

FWC drafts plan to review black bass regulations



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If there really is a bass fishing capital of the world, is it really Florida?

What if it's California, where 20-pounders are the descendants of Florida largemouth ancestors?

Does it really matter? No, although fish size makes an interesting talking point for introduction of a formal black bass management plan now aborning in Florida:

"Catch rates and overall angler satisfaction remain high compared to other states. However, only two of the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society's heaviest 25 black bass were caught in Florida."

That's from the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which has issued a draft plan soliciting public input on a large range of bass-specific fishery management issues that could become part of a 30-year plan. The present timetable forecasts enactment next February.

Other than jacking up Florida's standing as a place to catch big bass, FWC's objectives include preserving genetic distinctions between the peninsula's Florida largemouth and the panhandle's other bass species — spotted, shoal, Suwanee and northern largemouth.

It also contemplates establishing some sort of trophy-specific fishery. It seeks to bring together scattered elements of existing bass regulations, stocking programs, aquatic plant control, public access to waters and other stuff the state does directly and indirectly about all its black bass.

Theoretically everything then would be done more efficiently, possibly at the risk of over-management, but with some undeniably attractive ideas if those survive the process.

This makes the project worth the time of freshwater fishing-doers, at least to the extent of telling FWC what we like and dislike about the plan's ideas and objectives. At best, some of us may have great ideas that state staff haven't even thought of.

Unless public workshops are scheduled — a smart way to proceed, but still in FWC's "maybe" file — the best avail-

able way to consider the draft plan's ideas is to review the package online and then fill in the survey at www.myfwc.com/fishing.

If you can get to one or more of those meetings, pitching your ideas to whoever represents the FWC is the best way to assure that what you say will stick to someone.

Right now, though, the best way is to read the draft plan and other documents that accompany it online — and then open up the attached survey questionnaire and fill it in thoughtfully.

Its approach is to list a variety of concerns and ask you how important each one is to you — important, very important or critically important? Somewhat important or not important at all?

Let me list the ways

Yes, of course I've already done the survey. My policy toward FWC and all government agencies is generous:

If you want me to tell you how to do your job, just ask. Or just wait.

Let's see what I'm saying about as many of the issues as I can fit in here.

Lack of funds for FWC programs: critically important. I hope FWC doesn't spend so much money developing a management plan that it won't have enough to carry it out.

Too many tournaments: critically important if even one tournament blocks my access to waters I want to fish, otherwise not important.

Fish On

Too much chemical control of aquatic plants: critically important. Even if the chemical sprays don't kill fish, they kill habitat. I also hate those dredging machines that uproot everything growing on the bottom. We need less destructive ways to prevent vegetation from choking off water flow and clogging launch sites. This requires cooperation from water management districts.

Poor ethics among anglers (waste, illegal activities, habitat damage): Critically important. Can we stop ignorantly blaming our favorite foreigners and enforce laws and regulations more aggressively and punitively, no matter who violates them?

Development and population growth: Very important, but Florida has a lousy record of controlling those. It's not all bad, though. I hated seeing I-75 and the new suburbs going up along it in the southeastern boondocks, but they made some wonderful fishing accessible — just not accessible enough.

Too many non-native nuisance fish: Important, I guess, but you have to define what a nuisance is and I might disagree. I thought there were too many Mayan cichlids and Oscars until the January cold snaps killed huge numbers. A lot of people make a meal of Mayans. I still dream of catching a big clown knifefish and hope enough of them survived the cold.

SEE BASS P. 10

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