



Sheepshead & Tripletail
Draft Rule
July 10, 2017

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This presentation provides a summary of stakeholder feedback gathered on the status of Florida's sheepshead and tripletail fisheries. This presentation also summarizes a series of proposed draft rules to amend the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) sheepshead [68B-59, Florida Administrative Code (FAC)] and tripletail (68B-49, FAC) regulations.

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Photos courtesy of Ezster Keresztes and Scott Wajcman.

Unless otherwise noted, images throughout the presentation are by FWC.

Background

- FWC continually monitors fisheries through a variety of methods
- Some stakeholders notice a fishery trend before data can detect it
- Stakeholders have voiced concerns about a variety of lower profile inshore fisheries in recent years
- Staff reviewed the data on sheepshead and tripletail then embarked on an input gathering process



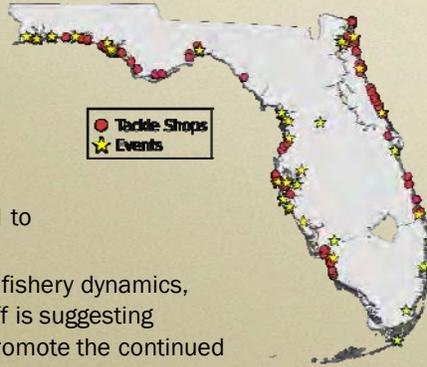
Photo courtesy of Rosemary White (L) and Chris Kalinowsky(R)

FWC uses a variety of methods, such as fishery independent and dependent data collection, to detect and monitor changes in many fisheries. In addition to this monitoring, stakeholders may notice changes in a local fishery prior to a trend being detected in scientific data. In some cases, stakeholders may suggest regulatory changes based on their perceptions of changes in the fishery or based on changing values. FWC staff listens to stakeholder input and evaluates it along with existing scientific monitoring information and knowledge of the biology of a particular species before suggesting regulatory changes.

Recently, stakeholders have expressed concern for a variety of inshore marine fish that generally receive less attention than premier fisheries such as red drum and snook. Because of stakeholder concerns raised for sheepshead and tripletail, staff reviewed the available data for these species statewide and began actively gathering public input on these fisheries.

Outreach – Sheepshead and Tripletail

- Public feedback campaign
 - FWC Saltwater Comments webpage kick-off
 - 21 club presentations
 - 10 fishing tournaments
 - 8 boat shows
 - Outreach materials distributed to 81 tackle shops
- **Today:** Based on species biology, fishery dynamics, and input from stakeholders, staff is suggesting management changes that will promote the continued sustainable management of these fisheries



To better understand stakeholder concerns and desires for the sheepshead and tripletail fisheries, staff began a public feedback campaign in February 2017. This campaign included presentations at 21 fishing and dive clubs; attending 10 fishing tournaments, 8 boat shows and fishing expos; and distributing outreach materials to more than 80 tackle shops. Additionally, the FWC Saltwater Comments webpage kicked-off in February 2017. This webpage provides an opportunity for stakeholders to submit feedback on a variety of saltwater species and fisheries statewide.

Today, taking into account the biology of the species, the dynamics of the fisheries, and concerns raised by stakeholders, staff is suggesting management changes for sheepshead and tripletail that will promote the continued sustainability of these inshore fisheries.

Overview – Sheepshead

- Found throughout Florida's coastal waters
- Mature between 2-5 years
 - 50% maturity at 11-14 inches TL
- Spawn in late winter/spring
 - Nearshore waters and estuaries
 - Aggregate prior to spawning
- 2017 FWRI assessment
 - Evaluated Gulf and Atlantic sheepshead separately
 - Neither considered overfished or undergoing overfishing



Photo courtesy of Matthew Daugherty

Sheepshead are an inshore species commonly found throughout Florida's coastal waters. While reported size and age at maturity varies throughout their range, there is general agreement that females begin to mature as early as age two and that half of the female population is mature at 11-14 inches total length. Spawning occurs in late winter and spring in nearshore waters and estuaries. Prior to spawning, sheepshead form aggregations in inlets and on nearshore reefs.

