

Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament
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Golden Tilefish added to the Tournament in 2015

The 58th annual Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament, which opens January 1, 2015 and runs throughout the year, has added Golden Tilefish to the list of species eligible for Citation awards. At its annual meeting last month the Tournament Committee considered a request from the public to add Golden Tilefish and Grouper (any species) to the list of species eligible for Citation recognition. The initial minimum qualifying weight was set at 30 pounds. Recent stock assessment data for Mid-Atlantic waters indicates the Golden Tilefish stock is not over fished and overfishing is not occurring. In Virginia the aggregate possession limit for tilefish (golden, blueline and san tilefish) is 7 fish. Snowy grouper and wreckfish are the two most commonly caught species of “grouper” (wreckfish are not true grouper but are lumped in this group for management purposes). Stock assessment data for these fish is limited. In the South Atlantic there is a vessel possession of just one fish and in Virginia there is an aggregate possession limit of one grouper per person. Both Golden Tilefish and grouper are caught in waters generally greater than 200 feet and suffer from extreme pressure differences (barotrauma) as they are brought to the surface. Even when using acceptable release procedures are followed a high mortality rate is thought to occur. For these reasons, while the Tournament Committee opted to add Golden Tilefish to the Program as a weight-in with a 30 pounds minimum, tilefish will not be eligible for a release award. Additionally the Committee felt the request to add grouper to the Program was not justified at this time.

On July 2, 2014 Howard Webb landed a 646-pound and 98-1/4 inches bluefin tuna and registered the catch for a state record. Mr. Webb holds a General Category Bluefin Tuna permit from NOAA, therefore the catch was legal, even though Recreational Bluefin Tuna permit holders could not keep any bluefin tuna 73 inches or greater (the recreational trophy category, those bluefin measuring 73 inches or greater, was closed on April 11, 2014). On that basis Gillingham disqualified the catch for recognition. Mr. Webb was protesting that decision on the basis that he was a recreational angler and had no intent to sell his catch. Additionally he stated the Tournament rules did not clearly indicate his catch was not eligible. After a lengthily discussion the Committee felt the Tournament rules clearly indicated to be eligible for recognition for State record or Citation awards the fish must be legally available to the recreational angling public and access to Trophy category bluefin tuna was closed when Mr. Webb made his catch.

The Committee reviewed the trend in Citation number by species, comparing the 2014 season to prior years. Citation numbers for several of the most popular inshore species, such as croaker, flounder, grey trout and spot were at very low levels but this had occurred in other times since the tournament began in 1958. The Committee next considered increasing the minimum qualifying length (currently 46 inches) to 48 inches for red drum. This discussion was carried over from the

2013 annual meeting to assemble additional background material. Lewis Gillingham stated red drum was added to the Tournament as an eligible species in 1960 with a minimum weight of 40 pounds. A release Citation was added in 1988 with a 44-inch minimum. The weight Citation was eliminated for 1999 and the minimum qualifying length was increased to 46 inches in 2004. The impact of increasing from the current 46-inch minimum to 48 inches would be significant. In 2013, 36.7% of the red drum registered for Citation awards would not have qualified. For 2014, 54.7 % would be eliminated. The Committee discussed what was considered a trophy red drum in other states and considered the potential impact to the Tournament from an angler's perspective and in cost savings. Following this review the Committee voted to maintain the current qualifying standards. "The Tournament Committee believes the current minimum qualifying standards represent a true trophy catch that warrants recognition by the Tournament even as the population size structure changes within a species," stated Tournament Director Lewis Gillingham.

The Tournament Committee made major changes to the 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.

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 2015. 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 species.

On another note, anglers should check their current saltwater fishing license for its expiration date before heading out on the water in 2015, as saltwater fishing licenses are now valid for 365 days from the date of purchase. Anglers must have a valid Virginia saltwater fishing license unless legally exempt. Again in 2015, 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 2015 fishery regulations as they are announced. All applicable fisheries regulations must be adhered to and a saltwater fishing license is required for Tournament participation. In addition, anglers fishing the territorial sea south of the Virginia border for striped bass are reminded these are North Carolina waters and anglers must have a valid North Carolina saltwater fishing license. Virginia does not have a reciprocity agreement with North Carolina and the Virginia saltwater license will not be accepted in North Carolina waters.

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

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