

Tripletail & Sheepshead



Final Public Hearing
April 26, 2018



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 2

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

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Photos courtesy of Scott Wajcman and Eszter Keresztes.

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

Background

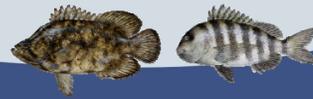
Stakeholders voiced concerns about a variety of lower profile inshore fisheries in recent years

2017: Staff gathered information on the tripletail and sheepshead fisheries

- Reviewed available data
- Worked with stakeholders to understand their concerns
- Draft rule hearing with Commission feedback

2018

- **February:** Draft rule hearing
- **Today:** Final public hearing
 - Revisit the previously discussed sheepshead bag limit change



After hearing concerns in recent years, staff began actively gathering public input in February 2017 on a variety of inshore marine fish that generally receive less attention than other high-profile fisheries, including tripletail and sheepshead. Because of stakeholder concerns, staff began reviewing available data and biological information for those species in early 2017.

At the July 2017 Commission meeting, staff presented a series of draft rules to address stakeholder concerns about the tripletail and sheepshead fisheries and received Commission feedback and direction to continue to work with fishery participants on the proposal.

At the February 2018 Commission meeting, Commissioners discussed a modified series of draft rules that incorporated available data and feedback received from the fishery and industry participants and directed staff to return in April with a final public hearing. Today, staff will be presenting the final rule proposal for Commission approval, which includes a revision to the proposed sheepshead bag limit reduction discussed in February based on additional feedback received since the February Commission meeting.

Tripletail – Proposed Final Rules

- Increase the tripletail minimum size limit to 18 inches TL
- Extend FWC's tripletail regulations into federal waters
 - Proposed 18-inch minimum size limit
 - Hook-and-line gear only
 - 2-fish recreational bag limit
 - 10-fish commercial bag and vessel limits
 - 2-fish commercial bycatch limit



Photo courtesy of Wi Ricks

Based on biological information that was unknown when Florida's tripletail regulations were originally implemented and stakeholder concerns for the fishery, the final rules would increase the minimum size limit for tripletail to 18 inches TL. The final rules would also extend FWC's current and proposed tripletail regulations into adjacent federal waters. This includes extending the proposed 18-inch size limit as well as the current allowable harvest gear (hook-and-line only), recreational bag limit (two fish per person), commercial bag and vessel limits (10 fish per person with a maximum of 10 per vessel), and commercial bycatch limit (two fish per person) into federal waters.

Tripletail – Feedback and Considerations

- Mixed feedback on the status of the fishery
- Limited feedback from the commercial sector
- Recreational anglers concerned about increased participation in the fishery
- General support for increasing the recreational size limit and decreasing the bag limit
- Lack of information makes it difficult to predict impacts of increased fishing pressure
- Size at maturity is ~18 inches, larger than current 15-inch minimum size limit
- Spearing currently allowed in federal waters
 - Easy target for spearing due to behavior
- Georgia tagging program is finding fewer tagged fish returning after overwintering off Florida



Photo courtesy of Scott Wajcman



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. In general, stakeholder feedback on the status of the tripletail fishery is mixed, and staff received limited feedback from the commercial sector. Recreational anglers did express some concern over increased participation in the fishery in recent years. Staff also received some support for both increasing the size limit and decreasing the bag limit.

There are a variety of things to consider related to the regulation of the tripletail fishery. The lack of information on tripletail, including the current stock status, makes it difficult to predict the impacts of the recent increase in participation seen in this fishery. Proactive management of this fishery may reduce the need for additional regulations in the future if interest in this fishery continues to grow. Although the 15-inch minimum size limit was originally implemented based on best available data, more recent data indicates that tripletail don't mature and spawn until they are larger than 15 inches. About 50% of tripletail are mature by 18 inches. Setting the minimum size limit at 18 inches would allow many fish the chance to spawn at least once prior to being available to harvest. Additionally, an 18-inch minimum size limit would create a consistent size limit in most of the Gulf as well as Georgia. Extending FWC regulations into federal waters off Florida would provide additional consistency and further conserve this growing fishery. Spearing tripletail in federal waters is currently allowed; however, 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.

Finally, an acoustic tagging program in Georgia has found fewer tagged tripletail returning to Georgia after overwintering off the Florida coast. More conservative regulations could help conserve this shared stock with the benefits extending beyond Florida.

