

**SEA GRANT**  
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Florida authorities are proposing a reduction in size limits for red drum and possible seasonal closures.

Like other Gulf states, Florida imposed stringent regulations on red fish in the 1980s when it became clear that not enough young fish were escaping inshore waters to join the offshore adult population.

Red drum spend the first two to four years of life in the nurturing waters of our bays and bayous. As they reach 17 to 30 inches, they tend to leave the estuaries, move offshore, and stay there. At times, red fish form large schools in the Gulf that can be seen from the air. The larger fish (greater than 38 inches) maybe 30 years or older.

Spawning occurs offshore in the fall with a peak in September and October. Females can produce over two million eggs in a single spawn but most probably produce around a half million eggs and may spawn more than once in a season.

No harvest of red drum is allowed in offshore federal waters and all Gulf states have similar low bag limits and slot size limits for state waters. For example, Alabama has a three fish per person limit and fish must be between 16 inches and 26 inches with one fish over 26 inches allowed. These regulations are believed to allow a minimum of 30% of the inshore fish to escape and join the offshore schools.

In Florida, there is a one fish limit with an 18 inch to 27 inch slot limit which currently allows a 32% escapement to the Gulf of Mexico. So what is the problem?

According to Florida managers there are several. First, the escapement rate has declined around 60% since 1991 while the number of recreational fishing trips directed at red drum have doubled resulting in about twice as many fish being harvested. Managers do not see any sign that the number of recreational fishermen is declining and they project that escapement will fall below 30% in the next few years because of increased fishing pressure. Managers suggest that narrowing the slot limit will keep escapement above the 30% goal.