

## Sheepshead & Tripletail



Draft Rule  
February 8, 2018



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

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 proposed draft 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 Eszter Keresztes and Scott Wajcman.

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*

- Feb. 2017: Staff began gathering input on several of these fisheries
- July 2017
  - Draft rules for tripletail and sheepshead
  - Commission directed staff to continue working with stakeholders and bring another draft rule to a future meeting
- Nov. 2017
  - Meetings with commercial sheepshead stakeholders
  - Outreach to shore-based subsistence fishermen
- Today: Second draft rule hearing



Recently, stakeholders have expressed concern for a variety of inshore marine fish that generally receive less attention than high-profile fisheries such as red drum and snook. Because of stakeholder concerns raised for tripletail and sheepshead, staff reviewed the available data for these species and began actively gathering public input on these fisheries in February 2017. At the July 2017 Commission meeting, staff presented the available biological and fishery information for tripletail and sheepshead as well as feedback gathered through stakeholder outreach. The presentation included draft rules for a variety of modifications to the tripletail and sheepshead rules. Based on information from fishermen who spoke during public comment at the July Commission meeting, Commissioners directed staff to continue working with the commercial sheepshead fishery to fine-tune staff's recommendation and return with a second draft rule at a later date. Additionally, staff were directed to reach out to shore-based subsistence anglers before the second draft rule hearing.

In November, staff held meetings with commercial fishermen on Florida's Atlantic coast and worked to engage shore-based subsistence anglers. Today, staff will be presenting a series of proposed draft rules for tripletail and sheepshead that incorporates the additional feedback received from the fishery and industry participants.

## 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% of fish mature at 18-19 inches total length (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 significantly more is known about this species than when Florida first implemented regulations, we still know very little about tripletail biology compared to many other species. Furthermore, no current state or federal stock assessments are available.

Tripletail are a pelagic fish 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 (TL). Although spawning behavior is not well documented, the limited available data suggests tripletail have a three-month spawning season offshore that peaks in July.

Tagging studies in recent years have provided insight into large-scale movement patterns of this fish. Along the Atlantic coast, tripletail exhibit seasonal migrations between Georgia and Florida. In these studies, a large portion of tripletail tagged in Georgia migrated southward toward 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 a Biological Profile for the Tripletail Fishery in the Gulf of Mexico and Western Central Atlantic. This profile is a comprehensive summary of available 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 that Florida has a smaller size limit than other Gulf states and Georgia. These facts served as an impetus for staff to re-evaluate management of this fishery.

## Regulations and Landings – Tripletail



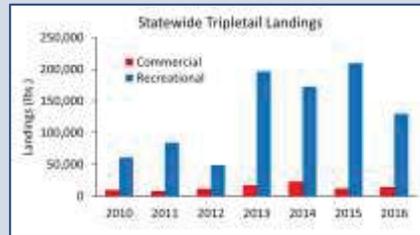
- Minimum size: 15 inches TL
- Allowable gear: hook and line only
- Season: open year-round
- *Not regulated in federal waters off Florida*

### 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 minimum size limit for tripletail in state waters is 15 inches TL for both recreational and commercial harvesters. Additionally, 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). 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
- **Update since last draft rule hearing**
  - Continued concerns from recreational anglers about increased participation in both the recreational and commercial fisheries
  - Continued support for increasing the size limit
  - Limited feedback from the commercial fishery



Photo courtesy of Jim Brown

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. This likely contributed to the fact that 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, breeding-size fish.

Since the last draft rule hearing, staff has continued to hear some concern from recreational anglers about the increase in participation in both the recreational and commercial tripletail fisheries in recent years. Stakeholders have also maintained general support for increasing the size limit for this species. There has continued to be limited feedback from the commercial fishery on tripletail, potentially due to the small size of this fishery.

## Proposed Draft Rules – Tripletail

- 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



*Staff propose maintaining FWC's current 10-fish commercial bag limit instead of reducing to 2 fish*



Photo courtesy of Will Ricks

Based on 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 increase the minimum size limit for tripletail to 18 inches TL. The proposed draft rules would also extend FWC's current and proposed tripletail regulations into adjacent federal waters. This includes the extension of 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).

Staff is no longer proposing the commercial bag limit reduction that was discussed at the July draft rule hearing.

## Considerations – Tripletail

- Lack of information about the species makes it difficult to predict impacts of increases in fishery participation
- Size at maturity is larger than current minimum size limit
  - Most females mature by 18 inches
  - 18-inch size limit would be consistent with most Gulf states and Georgia
- Spearing currently allowed in federal waters
- Acoustic tagging program out of Georgia is finding fewer tagged fish returning after overwintering off Florida
  - Stock shared by Florida and Georgia



Photo courtesy of Scott Wajzman



Lack of information on tripletail, including the current stock status, makes it difficult to predict the impacts of the increase in participation seen in this fishery in recent years on the stock. 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 implemented in 1996 was based on best available data at the time, more recent data indicates 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.

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; 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.

In recent years, an acoustic tagging program in Georgia has been finding fewer tagged tripletail return to Georgia after overwintering off of the Florida coast. More conservative regulations could help conserve this shared stock with the benefits extending beyond Florida.

