This presentation provides a summary of rule proposals to amend the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s (FWC) shrimp rules [68B-31, Florida Administrative Code (FAC)] to increase recreational access, allow commercial food shrimpers to use equipment necessary to produce the highest quality frozen shrimp, and clarify or update the current regulations.

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Unless otherwise noted, images throughout the presentation are by FWC.
In Florida, shrimp are harvested for both recreational and commercial use.

Recreational fishing for shrimp has a long history and tradition in many Florida communities. Methods and season vary but it provides a great opportunity to involve families and individuals in catching their own shrimp for food or personal bait.

Florida’s commercial shrimp fishery is one of the oldest and most valuable fisheries in the state, with an average annual dockside value of $49.7 million during the last 10 years. The commercial fishery harvests shrimp for both food and bait.
Management

- Management strategy:
  - Maximize yield
  - Protect nurseries
  - Separate user groups
- Current regulations are combination of rules with different origins
- Considerable regional variability
- Fishery has evolved over time

FWC’s management strategy for shrimp is intended to maximize yield, protect nurseries, and separate user groups. Yield is maximized by preventing harvest of small shrimp and allowing them to grow to larger more marketable size. This is accomplished through area closures to protect shrimp nursery areas. Using closed areas to protect small shrimp from harvest eliminates the need for intensive monitoring to open and close seasons based on shrimp size, a food shrimp minimum size limit, or shrimp counts (i.e., basing retention of food shrimp on number of shrimp in a pound). Additionally, area closures protect sensitive shrimp habitat, like seagrass, from damage from shrimp trawls. Spatial closures and other restrictions are also used to separate user groups that may have conflict, such as recreational and commercial shrimpers or shrimp trawls and trap gear.

FWC’s current shrimp regulations are a combination of rules with different origins, including local laws dating back to the 1920s. Many of the shrimp regulations were originally established in Florida Statutes. Although some statutory regulations have been incorporated into FWC rules, others remain only in statute, but are under FWC’s regulatory authority. Because of the variety of rule origins and the unique regionality in how the shrimp fishery operates, the current shrimp regulations are very complex. The operation of the fishery has evolved over time as well. To ensure continued viability of the shrimp fishery while maintaining the management strategy, shrimp regulations can be updated to align with changes in the fishery.
In order to address the changes in this fishery over time, staff embarked on a long-term project to update FWC’s shrimp regulations. The changes were separated into three phases which address changes in fishing practices, re-assess seasons and allowable harvest days, revisit spatial closures, and update outdated or incorrect rule language.

Phase 1 and Phase 2 were completed in 2018 and 2019, respectively, and focused on live food shrimp harvest and northeast Florida food shrimp harvest. Today’s rule proposal is the third and final phase of the long-term project and will update recreational and commercial shrimp regulations as well as make rule clarifications.
Proposed Rules

- Allow recreational shrimp harvest of 2 gallons per person and 5 gallons per vessel with cast nets and dip nets in the Big Bend closed area
- Allow use of high-salinity freezer tanks for commercial food shrimp harvest
- Clarifications and updates:
  - Update references to landmarks used to define a closed area within Santa Rosa Sound
  - Correct “Live Bait Shrimp License” to “Commercial Live Shrimp Production License”
  - Update “live bait shrimp producer” definition
  - Define “inland waters”

More specifically, the proposed rules would allow recreational shrimp harvest of two gallons per person and five gallons per vessel using cast nets and dip nets in the Big Bend closed area; allow use of high-salinity freezer tanks for commercial food shrimp harvest; update references to outdated landmarks used to define a closed area within Santa Rosa Sound; correct the “Live Bait Shrimp License” to “Commercial Live Shrimp Production License;“ update the “live bait shrimp producer” definition; and define “inland waters.”

The following slides will provide additional information on the proposed changes.
In the past, area closures were implemented to conserve small shrimp in nursery habitats or to spatially separate conflicting fisheries.

The Big Bend closed area, shown in the map, was established in 1993. In this area, all shrimp harvest is prohibited. The area consists of approximately 500,000 acres of shallow water characterized by dense and patchy seagrass habitat from the St. Marks Channel in Wakulla County south to Bailey’s Bluff in Pasco County. The intent of the closure was to maximize shrimp yield, eliminate the food shrimp size or count requirements (number of shrimp per pound), reduce finfish bycatch in trawls, and conserve seagrass habitat. Shrimping occurs adjacent to this area.