In response to concerns heard from stakeholders in recent years, DMFM staff requested an updated stock assessment, which the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) completed earlier this year. The 2017 FWRI sheepshead assessment indicates sheepshead on both the Gulf and Atlantic coast of Florida are not overfished or undergoing overfishing. The assessment indicates the total biomass and spawning stock biomass of sheepshead has increased slightly in recent years on Florida's Gulf coast and has remained relatively stable along the Atlantic coast of Florida since 1996.

Current Fishery – Sheepshead

- Minimum size: 12" TL
- Allowable gear: seine, cast net, hook and line, spear/gig
- Must be landed in whole condition
- *Not regulated in federal waters off Florida*

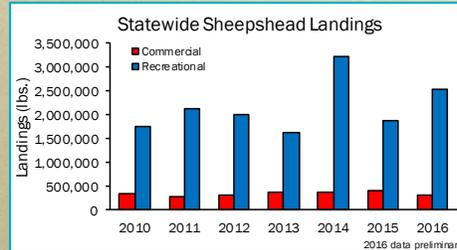


Recreational

- Bag limit: 15 per person per day

Commercial

- Requires SPL and RS
- No trip limit when using allowable gear
- Incidental bycatch limit: 50 lbs.



Recreational harvest averages ~86% of total harvest

Current sheepshead regulations for both recreational and commercial anglers in state waters include a minimum size limit of 12 inches total length; allowable harvest gear of seine nets, cast nets, hook and line, and spear/gig; and sheepshead must be landed in whole condition. There are no species-specific regulations for sheepshead in federal waters off Florida and sheepshead are open for harvest year-round in both state and federal waters.

The daily recreational bag limit in state waters is 15 sheepshead per person.

Commercial harvesters must possess a valid Saltwater Products License (SPL) with a Restricted Species endorsement (RS). Although commercial harvesters are not subject to trip or possession limits for sheepshead when harvested using allowable gear, they are limited to 50 lbs. of sheepshead as incidental bycatch when harvesting with other gear (e.g., shrimp trawls).

Statewide recreational and commercial harvest has remained relatively stable in recent years. On average, recreational harvest accounts for approximately 86% of total harvest, ranging from 82-90% each year since 2010. Despite a year of relatively high recreational landings in 2014, there is no apparent upward or downward trend in recreational or commercial landings.

Stakeholder Feedback – Sheepshead

- Mixed feedback on fishery status
- A lot of concern that people are targeting sheepshead during pre-spawn aggregations
- Strong support for a reduced bag limit
 - 5 sheepshead/person/day most common suggestion
- Some support for increasing the size limit
- Little support for different regulations during the spawning season
- Other suggestions include implementing a vessel limit and modifications to allowable harvest gears



Photo courtesy of Trey Wheeler

Recognizing that the result of the 2017 FWRI sheepshead stock assessment was favorable, some stakeholders have expressed concern that the current regulations may not be adequate to conserve this fishery long term.

To date, staff have received mixed feedback on both the status of, and stakeholders desired management changes for, the sheepshead fishery. Many stakeholders have expressed concern related to the practice of targeting sheepshead when they aggregate before spawning. They are concerned that this practice, combined with the relatively high bag limit and lack of a commercial trip limit, is unsustainable. There was also strong support for reducing the bag limit from both harvesters that expressed concern for the fishery and those that believe the fishery is doing well. Five sheepshead per person per day was the most common suggestion for a new bag limit. There was also moderate support for increasing the minimum size limit. In general, stakeholders felt it was important to make regulatory changes that apply year-round, not only during the spawning season.

Other suggestions include implementing a vessel limit and modifying allowable gear, such as prohibiting spearing and gigging.

