



Since the Net Ban:

Changes in Commercial Fishing in Florida

*Florida Sea Grant College Program -
research, extension and education for
a better coastal environment*

Introduction

In November 1994, Amendment Three of the Florida Constitution, otherwise known as the net ban, was approved by voter referendum. This amendment made it unlawful to use entangling nets (i.e., gill and trammel) in Florida's waters. The use of other forms of nets, such as seines, cast nets, and trawls, was restricted, but not totally eliminated. The primary species of finfish landed with entangling nets included striped mullet, spoiled sea trout, Spanish mackerel, sheepshead, pompano and blue fish. About two dozen species tend to school in shallow water which made the use of gill and trammel nets an efficient harvesting method.

Implementation of the net ban has had an impact on several groups. These include commercial fishers, seafood wholesalers and retailers, recreational fishers, and consumers of locally caught seafood. For some, the net ban may have generated positive benefits, while others may have experienced substantial losses. The expected outcomes of the net ban included:

- Reduced fishing pressure on key species would result in a reduced volume and value of landings.
- Increased market prices as supply diminished for net-caught species.
- Small businesses dependent on supplies from the net fishery would suffer financially.
- Recreational fishers would eventually experience a greater abundance of certain species.
- Related types of businesses, such as marine and boating supply dealers, bait/tackle shops, restaurants, etc., would also be affected.
- Increased health of the fish stocks.

The actual impact of the net ban on each of these groups is difficult to measure because other factors were changing at the same time the net ban was being implemented. Environmental conditions, fishing regulations, and general economic conditions were changing, and have continued to change ever since the net ban. Influence from these and other factors tend to "hide" the impacts that would have resulted from the net ban by itself. However, there are some observable changes that

have occurred *since*, but not necessarily as a *result* of, the net ban. The information in this brochure focuses on commercial fishing since data are readily available and recent studies have been completed that describe the industry. So, what do we know has happened since the net ban?

Changes¹ in the Overall Commercial Fishery for Net-Caught Species in Florida

- Average annual landings declined from 52 million pounds before ban to 18 million pounds after ban.
- Average dockside value per year declined from \$21 million before ban to \$13 million after ban.
- Average number of fishing trips per year declined from 226,000 before ban to 97,194 after ban.
- Number of commercial fishers declined from 20,000 before ban to 17,000 after ban.

Changes in the Recreational Fishery for Net Ban Affected Species

- Recreational landings decreased by 27 percent after the ban.
- Sales of resident and non-resident saltwater licenses increased by 3 percent after the ban.

Changes in the Condition of Stocks of Net-Caught Species

- Spotted sea trout stocks have remained steady following the net ban but are still overfished. Spanish mackerel stocks have increased dramatically after the net ban and are not overfished.
- Striped mullet stocks have increased following the net ban but are still overfished.
- Bluefish stocks are stable following the net ban, but are still overfished.
- Pompano stocks are increasing after the net ban, but are still considered overfished.

Sheepshead stocks are increasing statewide after the net ban, but remained overfished on the East Coast.

¹ The time period before the net ban includes 1992-1994, while the period after the ban includes 1996-1998. The year 1995 was omitted due to compliance concerns resulting from the ban being implemented mid-year.

Percentage Changes¹ in Commercial Fishing Landings, Value, and Price of Some Key Net-Caught Species

<u>Species</u>	<u>Trips Taken</u>	<u>Landings (lbs.)</u>	<u>Dockside Value</u>	<u>Price per lb.</u>
Spotted Sea Trout	-91%	-91%	-86%	+50%
Spanish Mackerel	-68%	-56%	-39%	+35%
Mullet	-48%	-60%	-49%	+34%
Bluefish	-68%	-76%	-71%	+21%
Pompano	-61%	-6%	-19%	+10%
Sheepshead	-63%	-68%	-45%	+71%

Changes in Family-Owned Commercial Fishing Businesses

Florida Sea Grant sponsored studies examined a sample of family-owned commercial fishing businesses before and after the net ban. These businesses utilized entangling nets as their primary gear type. Some of the changes these businesses experienced include:

- The number of families in the fishing business following the ban decreased by 25 percent. Families fishing full-time after ban decreased by 22 percent.
- Following the net ban, 25 percent of the individual fishers retired.
- Family income from fishing after the ban decreased by 31 percent.
- An increased dependence on non-fishing income after the ban was provided mainly by wives.
- The number of hours spent by husbands in non-fishing work after the ban increased by 100 percent.
- Time spent operating the boat decreased, but record keeping and time spent maintaining markets increased after the ban.
- The number of fishers targeting mullet, sea trout, and pompano decreased after the ban.
- The number of fishers targeting blue crab, stone crab and grouper increased after the ban.

Assistance Sought Following Implementation of the Net Ban

Several programs were offered by the State of Florida to provide assistance to small businesses that suffered losses resulting from the net ban. Of the families interviewed in the recent Sea Grant studies:

- 82 percent participated in the net buy back program.
- 64 percent participated in various Cooperative Extension educational programs.
- 26 percent collected unemployment benefits. 16 percent participated in aquaculture training. 16 percent enrolled in job retraining classes.
- 16 percent of the affected families began collecting food stamps.

For a more detailed discussion of this topic, refer to: Florida Sea Grant Technical Paper 101 (in press) or SGEF- ITO available on-line at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/sgf110.htm>

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