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Where are we? Item Number 3, 2011-2012 Fishing Proclamation Preview. Robin Riechers.

MR. RIECHERS: Chairman and Commissioners, my name is Robin Riechers, Coastal Fisheries Division and I'm here today to present to you -- it should be coming up on the screen here -- our one scoping item proposal regarding spotted sea trout and the way I'm going to do this today is to basically present it coastwide first and then I'm going to focus in on the midcoast area, where we have 3 bay systems that are more problematic. You've probably been hearing some about over the course of the last couple of years and then I'm going to actually present to you some of the results from the Lower Laguna Madre, where we passed a five-fish bag limit a couple of years back and that's going to help us in understanding what some of our options will be.

With that, just to catch you up -- now let me catch up -- I'm sorry -- to catch you up, our last major rule change regarding bag limits was when we went to ten fish in 1984 and then in 1990 we went from 14 inches to 15 inches and, most recently, as we just talked about, we had the 2007 Lower Laguna change and then, in 2002, of course, we eliminated the captain and crew, where captain and crew can't keep a bag limit onboard the boat if they're guiding and created the one fish over 25 inches.

Just to look at total fishing licenses sold, in the red line there, and it's on your left-hand side there or right-hand side -- I'm sorry -- and fishing efforts on your right-hand axis. Basically, the take home message here is that our fishing effort rose through the 1980s and basically capped off in about 2000 and we've been relatively stable, with a slight down trend since then.

This actually breaks it into what we call private recreational fishing effort, as well as our party or guide boat effort and you can see, obviously, mirrors that overall trend I just showed you but you can see that we did have quite a bit of significant increase in guide pressure throughout the 1990s and it has remained relatively stable since then, starting in about 2000 and you can see a slight drop-off in the last few years.

COMMISSIONER DUGGINS: What do you -- skip -- go to the first line, what do you mean by total effort?

MR. RIECHERS: That's total effort. That comes from our overall fishing intercept surveys that we do, where we basically get the man-hours that people have spent out there and we estimate that up for total pressure along the coast. Total fishing pressure and man-hours is what that will be.

COMMISSIONER DUGGINS: Okay.

MR. RIECHERS: Then, when you go to landings, obviously, the landings actually mirror fairly well the overall fishing effort. What you can see is that those guided anglers have a higher success rate there than do those private recreational boat anglers so, you know, they certainly -- while they make up about one-fifth of the overall effort, or less than one-fifth, they almost make up a third of the overall catch there.

Look at our overall gill nets. What we typically focus on is our spring gill nets because that's, as the fishery comes onboard in the spring, that's before we have that heavy fishing pressure in the spring and the summer and you can just see from that graphic, it's been fairly stable -- kind of peaked in around 2000 and has -- and you can certainly see that downward trend, just a little bit, in those most recent last years.

As I indicated, we're going to kind of focus now on west Matagorda Bay, San Antonio Bay and Aransas Bay. Those are the ones that have been most problematic in the overall abundance and we're going to just take a snapshot of each one of those. You'll see some similar trends here amongst those bay systems.

Look at west Matagorda Bay system. The gill nets again, focusing on the green line, the spring gill nets. Again, mirrors the overall kind of picture you saw. Of note there through, at the end, is that pretty big increase going into 2010, so we're getting some fish into the fishery now that basically, you know, will start showing up for people.

To kind of highlight this a little bit even more, we broke this into legal and sub-legal fish. Sub-legal fish are the red bars. Legal fish are the yellow bars and, if you look from 2008 to 2010, you can start to see that spike-up of those sub-legal fish, which really hadn't gotten to the fishery yet but, you know, we're going to see those fish coming along pretty quickly.

If you kind of pick any one of those bars -- we'll pick the one there in

2003, the red bar, you can see when you get a spike on that bar, about two years later you'll get a spike in the legal fish, as well. A little bit of lag time there.

Of importance to us is our bag seines, as well. That gives us fish that aren't caught in our gill nets. These are two- to five-inch fish, typically. You can see that from a west Matagorda Bay perspective, highly variable, when it comes to this recruitment -- young of the year recruitment and you can see that we have been on a little downward trend since about 2002.

We're going to now switch to San Antonio. I will go through these fairly quickly because they've, you know, you've seen them now for west Matagorda, you kind of know what we're talking about but, again, peak in early 2000, about a 20 percent decline as you move down to that .8 catch per unit -- catch per hour, with our gill nets there. Note that the scale is different on this one as compared to the past one because we have that real high peak there in the mid-90s.

Again, focusing really on the last three years, again, you can see as the sub-legal fish are starting to come into the system again, we've got some fish coming on in San Antonio Bay which people will start catching very soon, as well.

COMMISSIONER HOLT: When you say "coming on," you talking about we're stocking or coming naturally or --

MR. RIECHERS: No, this is just they're coming naturally.

COMMISSIONER HOLT: Okay.

MR. RIECHERS: We've had some recruitment years, which our bag seines show us and we're starting to see those in our gill nets and we're going to look at our bag seines here in just a second again, as well.

There's our bag seines, in fact. You can see that they started going up in that '05, '06 kind of range, really '06. That's what you're seeing in the graph I just showed you and I will tell you that in June and August of this year, we had record highs. We expect it to be -- it may not be the best on record, it may not meet that point in '92 but it's going to be a pretty high bag seine number as well here.

