest a stock-wide decline



Spotted seatrout is one of Florida's most popular inshore fisheries and staff has heard localized concerns about the status of the fishery from several areas around the state. 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 localized 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, some other Gulf states have completed stock assessments on the portion of the seatrout stock that occurs in their state. These assessments combined with the results of the 2019 seatrout stock assessment conducted by FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) suggest there has been a stock-wide decline in stock that spans from Texas to the Florida Panhandle.

Recent Timeline

- **July – Aug. 2017:** 12 public workshops
- **Nov. – Dec. 2018:** Online angler satisfaction survey
- **2019:** Updated stock assessment finalized
- **May 2019:** First draft rule hearing
- **July – Aug. 2019:** Workshops and additional public input
- **Oct. 2019:** Commission approved updated draft rule proposal
 - Directed staff to consider additional public comment
- **Today:** Final public hearing



Photo courtesy of Amy Bueschel



Based on concerns about the fishery from anglers and the release of a draft stock assessment by 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 participants.

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 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. At the October Commission meeting, staff is presented a proposal for management of recreational and commercial seatrout fisheries that incorporated the feedback received in July and August. The Commission approved the draft rule proposal but directed staff to continue considering additional public comments. Today, staff will present final proposed rules that incorporate feedback received during and since the draft rule hearing.

Seatrout Management Philosophy & Stock Assessment

Management Philosophy

- Commission's management target: 35% spawning potential ratio (SPR)
 - Maintains stock well above biological threshold
- Focus on angler values and satisfaction
- Provide a quality fishery within environmental conditions

Current stock assessment

- 3 of 4 zones not achieving management target
- All zones showing a downward trend in SPR



Photo courtesy of Jeff Naylor



FWC manages the seatrout fishery for both long-term sustainability and angler satisfaction. The current management target for seatrout is 35% Spawning Potential Ratio (SPR). SPR is the ratio between the biomass of mature fish in the population under the current amount of fishing pressure and the biomass expected for the same population with no fishing, and provides a metric for the impact of fishing on a stock. This management target maintains the stock well above the biological threshold of 20% SPR (the point at which there may not be enough eggs produced to sustain the population). 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 a cushion against uncertainty, habitat loss, and periodic environmental events such as red tides and cold weather events.

In addition to the SPR target, seatrout management also focuses on maximizing angler satisfaction in a fishery with diverse angler values. 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. FWC research and marine and estuarine habitat staff are also working within the compromised habitats to improve fishery habitat quality and quantity.

The 2019 seatrout stock assessment includes data through 2017 and evaluates the status of seatrout in each of the current management zones. The results of the stock assessment show that three of the four management zones were not achieving the 35% SPR target as of 2017 and that all zones were experiencing a downward trend in SPR.

Data Collected from the Fishery

Recreational

- Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP)
 - In-person interviews
 - Private anglers
 - For-hire customers
 - Effort surveys
 - Mail
 - Phone for-hire survey
- Additional data: iAngler, GRFS, at-sea observers, etc.



Commercial

- Trip tickets
- Trip Interview Program (TIP)



Catch and harvest data from the recreational and commercial fisheries are valuable information that is used in stock assessments.

There are multiple types of recreational data collected to estimate catch and harvest. The Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) is a federal program that FWC administers in Florida. It includes in-person interviews of private recreational anglers and customers on for-hire trips at the dock to estimate catch and harvest. It also includes surveys to estimate fishing effort that are done by mail for private recreational anglers and by phone for the for-hire sector. In addition to MRIP, other data sources may be available for some fisheries. Some of these include Angler Action Foundation's iAngler smartphone reporting app, FWC's Gulf Reef Fish Survey (GRFS), and at-sea fishery observers, in addition to other species-specific fishery monitoring efforts.

Commercial harvest in Florida is tracked using marine fisheries trip tickets. All fish harvested and sold into the commercial market in Florida are required to be recorded on a trip ticket. In addition to trip tickets, the Trip Interview Program (TIP) is a sampling program where biologists visit docks and seafood dealers to interview commercial harvesters and collect biological samples from harvested fish.

