

Tompkins: TPWD seeks input on regulation changes

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The TPWD is considering altering speckled trout regulations and wants the input of Texas anglers

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Photo By Shannon Tompkins/Chronicle

Texas coastal fisheries managers have seen speckled trout numbers in West Matagorda, San Antonio and Aransas bays sharply decline over the past several years.

Over the next month, Texas coastal fisheries managers will ask the state's 800,000 or so saltwater anglers a seemingly simple question about the hugely popular speckled trout fishery.

"It comes down to, 'How do you want us to manage your fishery?'" said **Art Morris**, outreach specialist for the **Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's** coastal fisheries division, of the agency's plans to solicit input on potential changes in rules governing the harvest of speckled trout.

Do anglers want the state to continue with the status quo which, history predicts, will result in trout populations and fishing success seeing erratic ups and downs with no guarantee those downward trends won't dominate?

Or do anglers want to see more conservative harvest regulations that, if the impacts of such rules in the Lower Laguna Madre are indicative, should produce a more stable population and lead to the average angler's possibly catching more and larger trout?

TPWD officials say the answer they get will play a role in deciding whether the agency proposes the first major statewide change in speckled trout harvest regulations in more than two decades.

Overall, Texas' speckled trout fishery is doing well considering the challenges it faces from high fishing pressure, ever-increased angler efficiency, shrinking estuarine habitat and a run of environmental conditions (drought, mostly) that have negatively impacted populations in some bay systems.

Some problem areas

Statewide, trout abundance, as gauged by spring gill net surveys conducted by coastal fisheries staff, has held fairly steady over the past decade. In some recent years, gill net surveys produced the highest catch rates of trout in some bay systems since the standardized surveys began in the 1970s. And even though it has declined a bit over the past couple of years, the gill net catch rate of trout coastwide is still higher than it was for much of the 1980s.

Coastwide, the number of trout landed by Texas' recreational anglers, determined through creel surveys conducted by coastal fisheries staff, has also held fairly steady over the past decade.

But some recent hiccups in those generally positive numbers have triggered a push for the TPWD to consider more conservative regulations as a way to maintain healthy trout populations.

"Over the past few years, we have seen a decline in landings and abundance of trout in some bay systems on the central coast," said Robin Riechers, director of the TPWD's coastal fisheries division. "That's generated interest in possible conservation measures."

Three bay systems — West Matagorda, San Antonio and Aransas — have been the most "problematic," Riechers told the **Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission's** regulations committee during a briefing this past month. After enjoying peaks in trout abundance and landings earlier this decade, the three bays have each seen steady decline.

The problem appears to be a combination of consecutive years of poor spawning success and recruitment of young trout into the fishery at the same time heavy fishing pressure was knocking a hole in the adult population. And trout seemed particularly vulnerable; other species such as redfish and black drum were doing great in the same bays where trout were stumbling.

This is much the same situation that faced the Lower Laguna Madre earlier this decade. While populations and landings of redfish and other species were stable or improving, the trout population had been in a long, steady decline in both size and abundance. And while Lower Laguna trout were having decent spawns, the young fish were disappearing (into ice chests, it seemed) as soon as they hit the 15-inch minimum length requirement.

Bag limit likely would change

In 2007, the TPWD addressed the situation by doing something it had never done: impose a regional trout regulation.

While the rest of the state remained under the 10-trout daily bag limit that had been in effect since 1984, anglers fishing in the Lower Laguna were restricted to taking no more than five.

Three years into the five-trout limit, the Lower Laguna's trout population hasn't greatly improved in number – but it's not getting worse. And interestingly, fishing success has improved.

"It certainly seems to have helped the quality of that fishery," Riechers said.

Prior to the five-trout limit, only 4 percent of anglers on the Lower Laguna landed five specks in a day, Riechers told the TPW Commission. Two years after the reduced limit took effect, 10 percent of Lower Laguna anglers checked by TPWD creel surveys had landed five trout – more than twice as many as before the rule change.

And the trout they boxed were larger, on average, than those kept before the five-trout limit. In other Texas bays, and in the Lower Laguna before the five-trout limit rule, the average trout kept by anglers was just over the 15-inch minimum. Today, the average trout kept in the Lower Laguna is 16 inches.

With concerns that the slump in trout populations needs to be addressed, the TPWD's coastal fisheries division plans to ask the public what changes, if any, in speckled trout regulations should be proposed.

The effective options for reducing speckled trout harvest are limited, Riechers said.

Increasing the current 15-inch minimum length requirement, put into place in 1989 and designed to allow female trout at least one spawning season before being eligible for harvest, would not be very effective at reducing harvest.

"We'll look at minimum size limits, but you get the bigger bang for your buck with reductions in the bag limit," Riechers said.

No rush to judgment

TPWD data indicates if Texas went to a statewide five-fish daily bag limit for speckled trout, it would result in a 14 percent reduction in the number of specks kept by anglers. Anglers fishing with guides would see their annual take of trout drop by 22 percent, while non-guided anglers would take home 12 percent fewer trout.

(Anglers fishing with guides account for only about 20 percent of the fishing pressure on Texas bays but take about one-third of the speckled trout landed.)

That reduction in harvest should help currently healthy speckled trout populations stay that way and improve those suffering declines.

But that's not to say Texas speckled trout are in dire straits.

"There are no huge alarm bells going off," Morris said.

"We don't have to propose any changes in the regulations if we're willing to live with the constant ups and downs we're seeing," Riechers said. "But we want to let fishermen know the situation and hear what they think."

To that end, the agency plans seven public "scoping" meetings during January to lay out the situation and expected impact of possible regulation changes and to let anglers offer suggestions.

Dates, locations and times of those meetings are being finalized, with plans for meetings at six locations along the coast and one in San Antonio.

If the TPWD decides to propose changes to speckled trout regulations, they will be officially offered at the Jan. 26-27 TPW Commission meeting in Austin and subject to another public comment period before possibly coming before the commission for a final decision at the board's March 31 meeting.

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