

December 1, 2024 UPDATE

From rockfish and menhaden to red drum and crabs, there's no shortage of Chesapeake Bay fishery news. VSSA has been busy tracking the sportfishing issues that are important to you. Fisheries Board Faces Important Decisions on Key Chesapeake Fisheries

Rockfish Remain Overfished; Changes Likely to Regulations in 2025

Although the six-hour marathon meeting of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC) Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board failed to yield any immediate forward progress to reverse years of decline for one of the nation's most important game fish, it wasn't simply another case of kicking the can down the road. The Board did vote to hold a special meeting on Dec. 16 to consider changes to 2025 management measures.

The ASMFC Striped bass management board will meet on Dec. 16 to consider changes. They anticipate a large volume of written public comments on this topic. Comments must be submitted by midnight December 10 to comments@asmfc.org. We suggest you write "striped bass" in the subject line so it will get to the right people.

We all know rockfish continue to face stiff headwinds and challenges, including an expanding blue catfish population that threatens juvenile stripers and blue crabs. Poor water quality and habitat degradation are also impediments to a healthy rockfish stock. Virginia anglers have done their part to reduce the harvest by supporting tighter regulations and shorter seasons.

VSSA strongly encourages the Commonwealth's delegation to the ASMFC to lead by example and support protections of spawning aged stripers – especially the 2015 and 2018 year-classes. Actions should extend to all sectors, including the commercial gill net fishery that operates in staging areas just prior to the Spring spawn.

Key Takeaways:

- The probability of rebuilding by 2029 is now less than 50 percent without additional cuts, which may b.
- Maryland's 2024 young-of-the-year (YOY) index is a dismal 2.0 compared, marking the sixth consecutive year it has been well-below to the long-term average of 11.
- Virginia's YOY registered 3.43, also well below the long-term average of 7.77 for two years in a row.
- Six of the last seven year-classes since 2015 have been below average.

Menhaden

The proposed menhaden study bill, if passed by the upcoming General Assembly, should provide the additional science on bay menhaden that regulators have been seeking. We will be lobbying to support this bill. In addition, ASMFC has established a work group to explore possible area and time closures to harvesting in the bay due to concerns about starving Osprey chicks. They plan to report back next year. The industry remains against any restrictions.

New, credible science from Miami University was presented to ASMFC and is calling into question the accuracy of the current menhaden stock assessment. This will take time to work its way through the ASMFC process.

Finally, the two menhaden lawsuits (Chesapeake Legal Alliance vs VMRC and the Federal suit claiming fraud and violation of the American Fisheries Act) remain active...we probably won't know more about these until early/mid 2025.

ASMFC Considers Changes to Red Drum in Southern Region

There are good reasons why red drum are popular with Virginia anglers. Today, both slot-sized puppy drum and trophy bull now may even rival striper fishery as the most abundant and popular game fish on the Chesapeake. In fact, the red drum range is expanding into Delaware, New Jersey and even coastal New York, a trend called an "extension" of the game fishes' migratory pattern.

According to the 2024 Red Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report, the northern stock of red drum (North Carolina through New Jersey) is not overfished and not experiencing overfishing. The southern stock (South Carolina through the east coast of Florida) is overfished and currently experiencing overfishing.

This influx of red drum into the Chesapeake and beyond is likely influenced by warming waters and has not gone unnoticed by the Bay's commercial sector. At the ASMFC meeting, Maryland Commissioner Robert T. Brown, a waterman from the Potomac River region, shared with the Red Drum Board his experience over the past few seasons. Brown said "thousands of sub- and slot-sized puppy drum" have been caught in his pound nets and those of other commercial fishermen. He noted that commercial hook-and-liners are also catching more redfish. Brown claims that not only are the drum eating more crabs, but the "dead discards" from his nets) is a wasteful and growing problem. He urged the Board to consider an increase in commercial landings.

VMRC's Pat Geer told Commissioners Virginia watermen are also reporting the same as Brown. He added that the Virginia Marine Resources Commission needs a science-based survey (bag seines, trawls) similar to those conducted by North Carolina, to better estimate the number of redfish in the Bay. Such a survey could cost several hundred thousand

dollars. Currently, Virginia uses North Carolina data and angler catch reporting (MRIP and dockside intercepts) to estimate recreational catches.

Pelagics Board Considers Changes to Cobia

As reported to the VSSA Board of Directors after both the Spring and Summer ASMFC meetings, a reduction in harvest (catch) is inevitable for the recreational and for-hire sectors in the Northern Region (Rhode Island through Virginia), where the average harvest was above its target. That was confirmed and placed into action with a nearly 16% reduction in harvest required in 2025.

At the October meeting, the ASMFC's Pelagics Board voted to direct States to submit implementation plans for Board consideration by January 1, 2025, and must implement these approved new measures by April, 1, 2025. Virginia's Pat Geer will head up the deliberations for the Northern Region. If not, consensus is reached on which measures to implement, a virtual Board meeting will be scheduled to select measures.

VMRC Votes Against Winter Dredging of Blue Crabs

At its meeting on Oct. 28th, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) voted 6-1 against extending the commercial crab pot harvest in December 2024, and against opening the season earlier in March 2025. According to VMRC staff, the Commission received 513 letters mostly opposing the proposals. Blue crab fishery continues to struggle and opening the winter dredge season would put at risk one of the Commonwealth's most valuable and iconic fisheries.

The most recent blue crab survey population tributaries show continued low numbers of both adult females and males, with an estimated total abundance at 317 million blue crabs. That is slightly down from last year's 323 million blue crabs but above the 2022 record low estimate of 227 million crabs.

VMRC to Hear Petition to Set Reasonable Catch Limits on Hickory Shad

CCA Virginia's 'Conserve Hickory Shad Campaign' petition is expected to be heard by the VMRC at its Dec. 3rd meeting. Public comments posted to the Commonwealth's Regulatory Town Hall website in September were reportedly all favorable.