Unfortunately I will not be able to attend the scoping meetings as I am in Africa on a hunting trip that was planned well in advanced but I would like for some of my work using TPWD data to get into the debate. Please pass this on to any decision maker.

TPWD needs big thanks for their level of help and cooperation.

I have two major points and the first is my view TPWD should not be involved at all in this type of decision. The second is the LLM model offers no reason for change.

TPWD’s job is correctly stated in the mission statement and that is to use the best available science to make conservation decisions. The Frequently Asked Question section posted by TPWD on the upcoming scoping is a clear admission this is not a conservation issue. Recall last time limit reductions were on the table, the issue arose out of trout population issues in the Middle Coast. TPWD accurately predicted based on record bag seine data those issues would resolve and they did.

Back then the Middle Coast presented a true conservation issue that simply does not exist anymore. The FAQs (as well as the overwhelming data I have received from Jeremy) make it clear in general the coast is doing fine and make it crystal clear we are NOT overfishing our resource. Bottom line in the FAQs the stated reason I suppose for limit reductions is found below

3.**Are spotted seatrout overfished?**

No.  TPWD gill net, bag seine and harvest data indicate they are not overfished.  Fishing pressure and landings are different for each bay, with some bays higher than others.  Spotted seatrout are the most sought after species by anglers in Texas inshore waters, **but the landings are currently at a sustainable level.**  ***A reduction in landings would increase the number of older and larger fish in the population.***

I will discuss below the LLM model and what if anything is gained but in my humble opinion TPWD is in the conservation management business and not trophy management. The fishermen who have an interest in “trophy management” for size gains are well organized and well represented. But their use of the resource is no more important than Joe Popping Cork who is just as happy taking ten fish home. License payers are your constituents and not CCA.

I think it should be telling to anyone voting on this issue that CCA has no “formal” position on the matter. Let us not kid one another, their upper tier people privately want this bad but they will not stick their neck out with their own member base but they want TPWD to stick their necks out with their license payers.

Once TPWD admits this is not about overfishing and conservation your job is done.

Now if the argument is we will see great benefits like in the LLM then at a minimum we should wait because at best the data in the LLM is inconclusive.

It looks like any size gains as seen in creel measurements are gone in the 2012 data. I asked Jeremy for the data that backed up the position the LLM has about 1 inch bigger fish and was given 2011 data that shows in the LLM they caught on a percentage basis more 16 inch than 15 inch fish. That is a single data point and yes it supports via creel methods bigger fish being caught in the LLM. But when I asked for 2012 that data point disappeared and LLM fishermen are catching the same size as anywhere else with 15 inches being the most often caught. I suspect the 2013 data is not offering any change, as it is not mentioned as a selling point for the LLM. At best this is inconclusive data.

**I can put all the charts and graphs I got but let me just do it this way. I got the data from Jeremy and if I am not representing it fairly he will correct me. I am confident that will not happen, as data is data.**

I also received data on the mean length. In 2012 the mean length for the LLM was exactly the same as its neighbor the Lower Coast. In the years of data I saw post 2007 there were 2 years, 2010 and 2011, where the LLM distinguished itself, if you want to call 6 millimeters a distinction. That means based on this data the best years show the mean was less than ¼ of an inch better for two years and the rest were the same.

I bet if you asked fishermen if are they interested in losing 5 fish in their legal catch and in return they can some years, not all, catch on average fish that are less than a ¼ inch bigger you will get a resounding NO.

I have a lot more on the LLM experience and I think if you ask Jeremy the business in the press about 4% of the fishermen prior to limit reductions caught 5 trout and now twice as many, 10% catch 5 has been debunked as an honest mistake. TPWD forgot to count the guys who caught 6,7,8,9 and 10 fish, which makes the 4% number really 8%. The real point though is 2012 LLM data is alarming.

In 2012, 7.2% of LLM guys got 5 fish (which is below the pre-limit reduction 8% above) and in the very same places TPWD now wants to consider lowering limits fishermen caught 5 or more fish 14.7%, more than double the LLM percentage. Guides in 2012 in the LLM 8.3% caught 5 fish or more and elsewhere guides 38% of the time (>4x) caught 5 or more. I have read in the FAQs that apparently 2013 looks bad as well. This new data is very troubling and as prudent managers no decisions using the LLM as a model should take place until the issues have clear explanations. At a minimum this says tap the brakes on thinking the LLM model is a success.

The FAQs basically admit despite limit reductions you are still seeing swings in gill net data in the LLM. For the first 3 years after limit reductions the spring gill net numbers went DOWN. With flounder you saw a noticeable jump after a year or so to allow fish to grow to gill net size.

The trend line for the LLM gill data is slightly up but so is the rest of the coast for the same period. The spring of 2013 data showed that unlike other coasts the LLM diverged and went up nicely BUT now the FAQs point out the fall 2013 gill nets are some of the worse seen. At best gill net data is inconsistent with the most recent fall data looking bad. The FAQs fairly say:

*Since implementation of these regulations in the LLM, gill net surveys show that relative abundance has remained relatively stable though considerable year-to-year fluctuations occur.*

Is this not also true for the entire Texas coast including those places where limits are ten? The data I have says absolutely. The fact that swings still occur is another reason why we should tap the brakes. Weren’t limits of 5 expected to smooth those swings out?

On bag seine data Robin admits it has not really performed as expected (see his remarks on Nov. 6th 2013 the Commissioners). If you look at 2012 numbers they are exactly the same as they were in 2007. I need not spend much time on bag seine, as I believe it is agreed these numbers are not a positive for the LLM model.

I have seen the claim that change is needed because 70% of the fishermen catch 2 or less fish. I thought well the “model” LLM must be doing better but it isn’t.

Here is the summary of my points.

1. The last time we looked at this was for true conservation reasons related to the health of the middle coast and those problems happily are now resolved
2. Trout are doing well in the areas you seek change and overfishing is not a problem so this is not about conservation like it was last time
3. The stated reasons this time are for a chance at catching bigger trout based on the LLM model, which is trophy management and not conservation.
4. 2012 and 2013 offer some bad statistics for the LLM like 15 inch is the most often caught size in the LLM just like elsewhere. Those numbers show no real percentage of bigger fish caught in the LLM than elsewhere. Also in 2012 the percentage of fishermen, both private and guides, having an easier time catching five fish is terrible when compared to the places that have limits of ten. The same may be true for 2013 as landings are again down badly.
5. Mean length data shows in 2012 the LLM is exactly the same as its neighbor the Lower coast. The best years for the LLM show 2 years of a 6-millimeter (les than ¼ inch) gain.
6. Gill nets data is not smoothed out and still go up and down like the rest of the coast. The fall of 2013 is terrible and that is after landings were down as well so nothing to explain why. At best gill nets are about the same as they are in places where limits are ten and do not distinguish themself.
7. Bag seine studies show no real benefit from reduced limits at any point in the 6 years. 2012 is the same level as 2007.

In light of the above how can anyone who has an objective view lower limits? If it is done it will be purely to make some influential group happy. Robin correctly points out that people (guides in particular) are not having problems catching more and bigger fish. The reason why a few are able to catch more and bigger fish is they put time and effort in their craft. TPWD cannot take from those who put time and effort on the water and expect it to make it easier for the weekend warriors.