

<http://m.chron.com/sports/outdoors/article/Falling-trout-numbers-will-force-changes-4988351.php#src=fb>

Use the link above to access a *Houston Chronicle* article written by Shannon Tompkins which references a move by TPW to solicit public input related to the speckled trout and flounder fisheries. No offense to the flat fish, but my focus is on the trout.

According to the article, authorities in TPW will once again attempt to determine the level of public support for doing something to improve the catch rate of speckled trout statewide. As of now, anglers targeting the species catch about two fish per day of effort on average. In the Lower Laguna Madre, where a 5-fish limit was introduced and enforced in 2007, catch rates and the average size of fish landed have improved.

During December, TPW will host a series of meetings to allow public input on the issue (as well as the ongoing attempt to properly manage the flounder population) and then a committee will consider the input and make a recommendation regarding the need (if any) for new regulations to control the harvest of speckled trout statewide. In the past, the state agency has also solicited input on the issue in the form of email responses. I'm hoping they do so again. In order to check this, try going onto their website and searching for a link which will allow for making comments.

This is all good news to me. In the past, when the state put this issue out there for public discussion, it felt as though they were doing it in response to complaints from a vocal minority who (like me) perceived a need for tighter limits. Now, it seems they are initiating the discussion because they recognize a problem on their own. In essence, this time they seem to be acting proactively rather than as a reaction.

A little history might be helpful here. The current limit on speckled trout (with the exception of the LLM) of 10 was put implemented by TPW in 1984, after the worst freeze-kill of coastal fish during the second half of the twentieth century occurred in December of 1983. The number 10 was a "cut in half" of the previous limit of 20, which was originally implemented after CCA "forced" or "strongly encouraged" TPW to declare trout and redfish as gamefish a couple years earlier. The whole movement was a response to what happened when Paul Prudhomme's recipe for blackening redfish threatened to wipe out the species. Spotter planes began leading seine-net boats to spawning schools in the Gulf to satisfy people's ravenous appetites.

In other words, the number 10 was not derived scientifically; it was chosen as a response to a terrible natural event. Human populations tend to settle on some numbers more than others when making decisions like these: 3, 5 and 10 come up regularly.

Since 1984, fishing pressure has increased dramatically in Texas estuaries. The raw number of anglers purchasing saltwater stamps has risen by a large factor. I'm not referencing the specific number here, but it can be accessed easily enough, since TPW keeps records on it. More importantly, the raw number doesn't represent the actual increase in "effective" fishing pressure, because it fails to account for all the improvements in methods, equipment and technology which have come into use since 1984.

Anglers today have bigger, faster boats. They have GPS technology and Google Earth

images to study. Consequently, they travel farther from the dock more often, and visit specific sweet spots in the estuaries more frequently. When they fish, they employ “better” rods and reels, lines and lures, and use tools like the Power Pole to control their boats more effectively.

Most importantly, many of them target spotted seatrout by using live croaker as bait. Virtually no one used the method back in the mid-80s. The method is indisputably superior to any other.

So, by any measurable standard, the effective fishing pressure on speckled in the Lone Star State's estuaries has increased significantly since the implementation of the 10-fish limit nearly 30 years ago. Therefore, I'd say the following assertion rings unarguably true: if 10 was the “right” number back then, it cannot be now.

Those who argue against reducing the limit on trout today like to say “the science doesn't support it”. Well, the “science” didn't implement the limit in the first place. But all the data we have today **does** support the idea that the fishery is in decline. If we don't do something now, the average size of the fish will continue to decrease, and the average number of fish landed per day of effort by anglers will too.

I offer this blog as a way of encouraging all who read it to support the lowering of the limit on speckled trout statewide by emailing TPW and telling them you favor such a change. Better yet, go to one of the meetings and voice your opinion. Let's do everything we can to urge TPW to do the **right thing** this time!