MEMORANDUM

To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management

Date: February 8, 2018

Subject: Tripletail and Sheepshead – Draft Rule

Purpose:
Obtain approval of a series of draft rules regarding statewide management changes for tripletail and
sheepshead 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. In addition to reviewing available data, staff conducted a feedback campaign to
gather public input on several inshore fisheries. Feedback also was gathered through the FWC Saltwater
Comments webpage. Following a presentation on tripletail and sheepshead at the July 2017 Commission
meeting, staff continued working with stakeholders from which we had previously received little feedback in
an effort to fine tune the draft rule proposal.

Tripletail – In 1996, Florida was the first Gulf state to implement tripletail regulations. 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. This publication
documented the 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 extend FWC’s current and proposed tripletail regulations into
federal waters.

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 in
early 2017. Although the assessment indicates that neither the Florida Atlantic or Gulf sheepshead stocks are
overfished or experiencing overfishing, stakeholders have expressed concern that the current bag limit
coupled with the practice of targeting sheepshead during pre-spawn aggregations may be unsustainable.
Prior to 2012, sheepshead were managed in Atlantic federal waters off of Florida by the South Atlantic
Fishery Management Council. However, the Council removed sheepshead from their management under the
expectation that FWC would take over management in federal waters. Taking stakeholder concerns and the
increased pressure on inshore fisheries into account, staff propose implementing more conservative
recreational regulations to ensure the continued sustainability of the sheepshead fishery. Staff also proposes
extending FWC’s current and proposed sheepshead regulations into federal waters off Florida where there
are currently no sheepshead-specific regulations.
Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommend approving the following proposed draft rules:

**Tripletail (68B-49, Florida Administrative Code (FAC))**
- Increasing the recreational and commercial minimum size limit from 15 to 18 inches, based on the size at maturity
- Extending FWC’s current and proposed tripletail regulations into federal waters
  - 18-inch minimum size limit (*proposed*), hook-and-line only, two fish recreational bag limit, 10 fish commercial bag and vessel limits, and two fish commercial bycatch limit

**Sheepshead (68B-59, FAC)**
- Reducing the recreational bag limit from 15 to 5 fish per person day
- Implementing a spawning-season vessel limit of 50 sheepshead per day for recreational harvesters during the peak spawning months of March and April
- Extending FWC’s current and proposed sheepshead regulations into federal waters
  - 12-inch minimum size limit, allowable harvest gear (seines, cast net, hook and line, spear/gig), five fish recreational bag limit (*proposed*), 50 fish recreational vessel limit in March – April (*proposed*), and 50 pound commercial bycatch limit

Staff also recommends returning for a final public hearing at the April 2018 Commission meeting.

**Staff Contact and/or Presenter:**
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