Considerations

- Public input since October generally consistent with previous input
 - Continued opposition from portions of Big Bend
 - More willingness to accept final proposal
 - Outside Big Bend, majority of anglers supported making some management changes
- Final proposal a compromise
 - Anticipated SPR increases
 - Addresses variable angler values and requests
- Staff identified an unnecessary commercial reporting form



Public feedback on fisher satisfaction, perceived status of the fishery, and acceptability of potential regulation changes also inform the management process. Input from the public at and since the October draft rule hearing has generally been consistent with the input received prior to that draft rule hearing. Although there has been continued opposition to the proposal from some portions of the Big Bend, some anglers are more willing to accept the final proposal being presented today. Outside of the Big Bend, the majority of anglers have supported management changes, although many did not support all aspects of the specific proposal.

The seatrout fishery has a wide variety of angler desires, concerns, and local environmental conditions both within and among management zones. The final rule proposal is a compromise that incorporates differing angler views on the status of the fishery as well as different fisher values and management requests, while also providing changes that are expected to improve the status of the fishery in areas where it isn't meeting the Commission's management target. An example of this can be seen through the public input and staff proposal for the Central East zone, which includes the Indian River Lagoon. Staff's original proposal in May 2019 was intended to improve the status of the fishery in order to achieve the management target in the future. However, public feedback from the area was very split with some anglers believing the fishery is strong and requesting no changes and many others requesting a multi-year fishery closure, because of their belief that the fishery has declined significantly. As a compromise between these very different viewpoints, staff added a two-month winter closure to the proposal for the Central East zone that was presented both at the October Commission meeting and today's Final Hearing.

Through the rulemaking process, staff also identified a commercial reporting form that is no longer needed to ensure the enforceability of the commercial regulations.

Proposed Final Rule

- Modify management zones

Recreational

- Reduce bag limits
 - Western Panhandle: 5 to 3
 - Big Bend: No change (5)
 - South : 4 to 3
 - Northeast: 6 to 5
 - Central East: 4 to 2
- Slot limit 15-19 inches
- Allow 1 over-slot seatrout/vessel
- Prohibit harvest by captain and crew when on a for-hire trip
- Re-establish Feb. closure in Western Panhandle and Nov. – Dec. closure in Central East



Commercial

- Reduce trip limits: 50 seatrout/harvester, 100 seatrout/vessel
- Remove unnecessary reporting form



Based on public input from the Big Bend, staff updated the proposal presented in October for the final public hearing. Updates to the proposal are shown as underlined text on the slide. The proposed final rules would update 68B-37, FAC, as follows:

- Split the current Northwest zone into the Western Panhandle and Big Bend zones
- Move the border between the current Southwest and Southeast zones to the Broward-Palm Beach county line
- Maintain the current five fish bag limit in the Big Bend zone (update since draft rule hearing, previous proposal reduced the bag limit to four fish)
- Reduce the recreational bag limits to three fish in the Western Panhandle and South zones, two fish in the Central East zone, and five fish in the NE zone
- Modify the recreational slot size limit to 15-19 inches
- Allow harvest of only one over-the-slot fish per vessel
- Prohibit guides (captain and crew) from keeping a personal bag limit when on a for-hire trip
- Re-establish a February winter closure in the Western Panhandle and a November – December winter closure in the Central East zone
- Reduce the commercial trip and vessel limits to 50 seatrout per person with a maximum of 100 seatrout per vessel per day statewide

The proposed final rules would also eliminate a burden on the commercial fishery to submit reporting forms that are no longer needed to ensure enforceability of the regulations (update since draft rule hearing).

Staff Recommendation

Approve the final rules to improve the spotted seatrout fishery throughout the state

- Modify management zones
- Reduce recreational bag limits: Western Panhandle = 3, 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 on a for-hire trip
- Re-establish winter closures: Western Panhandle (Feb.), Central East zone (Nov. – Dec.)
- Reduce commercial limits: 50/person, 100/vessel
- Remove unnecessary commercial reporting form

Make rules effective Feb. 1, 2020; advertise changes to the proposed rules via a Notice of Change



Photo courtesy of Tindi Rainey



Maintain 5-fish bag limit for the Big Bend zone

Staff recommends approving the proposed final 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, 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 only one over-the-slot fish per vessel
- 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
- Reducing the daily commercial trip and vessel limits to 50 seatrout per person with a maximum of 100 seatrout per vessel statewide
- Removing an unnecessary commercial reporting form.

