

Sikes: Is it time to lower the trout limit?

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CORPUS CHRISTI — Proposal might be too strong a term to describe this latest suggestion to expand the five-trout rule northward and possibly to extend the no-gigging rule for flounder beyond November.

But you can trust that cutting by half the 10-fish speckled trout limit coastwide indeed will be a major talking point during a series of upcoming public scoping meetings hosted by Texas Parks & Wildlife. Meeting dates and times have not yet been set. But they start in December. The Corpus Christi meeting will be in January.

If you'd like to weigh in early, direct your comments to Art Morris at swfishcomments@tpwd.texas.gov.

Everybody knew this was coming. And by my estimation, a growing number of coastal anglers will welcome the opportunity for change.

TPW officials won't label this a proposal until it's formally submitted as such. For now, we'll call it a discussion item before the public.

A five-trout rule has for some time enjoyed a healthy fan base in parts of Texas. So has the status quo. But during the past decade, two major circumstances may have caused the pro-change movement to gain momentum.

The first, of course, occurred in 2007 when the department imposed a five-fish limit on the Lower Laguna Madre, basically from Port Mansfield southward to Mexico.

The change was rooted in science. Gillnet surveys showed a decline in mid-size trout that could only be caused by angler harvest. They saw no decline in the recruitment of newborn trout, which eliminated other possible causes such as water quality.

Recent gillnet surveys indicate the rule change accomplished its goal by reversing the downward population trend. But with more fish came greater harvest.

When the change took effect, only about 4 percent of anglers reported catching five trout during a day of fishing. Today, that percentage has more than doubled to 10 percent. And on average, they're catching bigger trout.

So we lowered the limit, but increased the harvest. The rule change today is viewed by many anglers as a major success.

In 2007, gillnet surveys along other parts of the coast did not suggest a statewide five-trout rule was warranted. But by 2011, trout numbers on average were in decline statewide. Particularly troubling were extended declines in Aransas, San Antonio, Corpus Christi and East Matagorda bays.

This was the second circumstance that prompted many additional anglers to join the five-trout club.

Meanwhile, the Upper Laguna Madre by comparison enjoyed an eight-year run of increased trout numbers.

In 2011, folks at TPW's Coastal Fisheries division asked anglers how they wanted fisheries management to proceed into the future. And as expected, the five-trout limit occupied much of the conversation.

The response was impressive by historical standards. More than 1,200 people submitted opinions that were evenly split. A little more than half of the 49 percent who favored some kind of change indeed wanted a five-trout limit.

But change did not come.

Since then, trout in Matagorda Bay have rebounded to a near record level. San Antonio Bay is enjoying a similar increase. Aransas Bay trout, which by 2010 had fallen to 40 percent of the long term average, also has been trending upward again.

The peaks and valleys of Corpus Christi Bay's trout population have not been as dramatic. But it, too, is on the rise. Gillnet catch rates for Upper Laguna Madre trout had a record year in 2011 and despite brown tide and water quality concerns the population remains healthy, similar to what we saw during the previous several years.

Biologists say lowering the limit to five fish would result in an estimated 20 percent boost in spawning-age trout and a 50 percent increase in the number of bigger trout (25 inches or better). This is according to TPW computer models, which you either believe or don't.

Those 10 percent of anglers who catch 90 percent of the fish might be surprised to learn that, on average, non-guided anglers catch 2.1 trout per trip. Guided anglers average 4.5 trout per trip.

So, if the Lower Laguna Madre model holds true, then I expect those catch numbers would improve wherever the five-trout rule is adopted.

I suspect the flounder proposal will not be nearly as controversial. Trout are the most popular saltwater fish in Texas, while many anglers along much of the coast rarely target flatfish.

But overwhelmingly, anglers favored tightening the flounder rules in 2009 after the population bottomed out in 2007. We changed the recreational daily bag on flounder from 10 to five and reduced the nightly commercial take from 60 to 30.

The rule further prohibits recreational and commercial gigging during the peak migration in November. Rod-and-reel anglers still are allowed to keep two flounder per day during November when spawning females are most vulnerable.

After the new rules took effect, the flounder harvest fell sharply, but each subsequent year we've caught increasingly more flatfish. Not only has the flounder population nearly doubled, but as a result more anglers are targeting them.

State fisheries managers believe there is room for improvement. Part of this thinking is based on a proactive strategy to brace against future fishing pressure.

Texas already has about 800,000 saltwater anglers. And the population could nearly double within the next 20 years.

At least some of them will think of our bays as their seafood market.

