



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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No Changes for Tournament Rules or Citation Requirements in 2018

The 61st annual Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament, which opened January 1, 2018 and runs throughout the year, held its annual Tournament Committee meeting in December to consider possible rule and Citation minimum changes. The main agenda items reviewed included the 2017 Citation data with a comparison to prior years, a discussion of the “legality,” in terms of Citation and State record eligibility, of using power assist gear for day time deep-dropping for swordfish, where the same reel with power assist could be disengaged then used to fight the fish, and the consideration of a possible name change for the Tournament.

The Committee first reviewed the trend in Citation number by species, comparing the 2017 season to prior years. Citation numbers for several of the most popular inshore species, such as croaker, flounder, gray trout and spot remained at very low levels in 2017, while trophy red drum numbers continue to be very high. Two state records were set in 2017. A 58-pound golden tilefish, caught on June 27, 2017 by Joshua Jung of Virginia Beach, was certified as the new Virginia State Record for the species by the Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament. Then on November 1, 2017, a 6-pound 12-ounce gray triggerfish, caught by Dave Walden of Yorktown, VA was certified as the initial Virginia State Record for the species by the Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament.

Later in the meeting the Committee considered lowering the minimum weight requirement for spadefish from the current 9 pounds. Spadefish were added to the list of eligible species for weight in 1995 with a 9-pound minimum but only two fish were registered that year. The minimum weight was decreased to 7 pounds in 1996, then increased to 8 pounds in 1998, and finally increased to 9 pounds in 2002 (a 22-inch minimum release was also established the same year), as the Committee attempted to find the right balance between a “true trophy weight” and realistic

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availability. Citations peaked at over 900 in 2003 but have never exceeded 40 since that year. Further, fewer than 10 Citations have been registered in any year since 2010 with seven weight Citations registered in 2017. Several Committee members felt the 9-pound minimum weight was too high given the stock has been exposed to increased recreational fishing pressure that is unlikely to return to levels seen when spadefish were added to the Citation Program stopped short of lowering the minimum weight of 9 pounds. Tournament Director, Lewis Gillingham will prepare a detailed evaluation using spadefish Citation data from years when the minimum weight requirement was less than 9 pounds for the next annual meeting.

The Committee next focused its attention on the request to use power assist gear, specifically in the daytime deep drop fishery for swordfish, where power to the reel can be switched on and off. In the off position the reel functions like any other reel. The use of this gear for Citation or State Record consideration would require a modification of the rules. Several committee members were very familiar with this type of gear, as well as at least one member in the audience. The Committee had also received a detailed letter from a concerned angler. This angler indicated this gear would provide definite advantages to landing a swordfish over a normal hand-turned reel. For instance, one difficulty in hooking a swordfish comes when the fish initially takes the bait and streaks for the surface. Using this power-assist gear would definitely aid in hooking the fish as slack could quickly be taken up and the hook set. Committee members acknowledged this gear disqualified the user for any IGFA record recognition (three members of the Committee are VA IGFA representatives). After more discussion, which included the gear could be used just to deploy a heavy weight to take the bait to a desired depth (like a downrigger) as long as a release clip was used, the Committee determined no changes to the rules were warranted. So the use of this gear, as both to deploy the bait to depths using a heavy weight and later to fight the fish would disqualify the anglers for Citation and State Record recognition.

Lastly a Committee member had requested the group consider the idea of changing the name Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament to better reflect its description in Code-- to promote and develop the Commonwealth's saltwater angling resources for their recreational and economic benefits. Name changes were suggested and the Committee voted to support such a change but realized a name change would require a Legislative change. The Committee voted unanimously in support of such a change but the pathway for such a change would require contacting and support from one's individual Delegate.

The Tournament Committee made major changes to the Fishing Tournament's Program in 2004, instituting release Citations for all species and increasing the qualifying minimums for more than a dozen species. In recent years, the Committee has attempted to fine tune individual minimum qualifying weights and lengths to coincide with historical trophy-fish standards.

The Tournament Committee meets at least annually to review and set minimum qualifying weights and lengths for species eligible in the State's popular recognition program. Additionally the Committee can consider changes to the Tournament's rules regarding Citations and State records at this time.

Other popular programs administered by the Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament, such as

the Junior Angler Program, and the Expert and Master Angler programs, will return unchanged in 2018. The Junior Angler Program challenges children less than 16 years of age to catch and release six species of saltwater fish. To qualify as an Expert Angler a fisherman must register fish in at least six different species for Citation awards during the year. Master Angler requirements are 25 Citations (with a maximum of one per species per year) in at least five different species over an unlimited period of time starting in 1996. Additional Master Angler levels can be achieved with an additional 25 qualifying Citations and five additional species.

On another note, anglers should check their current saltwater fishing license for its expiration date before heading out on the water in 2018, as saltwater fishing licenses are valid for 365 days from the date of purchase. Anglers must have a valid Virginia saltwater fishing license unless legally exempt. Again in 2018, those anglers 16 years of age and older but not required to purchase a saltwater fishing license (such as those anglers over 65 years of age or anglers fishing on another angler's licensed vessel) must register with the Virginia Fisherman Identification Program (it is free and can be done online at www.mrc.virginia.gov/FIP). Anglers are also advised to pay attention to all 2018 fishery regulations as they are announced. Changes to tautog, blueline tilefish, black sea bass and cobia regulations are anticipated by early spring. Anglers can always check the agencies' website for the most current regulations (www.mrc.virginia.gov). Anglers can also find links to fish identification aids on this site. All applicable fisheries regulations must be adhered to and a saltwater fishing license is required for Tournament participation.

The Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament is a program of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission funded with revenues from Virginia's saltwater fishing license. The Tournament offers handsome wooden wall Citation plaques or album sized certificates for 36 species of saltwater fish which meet minimum criteria. The Tournament operates all year. For more information, contact Lewis S. Gillingham, Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament, 2600 Washington Avenue, Third Floor, Newport News, VA 23607, (757) 491-5160, (757)247-8014 (fax), or vswft@mrc.virginia.gov