This is a review and discussion of Florida’s recreational two-day spiny lobster mini-season, with a focus on Monroe County and the Florida Keys. Topics will include management history and recent stakeholder requests related to management of mini-season in Monroe County.

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Stakeholders have recently contacted the Commission to express concerns related to congestion and habitat damage during the recreational mini-season in the Florida Keys.

This presentation will provide a brief background of Florida’s spiny lobster fishery and an overview of the recreational mini-season, including management history, current regulations, and recent stakeholder requests for mini-season in Monroe County. The presentation will then review considerations and next steps.
Most spiny lobster that occur in Florida waters were spawned elsewhere in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico and are transported to south Florida via ocean currents during their five-to-seven-month larval phase. Spiny lobster larvae can travel thousands of miles before settling in shallow nearshore areas in seagrass and algae beds. When they reach the juvenile stage, they begin to congregate with other juvenile lobsters around protective habitat in nearshore areas. As they begin to mature, spiny lobster move from these nursery areas to offshore reefs.

It can take about two years for a lobster to grow to the minimum harvestable size, and they can grow as large as 15 pounds.

Because of these life history patterns and because most of Florida’s spiny lobsters originate from outside of the state, harvest rates of legal-sized spiny lobster in Florida has limited impact on the fishery’s productivity in future years.

In Florida, spiny lobster are harvested by diving, with bully nets, and with spiny lobster traps (for commercial harvest only).
Spiny lobster supports a popular recreational fishery in Florida. Serving as a major draw for tourism, the recreational fishery is an important component of south Florida’s economy and culture. Lobstering also provides a positive family-friendly activity. The commercial spiny lobster fishery is one of Florida’s most valuable commercial fisheries, and accounts for roughly 90% of all spiny lobsters landed commercially in the U.S. The spiny lobster fishery occurs statewide, but is primarily centered in south Florida and the Florida Keys.

FWC manages the spiny lobster fishery in state waters. In federal waters off Florida, the fishery is jointly managed by the South Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico fishery management councils. Regulations in federal waters typically mirror state regulations. Any changes made to lobster regulations in state waters would need to be coordinated with the councils if FWC is interested in seeing similar changes adopted in federal waters.
Recreational Mini-season

- 2-day season created to
  - Reduce conflicts between recreational and commercial sectors
  - Compensate for allowing commercial pre-season trap soak period
- Florida Keys are most popular destination
  - 65% of mini-season lobster are harvested in the Keys
  - Mini-season is unpopular with some Florida Keys residents

In 1974, the Legislature created a two-day spiny lobster mini-season to allow an additional harvest opportunity for recreational harvesters prior to the start of the regular spiny lobster season. The mini-season was created to reduce conflicts between recreational and commercial harvesters on the first day of lobster season, and to compensate the recreational fishery for allowing commercial harvesters to place baited traps in the water five days before the season opened. Detailed changes to mini-season regulations through the years will be presented on an upcoming slide.

Responses to recreational lobster fisher mail surveys conducted by the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) indicate the Florida Keys are the most popular destination for mini-season, attracting about 60% of mini-season participants (around 45,000 fishers) each year. Additionally, approximately 65% of lobster harvested during mini-season are harvested in the Florida Keys. While this has a positive economic impact for local businesses, the large influx of visitors can result in habitat damage and congestion on and off the water, which has made mini-season unpopular among some Florida Keys residents.
Mini-season Management History

- **1975**: First mini-season
- **1988**: Moved to last full weekend in July
- **1992**: Management changes made to reduce crowding and congestion in Monroe County
  - Moved mini-season to occur on last Wednesday and Thursday in July
  - Doubled daily bag limit in areas outside of Florida Keys from 6 to 12 lobster per person
- **2003**: Daily bag limit for Biscayne National Park reduced to 6 lobster per person

The first mini-season was held in 1975 and was initially set as July 20-21 (10 days before the regular season opened on August 2). In 1988, the mini-season and regular harvest season dates were modified to occur slightly later to allow additional time for lobster spawning before harvest opened, and to be consistent with the timing of the mini-season in federal waters.

