

# Gulf County (St. Joseph Bay) Bay Scallops



Draft Rule – Consent Agenda Item #2  
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**Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**

Version 1

This presentation provides a brief update on the St. Joseph Bay scallop population status and a summary of proposed draft rules to amend the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) bay scallop regulations in 68B-18, Florida Administrative Code (FAC) to set long-term season dates for Gulf County, including St. Joseph Bay.

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Cover photo courtesy of Tyler Jones, UF/IFAS Florida Sea Grant.

## Recent Scallop Management



- **2017–2019:** Commission set unique season dates via Executive Order (EO)
  - Balanced public's management desires with sustainability of scallop populations
- **May 2019:** Commission approved series of rule changes for entire harvest area
  - Included July 1 – Sept. 24 season for Gulf County, directed staff to
    - Modify 2020 season by EO
    - Return for further consideration of future seasons
- **Dec. 2019:** Set 2020 Gulf County season by EO
- **Today:** Draft rule hearing to modify long-term season dates for Gulf County



Photo courtesy of Carol Lyn Parrish



Harvesting scallops is a popular, family-friendly, recreational activity throughout the Big Bend and eastern Panhandle. The fishery is also an important economic driver for many coastal communities. Timing of the scallop season can affect the economic benefits for local communities and may also impact the sustainability of local scallop population.

In June 2016, the Commission directed staff to review statewide scallop management. From 2017-2019, FWC took an adaptive approach by managing the scallop fishery to balance community and stakeholder desires with the sustainability of local scallop populations. This led to short-term management changes being made annually by Executive Orders (EO). Throughout this time period, staff worked with communities and stakeholders to identify a well-balanced, sustainable season structure that could be implemented long-term.

At its May 2019 meeting, the Commission approved a series of final rules that established long-term seasons throughout the entire open harvest area. To allow additional time to evaluate the status of the scallop population in St. Joseph Bay following the 2018 red tide and Hurricane Michael, the Commission also directed staff to modify the 2020 Gulf County season by EO, if necessary, and to return at a later date for further consideration of future long-term Gulf County season dates.

Based on the Commission's direction and stakeholder feedback received since the May Commission meeting, the 2020 season for Gulf County was modified by EO to be August 16 – September 24.

Today, staff is presenting a draft rule that would modify the long-term season dates for Gulf County, beginning in 2021.

## Recent St. Joseph Bay History



### 2015 red tide

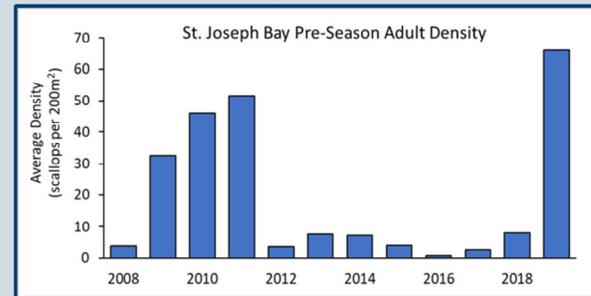
- Almost no juvenile scallops detected during peak spawning
- Responded with regulatory action and restoration efforts in 2016

### 2018 red tide and hurricane

- Post-impact survey
  - No wild adult scallops observed
  - Some juvenile settlement

### 2019

- Pre-season density highest in 10+ years
- Short-term research projects
  - Improve data on catch, effort, and spawning stock



In late 2015, St. Joseph Bay experienced a prolonged red tide event during the peak scallop spawning period. This negatively impacted spawning and scallop survival, and resulted in poor recruitment of juvenile scallops. In response, the Commission modified regulations for the 2016 season in Gulf County by shortening the harvest season and reducing the daily bag limit. FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) also began extensive scallop restoration efforts and developed community-based restoration projects.

In fall 2018, St. Joseph Bay experienced another red tide bloom followed by Hurricane Michael. To evaluate the impacts of these events, FWRI conducted a post-impact survey. Staff visited numerous sites with previously-documented high densities of scallops, sampled a higher than normal number of locations throughout the bay, and consulted with local experts. Despite extensive surveys, no wild adult scallops were observed. Staff also observed higher than normal (93%) scallop mortality at restoration locations. However, some juvenile settlement was observed, indicating that limited spawning occurred.

Although the post-impact trends were less than favorable, 2019 pre-season scallop surveys indicated a significant increase in scallop densities (66 scallops/200m<sup>2</sup>) in the Bay. There are a number of factors, including the natural variability of scallop populations, that may have contributed to this significant increase but the direct cause of this large abundance increase is unknown at this time. FWRI also secured Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment funds to conduct multiple short-term scallop research projects in St. Joseph Bay, which were designed to improve information related to catch, effort, and post-season spawning stock. These data are expected to be valuable for informing future management decisions for this fishery.