Stakeholders have requested the ability to recreationally harvest shrimp with cast nets and dip nets in the Big Bend Closed Area. A daily harvest of two gallons of head-on shrimp per person and the same statewide possession limit of no more than five gallons of head-on shrimp per vessel with these gear types would increase recreational access to the shrimp fishery and is expected to have minimal impact on the resource and habitat.
In Florida, the use and possession of a “brine box,” a container holding water of a higher salinity than the surrounding seawater, has been prohibited from use in the shrimp fishery since 1992. Historically, brine boxes were used to sort shrimp from bycatch. This caused 100% bycatch mortality, which led the Marine Fisheries Commission, FWC’s predecessor agency, to prohibit brine boxes.

Recently, industry requested the ability to use a brine box, in the form of a high-salinity freezer tank, as part of the Individual Quick Freeze (IQF) process, which is detailed on the following slide.
The IQF flash-freezing process is the current industry standard for frozen food shrimp. This process involves separating, sorting, and bagging harvested shrimp, followed by pre-freezing the shrimp in a high-salinity freezer tank (brine box) prior to onboard frozen storage. This creates a higher quality and more valuable end-product than other freezing methods.

Prohibiting possession of brine boxes in state waters puts Florida’s food shrimp harvesters at an economic disadvantage because, instead of rapidly chilling the shrimp in brine, these harvesters must place them on ice, resulting in a lower quality product. Allowing brine boxes to be used as part of the IQF process will bring this portion of the shrimp rule in line with industry standards and remove the economic barrier caused by the brine box prohibition. Additionally, the possession and use of brine boxes for IQF are allowed in all other southeastern U.S. states and federal waters.

The recommended rule change would continue to prohibit the use of brine boxes to sort shrimp and bycatch.

The commercial food shrimp harvesters and processors staff received input from are supportive of allowing the use of brine boxes for the IQF process.
Rule Clarifications and Updates

- Clarify and update landmarks used to define boundaries of a closed area in Santa Rosa Sound
- Correct “Live Bait Shrimp License” to “Commercial Live Shrimp Production License”
- Update “live food shrimp producer” definition
- Add “inland waters” definition

Part of updating regulations include clarifying rule language and incorporating updates, some of which will also create consistency with Florida Statutes (F.S.).

In rule, the western boundary of the food shrimp harvest closed area within Santa Rosa Sound is the Bascule Bridge roadway; however, this roadway no longer exists. Updating the western boundary reference to the replacement roadway, the Bob Sikes Bridge (County Road 399) and adding the road name, U.S. Highway 98, to the eastern boundary, Brooks Bridge, will clarify the boundaries of the closed area. This update is consistent with the rule’s original intent and will not affect the current prohibition on food shrimp harvest in Santa Rosa Sound.

Next, correct the name of the “Live Bait Shrimp License” to be the “Commercial Live Shrimp Production License” as directed by 379.247(3)(f), F.S. The “live food shrimp producer” definition would also be updated to remove the reference to the Northeast Region because commercial live bait harvest occurs throughout the state and not just the Northeast Region.

Lastly, the term “inland waters” is used to describe where portions of the shrimp rule apply, but it is not defined in the shrimp rule. Adding the definition for “inland waters” from F.S. to FWC shrimp rules will provide clarity for where some shrimp rules apply.
Staff recommends approving advertisement of the proposed rules that would increase recreational access, allow use of equipment required to produce the highest quality frozen shrimp, and clarify and update the current rule.

Specifically, proposed rules would allow recreational shrimp harvest of two gallons per person and five gallons per vessel using with cast and dip nets in the Big Bend Closed Area; allow the use of high-salinity freezer tanks for commercial food shrimp harvest; update the outdated landmarks defining a closed area within Santa Rosa Sound, correct “Live Bait Shrimp License” to “Commercial Live Shrimp Production License” and update “live bait shrimp producer” definition; and define “inland waters.”

If approved and directed, staff will return for a final hearing at the March 2022 Commission Meeting.