Considerations – Sheepshead

- In some areas, harvest is concentrated on pre-spawn aggregations
- Fishery operates differently in different parts of the state
- Majority of commercial trips land <50 lbs.
 - The small proportion of trips that land >250 lbs. are responsible for a third of the commercial harvest
 - A commercial trip limit may protect against potential unchecked future growth in the fishery while minimizing impacts to the current commercial fishery
- South Atlantic Council removed sheepshead from their snapper grouper FMP in 2012
 - Not regulated in any federal waters off of Florida since that time



Photo courtesy of Catherine Longmire



There are a number of things to consider when evaluating the management of this fishery. In some areas of the state, sheepshead harvest is heavily concentrated on pre-spawn aggregations. In other areas, sheepshead are targeted on a more year-round basis.

In regard to the commercial fishery, more than 85% of the commercial trips that land sheepshead harvest 50 lbs. or less per trip. However, the small portion (2%) of commercial trips that land more than 250 lbs. account for nearly a third of the total commercial harvest. Implementing a commercial trip limit may protect against potential unchecked future growth in the fishery while minimizing the impacts to the current commercial fishery.

Prior to 2012, the South Atlantic Council managed sheepshead in federal waters off Florida's Atlantic coast. In 2012, the South Atlantic Council removed sheepshead from its snapper grouper fishery management plan (FMP). Since then, sheepshead has not had species-specific regulations in federal waters.

Proposed Draft Rules – Sheepshead



68B-59.001 Designation as a Restricted Species

- *Extend the regulations in 68B-59, FAC, to federal waters off of Florida*

68B-59.003 Size Limit; Landed in Whole Condition Requirement

- *Clarify language related to extending regulations into federal waters*

68B-59.004 Bag Limits; Bycatch Allowance

- *Reduce the recreational bag limit to 5 per person per day*
- *Create a commercial trip limit of 200 per person per day from May – February*
- *Create a commercial trip limit of 50 per person per day from March – April*
- *Create a vessel limit of 50 per vessel per day from March – April*
- *Clarify language related to extending regulations into federal waters*

68B-59.006 Allowed and Prohibited Gear and Methods of Harvest; Bycatch Exception

- *Clarify language related to extending regulations into federal waters*



In order to proactively address stakeholder concerns for the sheepshead fishery, the proposed draft rules would modify 68B-59.001, 68B-59.003, 68B-59.004, and 68B-59.006, FAC, to include language extending FWC's sheepshead regulations into adjacent federal waters.

The proposed draft rules would also modify 68B-59.004, FAC, to reduce the recreational bag limit to five sheepshead per person per day, create a commercial trip limit of 200 sheepshead per person per day outside of the peak spawn (March and April), create a commercial trip limit of 50 sheepshead per person per day during March and April, and create a vessel limit of 50 fish per day for all harvesters from March through April.

Overview – Tripletail

- **1996:** Florida was the first Gulf state to regulate tripletail
 - Stakeholders requested proactive management
 - Other states have implemented regulations in recent years
- No current stock assessment
- 50% mature at 18-19 inches TL
- Spawning behavior not well documented
- Evidence of seasonal migrations
 - Between Georgia and Atlantic coast of Florida
 - Throughout portions of the Gulf
- Increased interest in this fishery in recent years
- **2016:** Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission finalized a tripletail biological profile



Photo courtesy of Trey Holcomb and Preston Burke



In 1996, Florida was the first Gulf state to implement tripletail-specific regulations. At the time, there was very little biological information available. Thus, Florida's management approach was proactive and initiated based on stakeholder concerns for the fishery. As more data has become available, other states have also implemented regulations in recent years. Although there is significantly more information known about this species than when Florida first implemented regulations, we still know very little about tripletail biology compared to what we know about many other species. Furthermore, no current state or federal stock assessments are available.

Tripletail are a pelagic fish that are frequently found in association with floating materials, such as weedlines and buoys. Growth is rapid at early ages and tripletail have been reported to reach nearly 15 inches in their first year. Research suggests that half of the tripletail population is mature at 18-19 inches total length. Although spawning behavior is not well documented, the limited available data suggests tripletail have a three month spawning season offshore that peaks in July.