And there you can see why people were, in fact, given us phone calls a

couple of summers ago. Myself -- I got more phone calls two summers ago than this summer. I think that speaks to some of those fish coming into the system and starting to be available to catch but you can certainly see where people did see their landings drop off and so that was some of the concern.

Next, we'll go to Aransas Bay and you can see the same kind of trend. The peak in those early 2000s and now somewhat of a downward trend. That trend there is about 50 percent of what it was or 30 percent of what it was at one point in time. It just depends on which point you try to select.

Again, not as pronounced here but you do see the rise in the three years -- '08, '09 and '10, in the red bars there at the end.

And this one, if we didn't catch another spotted sea trout for the rest of this month, is already a record high and, as you can see there, it's following two other record highs so we got a lot of fish coming into that sub-legal category as well, as seeing more fish in that sub-legal category.

And there, again, as noted before, you can see why people were somewhat concerned regarding their landings. I'm going to briefly go down to Lower Laguna Madre and remind everyone, of course, that we implemented a bag limit change there that went to five fish that we started in September of 2007. And the reason I'm doing this is obviously twofold, one, to show you the results of your efforts there in managing that part of the fishery but we've also had some interesting behavioral shifts that may be part of the dialogue as we move forward.

When we look at fishing efforts, you can see that fishing effort basically was stable in the Lower Laguna Madre, through time. You can see little uptick in most recent years. You can see the long-term downward trend that basically had us look at that. All the way to about 2006 there, we were on a long-term downward trend and that's, of course, why we took the action we took to go to five fish in that part of the world.

Most importantly, right here you can see that the guide community took great advantage of that first year in regards to that rule, had great success and you can see that the private boat anglers with the red line are starting to have some of that similar success, doing very well, as far as catches.

This is what is quite interesting. When you take the two years before, in the yellow, and the two years after the rule change, in the red, obviously in the yellow, you had fish out all the way to ten fish because the bag limit

was ten. When you start moving those fish back into the distribution of the five, you can see that the success rate of the angler actually reaching five fish has gone up. We're redistributed that catch. That catch that used to be out there from five to ten fish is now re-distributed and a lot more individuals are catching their bag limit at -- you can see there -- at 10 percent or so.

This is also quite interesting in that the yellow bars represent the two years before and that is what you'd typically see with a minimum length limit. It's at its highest point or highest frequency at the point where that length limit is established and then it goes downhill from there.

What you can see with the red bars there is the two years after, and what that basically is telling us, we would expect that red bar at 15 inches to be as high or higher than at the 16-inch mark but what that basically is telling us is that individuals -- private and party boats or guide boats -- are targeting 16-inch fish. They're targeting larger fish. It either means they're discarding those fish when they first catch them, waiting on larger fish or it means that we have some high grading going on. They actually discard those fish some time during their trip when they catch a larger fish.

So what that tells us about any considerations of bag limit changes is that we may not see -- we have some behavioral changes and we may not get the anticipated results because of those kinds of shifts. So basically we're going to increase our release mortality with that kind of targeting behavior.

So what -- in summary, that basically -- our conclusion is that we've got some real strong year classes emerging in the midcoast areas. We're already picking those up in our gill nets and in the legal fishery. We're seeing some strong year classes in our bag seines that are following those, as well.

When viewing this information, our Coastal Resource Advisory Committee recommended that we go to scoping with this. They believe that we should go have a discussion about some conservation measures regarding spotted sea trout. We certainly will concur with that if you concur and go out for that scoping. You know, I will say, when we say conservation measures here, it probably either means a discussion about minimum size limits or bag limits. From a biological standpoint, we believe we're about there on the minimum size limit. It's probably going to be more of a discussion about a bag limit reduction.

That concludes my presentation. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

COMMISSIONER FRIEDKIN: Are there any questions?

COMMISSIONER DUGGINS: Are you looking for recommendations or support for your recommendation that we vote?

MR. RIECHERS: Yes.

COMMISSIONER HOLT: That's a good idea.

COMMISSIONER FRIEDKIN: Sure.

COMMISSIONER HOLT: It's been two years? How long has it been? When did we put these in place?

MR. RIECHERS: The Lower Laguna Madre we put in place in 2007 and, of course, it -- we haven't had any significant discussion regarding coastwide measures since 2002.

COMMISSIONER HOLT: So scoping would be done for Lower Laguna Madre or are you talking about --

MR. RIECHERS: No, we're talking about scoping coast-wide, specifically these middle coast areas where we've had a lot of feedback and belief that a lot of folks believe there's a real change in angler ethic and the desire to have greater conservation. Certainly, our Coastal Resource Advisory Committee expressed that, as well.

COMMISSIONER HOLT: Change in angler ethic.

MR. RIECHERS: Meaning --

COMMISSIONER HOLT: Help me.

MR. RIECHERS: -- more of our coastal anglers are practicing catch and release and have a desire to possibly see that bag limit go down.

COMMISSIONER HOLT: Even you've got -- in busier areas. Okay.

COMMISSIONER FRIEDKIN: Thanks, Robin.

MR. RIECHERS: Thank you.