

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: July 10, 2017
Subject: Sheepshead and Tripletail – Draft Rule

Purpose:

Staff will present a series of draft rules regarding statewide management changes for sheepshead (68B-59, Florida Administrative Code [FAC]) and tripletail (68B-49, FAC) to promote the continued sustainability of these fisheries and address concerns expressed by stakeholders.

Summary:

FWC monitors many fisheries for indications of decline. However, stakeholders sometimes notice changing trends in a fishery before they are detectable in the research data or request the management philosophy for a particular species be reevaluated. In recent years, stakeholders have expressed an interest in regulatory changes for a variety of inshore marine fish that generally receive less attention than premier fisheries such as red drum and snook. To better understand these concerns, staff conducted a public feedback campaign to gather public input on several inshore fisheries. A new FWC Saltwater Comments webpage was developed and a coordinated campaign to gather public feedback was conducted by making presentations at fishing and dive clubs; talking to fishermen at tournaments, boat shows, and fishing expos; and distribution of information to tackle shops. This presentation will focus on sheepshead and tripletail.

Sheepshead – In recent years, stakeholders have expressed concern about sheepshead harvest rates. In response to these concerns, DMFM staff requested an updated stock assessment, which FWRI completed earlier this year. While the assessment indicates that neither the Florida Atlantic or Gulf sheepshead stocks are overfished or experiencing overfishing, some stakeholders are concerned that the current regulations may not be adequate to conserve the fishery long term. Stakeholders have expressed concern that the current bag limit coupled with the practice of targeting sheepshead during pre-spawn aggregations may be unsustainable. Taking into account these concerns as well as the increased pressure on all inshore fisheries, staff propose implementing more conservative regulations to ensure the continued sustainability of the sheepshead fishery.

Tripletail – In 1996, Florida was the first Gulf state to implement tripletail regulations. At the time, there was very little biological information available on tripletail. In November 2016, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, in coordination with FWC and the other Gulf states, finalized a Biological Profile for the Tripletail Fishery in the Gulf of Mexico and the Western Central Atlantic. The profile is a comprehensive compilation of information on tripletail biology and the fishery from Texas through Georgia and throughout the Caribbean. This publication documented an increasing popularity of the tripletail fishery and the fact that Florida's minimum size limit for this species is well below the size at maturity. In response to stakeholder requests for proactive management of this fishery, staff recommend increasing the minimum size limit for tripletail to more closely align with the size at maturity as well as other proactive regulatory measures.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommend approving the following proposed draft rules:

Sheepshead

- Reducing the sheepshead recreational bag limit from 15 to 5 fish per person day
- Creating a commercial trip limit of 200 sheepshead per person per day outside of the peak spawning season
- Implementing a spawning-season vessel limit of 50 sheepshead per day for both commercial and recreational harvesters during March and April
- Extending FWC's sheepshead regulations into federal waters

Tripletail

- Increasing the tripletail minimum size limit from 15 to 18 inches, based on the size at maturity
- Reducing the commercial trip limit to 2 tripletail per person per day
- Extending FWC's tripletail regulations into federal waters

Staff also recommend returning for a final public hearing at the September 2017 Commission meeting.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

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