

Flagler County
Sportfishing Club
P.O. Box 353383 Palm Coast, Florida 32135-3383

November 7, 2011

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
2590 Executive Center Circle East
Berkley Building
Tallahassee, FL 32301

Attn: Kathy Barco, FWC Chairman

Dear Commissioner Barco:

On behalf of the over 400 members of the Flagler County Sportfishing Club (FCSFC), I offer the following comments regarding the current FWC proposal to modify commercial and recreational fishing regulations for spotted sea trout in Florida.

First, I would like to provide some background on our perspective. The majority of our members fish for trout in the Northeast Region of the state, primarily the Intercoastal Waterway and the many tributaries leading into it within Flagler County and our neighboring counties. Each year our club holds many fishing tournaments for our club members and two large fund raising tournaments for local charities that fish for trout and other species. Many of our members have fished this area for many many years. There was a time when this area was home to some very large sea trout. Since that time, extensive habitat loss and water quality degradation has negatively impacted sea trout abundance in our area. Commercial gill netting further depleted the fish that remained and during the years that followed trout were rarely caught.

Since the enactment of the constitutional amendment banning the use of entanglement nets, the adoption of tighter recreational fishing regulations and the creation of numerous environmental enhancement projects in our area we have begun to see trout slowly return to our area. We view trout like 'the canary in the coal mine' when it comes to the health of our estuary. Seeing their return is a very positive sign. Many of our members who catch trout release them with the hopes that species will become more abundant.

The Northeast Region is not blessed with large quantities or species of inshore fish. Our offshore fishermen have to travel many miles offshore to get into deep enough water for a decent fishing experience. A big consideration in this area is the fuel cost of traveling offshore to catch these larger fish. Therefore, most of our members fish the inshore waters and rely trout as one of the species they would like to catch. This is an attractive quality for the Northeast Regions inshore fishing experience and a valuable asset for numerous fishing guides who need to provide action for their clients.

The FCSFC does not support any expansion of the commercial fishery for sea trout in the Northeast Region of the state, nor do we support lifting the November and December closure for recreational anglers. While we acknowledge that FWC stock assessments indicate that trout are exceeding the management goal (35% SPR) in the Northeast Region, the FCSFC believes that the fishery is far from fully recovered in our part of the state. While FCSFC members have witnessed improvements in their trout catches in recent years, we believe that relaxing existing commercial and recreational regulations for trout at this time is premature.

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The current economic climate is also likely to keep more anglers inshore, rather than making costly fishing trips offshore. The FCSFC believes maintaining the status quo in the northeast portion of the state is not only reasonable, but also appropriate at this time, especially when you factor in the impact our water quality issues have on trout. Most of our members are content with the current regulations. Because the commercial fishery for trout in the northeast region is negligible, we don't believe further commercial expansion is prudent at this time either.

The FCSFC does not support any changes to the allowable gear for sea trout throughout Florida, commercial or recreational. We understand the logistics and practicality of allowing two properly permitted commercial anglers to fish from the same vessel for trout, and we do not have any issue with that proposed change in the commercial regulations. We do question the need to allow the commercial sale of trout during closed seasons. Trout do not freeze well and we see potential abuses if commercial anglers are allowed to sell trout out of season. We see no need to change the commercial sale regulation.

Coastal counties like ours have invested millions of dollars in estuarine habitat enhancement. Those efforts are beginning to show promise. Consequently, we are beginning to see the return of spotted sea trout. Other communities like Jacksonville, St Augustine and Daytona Beach have also invested heavily in habitat enhancement. We hope the FWC will not diminish this investment in the trout's recovery in the northeast portion of the state.

The FCSFC's 21-year perspective regarding spotted sea trout should not be taken lightly. We urge the commission to not make significant changes to the current commercial and recreational harvest or fishing season regulations for spotted sea trout in the Northeast Region.

Thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,

Charles Gleichmann
President

Cc: Chuck Collins, FWC Regional Director, South Region
Chris Wynn, FWC Regional Director, Southwest Region
Rob Robbins, Deputy Director PBC Environmental Resources Mgt.