

Rule curtails turtle hunt

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The staff of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has proposed a complete ban on the commercial harvest and sale of wild freshwater turtles.

If adopted by the wildlife commission, the rule unveiled Friday would be the toughest regulation on turtle harvesting in the United States, state officials said.

A rising demand from China, where the animals are a delicacy and used in medicine, has led to a rise in the capture of wild freshwater turtles from lakes, ponds and other waterways — to the point that some biologists worry that certain species are in peril.

But the fishermen who harvest the turtles say their livelihood is what's endangered, especially if this new rule goes into effect.

"It's going to put us out of business," said Tim Thomas, 51, of Eagle Lake.

Thomas contended that what's driving talk of a ban is not science, but politics. Gov. Charlie Crist called on the commission to enact tougher rules last fall.

"The governor don't know nothing about turtles," he said.

However, one of the biologists who spearheaded the campaign to ban the harvest praised the move. Matt Aresco, who manages a private nature reserve in the Panhandle, said the proposed ban "will solve the serious problem of overexploitation," and he praised the commission and Crist for "showing true stewardship for Florida's natural resources."

In the wake of a public outcry about the practice, Crist had urged his appointees on the commission to "move toward a complete ban on the harvesting of our wild turtles."

The draft rule, which the wildlife commission is scheduled to vote on April 15, would do just that. It would ban the commercial taking or sale of wild, freshwater turtles.

The draft rule also would prohibit taking turtles that are listed on Florida's imperiled species list from the wild, as well as species that look similar to the imperiled species, which include common snapping turtles and cooters.

In addition, the collection of eggs would be prohibited. Individuals would be allowed to take one freshwater turtle per day per person from the wild for noncommercial use. The transport of more than one turtle per day would be prohibited.

Wildlife commissioners will consider the draft rule at the April 15 meeting in Tallahassee. If approved, it would be advertised for a final hearing at a June commission meeting in Crystal River. Both meetings will offer the public a chance to comment.

As of last fall exporters were shipping up to 3,000 pounds of softshell turtles a week out of Tampa International Airport, according to wildlife commission documents. A Fort Lauderdale seafood company was buying about 5,000 pounds of softshell turtles a week for \$2 a pound.

Other states — Alabama and Texas, among others — have recently restricted or banned the harvest of turtles. As those states have cut off access, the harvesters have focused more and more on Florida's turtles, Aresco said.

The harvesters use hooks baited with chicken, pork fat and bacon to capture the turtles for exporters who airfreight the animals live. They target the larger turtles, the ones old enough to reproduce, Aresco said. Wipe out those and soon all the turtles will be gone, he contended.

Two environmental groups, the Center for Biological Diversity and the St. Johns Riverkeeper, petitioned the wildlife commission to ban freshwater turtle harvesting. Turtle biologists asked the state to curtail it to just one turtle per person per day. The commission's own experts recommended a limit of five per person per day.

But several turtle harvesters showed up at the meeting in September to complain that such a strict limit would ruin their livelihoods. So the commissioners voted for an interim rule limiting everyone to 20 turtles a day per person — or 140 a week — for licensed harvesters.

To comment

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will consider the proposed ban at its April 15 meeting in Tallahassee. If approved, the ban will be advertised for a final hearing at a June meeting in Crystal River. The public may submit comments to the commission any time during the process, either by testifying at the meetings or by sending comments to turtles@MyFWC.com.

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