

# MEMORANDUM



**To:** Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

**From:** Tom Champeau, Director, Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management

**Date:** June 24, 2015

**Subject:** Black Bass Regulation Changes

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## **Purpose:**

The purpose of this item is to request Commission approval of proposed draft rules that would:

- Maintain a Daily Bag Limit for all black bass at 5 fish daily aggregate limit
- Eliminate current three management zone approach for largemouth and replace with one statewide regulation:
- Establish no minimum size limit on largemouth bass with only one (1) per day 16 inches or longer in total length
- Establish size limits on Suwannee Bass, Shoal Bass, Choctaw Bass, and Spotted Bass as 12 inch minimum size limit, only one (1) per day may be 16 inches or longer in total length.
- Remove 42 special regulation areas (which would then be managed under the statewide rules), add two new special regulations on Alabama border waters
- Add a Shoal Bass Conservation Zone: Catch-and-release section of the Chipola River

## **Summary:**

In 2011, the Commission approved the Black Bass Management Plan (BBMP) with the goal of improving black bass populations, providing new and improved angling opportunities, promote Florida's bass fisheries more effectively, and affirm Florida as the Bass Fishing Capital of the World. The BBMP required a comprehensive review of statewide and special bass regulations and this rule change proposal is an outcome of that review.

To determine if current regulations were consistent with management needs and angler preferences, management and research staff worked with stakeholders for over two years to review the effectiveness of current statewide and special regulations, assess angler attitudes and opinions, analyze biological data, and test various options by computer modeling. Staff conducted 25 public workshops, met with dozens of fishing related businesses, and collected input from over 8,000 people. Public input was comprised mostly of Florida residents; however, hundreds of non-residents from over 30 states provided comments. These proposed changes are largely supported by respondents with some opposition. Major issues from those opposed are; desire for total catch-and-release, think current regulations are adequate, and fear that new rules will interfere with bass tournaments. Staff is developing an implementation plan that includes communication/outreach programs and improvements to the on-line bass tournament self-issuing permit system to address angler concerns and improve support for the proposed regulations.

Overall regulations for harvest of black bass are being simplified. By shifting harvest from larger bass to smaller bass, populations will improve, and anglers' desires regarding both harvest and

fishing experience quality can be better met. While biological conditions of some lakes with existing catch-and-release regulations for largemouth bass were appropriate for the proposed regulations, stakeholders strongly favored making no changes. Balancing stakeholder needs with science-based decision making results in 16 areas maintaining current regulations while 42 lakes with special regulations are recommended for the new statewide regulation. Limited distribution and slower growth of four black bass species in Panhandle rivers warrants harvest protection of smaller fish, reduced harvest of quality sized bass, and the creation of a no harvest-Shoal Bass Conservation Zone in the Chipola River.

**Staff Recommendation:**

Approve the proposed rules that establish new regulations for black bass for publication, direct staff to continue to work with stakeholders, fishing tournament sponsors and outreach efforts and then return in February 2016 for final approval. If approved the regulations would become effective on July 1, 2016.

**Staff Contact and/or Presenter**

Tom Champeau, Director, Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management