## 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 nor undergoing overfishing



Photo courtesy of Matthew Daugherty

The next several slides will focus on the sheepshead fishery. 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 TL. Spawning occurs in late winter and spring in nearshore waters and estuaries. Prior to spawning, sheepshead form aggregations in inlets and on nearshore reefs.

FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) completed a sheepshead stock assessment in 2017. This 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.

## Regulations and Landings – Sheepshead

- 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*

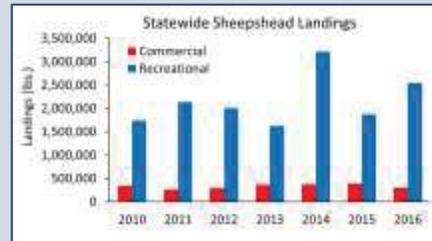


### Recreational

- 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 in both state and federal waters 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. 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.

## Stakeholder Feedback – Sheepshead

- Mixed feedback on fishery status
- Significant concern about impacts of people targeting sheepshead during pre-spawn aggregations
- Strong support for a reduced recreational bag limit
  - 5 sheepshead/person/day most common suggestion
- Some support for increasing the size limit
- Little support for only changing regulations during the spawning season
- Other suggestions include implementing a vessel limit and modifications to allowable harvest gear
- **Results of outreach since last draft rule hearing**
  - Commercial: limited support for implementing additional commercial regulations
  - Shore-based anglers: rarely catch more than 5-6 fish per day



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 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 recreational bag limit and lack of commercial bag and vessel limits, is unsustainable. There has been strong support for reducing the bag limit from harvesters that have expressed concern for the fishery, as well as those that believe the fishery is doing well. Five sheepshead per person per day has been the most widely supported bag limit recommendation. There has also been moderate support for increasing the minimum size limit. In general, stakeholders felt it was important to make regulatory changes year-round, not only during the spawning season. Other suggestions from stakeholders include implementing a vessel limit and modifying allowable gear, such as prohibiting gigging and other forms of spearing.

Since the July draft rule hearing, staff has conducted additional outreach to the fishery, specifically targeting the commercial fishery and shore-based subsistence anglers. To date, there has been very limited support for further restricting the commercial fishery from commercial harvesters. Shore-based subsistence fishermen generally reported that they very 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 fish is sufficient for their subsistence needs.

## Proposed Draft Rules – Sheepshead

- Reduce the recreational bag limit to 5 per person per day
- Create a recreational vessel limit of 50 per vessel per day from March – April
- Extend FWC’s regulations for sheepshead into adjacent federal waters
  - 12-inch minimum size limit
  - Current allowable gear
  - Proposed recreational bag and seasonal vessel limit
  - 50 lb. commercial bycatch limit



*Staff propose maintaining FWC’s current commercial regulations instead of implementing bag and vessel limits*



In order to proactively address stakeholder concerns for the sheepshead fishery, the proposed draft rules would reduce the recreational bag limit to five sheepshead per person per day and create a recreational vessel limit of 50 fish per day during the peak spawning months of March and April.

The proposed draft rules would also extend FWC’s current and proposed sheepshead regulations into adjacent federal waters. This includes the extension of the current 12-inch 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 5-fish recreational bag limit and spawning season 50-fish recreational vessel limit.

Staff is no longer proposing implementing the commercial bag and seasonal vessel limits that was discussed at the July draft rule hearing.

## Considerations – Sheepshead

- Fishery operates differently in different parts of the state
- In some areas, vessel-based harvest is concentrated on pre-spawn aggregations
- Shore-based subsistence fishermen report rarely catching more than 5 fish
- Very little support for modifications to commercial regulations
  - Commercial harvest averages ~14% of total harvest over the past 10 years
  - 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
- Previously managed in Atlantic federal waters off Florida by the South Atlantic Council
  - Council removed sheepshead from their snapper grouper FMP in 2012 with the expectation that FWC would take over management in federal waters off Florida



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 while in other areas sheepshead are targeted on a more year-round basis. Harvest targeting pre-spawn aggregations is often vessel-based. Shore-based subsistence fishermen reported they rarely catch five or more sheepshead.

Overall, there has been very little support from the commercial fishery for tightening the commercial regulations. The commercial fishery accounts for around 14% of the total sheepshead fishery statewide in the past 10 years. More than 85% of the commercial trips that land sheepshead harvest less than 50 lbs. 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.

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

## Staff Recommendation

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

### Tripletail

- Increase the minimum size limit from 15 to 18 inches TL
- Extend FWC's size limit, allowable gear, recreational bag limit, and commercial bag and vessel limits into federal waters

### Sheepshead

- Reduce the recreational bag limit from 15 to 5 fish per person per day
- Create a recreational vessel limit of 50 fish per vessel per day during March and April
- Extend FWC's size limit, allowable gear, recreational bag and seasonal vessel limit, and commercial bycatch limit into federal waters

**Maintain the current commercial bag and vessel limits for both species but still extend those regulations into federal waters**

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



Staff recommends proactively providing additional conservation measures for the state's tripletail and sheepshead resources by approving draft rules to increase the recreational and commercial minimum size limit for tripletail to 18 inches; reduce the sheepshead recreational bag limit to five fish per person per day; create a recreational vessel limit of 50 sheepshead per vessel per day 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.

Staff recommends maintaining the current commercial bag and vessel limits for both species but extending those regulations into federal waters off Florida.

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 April 2018 Commission.

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



## 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



## 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