Although biological data is limited for this species, tagging studies over the past few years have provided insight into large-scale movement patterns of this fish. Along the Atlantic coast, tripletail have exhibited seasonal migrations between Georgia and Florida. In these studies, a large portion of tripletail tagged in Georgia migrated southward towards Cape Canaveral, FL, where they overwintered, returning to Georgia in the spring. Similar migrations have been observed along the Gulf coast. Tripletail spend spring and summer in the northern Gulf of Mexico before traveling to south Florida and the Keys to overwinter. Despite evidence of long seasonal migrations, the fact that individual tripletail are often caught multiple times near their original tagging locations suggests they exhibit some level of site fidelity once arriving to their summer and/or winter residence.

In recent years, interest in this fishery has increased. In 2016, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, in coordination with FWC and the other Gulf states, finalized the Biological Profile for the Tripletail Fishery in the Gulf of Mexico and Western Central Atlantic. This profile is a comprehensive summary of information on tripletail biology and the fishery from Texas to Georgia and throughout the Caribbean. This publication documented the increasing popularity of Florida's tripletail fishery and served as an impetus for staff to re-evaluate the management of this fishery.

Current Fishery – Tripletail



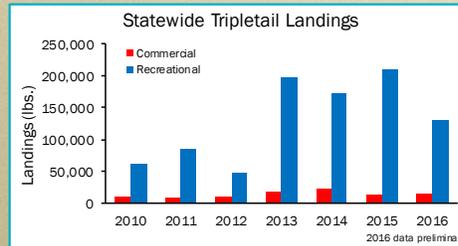
- Minimum size: 15 inches TL
- Allowable gear: hook and line
- Must be landed in whole condition
- *Not regulated in federal waters off Florida*

Recreational

- Bag limit: 2 per person per day

Commercial

- Requires SPL and RS
- Bag limit: 10 per person or per vessel with allowable gear
- Incidental bycatch limit: 2 per person or per vessel



Recreational harvest averages ~90% of total harvest

The minimum size limit for tripletail in state waters is 15 inches total length for both recreational and commercial anglers. Additionally, the only allowable harvest gear is hook and line and all tripletail must be landed in whole condition. There are no species-specific regulations for tripletail in federal waters off of Florida and the fishery is open year-round in state and federal waters.

The recreational bag limit is two tripletail per person per day.

Commercial harvesters are required to have a valid SPL with an RS. They are limited to 10 fish per person or per vessel per day, whichever is less, when fishing with hook and line. There is an incidental bycatch limit of two fish per person if harvested with any other gear while legally fishing for another species.

The increase in interest in the tripletail fishery can be seen by the sharp increase – more than twofold – in recreational harvest starting in 2013. On average, recreational harvest has accounted for almost 90% of total harvest since 2010.

Stakeholder Feedback – Tripletail

- Mixed feedback on the status of the fishery
- Some concern with increasing participation
- Some support for increasing the size limit and decreasing the bag limit
- Other suggestions include requiring the use of circle hooks and implementing a slot limit



Photo courtesy of Mike Maione

Although this fishery has become more popular in recent years, the number of anglers that target tripletail is still relatively low compared to some of the more well known inshore fisheries. Because of this, staff received less feedback for this fishery than for sheepshead. In general, stakeholder feedback on the status of the tripletail fishery is mixed but some anglers did express concerns over increased participation in this fishery in recent years. Staff also received some support for both increasing the size limit and decreasing the bag limit. Other suggestions included requiring the use of circle hooks when targeting tripletail and implementing a slot limit to protect large, breeder fish.

Considerations – Tripletail

- Size at maturity larger than current minimum size limit
 - Most females mature by 18 inches
 - 18-inch size limit would be consistent with most Gulf states
- Spearing is currently allowed in federal waters
- Reports from Georgia fishermen that they are seeing fewer tripletail in recent years
 - Tagging studies show a shared stock



Photo courtesy of Scott Wajzman



There are several things to consider when evaluating the management of the tripletail fishery. First, although the 15-inch minimum size limit was implemented in 1996 based on best available data, more recent data indicated that 15 inches is smaller than the size at maturity. It is expected that the majority of tripletail would be mature and potentially have had an opportunity to spawn if the size limit were raised to 18 or 19 inches. Additionally, an 18 inch minimum size limit would create a consistent size limit throughout most of the Gulf as well as Georgia.

