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FWC's proposed rules to protect diamondback terrapin turtles in Florida stir controversy

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A proposed draft rule meant to protect the diamondback terrapin turtle in the state stirred controversy Thursday during a Florida Wildlife and Conservation Commission meeting.

FWC staff proposed a draft rule to prohibit the taking of diamondback terrapins unless permits are already in hand and require blue crab traps to be equipped with a bycatch reduction device to limit terrapins in the traps.

Brian Branciforte of FWC's division of habitat and species conservation said the turtles have been historically overexploited for food and populations of the turtles declined in the late 1800s and early 1900s due to wild harvesting in "tremendous numbers."



The goal of the rule would be to prevent a future listing of the species, he said.

More than 30 people queued up for public comment, providing diverse opinions about the draft rule. Biologists and environmentalists commended FWC, but commercial blue crabbers and reptile hobbyists brought up issues with the draft rule.

Those for the rule change thought the proposed bycatch reduction device, or BRD, was a good idea, but some said the opening could be smaller to further limit the accidental capture of the turtles. The BRD is almost like an escape hatch if turtles become stuck.

Elise Bennett, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the draft rule is an important step in the right direction, but wants the BRD to have smaller dimensions.

FWC proposed a 2- by 6-inch opening, but Bennett said those dimensions are untested in Florida waters and have proven to be ineffective.

“The 1.75 inch by 4.75-inch BRD has been tested in Florida and found to be 73% effective,” she said.

Other public commenters reiterated these claims.

However, commercial crabbers from around the state gave anecdotal evidence that diamondback terrapins have not been found in their traps.

Jason Rudd, who identified himself as a commercial fisherman in Crystal River, said the BRDs will destroy the blue crabbing industry in the areas where they are required.

“These turtles are rarely if ever caught,” Rudd said. “There has to be another way instead of modifying our traps. Education or some other method to get to where we don’t have to use these things.”

Other crabbers supported these statements.

The other portion of the rule outlining a prohibition on the possession of diamondback terrapins without a permit drew the ire of reptile hobbyists.

One commenter said the possession rules do not address the threats terrapins face, such as habitat loss and deaths from motor vehicles. Others suggested a potential increase in illegal harvesting if possession is banned.

As public comment wrapped up, FWC commissioners seemed to agree that more work was needed before a final rule was made official.

Commissioner Michael Sole said his head was spinning after hearing the public testimony and hadn’t gotten his arms wrapped around everything yet.

“One thing I will caution my compatriots here is kicking this too far down the road,” he said. “Candidly, it is essential that we take action to ensure the diamondback terrapin is not listed as a threatened or endangered species. Inaction will really cause significant problems not only for commercial fisheries but for other industries across the state.”

The commission unanimously voted to move forward with the draft rules but asked the agency’s staff to do more work before a final rule is brought back to the commission in May.

The commissioners also discussed protection guidelines for the southeastern American kestrel and the Florida tree snail.