

Questions on Proposed Changes to Spotted Seatrout Management



When do spotted seatrout start to reproduce?

Most spotted seatrout, male and female, begin to spawn at age 1, usually the following summer after they hatch. Age-1 females average between 8 and 11 inches. Males are typically smaller, averaging between 6 and 9 inches.

The fishing in my area is still great. Why do we need to do something now?

The increasing harvest of age-1 and -2 fish is something we're seeing state-wide. We have not seen a major decline in *recruitment*, so experienced anglers are still able to catch trout. But we are seeing changes in the population *structure* of trout that, as biologists, causes us to be concerned over the ability of the population to maintain itself.

The population is fine. I always catch my limit.

Angler Trip Harvest Frequency (Mississippi border to the Mermentau River)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 31% of angler trips harvested 1 fish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% of angler trips harvested 2 fish.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9% of angler trips harvested 3 fish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85% of angler trips harvest 10 fish or less.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 97% of angler trips harvest less than the 25 fish limit. 	

(The Texas border to the Mermentau River is not included because they have an SST bag limit of 15 instead of 25.)

Calcasieu Lake already has a reduced creel limit with a slot, we don't need new regulations.

Catch rates are not much different between Calcasieu Lake and the remainder of the state:

Angler Trip Harvest Frequency (Mermentau River to Texas border only)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 41% of angler trips harvested 1 fish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18% of angler trips harvested 2 fish.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11% of angler trips harvested 3 fish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 94% of angler trips harvest 10 fish or less.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 97% of angler trips harvest less than 15 fish 	

The existing creel and size limits for Calcasieu Lake are still more liberal than what is estimated to be needed for the population to recover state-wide. When the current harvest limits were initially proposed for SW LA, the Department estimated that the changes would make fairly small changes in the overall catch rate. That analysis is consistent with what we observe under current conditions.

Why does the assessment only focus on the females and not the entire population?

To simplify the population modeling. The number of eggs produced by females is often the limiting factor for population size and growth, so modelling that portion of the population shows where it stands with regard to reproductive potential. Seatrout also exhibit sexually dimorphic growth where females grow much faster than males. This leads to a fishery that primarily lands female fish. Rather than complicate the assessment by modeling males and females separately, only the female proportion of the stock is modeled (all of the reproductive information, much of the yield information).

Why is LDWF just now proposing changes if there has been overfishing for 6 of the last 10 years?

The last assessment of spotted seatrout used data through 2013, prior to the period of overfishing and overfished. The current assessment uses data through 2018. The Department had been wanting to complete several assessments, but was waiting on NOAA to approve a method to use both LA Creel and MRIP data. Once that method was approved, spotted seatrout was the first assessment done.

The assessment cannot be accurate since LDWF doesn't sample catches from private docks.

We assume that folks that use private docks land fish at a rate similar to folks that use public ramps (same catch rates). The fishing *effort* from private docks is accounted for in the effort estimates of the creel survey. Every dockside creel survey faces this challenge and the alternative, a roving clerk creel survey - where anglers are interviewed on the water - has other issues (unable to measure and count all of the fish at the end of the trip, interviews while fishing are much more burdensome for anglers, etc.)

The assessment cannot be accurate since LDWF doesn't collect fishery-independent samples from private waters.

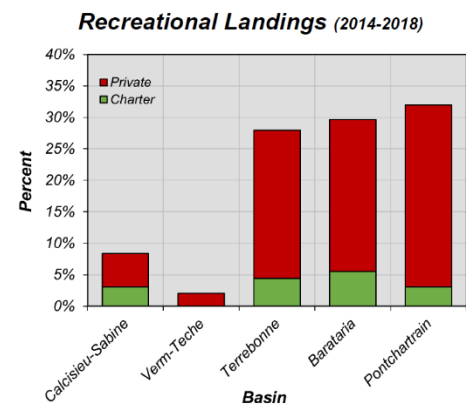
We have a broad range of stations across the state that includes a number of habitat types. Trout in private waters are likely to be in other parts of the estuary at other times of the year – they are migratory. Also, those trout are part of the assessment as fish from those waters that are caught and brought back to public launches can be sampled as part of the fishery-dependent monitoring programs (LA Creel and biological monitoring).

I'm not interested in a trophy spotted seatrout fishery. Why does it matter that there are very few big age 3 and older fish in Louisiana?

The maximum age of spotted seatrout is 10 years of age. Currently the spawning stock is made up of primarily age-1 and age-2 fish. If the spawning stock continues to decrease in age it will primarily consist of age-1 fish only. If that happens, the stock is at risk of collapse due to a single recruitment failure. Those larger fish do add to the spawning population, and our biological goal is to increase the size of the spawning population, which requires increasing survival of age 1 and 2 fish. Having larger, older trout in the water is a *result* of that goal, not the goal itself.

How much of the harvest comes from charter boats and private boats? If charter captains didn't keep a limit, would that help?

- Charter landings account for only 16% of statewide landings. Private recreational landings account for the other 84% of the statewide overall recreational landings.
- If charter captains were *not* allowed to keep a limit, it would make at most a few percent difference in the total harvest. Not nearly enough to allow recovery of the stock.



What is the yearly commercial harvest of spotted seatrout?

After the entangling net ban in 1995-1997, commercial landings declined significantly. Commercial fishermen harvest less than 1% of their one million pound annual quota, an even smaller fraction of the overall harvest. The commercial fishery is limited to rod and reel gear only.

Won't increasing the size limit increase the number of throw backs that die?

Increasing the size limit will increase the number of fish that have to be released. The fraction of those that die should be similar to the current rate of discard mortality, unless angler behavior changes. The additional mortality is taken into account as part of the management analysis.

How do you know fishing effort is increasing?

From estimates of fishing effort through time derived from fishing surveys (MRFSS, MRIP, and LA Creel). Additionally, we have also seen increases in saltwater fishing license sales, which also indicates a trend in more people participating in the sport.

Why 2025?

Recovery time was based on the species generation time (average age of spawning females in a population) in addition to socioeconomic factors. The stock could be recovered in a shorter time frame but would be more painful to the public (e.g. could be recovered in a single year by closing the fishery for the entire year).

For more information or to leave public comment about potential regulation changes visit:

<http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/page/spotted-seatrout>