## St. Joseph Bay Stakeholder Feedback

- Numerous feedback opportunities since 2016
- Desire to improve sustainability while maintaining harvest opportunities
- Community continues to support mid-Aug. start date
  - Allows scallops to grow to larger size
  - Extends tourism into fall
  - Limited opposition from vacationing families

### November 2019 workshop

- Significant opposition to July 1 start date
- Overwhelming support for season similar to recent years
  - Start in mid-Aug.
  - End in mid- or late-Sept.



*2020 season set by EO: Aug. 16 – Sept. 24*



Over the years, staff has worked alongside communities throughout the open harvest area to balance their management desires for this fishery with maintaining sustainable scallop populations. Stakeholder feedback opportunities have ranged from annual in-person workshops since 2016, online feedback, and a stakeholder satisfaction survey sent to license holders in late 2018. Staff also held a post-environmental impact public workshop in early 2019 to gather feedback specific to the 2019 Gulf County season. Throughout all the commenting opportunities, St. Joseph Bay scallopers and the community have expressed an overwhelming desire to continue improving the sustainability of the scallop fishery while maintaining harvest opportunities.

Overall, feedback related to Gulf County has been in support of a mid-August start date because of concerns that scallops are too small in early July, which results in a higher number of scallops being harvested per volumetric bag limit and a higher number of dead discards due to the effort required to clean small scallops relative to the amount of meat obtained. The community also feels that a July start date is unnecessary from a local economic perspective. Delaying the start date to mid-August extends Gulf County tourism later into the fall. Staff has heard some opposition from families wanting to vacation in the area earlier in the summer.

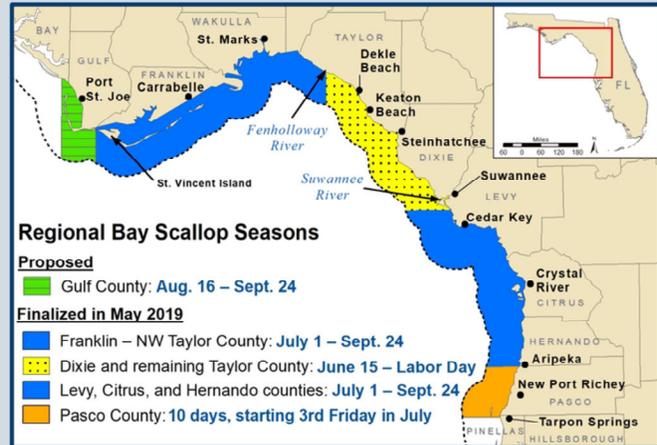
Staff held an in-person workshop in Port St. Joe following the May 2019 Commission meeting to gather feedback on the 2020 and future seasons. All who provided feedback were opposed to a July 1 start date, noting the reasons voiced previously, and there was overwhelming support to maintain a mid-August through mid- to late-September scallop season, similar to recent years. Additionally, the Gulf County Board of County Commissioners adopted a resolution requesting the Commission maintain a mid-August through mid-September season, or similar, each year. Based on stakeholder input, including the 2019 workshops, and local government requests, staff modified the 2020 season by EO to open Aug. 16 and continue through Sept. 24, 2020.

# Proposed Draft Rules



## Beginning in 2021

- Define Gulf County scallop zone
- Modify the long-term season for Gulf County scallop zone to begin on Aug. 16 and continue through Sept. 24 each year



The proposed draft rules would modify 68B-18, FAC, to define the boundary of the Gulf County scallop zone and the long-term season for this zone to begin on August 16 and continue through September 24 each year. The proposed season aligns with public feedback and local government requests.

This map provides a summary of the proposed long-term Gulf County season and the Commission's previously approved long-term seasons throughout the remaining harvest area that were finalized in May 2019.

## Staff Recommendation



### Approve the proposed draft rules to modify the long-term Gulf County (St. Joseph Bay) scallop season beginning in 2021:

- Define Gulf County scallop zone
- Set season dates: Aug. 16 – Sept. 24

*If approved, the changes will be noticed and filed for adoption without further hearing*



Photo by: Carol Lyn Parrish



*2020 season set by EO: Aug. 16 – Sept. 24*

Staff recommends approving the proposed draft rules that would define the Gulf County scallop zone and modify the scallop season in this zone to open on August 16 and continue through September 24 each year, beginning in 2021.

If approved, staff recommends the proposed changes be advertised and filed for adoption with no further hearing, unless requested by a member of the public.

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