

Va.'s 'Canada first' policy

On a cold, blustery day in January, as bay advocates greeted one another in the General Assembly building in Richmond, I was reminded of the humanity sometimes lost in walking these halls and speaking with lawmakers about protecting our cherished Chesapeake Bay and its most important



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fish, the menhaden.

And for the third consecutive year a bill to fund a badly needed study of bay menhaden, as proposed by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, has failed. After hundreds of phone calls, visits, letters and petitions signed by 25,000 concerned citizens, how can this be?

The health of the bay and menhaden in particular should be of concern to all because these little baitfish are the base of the bay's food chain and critical for a healthy ecosystem. Striped bass, once our most valuable fishery, are particularly sensitive to declines in menhaden. As usual, we are up against powerful lobbyists, big political donations and misinformation that clouds so many of today's issues.

Concerns about overharvesting have grown with recent research that shows osprey chicks in the main stem of the Chesapeake Bay are starving due to

lack of menhaden. Often viewed as the "canary in the coal mine," osprey are yet another red flag, and this finding is consistent with the observations of many who note a decline in menhaden over recent years. Menhaden are a vital public resource yet the public has little say in how they are managed.

This is impacting the recreational fishing economy in Virginia — for example, fishing charters, bait shops, marinas and tourism — as well as important commercial crabbing and fishing. The American menhaden bait industry, which supplies crabbers and fishermen along the coast, is also impacted because the vast majority of the coastal quota goes to Canadian-owned Omega Protein, which grinds them up for animal feed.

In Virginia, the epicenter of the East Coast menhaden harvest, the bait industry gets only 10% of the quota while the foreign company gets 90%. And since Virginia is the only East Coast state that still allows this fishing, our near-shore waters get hammered all summer long. If you frequent the bay, you have no doubt witnessed those big blue industrial fishing machines wreaking havoc.

Thousands have asked our government officials: Why are we allowing a foreign company to practice industrial scale fishing in the bay, the most important estuary on the East Coast and

nursery to many fish, like striped bass? They are taking up to 112 million pounds annually with no understanding of the impact on the bay's fragile ecosystem. And when we raise these issues to the industry, they are quick to respond "there is no science to support your concerns."

Fishery regulators are hesitant to act because of a "lack of science," which the industry constantly touts. Yet, the industry lobbies against funding for a scientific study, despite being involved in the design of the study two years ago. To add insult to injury, the industry refuses to share their detailed catch data with scientists who could use it to estimate menhaden health in the bay.

Are we risking the health of the bay's ecosystem and economy so that a Canadian company can make higher profits? By allowing the lower-cost harvesting in the bay versus the ocean, the state is subsidizing the industry with absolutely no understanding of the impact.

This "Canada first" policy must end. Move industrial menhaden fishing out of the bay until science can show it is not causing harm. Perhaps then they will become a responsible company and support needed science.

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