Spearing tripletail in federal waters is currently allowed; whereas it is prohibited in state waters. Due to tripletail's behavior of laying relatively flat near the surface of the water in predictable locations, such as beneath buoys, they are an easy target for spearing. Extending FWC regulations into Federal waters off of Florida would provide additional consistency and further conserve this growing fishery.

In recent years, Georgia anglers have reported seeing fewer tripletail. Based on the documented migration of tripletail from the Atlantic coast of Florida to Georgia, more conservative regulations could help conserve this shared stock with the conservation benefits extending beyond Florida.

Proposed Draft Rules – Tripletail



68B-49.001 Designation as a Restricted Species

- *Extend the regulations in 68B-49, FAC, to federal waters off of Florida*

68B-49.003 Size Limit; Landed in Whole Condition Requirement

- *Increase the tripletail minimum size limit to 18 inches total length*
- *Clarify language related to extending regulations into federal waters*

68B-49.004 Bag and Vessel Limits; Bycatch Allowance

- *Reduce the commercial trip limit to 2 tripletail per person*
- *Remove the separate commercial bycatch allowance*
- *Clarify language related to extending regulations into federal waters*

68B-49.006 Allowed and Prohibited Gear and Method of Harvest; Bycatch Exception

- *Clarify language related to extending regulations into federal waters*



In order to address biological information that was unknown when Florida's tripletail regulations were originally implemented, as well as proactively address stakeholder concerns for the tripletail fishery, the proposed draft rules would modify 68B-49.001, 68B-49.003, 68B-49.004, and 68B-49.006, FAC, to include language extending FWC's tripletail regulations into adjacent federal waters. The proposed draft rules would also modify 68B-49.003, FAC, to increase the minimum size limit for tripletail to 18 inches total length. Finally, the proposed draft rules would modify 68B-49.006, FAC, to reduce the commercial trip limit to two tripletail per person per day whether targeting tripletail or taking them as bycatch in another fishery. The separate bycatch allowance of two tripletail per person per day would also be removed because it would be redundant with the trip limit for all commercial harvest. Commercial harvesters would still be able to harvest up to two tripletail per day as incidental bycatch under the general commercial trip limit.

Staff Recommendation

Approve the draft rules to further conserve Florida's sheepshead and tripletail fisheries

Sheepshead

- Reduce the recreational bag limit from 15 to 5 fish per person per day
- Create a daily commercial trip limits of 200 fish per person outside of the peak spawn and 50 fish per person during March and April
- Create a recreational and commercial vessel limit of 50 fish per vessel per day during March and April
- Extend FWC's sheepshead regulations into federal waters

Tripletail

- Increase the minimum size limit from 15 to 18 inches TL
- Reduce the commercial trip limit from 10 to 2 fish per person per day
- Remove the now-redundant commercial bycatch limit
- Extend FWC's tripletail regulations into federal waters



If approved and directed, return for a final public hearing at the September Commission meeting

Staff recommends proactively providing additional conservation measures for the state's sheepshead and tripletail resources by approving draft rules to reduce the sheepshead recreational bag limit to five fish per person per day; create a commercial trip limit of 200 sheepshead per harvester per day outside of the peak spawning season; create a recreational and commercial vessel limit of 50 sheepshead per vessel per day during March and April (peak spawning season); increase the tripletail minimum size limit to 18 inches total length; reduce the commercial trip limit to two tripletail per person per day; remove the now unnecessary bycatch-specific commercial trip limit; and extend both FWC's sheepshead and tripletail regulations into adjacent federal waters.

Staff have notified both the South Atlantic and Gulf councils of our intention to extend our regulatory authority for these species into adjacent federal waters.

If approved and directed, staff will return for a final public hearing at the September 2017 Commission meeting in Okeechobee.