In 1992, Monroe County residents, businesses, and commercial interests requested the mini-season either be modified or eliminated because of concerns regarding large crowds and congestion. To address these concerns and reduce congestion in Monroe County, the mini-season was moved from the last weekend in July to the last consecutive Wednesday and Thursday in July. Also, the daily mini-season bag limit in areas outside of Monroe County was doubled with the intent of attracting harvesters to other areas of the state. Despite these changes, Monroe County continues to be the most popular place for mini-season.

In 2003, the daily bag limit for Biscayne National Park was reduced to six lobster per person to align with the bag limits applicable in Monroe County. This change was made at the request of Biscayne National Park.
**Seasons and Regulations**

- **Seasons**
  - Mini-season: Last Weds. and Thurs. in July
  - Trap soak period: Saturday after mini-season through Aug. 5
  - Regular season: Aug. 6 – Mar. 31
- **Recreational bag limits vary by season and location**
  - Mini-season
    - Monroe County and Biscayne National Park: 6 per person
    - Remainder of state: 12 per person
  - Regular season: 6 per person (statewide)

Currently, the two-day recreational mini-season occurs on the last consecutive Wednesday and Thursday in July each year. Commercial harvesters may begin placing lobster traps in the water to soak beginning the Saturday immediately following mini-season, but traps cannot be pulled and lobsters may not be harvested during this pre-season trap soak period. Because the mini-season dates change each year, the length of the trap soak period also varies each year (ranging from four to 11 days over the next 10 years). The current trap soak period was set at the request of the commercial lobster fishery in 2018, when it was changed from a five-day period immediately preceding the regular season to the period beginning on the Saturday following mini-season.

Different daily bag limits apply to recreational harvesters outside Monroe County and Biscayne National Park during mini-season than apply during the regular season. During mini-season, a person may harvest up to six lobster per day in Monroe County or within Biscayne National Park, or up to 12 lobster per day in all other areas of the state. During the regular season, the daily recreational bag limit is six lobster per person statewide.

There are also local ordinances that apply in certain areas of Monroe County during mini-season and during the first few days of the regular season. These ordinances vary by location, but generally limit snorkeling and diving within a certain distance of improved residential or commercial shorelines, any manmade or private canal, or any marina. The intent of these ordinances is to promote public safety and welfare and to reduce the incidence of property destruction and trespassing.
As a result of high mini-season participation by visitors to Monroe County, residents of the Florida Keys and local governments have contacted staff with concerns related to overcrowding and congestion (both on and off the water); habitat damage from lobster divers interacting with coral reefs and increased vessel traffic; and bag limit violations by mini-season participants. These are similar to the concerns that prompted the Marine Fisheries Commission to adjust mini-season bag limits and dates in 1992.

Some stakeholders have requested the Commission consider eliminating mini-season altogether. In October 2020, staff and Commissioners received a new request to modify the structure of mini-season in Monroe County to reduce congestion on the water and associated impacts to habitat, enforcement issues, and user conflicts. To address these concerns, Last Stand, a Key West-based non-profit organization, proposed the Commission consider developing a limited-entry or lottery system to limit the number of harvesters in Monroe County during mini-season, and require harvesters to tag lobsters to reduce potential for bag limit violations. Last Stand also suggested further managing effort by dividing Monroe County into four zones and allotting lottery permits regionally, and potentially extending the limited-entry or lottery system for mini-season through the first week of the regular season.

Monroe County officials recently formed a Mini-Season Task Force comprised of representatives of local government, businesses, state and local law enforcement, the Monroe County Tourist Development Council, environmental organizations, and diving and fishing representatives. FWC staff serve as a resource for this group. The Mini-Season Task Force’s objective is to develop recommendations to reduce environmental damage during mini-season and make it more palatable for Florida Keys residents. The Task Force began meeting in March 2021 and has not developed any specific recommendations; however, they have discussed options to unify local mini-season ordinances, improve traffic management, and address concerns related to bag limit violations with a potential lobster tag program.
Any discussion about mini-season must first recognize that it is an iconic event unique to Florida, which has become an important part of south Florida’s culture and, more broadly, Florida’s culture. The recreational lobster fishery injects tens of millions of dollars into the Keys’ tourism-based economy during mini-season. The Florida Keys are the preferred destination for most mini-season participants because the region’s clear, shallow waters provide excellent conditions to dive and bully net for lobster. While the popularity of mini-season in the Florida Keys contributes to overcrowding and congestion, these issues are outside of FWC’s regulatory authority.