Staff recommends maintaining the current 5-fish bag limit for the Big Bend.

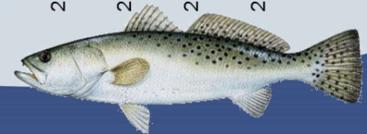
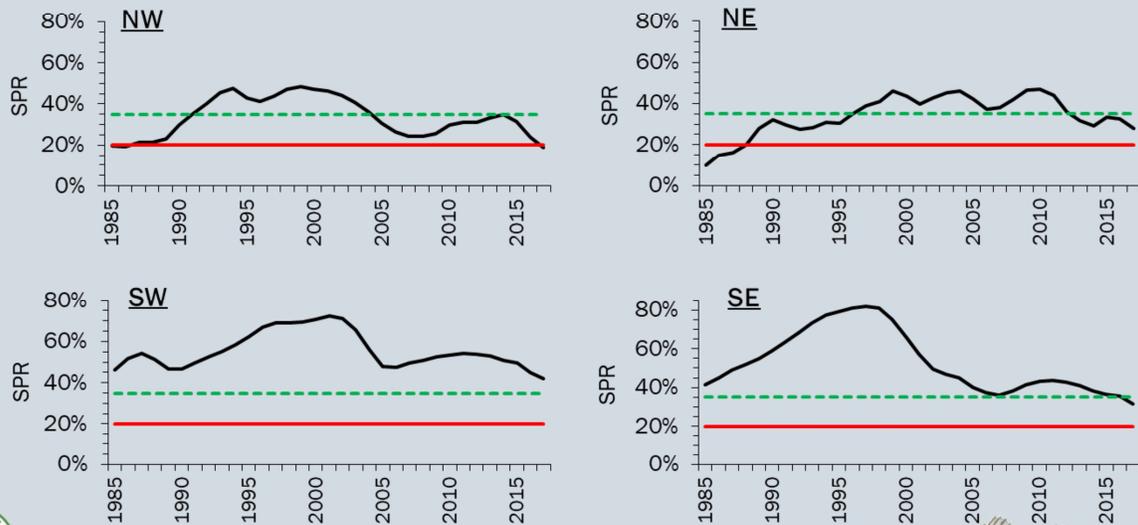
If approved and directed, staff recommends making the rules effective February 1, 2020. Staff would advertise the changes to the draft rules via a Notice of Change.

Staff have evaluated the proposed final rules under 68-1.004, FAC, and found them to be in compliance.

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



2019 Stock Assessment Results



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.

Current Regulations

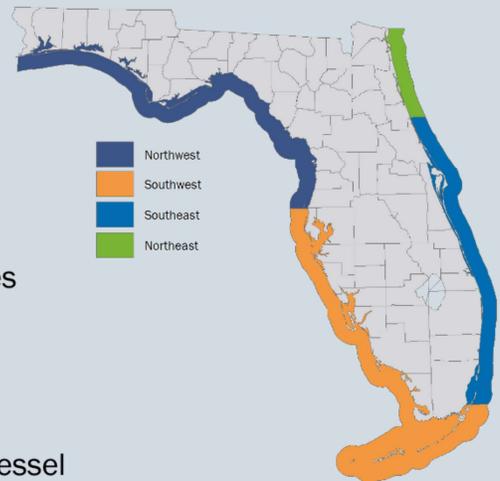
- Managed regionally (4 zones)
 - Habitat, population, and fishery differences

Recreational Regulations

- Slot limit: 15-20 inches (one over 20 in. allowed)
- Regional bag limits
 - NW: 5, SW and SE: 4, NE: 6
 - Based on past assessments, fishery differences
- Open year-round since 2012

Commercial Regulations

- Slot limit: 15-24 inches
- Trip limits: 75 fish per harvester, max of 150 per vessel
- Open seasons: 5-6 months during summer and fall



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.