

## Daily bag limit change for speckled trout in the air

By David Sikes

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COASTAL BEND — Few coastal anglers doubted this was coming.

And even fewer doubt this would become one of Texas Parks & Wildlife's most contentious coastal fisheries battles.

You can soon expect to hear heightened discussions that essentially call for a statewide reduction of the speckled trout daily bag from 10 fish to five.

I hesitate to call this a department proposal, because technically it's not. Pressure from anglers who would like to see a five-fish trout limit has prompted TPW officials to broaden the conversation and take it on the road. But make no mistake. This could lead to a rule change.

During its public outreach the department also may entertain the possibility of lesser bag-limit reductions for trout or a do-nothing option. But I'm confident that five is the number you'll hear loudly and most often. The "Just Keep Five" mantra has dominated a reasonable portion of the angling conversation for at least a decade.

This is both a conservation argument and an economic one. Proponents of Just Keep Five would like to erase the widely held notion that the shallow inshore waters of the Texas coast is a seafood market.

The trout limit was reduced to five fish below the Landcut in 2007, at the end of an eight-year decline in the population of mid-size specks. The decline was exclusive to trout. State biologist had to reasonably conclude the problem stemmed from over-harvesting because no other fish species from Port Mansfield south was suffering.

TPW gillnet surveys indicate a similar decline has occurred since 2000 in the waters of Aransas, San Antonio and West Matagorda bays, said Robin Riechers, TPW's director of Coastal Fisheries. It's important to note that fishing pressure is increasing everywhere on the Texas coast.

Riechers tells me that effective management tools to address this problem are limited. Raising the minimum harvest length doesn't seem to produce the desired effect on its own, he said. And season closures, such as they have in Florida during the snook spawn, would be a tough sell to coastal anglers here. Though this measure could be

part of the discussion, it is unlikely to become a proposal.

Since the 2007 five-trout rule went into effect in extreme South Texas, Riechers said department surveys indicate a slight improvement in the trout population there.

Anecdotal reports from anglers indicate the improvement has been better than marginal.

Riechers said at first only 5 percent of anglers there reported catching five trout.

Today, 10 percent claim the same. Other factors may have contributed to this.

For one, the Mansfield Channel's restricted flow from the gulf was boosted by dredging last year. And in 2003, the state imposed a trophy trout rule that restricts anglers to a single trout 25 inches or better as part of their daily bag. At the same time, the state began prohibiting guides from keeping their personal allotment of fish during charter trips.

Riechers said the trout population rise down south might have been even better if not for an apparent change in angling habits. It seems anglers are taking home larger fish than they were before. Riechers suggested this could be the result of culling and a desire to return home with a heavier bag of fillets.

"We haven't seen as great a benefit as we expected," Riechers said about the department's management strategy down south.

But it's really too soon to judge.

So why impose the five-trout rule statewide to correct a problem seen at several isolated trouble spots?

The simple answer would be to avoid confusion. Down south, it was easy. The rule affects all inshore waters south of the Landcut. Mexico is the southern boundary of the regulation.

Trying to mark or enforce boundary lines elsewhere along the coast would be very close to a regulatory impossibility.

The department will schedule a series of scoping meetings in January to outline the problem and to entertain a range of management solutions. But you can provide input immediately. At these meetings TPW biologists likely will reveal projected outcomes that each prospective rule change might provide based on computer modeling. Comments from the public meetings will be combined with department data to form a proposal or report revealed to TPW commissioners during a meeting in Austin on Jan. 26-27.

There is a real possibility that no change will be proposed.

But if a regulatory change is proposed, the rule would be posted on the Texas Register, subject to public comment, and likely come to a formal vote in Austin during the March 31 commission meeting. If the commission votes in favor of a change the

rule would go into effect Sept. 1, 2011.

Direct your comments on changing the trout regulations to Art Morris at (361) 825-3356 or [art.morris@tpwd.state.tx.us](mailto:art.morris@tpwd.state.tx.us).

### **Harvest Numbers from a five-fish trout limit**

Texas Parks & Wildlife officials have projected the reductions in our speckled trout harvest expected as a result of changing the daily trout limit from 10 fish to five.

Sabine Bay would see a 13 percent harvest reduction during non-guided trips and a 36 percent reduction from guided trips.

Galveston Bay would see a 11 percent harvest reduction during non-guided trips and a 31 percent reduction from guided trips.

Matagorda Bay would see a 14 percent harvest reduction during non-guided trips and a 18 percent reduction from guided trips.

San Antonio Bay would see a 14 percent harvest reduction during non-guided trips and a 13 percent reduction from guided trips.

Aransas Bay would see a 9 percent harvest reduction during non-guided trips and a 13 percent reduction from guided trips.

Corpus Christi Bay would see a 3 percent harvest reduction during non-guided trips and a 27 percent reduction from guided trips.

Upper Laguna Madre would see a 14 percent harvest reduction during non-guided trips and a 30 percent reduction from guided trips.

Coastwide the effect would be 12 percent reduction during non-guided trips and a 22 percent reduction from guided trips.

*Source: Mark Fisher, TPW Coastal Fisheries Science Director*

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