

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Finfish Management Advisory Committee (FMAC)
380 Fenwick Road, Fort Monroe, VA
Tuesday, October 18, 2022

ATTENDANCE

Members Present

- Jeff Deem
- Alex Aspinwall
- Ernest Bowden
- Will Bransom
- John Bello
- Skip Feller
- Mike Lightfoot
- Scott MacDonald
- Alex Perez
- Tom Powers
- Mark Sanford
- Marcus Simes

Members Absent

- Robert Crisher

VMRC Staff Present

- Pat Geer
- Shanna Madsen
- Adam Kenyon
- Alexa Galván
- Lewis Gillingham
- Brooke Lowman
- Joshua McGilly
- Jill Ramsey
- Somers Smott
- Brandon Sterling

Others Present

- Brendan Runde
- Charles Dryden
- Robert Hollowell
- Ron Larsen
- Todd Janeski

Minutes prepared by Alexa Galván.

I. FMAC Announcements

Chairman Jeff Deem called the meeting to order at 5:00pm. New members to the committee were introduced, including Alex Aspinwall, recreational fisherman; Will Bransom, recreational fisherman and Associate Commissioner to the VMRC; Alex Perez, recreational fisherman and charter captain; Mark Sanford, commercial fisherman; and Marcus Simes, recreational fisherman.

II. Approval of minutes from the March 7th, 2022 meeting

Chairman Deem requested more time to review minutes from the March 7th, 2022 meeting. These minutes will be approved at the following committee meeting.

III. New Business

A. Evaluation of and changes to the Recreational Cobia Permit Program

Ms. Somers Smott, Fisheries Management Specialist, presented a history of the recreational cobia permit program, which had been requested by cobia anglers to monitor an expanding fishery and provide data on the recreational fishery to scientists and managers. Staff requested feedback on the program from Dr. Erik Williams, chief of the Atlantic Fisheries Branch within the Sustainable Fisheries Division of the NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Science Center and the lead modeler for the cobia stock assessment. Dr. Williams said reporting and bag limit bias in cobia harvest reports makes the current program of limited use to the stock assessment, but that angler-provided age and length data would be very useful, especially regarding discards. Deputy Chief Shanna Madsen cited data accuracy issues with cobia reporting and burdens on staff and anglers. Mr. Joshua McGilly, Fisheries Management Specialist, proposed a voluntary recreational cobia program to collect age and length data. Mr. McGilly asked the committee for suggestions for the new program and on outreach to target interested anglers.

The committee discussed the usefulness of the VMRC freezer collection program in collecting cobia biological data. Mr. Skip Feller said he would like to see a collection freezer restored to Rudee Inlet. Mr. Tom Powers asked about the current program's ability to replace MRIP harvest and effort estimates. Deputy Chief Madsen said no program has the statistical significance of MRIP so no program could or should be expected to replace MRIP. Mr. Bransom approves of moving from a program with sanctions for non-reporting to a voluntary program. He suggested outreach to angler clubs, boat shows, and seminars. Mr. Feller agreed angling clubs are always looking for speakers. Chairman Deem asked for the committee be able to review the public presentation. The Committee and staff were in agreement that the mandatory recreational cobia permit program will be ceased in 2023 and instead outreach will focus on creating a voluntary cobia age and length data collection program for anglers which focuses on data gaps in the stock assessment

B. Updates

i. Report on the 2021 incidental speckled trout commercial fishery

Mr. McGilly updated the committee on the 2021-2022 speckled trout season and performance of the incidental catch allowance. After the quota was achieved in October 2021 and the directed season closed, commercial fishermen were allowed up to 50 pounds of speckled trout per day per licensee with a vessel limit of 100 pounds per day; this resulted in 19,982 additional pounds of speckled trout harvest. Mr. Powers was concerned that some people might use the incidental catch allowance to target speckled trout, but several committee members said it would not be worth targeting for that few fish. Mr. Scott MacDonald said the data presented suggests the program worked as intended, as the primary

gear was gillnet, and it is difficult to target species using that gear. In addition, he stated that the next step needs to be increasing the directed quota. Several committee members stated there are more speckled trout in the bay now than there used to be. Mr. Powers feels the large number of speckled trout within the Bay is due to voluntary cuts to the recreational bag limits.

ii. Shortfin mako retention prohibition

Mr. McGilly said that on July 5th 2022, NOAA Fisheries published a final rule that no Atlantic shortfin mako sharks may be landed or retained in any U.S. Atlantic highly migratory species fishery until further notice and that Virginia would be mirroring the ban for state waters. Virginia anglers target shortfin mako mainly in federal waters and closure of state waters will help law enforcement during port checks. Closure of state waters will discourage claims of catching a shortfin mako from state waters while federal waters are closed.

iii. Black sea bass February season

Ms. Alexa Galván, Fisheries Management Specialist, asked the committee if Virginia should request a February recreational black sea bass season for 2023. Mr. Feller said he would support opening the season because it is important to the charter industry, though headboats may not participate as they have in the past due to the uncertainty of weather in February. Mr. Bransom agreed the February season is important to the charter industry. Ms. Galván said the Commission would be voting on the February season at their January meeting. Mr. Bransom made a motion to recommend having a February recreational black sea bass season in 2023. Mr. Alex Perez seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

iv. Spiny dogfish trip limit increase

Ms. Jill Ramsey, Fisheries Management Staff, informed the committee that at the request of industry, the Commission increased the trip limit for spiny dogfish from 6,000 pounds to 7,500 pounds per trip to mirror the increase to the federal trip limit. This increase does not affect the total quota, but allows the quota to be caught in fewer trips to conserve fuel and decrease costs.

IV. Other Business

Mr. Feller asked on behalf of the charter industry to decrease the bag limit for sheepshead from four fish to two. Mr. Powers asked to see bag limit frequency distribution from MRIP data and Mr. Bransom asked staff to also look at limiting the harvest of large fish. Chief of Fisheries Pat Geer said staff could look into it for the next meeting.

Mr. MacDonald asked if there are any options to increase the 100 pound trip limit for weakfish. There have been reports of fishermen pulling their gear due to the amount of weakfish in the water. Mr. Robert Hollowell, haul seine fisherman, agreed. He said he is having to pick thousands of weakfish out of his net or release the whole catch. Mr. Hollowell is also concerned with the number of red drum he's having to release. Chief Geer said both species are managed by ASMFC and would require ASMFC to change management measures, which is not likely to happen until a new stock assessment is published.

Ron Larsen, fisheries liaison for the Dominion wind energy program, offered to answer any questions about the development of wind energy off Virginia. Dominion is currently working with VIMS and the VMRC on fisheries monitoring in any affected areas.

V. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 7:03pm.