Additionally, although many Florida Keys residents are concerned about potential bag limit violations during mini-season, research and landings data indicate there are not large-scale resource issues in the fishery and the amount of lobster harvested during mini-season does not present a conservation concern. Most of the lobster in Florida waters are spawned elsewhere in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico and are transported as larvae to Florida via ocean currents.

It is also important to note efforts to reduce or eliminate mini-season participation in the Florida Keys, or statewide, could shift recreational effort to the start of the regular season. This shift could result in increased congestion and user conflicts when both recreational and commercial harvesters are on the water, which mini-season was created, in part, to alleviate.

Further, the creation of a new limited-entry or lottery system would generate additional challenges. These include: high costs associated with changes to license system infrastructure and distributing lobster tags; determining how many permits should be made available; and potential impacts to families’ mini-season traditions because not everyone would be guaranteed a permit.

Finally, though the lobster fishery is centered in south Florida, mini-season occurs statewide in both state and federal waters. Regulations in federal waters typically mirror state regulations. Any changes made to lobster regulations in state waters would need to be coordinated with the councils if FWC is interested in seeing similar changes adopted in federal waters.
No specific direction is requested at this time; however, input on mini-season is welcome.

Staff will remain engaged with stakeholders and will continue to serve as a resource for the Monroe County Mini-season Task Force, as needed.
The following slides are considered backup material and are not anticipated to be part of the actual presentation.
This graphic shows spiny lobster landings (in pounds) attributed to commercial and recreational harvesters for the 1991/1992 through the 2019/2020 spiny lobster seasons. On average, the commercial fishery harvests approximately 5.35 million pounds each year and the recreational fishery harvests approximately 1.58 million pounds each year. Recreational surveys were not conducted for 2004/2005 or 2017/2018 because of hurricanes, therefore recreational landings are not available for those years.
Recreational Spiny Lobster Regulations

- **Seasons**
  - **Mini-season:** Last Wednesday and Thursday in July
  - **Regular season:** Aug. 6 – March 31
- **Daily bag limits vary by season and location**
  - **Mini-season**
    - Monroe County and Biscayne National Park: 6 per person
    - Remainder of state: 12 per person
  - **Regular season:** 6 per person (statewide)
- May be harvested by diving, and with bully nets or hoop nets
- No recreational trap fishery
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<tr>
<th>Mini-season Enforcement and Outreach</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Law Enforcement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ About 30 additional officers sent to Monroe County each year for mini-season and start of regular season</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Special details focused on lobster resource violations and boating safety</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outreach</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Florida Coral Crew</td>
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<tr>
<td>▫ Targets divers and recreational lobster harvesters</td>
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<tr>
<td>▫ Best fishing practices to minimize coral reef damage</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Mini-season information booth provides regulations and tips to visitors</td>
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Because so many people travel to the Florida Keys to harvest lobster each year, FWC sends 30 additional law enforcement officers to Monroe County around mini-season and the start of the regular season when participation is highest to boost enforcement efforts. During this time, officers conduct special enforcement details focused on lobster resource violations and boating safety.

FWC also conducts dedicated outreach activities related to mini-season via the Florida Coral Crew program and by hosting a mini-season information booth in Key Largo. The Florida Coral Crew program targets divers and recreational lobster harvesters and provides best fishing practices and tips to minimize damage to coral reefs. Each year, FWC and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary host a mini-season information booth on the side of US-1 in Key Largo. Staff provide visitors with information on lobster rules and regulations, tips on how to enjoy mini-season responsibly, and the importance of protecting coral reefs and lobster habitats.