**Finfish Task Force Meeting**

**Wednesday, August 14, 2019, 10:00am**

**LDWF Headquarters**

**2000 Quail Dr., Baton Rouge, LA 70898**

**I.** Ben Graham called the meeting to order

**II.** Roll call

**Voting Members Present:**

John Walther

Daryl Simon

Jay Trotter

George Huye

Ben Graham

Adam Guillory

Stuart Billeaud

Houston Hoover

Steve Rockwieler

James Pelas

**Voting Members Absent:**

Wayne Rollo

Acy Cooper, III

Daniel Edgar

Senator Allain

Representative Stefanski

**Non-Voting Members Present:**

Jason Adriance

Chad Hebert in for Edward Skena

Jack Isaacs

**Non-Voting Members Absent:**

Justin Gremillion

**III.** Steve Rockwieler motioned to accept the July 20, 2018 meeting minutes, 2nd by Daryl Simon. Motion carries.

**IV.** Houston Hoover motioned to accept the August 14, 2019 meeting agenda as presented, 2nd by George Huye. Motion carries.

**V.** New Business-

1. James Pelas motioned to open nominations for Finfish Task Force chairman, 2nd by Stuart Billeaud. Motion carries.

The task force nominated Senator Allain as the Chairman of the Finfish Task Force

Steve Rockwieler motioned to close nominations for chairman, 2nd by Stuart Billeaud. Motion carries.

George Huye motioned to open the nominations for Finfish Task Force Vice-Chairman, 2nd by Houston Hoover. Motion carries.

Ben Graham was nominated for vice-chairman

Daryl Simon motioned to close the nominations for vice-chairman, 2nd by Steve Rockwieler. Motion carries.

1. Jack Isaacs led discussion on the economic impacts on the commercial finfish community from the recent change to the commercial greater amberjack trip limit at Gulf Council

Jack Isaacs stated that he can look into landing’s data from trips 24 hours or less and show volume of amount of trips that fell into each category

1. Jason Adriance led discussion on the status of the fisheries disaster declaration

**GENERAL**

* The Mississippi River flood of 2018-19 is now the longest duration flood since duration records became available in 1900, surpassing the flood of 1927 in duration (1927 flood was 152 days at or above flood stage at Red River Landing, while current flood is 200+ days and counting).
* Bonnet Carré Spillway opened for an unprecedented two times in 2019:  
  o Opened2/27andclosed4/11(44days)206baysopened,213,000cfsatmax,140,091avgcfs o Opened5/10andclosed7/27(79days)168baysopened,161,000cfsatmax,122,104avgcfs
* All Bonnet Carré Spillway flood bays were closed on July 27, 2019, marking 123 total days of operation.

**FINFISH**

* + Few invasive species have been collected. One Rio Grande Cichlid was collected from the western end of Lake Pontchartrain in July and an Asian carp was reportedly caught in Drum Bay (eastern St. Bernard Parish) in June.
  + Female spotted seatrout typically seek high salinity waters in order to spawn and will be displaced by lower salinity waters.
  + Vermilion/Atchafalaya basin spotted seatrout collections have increased somewhat in June and are near average after being below average from March through May.
  + Pontchartrain Basin spotted seatrout collections began to decrease in May and are well below average into June.
  + Black drum commercial landings in the Vermilion/Atchafalaya basin are down 62% in March-May, and 53% year-to-date.
  + In the Calcasieu basin, commercial black drum landings are down 41% in March-May, and 32% year- to-date.
  + Statewide declines of 35% have not yet been observed (35% is threshold for federal fisheries disaster declaration) in the commercial landings of black drum and sheepshead so far this year overall.

The most up-to-date information on the fisheries disaster declaration can be found at

[www.wlf.la.gov/floodinfo](http://www.wlf.la.gov/floodinfo)

Still too early to provide any definitive answers, still compiling information that will eventually go to NOAA as a part of the disaster declaration.

Chrystel Olander with Big D’s Seafood read a letter to the board:

“Dear Finfish Task Force Board, things that need to be addressed by the finfish board ASAP- Freshwater disaster funding for all impacted saltwater finfish species that been constantly impacted by freshwater disbursements by the Corps of Engineers, not just the Bonnet Carre Spillway. To address the need for disaster funding to be put into place so future funding for fishermen and all businesses impacted (docks, processors, restaurants, and recreational entities and the like that directly support the Louisiana tourism industry.) The freshwater intrusion is not just a Bonnet Carre Spillway problem, it’s a 365-day-a-year problem, for some people, not just in the Vermillion Bay area. Something needs to be done to fix these issues, it is the task force’s job to tackle the issue at all fronts. A letter needs to be drafted from the Finfish Task Force and drafted in such a way that it can provide to fix more than just the Bonnet Carre Spillway opening disaster. This letter needs to be sent to the Secretary of Wildlife and Fisheries, Mr. Jack Montoucet, and all of his constituents, including Mr. Patrick Banks and staff and representatives of the Wildlife and Fisheries Commission. The letter needs to also be sent to the Senate Natural Resources Committee, the governor, Lt. governor, and the Secretary of Commerce.”

Harry Blanchet stated that LDWF is working under a set of rules put forth by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). We (LDWF) are doing our best to work with the southeast regional office of NMFS so that we are all on the same page and not going to get an application for disaster rejected because of some errors in our presentation. We are trying our best to address as best as we can, under the NMFS rules, the issues. We understand that there are going to be very specific cases where people are impacted a lot more than we are going to be able to show. We have to show losses over a 12 month period, the issue is we have some impacts that date back further than 12 months. We have been seeing declines in our public oyster grounds, east of the Mississippi River, since 2009- there was a flood in 2008 along with hurricanes. Those grounds are severely impacted and have been for over ten years now. According to the NMFS, we can’t apply for disaster assistance of greater than a year, that’s a problem that LDWF is trying to work through. NMFS views charter boats as a part of the recreational fishery, so this cannot be included as part of the application. We can, if we get a declaration of emergency, use those funds for projects that will help charter fishermen and recreational fishermen.

