

Tompkins: TPWD doesn't change rules on speckled trout

Tompkins: Hold line on regulations

Panel decides no rules changes on speckled trout

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The biggest surprise among the handful of proposed changes in fishing and hunting regulations **Texas Parks and Wildlife Department** staff announced this past week was what *wasn't* included.

Three months and seven often-contentious public meetings after announcing the agency would solicit Texas coastal anglers' input on potential changes in rules governing harvest of speckled trout, TPWD's coastal fisheries managers backed away from proposing changes to bag or length limits for the state's most popular inshore game fish.

"Staff would recommend removing spotted seatrout from consideration for rules proposals, at this time," Robin Riechers, coastal fisheries division director, told the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission's regulations committee in a Wednesday meeting.

Citing concerns voiced by some anglers about declining trout catches from mid-coast bays over the past few years – concerns substantiated by TPWD sampling of the fisheries and anglers' catches - TPWD coastal fisheries managers last November announced they would seek public input on potential changes in trout management strategies, focusing on manipulating bag or size limits. The public discussion was encouraged by the **Coastal Resources Advisory Committee**, a group of citizens appointed by the **TPW Commission** chairman to serve as a sounding board on coastal fisheries matters.

Part of the effort involved a series of seven public "scoping" meetings, held along the coast from Port Arthur to Corpus Christi, where coastal fisheries staff explained the agency's data on trout populations and angler catches, the estimated impacts of various changes in bag or length regulations and solicited anglers' opinions.

Data from standardized gill net surveys indicated the state's speckled trout population was fairly stable, coast-wide, as were fishing pressure, catch rates and "angler satisfaction" as gauged by creel surveys.

Eye-opening data

In Aransas, San Antonio and Matagorda bay systems, where trout populations and catch rates had declined for several years this past decade, TPWD gill net sampling showed a recent strong upswing in the number of "sub-legal" (less than 15-inch) trout. Also, this year's bag seine sampling indicated recent spawning success; Aransas and San Antonio bays, Riechers said, showed record numbers of trout fry.

Texas' trout population is stable, as are fishing pressure and angler landings of trout.

Texas' trout population is not facing imminent danger from overharvest, but changes in fishing regulations - cutting the bag limit from 10 per day to five or seven trout, or increasing the minimum length requirement from 15 to 16 inches - could, managers said, be a cushion helping **prevent steep swings** in trout populations such as those seen recently along the middle coast. It would be proactive management instead of reactive.

Public feedback on the issue, which included 1,243 comments from the scoping meetings and e-mails, was split between those wanting to maintain the regulations and those preferring changes in the regulations - 49 percent supported some change in the trout regulations; 51 percent favored the status quo.

Reducing the daily bag limit to five trout was the most often-mentioned rules change. And anglers along the middle and lower coast were more likely than those along the upper coast to support more conservative regulations.

Many anglers voiced their belief that the scoping process was a sham, and that the agency had decided, unilaterally, to impose a five-trout bag limit.

They were wrong.

In the end, with the overall trout fishery showing no steep decline, evidence of good numbers of young trout poised to boost the population of the problematic mid-coast bays and no clear mandate from anglers to proactively manage the fishery, agency staff decided not to propose changing the trout regulations this year.

Options on the table

But the door remains open for managers to recommend changes down the road.

"Obviously, this fishery is very important to the state of Texas and very important to Parks and Wildlife ... so we want to continue to monitor it very, very closely," Riechers said. "We want to see if those gains that we expect to see moving through the system - those increases in sub-legal fish - show up in our legal fish catches and our gill nets and harvest estimates as we move forward. So we're going to be watching this very closely."

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