

Falling trout numbers will force changes

By Shannon Tompkins | November 16, 2013 | Updated: November 16, 2013 7:47pm

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Texas' flounder fishery has begun rebounding under conservative fishing rules imposed in 2009, and fisheries managers are looking at ways to maintain and improve that fragile recovery.

A couple of interesting, arguably counter-intuitive phenomena occurred along Texas' coast over the past few years that could signal changes ahead for the state's coastal anglers.

Regulations governing harvest of speckled trout and flounder, two of the state's most sought-after and economically important inshore sport fish, were considerably tightened. In 2007, the daily bag limit of speckled trout was halved in the Lower Laguna Madre. Two years later, rules slashing flounder limits and imposing other restrictions on taking of the flatfish took effect statewide.

But instead of the more conservative rules resulting in anglers taking fewer of these fish, they've led to more anglers taking more fish. And the targeted fish, whose populations had been struggling, have seen their numbers stabilize or increase - which is exactly what fisheries managers hoped when they recommended the changes.

In the wake of this, state fisheries managers, at the urging of the [Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission](#), plan to look at potentially expanding the conservative

speckled trout rules to cover more of the coast and further tightening flounder rules.

And they'll want to hear what Texas' 800,000-plus-and-growing community of saltwater anglers thinks of the ideas.

Fishery support

At a public meeting in Austin earlier this month, the nine-member [TPW Commission](#), which sets policy for the [Texas Parks and Wildlife Department](#), instructed the agency's coastal fisheries staff to look at the potential effects of expanding the five-fish daily bag limit for speckled trout currently in effect in the Lower Laguna Madre to other areas of the coast. Also, at the commission's urging, the staff will look at the potential effects of further tightening flounder regulations, including increasing the length of the current November-long prohibition on giggering flounder.

Those potential rule changes and their predicted effects will be aired in a series of yet-to-be-scheduled public "scoping" meetings where interested anglers can offer feedback.

Considerable evidence exists that Texas' flounder fishery and flounder fishers have benefited from rules changes that took effect in 2009.

Between 1980s and 2008, the relative abundance of adult and juvenile flounder in Texas bays, as gauged by coastal fisheries staffs' standardized gill net and bag seine sampling programs, declined by half. The number of flounder landed by anglers fell, too, despite fishing pressure increasing 50 percent over that period.

Fisheries managers identified low recruitment of young flounder into the fishery as a major problem, and that was exacerbated by the heavy toll anglers were taking on female flounder each autumn as adult fish migrated from bays to the Gulf, where they spawn during winter. That fall migration, which concentrates flounder, makes them particularly vulnerable to anglers. About 60 percent of the annual flounder catch was taken between Oct. 1 and Dec. 31, with most of those caught during November.

Reducing limits

To reduce harvest of adult flounder, the state cut the daily recreational bag limit from 10 flounder to five during all months except November. In November, when the fall flounder "run" peaks, the daily limit for recreational and commercial fishers was cut to two fish, and giggering flounder was prohibited.

The new restrictions reduced flounder landings that year. But recreational landings of flounder have risen each year since, a function, fishery managers believe, of more adult flounder making it through the angling gauntlet to spawn combined with a series of winters in which water temperatures were cool enough to provide optimum conditions for fertilized eggs and larvae to survive, greatly boosting flounder recruitment.

Flounder relative abundance in Texas waters has increased 80-100 percent since the regulation changes took effect, [Robin Riechers](#), director of the TPWD's coastal

fisheries division, reported to the commission at a Nov. 6 briefing. Recreational landings of flounder have dramatically increased, too, doubling in some of the past three years.

This comes with more anglers targeting flounder. Eight percent of the more than 10,000 Texas saltwater anglers whom TPWD staff interviewed during creel surveys over the past year indicated flounder were the primary target of that day's fishing trip. In prior years, only 1-3 percent of anglers indicated flounder were their primary target.

Current regulations may not be enough to maintain the momentum of the nascent flounder recovery while buffering the fishery against vagaries of environmental changes, inevitable poor recruitment years and increasing fishing pressure from a growing human population. And state fishery managers will be looking at ideas such as extending the current November flounder rules - no gigging, two-fish limit - to cover parts of October and/or December.

They also will be looking at the potential effects of extending the five-fish bag limit currently in effect in the Lower Laguna Madre to other parts of the Texas coast.

In spring of 2005, for the first time since TPWD began standardized gill net sampling of all bays in 1975, the relative abundance of speckled trout in the Lower Laguna Madre, long considered a premier trout fishery, fell below the coast-wide average. The bay system's speckled trout fishery showed classic signs of overfishing; trout were pulling off good spawns, but increasingly fewer of those fish were living long enough to grow much past the 15-inch minimum length limit imposed on recreational anglers.

To increase the number of trout surviving to spawning age and older, TPWD placed the Lower Laguna Madre under a five-trout daily bag limit, half the statewide 10-trout daily limit. **The move, the agency predicted, would annually reduce Lower Laguna anglers' total landings of specks by about 13 percent while boosting the "spawning biomass" by 15 percent.**

The move was controversial, but the quality of the fishery quickly and dramatically improved. **Prior to the five-trout limit, only 4 percent of the anglers on the Lower Laguna Madre landed five specks in a day of fishing. Two years after the reduced limit took effect, 10 percent of Lower Laguna Madre anglers checked in TPWD creel surveys had landed five trout - more than twice as many as before the rule change. And the fish were, on average, larger.**

Could such a move help improve the speckled trout fishery in hard-fished bay systems such as those along the middle Texas coast, where fishing pressure is intense and the trout population has held its own mainly because it has enjoyed some recent outstanding spawns?

"The question is, can you do something to ensure you keep more fish out there, longer, and distribute them among more people?" Riechers said.

Reducing the 10-trout bag limit could be a way to do that without having a dramatic impact on anglers; **currently, about 70 percent of anglers targeting trout catch two or fewer fish per day.**

'Scoping' meetings

At the commission's request, coastal fisheries staff will draw up a list of possible rules changes, including a five-trout bag limit, and their predicted effects to air at "scoping" meetings in late December or early January. Look for the drafts to focus on the middle and lower coast, West Matagorda Bay through the Upper Laguna Madre.

Drafting potential changes to flounder and speckled trout regulations for discussion at a scoping meeting shouldn't be seen as a sign the agency is going to recommend any of those changes, Riechers said.

"It's not unusual for us to look at and discuss things in the scoping process but decide not to move forward with them," he said.

If agency staff opts to propose any changes in regulations governing speckled trout or flounder fishing, they would be officially proposed at the TPW Commission's public meeting in January.