Sheepshead – Proposed Final Rules



- Reduce the recreational bag limit to **10** fish per person per day
- Create a recreational vessel limit of 50 fish per vessel per trip from March – April
- Extend FWC's regulations for sheepshead into adjacent federal waters
 - Current 12-inch minimum size limit
 - Current allowable gear
 - Current 50-lb. commercial bycatch limit
 - Proposed recreational bag and seasonal vessel limit



In order to address stakeholder concerns for the sheepshead fishery and taking into account feedback received since the February draft rule hearing, the final rules would reduce the recreational bag limit to 10 sheepshead per person per day (an adjustment from the previous draft rule), and create a recreational vessel limit of 50 fish per trip during the peak spawning months of March and April.

The final rules would also extend FWC's current and proposed sheepshead regulations into adjacent federal waters. This includes the extension of the current 12-inch minimum size limit, allowable harvest gear (seines, cast net, hook and line, spear/gig), and commercial bycatch limit (50 lbs. per person) as well as the proposed 10-fish recreational bag limit and spawning season 50-fish recreational vessel limit.

Sheepshead – Feedback and Considerations

- Mixed feedback on fishery status
- Significant stakeholder concern about targeting of pre-spawn aggregations
- Strong support for a reduced recreational bag limit
 - Some disagreement on what bag limit is appropriate
-  ▪ Recent feedback that 10 fish is more desirable than original proposal of 5 fish
- Limited support from the commercial fishery for additional commercial regulations
- Shore-based anglers report rarely catching more than 5-6 fish per day
- Extending FWC regulations into federal waters is consistent with South Atlantic Council's expectation when the species was removed from federal management



Recognizing that the result of the 2017 FWRI sheepshead stock assessment was favorable, some stakeholders remain concerned that the current regulations may not be adequate to conserve the sheepshead fishery long term. To date, staff has received mixed feedback on both the status of, and stakeholders desired management changes for, this fishery. Many stakeholders have expressed concern that the practice of targeting sheepshead when they aggregate before spawning, combined with the relatively high recreational bag limit and lack of commercial bag and vessel limits, is unsustainable. There has been strong support for reducing the recreational bag limit but there is no clear agreement from stakeholders on what is an appropriate number. Since the February draft rule hearing, staff has heard additional feedback that the original five-fish bag limit proposal may be unnecessarily restrictive and that a 10-fish bag limit would be more reasonable.

To date, there has been very limited support from commercial harvesters for further restricting the commercial fishery.

Shore-based subsistence fishermen generally reported that they rarely catch more than five or six sheepshead in a single day and that an average sheepshead harvest is two or three fish. Most also reported that two to six sheepshead is sufficient for their subsistence needs.

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 with the expectation that FWC would take over management of sheepshead in federal waters off Florida.

Staff Recommendation

Approve the proposed final rules to provide additional conservation of Florida's tripletail and sheepshead fisheries

Tripletail

- Increase the minimum size limit from 15 to 18 inches TL
- Extend FWC's regulations into federal waters

Sheepshead



- Reduce the recreational bag limit from 15 to 10 fish per person per day
- Create a recreational vessel limit of 50 fish per vessel per trip during March and April
- Extend FWC's regulations into federal waters

Make the rules effective July 1, 2018; advertise change to the proposed rules via a Notice of Change



Staff recommends proactively providing additional conservation measures for Florida's tripletail and sheepshead resources by approving the proposed final rules to increase the recreational and commercial minimum size limit for tripletail to 18 inches; reduce the sheepshead recreational bag limit to 10 fish per person per day; create a recreational vessel limit of 50 sheepshead per vessel per trip during the peak spawning months of March and April; and extend FWC's current and proposed tripletail and sheepshead regulations into adjacent federal waters, including the previously described size limits, allowable gear, and recreational and commercial bag and vessel limits.

If approved, staff recommends making these rules effective July 1, 2018. Staff would advertise the change to the originally proposed sheepshead recreational bag limit rule via a Notice of Change.

