

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Finfish Management Advisory Committee (FMAC) Minutes
380 Fenwick Road, Fort Monroe, VA
VMRC Commission Room,
Monday April 22, 2019 – 6:00 P.M.

ATTENDANCE

Members Present

Jeff Deem
Honorable James Minor
Honorable Dr. Ken Neill
John Bello
Ernest Bowden
Michael Lightfoot
Scott MacDonald
Tom Powers

VMRC Staff Present

Rob O'Reilly
Pat Geer
Jill Ramsey
Ethan Simpson
Alexa Kretsch
Lewis Gillingham
Adam Kenyon

Members Absent

Meade Amory
Skip Feller
Andy Hall
Walter Rogers
Bob Sinclair
Robert Weagley

Others Present

Charles Dryden
Chris Ludford
Mike Avery
David Tobey
Kelly Place
Wes Blow
George Trice

Minutes were prepared by Alexa Kretsch.

I. Introductions; Announcements

Chairman Jeff Deem called the meeting of the Finfish Management Advisory Committee to order at 6:07pm. Chairman Deem asked that the Committee follow Robert's Rules of Order for a better flow of discourse.

Chief of Fisheries Rob O'Reilly briefed the committee on the agenda items for the evening, and reminded the committee that staff would not know the direction of ASMFC's striped bass harvest reduction plan until the striped bass board meets on April 30th. Staff is currently seeking potential options to achieve conservation equivalency to any ASMFC proposal. He also made the Committee aware of Virginia's letter to ASMFC jointly signed with Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Chief O'Reilly introduced Michael Lightfoot, a newly appointed member of FMAC.

II. Approval of minutes from the March 25, 2019 meeting.

Chairman Deem asked to postpone the approval of minutes until the next meeting to allow the Committee time to review the draft of minutes. This was agreed upon by staff and the Committee.

III. Discussion Items:

A. Final Recommendation for Black Sea Bass Season Adjustment in Response to the February Harvest

Deputy Chief of Fisheries Pat Geer reviewed the recreational February black sea bass season, in which 10,082 pounds of black sea bass were landed from 74 trips. VMRC staff sampled 17 trips and 1,241 fish. He presented options for closing days to account for the weight of fish landed in February: 21 days would need to be taken from May-June or September-October, 45 days would need to be taken from July-August, or all of November-December would need to be closed with several days from October as well. Mr. Ernest Bowden stated that in the future, there may need to be a cap on landings during a February season since more anglers are impacted by closures in the regular season. Mr. Tom Powers said he would not be in favor of splitting the season. Chief O'Reilly said Skip Feller, member of FMAC, had recommended a June 1-21 closure, with the consensus of fellow charter captains. Mike Avery of the Virginia Saltwater Sportfishing Association reported the results of a poll that showed the majority of anglers in favor of the June 1-21 closure. He said that there are many other species open to fishing at that time. **Mr. John Bello made a motion to recommend to the Commission a June 1 to June 21 closure to the 2019 recreational black sea bass season. The Honorable James Minor seconded. The motion passed unanimously.**

B. Continued Discussion on Future Striped Bass Management.

Deputy Chief Geer presented a graph from VIMS that showed larger striped bass produce the most eggs. He also showed that the percentage of bigger fish being landed in the bay is declining. Mr. Powers asked to see statistics in terms of average weight, because the length of fish landed is market driven. Chief O'Reilly said that the ITQ tag database stores weight information and that staff would be looking at the relationship of weights collected by the Biological Sampling Program and by tags. The sampling program has been in place since 2007 and collected information from more gears and seasons. Currently, the sampling program aims to sample 1% of fish landed.

Deputy Chief Geer presented potential options for conservation measures to the commercial striped bass fishery, mostly in reducing the landings of large fish. These options included shortening the fishing season, reducing the gill net mesh size to 7" in the bay and 9" on the coast, placing a maximum mesh size in March-June to cap at 28" fish, and placing a maximum length of 36" in Virginia tributaries of the Potomac. Deputy Chief Geer mentioned that Virginia is the only state with a commercial striped bass gill net fishery that does not have a maximum mesh size; most states or jurisdictions have regulations for 6-8" stretched mesh. Mr. Michael Lightfoot doesn't believe the Potomac size limit would represent much of a savings and thinks that a 7" net would be too big; a 6" net usually selects 28" fish. Maryland and the Potomac have good luck with 7" and most nets in the bay use a 6.5-7" net. Mr. Lightfoot believes shortening the season and placing a maximum mesh size from March to June would not contribute to significant savings. Mr. Bowden agreed that shortening the season is a bad idea, because timing of the fishery is variable and depends on movement of the fish. He said a maximum mesh size from March to June is a good start and said any decrease in mesh size should be gradual. Mr. Lightfoot said a 36" maximum length fish

would need a mesh size reduction as well or discard mortality would increase. He passed on word from the Twin Rivers Watermen's Association that his association supports a 7" mesh size. Mr. Scott MacDonald said most watermen will want an 8" mesh in the bay, but a 7-7.5" mesh size is possible if the mesh size was decreased gradually. Deputy Chief Geer discussed VMRC's Biological Sampling procedures. George Trice, commercial fisherman, said a 7" mesh in the bay would push effort into the rivers, where smaller fish are. He would prefer a 9" maximum. Kelly Place, commercial fisherman, said he saw an unusual amount of large fish on the Eastern Shore this year. An 8" mesh in the ocean would have been too small. He said the necessary mesh size depends on the year class being fished at the time and in that region. Mr. Place suggested a bycatch allowance of large fish, similar to the weakfish bycatch fishery. That would allow the Biological Sampling Program to sample larger fish and decrease the dead discards. He also questioned the stock assessment model used, which Chief O'Reilly said he could address after the upcoming ASMFC meeting.

Chief O'Reilly presented potential recreational measures for striped bass. This included a vessel limit for large fish, the elimination of the trophy seasons, the use of a non-offset circle hook with live or dead bait, and a no take slot limit for a time in fall. Mr. Powers said any no take slot should be consistent across the whole fall season. Mr. Lightfoot said circle hooks work, but it takes patience to adjust to. Chief O'Reilly showed examples of analyses to achieve a 17% reduction in recreational landings, which is a target number proposed by the Striped Bass Technical Committee of ASMFC. Mr. Lightfoot said the recreational fishery needs to have accountability and said some members of the for-hire fishery have shown willingness to tag large fish for reporting purposes.

IV. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 8:03 pm by Chairman Deem.