New limits set on Basin area bass by LWFC

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Invoking the state’s Emergency Procedures Act, the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission approved a 14-inch minimum-size limit on largemouth bass taken from waters in and around the Atchafalaya Basin.

The plan went into effect immediately and will run for the next 120 days. During that time, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries will seek to make the new rule run through Sept. 30, 1995.

The area under the new size limit is bounded by U.S. Hwy. 190 from Port Allen to the Atchafalaya Basin’s West Guide Levee on the north; the West Guide Levee to U.S. Hwy. 90 on the west; north of U.S. Hwy. 90 to La. Hwy. 20 and to La. Hwy. 1 in Thibodaux on the south; then, from that point in Thibodaux up La. 1 to U.S. 190 at Port Allen.

Acting on recommendations of LDWF biologists, the commission voted unanimously for the unprecedented size limit after an estimated 5 million bass were killed in the Atchafalaya Basin/ Lakes Verret-Palourde Basin area during and after the passage of Hurricane Andrew in late August.

“These two areas experienced significant fish kills . . . areas the department believes would benefit from additional management procedures,” Inland Fisheries Division administrator Bennie Fontenot told the commission members Thursday.

Fontenot said his staff had devoted 253 man-days in the Basin since the Aug. 25-26 storm tracked through the heart of the Basin. He said the LDWP plans were discussed with biologists and professors from the LSU School of Fisheries and a panel of experts from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state departments of Environmental Quality and Natural Resources.

LDWP biologist Gary Tilyou explained the rationale behind the 14-inch minimum length: “That length was chosen based on the growth rates of largemouth bass in the Atchafalaya Basin.

“A 14-inch minimum will protect the fastest growing fish in the 1993 year-class until they have had an opportunity to spawn. More importantly, this minimum size will also protect the two- and three-year-old bass currently in the system. Protecting these size classes will protect the primary brood stock for the 1993 spawn,” Tilyou said.

Commission member Bert Jones from Ruston asked why there were no such limits put on crappie or bream fishermen. Tilyou said 7 million crappie and 23 million bream were also involved in the kill.

“These two species are very prolific and we believe in many cases they will repopulate entire areas,” Fontenot explained.

“By proposing a management strategy for these systems, we are not suggesting they will not recover on their own. We believe, in time, that they will recover. But, we feel our proposal will accelerate the recovery of these systems,” Fontenot said.

Tilyou also identified three other major hurricane-affected areas — the Lake Dauterive/Fausse Pointe area, the Amite River Basin and the Lake Boeuf area near Des Allemands. Fontenot said field personnel had discovered enough brood stock remaining to restock those areas.

Other parts of the restocking effort “will come after the water quality improves in the the affected areas,” Fontenot said.

Tilyou outlined that the department, with the help of citizens’ organizations and assistance from sister states and the federal governments, will attempt to restock the Basin with fingerlings and broodstock. He said early estimates are the 200,000 acres were affected and that as many as 4 million largemouth bass, 1 million crappie (sac-a-lait) and 2 million catfish fingerlings will be needed to complete that part of the project.

“Several private organizations have contacted the department regarding stocking the impacted area with black bass that they catch from other areas,” Tilyou said. “We have accepted their offer and will assist them by distributing the bass from centralized locations and conducting the actual stocking.”

In other commission action Thursday, new game-breeder and shooting preserve regulations were passed; commercial fishing for striped mullet was divided into “pre-roe,” “roe” and “non-roe” seasons; delayed action on (live) Bait Dealers Permits until the Nov. 5 meeting to clarify one section of the new rules was rewritten; and was notified of the intent of Chairman Jimmy Jenkins to amend commission by-laws affecting official notification of agenda items for future meetings.