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

The following slides are considered backup material
and are not anticipated to be part of the actual
presentation



Tripletail – Regulations and Landings



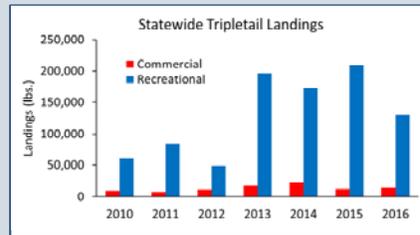
- Minimum size: 15 inches TL
- Allowable gear: hook and line only
- Season: open year-round
- *Not regulated in federal waters off Florida*

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 current minimum size limit for tripletail in state waters is 15 inches total length (TL) for both recreational and commercial harvesters. The only allowable harvest gear is hook and line and all tripletail must be landed in whole condition. Florida's tripletail fishery is open year-round and there are no species-specific regulations for tripletail in federal waters off of Florida.

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

Commercial harvesters are required to have a valid Saltwater Products License (SPL) with a Restricted Species endorsement (RS) to harvest commercial quantities or sell tripletail. They are limited to 10 fish per person or per vessel, whichever is less, when fishing with hook and line. There is an incidental bycatch limit of two fish per person or per vessel, whichever is less, 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.

Sheepshead – Regulations and Landings

- Minimum size: 12 inches TL
- Allowable gear: seine, cast net, hook and line, spear/gig
- Season: open year-round
- *Not regulated in federal waters off Florida*



Recreational

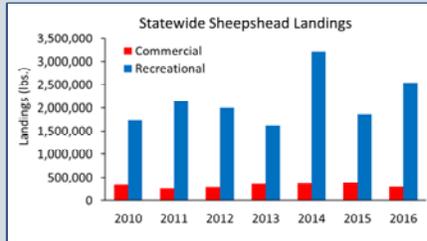
- Bag limit: 15 per person per day

Commercial

- Requires SPL and RS
- No bag or vessel 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 harvesters in state waters include a minimum size limit of 12 inches TL; allowable harvest gear of seine nets, cast nets, hook and line, and spear/gig; and sheepshead must be landed in whole condition. Sheepshead are open for harvest year-round and there are no species-specific regulations for sheepshead in federal waters off Florida.

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

Commercial harvesters must possess a valid SPL with an RS to harvest and sell sheepshead. Although commercial harvesters are not subject to bag or vessel limits for sheepshead when harvested using allowable gear, they are limited to 50 lbs. of sheepshead as incidental bycatch if harvested with other gear types while legally fishing for another species (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 either recreational or commercial landings in recent years.

Tripletail Regulations in State Waters

Jurisdiction	Size Limit	Bag/Possession Limit	Season	Commercial Regulations
Gulf/Atlantic Federal Waters	No limit	No limit	None	None
Florida	15 in. total length	2 per person	None	10 per vessel per day, (incidental bycatch 2 per vessel per day)
Alabama	18 in. total length	3 per person	None	Same as recreational
Mississippi	18 in. total length	3 per person	None	Same as recreational
Louisiana	18 in. total length	5 per person	None	100 lb. per trip
Texas	17 in. total length	3 per person, (6 possession)	None	Same as recreational
Georgia	18 in. total length	2 per person	None	Same as recreational



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Sheepshead Regulations in State Waters

Jurisdiction	Size Limit	Bag/Possession Limit	Season	Commercial Regulations
Gulf/Atlantic Federal Waters	No limit	No limit	None	None
Florida	12 in. total length	15 per person	None	12 in. total length, no trip limits for directed harvest, incidental bycatch in shrimp trawls 50 lb.
Alabama	12 in. fork length	10 per person	None	12 in. fork length, no trip limits
Mississippi	No limit	No limit	None	None
Louisiana	10 in. fork length	No limit	None	Same as recreational
Texas	15 in. total length	5 per person	None	15 in. total length, no trip limits
Georgia	10 in. fork length	15 per person	None	Same as recreational




Sheepshead Regulations in State Waters

Jurisdiction	Size Limit	Bag/Possession Limit	Season	Commercial Regulations
Gulf/Atlantic Federal Waters	No limit	No limit	None	None
Florida	12 in. total length	15 per person	None	12 in. total length, no trip limits for directed harvest, incidental bycatch in shrimp trawls 50 lb.
Alabama	12 in. fork length	10 per person	None	12 in. fork length, no trip limits
Mississippi	No limit	No limit	None	None
Louisiana	10 in. fork length	No limit	None	Same as recreational
Texas	15 in. total length	5 per person	None	15 in. total length, no trip limits
Georgia	10 in. fork length	15 per person	None	Same as recreational