Kindra Arnesen stated that fishermen are migrant workers to some level, whether it’s east to west or west to east. Is LDWF looking into this when taking this into account when looking at commercial licenses and what docks fishermen are landing at? Say someone in the east is heavily impacted on the east side of the MS River and they come and sell on the west side of the river. There may be more fishery effort where there is a mass migration of fishermen. Asked that LDWF take this into account when calculating losses.

Douglas Olander stated that Calumet Cut needs rocks to control water, if the disaster funding wouldn’t go to fishermen requested that is go towards projects like this

1. The task force discussed mullet season

Kindra Arnesen stated that she would like to see the season open both nights and weekends, the other recommendation was to just open on weekends. The only issue was with enforcement policing night fishermen. The reason the weekends are so important to mullet fishermen is because a lot of times a front will come through right before or during the weekend, a lot of fish are lost during or right ahead of these fronts.

James Pelas stated that in 2016 he fished 18 days the whole season, in 2017 only 13 days of the whole season, and in 2018 only 12 days. Requesting nights and weekends back due to fronts coming through and cause fishermen to lose 3-4 days.

Kindra Arnesen stated that the enforcement issue might be remedied by instead of having multiple enforcement agents on the water while fishing to rather have enforcement agents come to the dock. One other option would be to call in when going out, like the Pompano fishery

The season is legislatively established so in order to change the season it would require through the legislature. The season is currently the 3rd Monday in October to the 3rd Monday in January. The number of permits for mullet fishery is somewhere in the high 80s to low 90s

Acy Cooper, Jr. stated that he plans to have legislation drawn up for the next legislative session and would like a letter of support from the finfish task force

Chrystel Olander stated that changes are needed for the opening of night and weekend mullet fishing. The finfish task force should take action to increase the marketability of mullet fishery

Eddie Lejune requested that if any changes are made to the mullet fishery that his area be treated fairly (Cameron Parish)

Kindra Arnesen requested that the finfish task force make a recommendation to the WLF Commission to assist in moving the agenda forward to open the mullet season on nights and/or weekends

George Huye asked if the industry could have one or the other nights OR weekends, what would it be?

Kindra Arnesen stated that she would rather weekends due to the front systems

Sterling Constance stated that he would rather nights because fish don’t see the nets at night and you have a better chance of catching more fish

Douglas and Chrystel Olander stated they would prefer nights

Kindra Arnesen stated that nights and weekends were pulled from the mullet fishery due to pressure from different groups to get rid of gill nets. Gill nets can be used in one of two ways, it can used as a set net or it can be used as a strike net. Kindra stated that using a gill net with the strike net method is the most responsible way to use a gill net.

Chrystel Arnesen stated that the introduction of night fishing would take care of a lot of the recreational vs commercial fishermen in this industry

Acy Cooper, Jr. stated that the industry wants set nets not strike nets

George Huye said that the complaints he has heard from recreational fishermen on the pompano fishery is not a conflict issue but rather that pompano season is in conflict with the spawning season. Is it possible to move the dates of the pompano season?

Jason Adriance stated that pompano is also a legislatively established season, so it would also take the legislature to make this change

Jason Adriance stated that he could provide the task force with more information on the benefits of moving the season

Kindra Arnesen stated that the board would need to know if WLF has done a stock assessment on the pompano fishery before any changes are made, if a stock assessment has not been completed maybe look into trip ticket history. Also if the season used to open in April, look historically at what landings were before it started opening August 1st and do some comparisons on overall pounds landed

Requested that LDWF provide feedback on the pompano fishery regarding migratory patterns, spawning seasons, etc.

Chrystel Olander read a letter to the board, “Changes to the laws on speckled trout fishery need to be addressed immediately. We need this board to put laws in place to provide the capability to use the proper and productive gear as with the strike net, to bring speckled trout to prospective markets. Currently the gear allowed for this fishery is useless to date.

The task force asked enforcement to provide some feedback on the enforcement issue with extending the mullet fishery to nights and weekends

Chad Hebert stated that the current law states that fishing at night is not allowed, so that’s the reason why this is enforced. Stated that issue in opening up the fishery at night is that people do bad stuff in the cover of darkness and there is also a big public safety issue

Adam Guillory made a motion to postpone consideration and discussion of opening the mullet season on nights and/or weekends until Senator Allain, task force chairman, is present, 2nd by Daryl Simon. Motion carries.

The task force requested official opinion from enforcement on their concerns and issues with opening the mullet season on nights and/or weekends

George Huye requested that the task force meet a minimum of four times a year and once a quarter

Adam Guillory requested that Kindra Arnesen document recommendations referring to enforcement of mullet fishery on nights and weekends and asked that she present that formally to Finfish Task Force

Kindra stated that she plans to meet with enforcement one-on-one to come up with viable ideas and solutions regarding to the enforcement of mullet fishery on nights and weekends

1. The task force discussed finfish labeling

George Huye stated that this past legislative session a bill was passed to require restaurants to label foreign, domestic shrimp and crawfish. Added that he would be in favor of doing the same thing for finfish and adding finfish to the bill in the future

Chrystel Olander stated that the seafood labeling bill needs to include finfish but in a different context than the shrimp and crawfish bill that has been passed. It needs to be able to be listed as its species of finfish