

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Finfish Management Advisory Committee (FMAC)
380 Fenwick Road, Fort Monroe, VA
VMRC Commission Room,
Monday, November 25, 2019 – 6:00 P.M.

ATTENDANCE

Members Present

Jeff Deem
Honorable Dr. Ken Neill
John Bello (call in)
Scott MacDonald
Michael Lightfoot (call in)
Meade Amory
Honorable James Minor
Dr. Milton Cook

Members Absent

Ernest Bowden
Skip Feller
Andy Hall
Tom Powers
Walter Rogers
Bob Sinclair
Robert Weagley

Note: Ed Sarfan appointed day of meeting

Others Present

Joey Keefe
Bruce Conner
George Trice
Bob Fisher
Brian Peede

VMRC Staff Present

Pat Geer
Lewis Gillingham
Adam Kenyon
Somers Smott
Olivia Phillips
Jennifer Farmer
Alexa Kretsch
Ellen Bolen

Minutes were prepared by Somers Smott.

I. FMAC Announcements – J. Deem

Mr. Jeff Deem called the meeting to order at 6:04pm.

I. Approval of Minutes from November 14 Meeting

A motion to approve minutes from the November 14, 2019 was made by Mr. Scott MacDonald, seconded by Mr. Meade Amory with one abstention from Mr. James Minor.

II. Old Business – Commercial Electrofishing for Catfish

Ms. Alexa Kretsch, Fisheries Management staff member, placed the draft regulation for commercial electrofishing for catfish on the screen for the committee and the public to review. She explained some changes made since the committee received the document the week prior, including defining harvest. Dr. Cook asked how the locations were determined

and why tributaries were eliminated. Ms. Kretsch explained the locations came from the experimental blue catfish electrofishing study conducted from 2014 to 2017 by Mr. George Trice in conjunction with Mr. Bob Fisher of VIMS, and funded by Fisheries Resource Grants. The tributaries were eliminated because of concerns with user conflicts and unsuitable conductivity in those areas. Mr. Deem asked for clarification on the shocking area created by electrofishing pulses, and Mr. Trice clarified that the pulse has an effective area with a diameter of 250 feet. Ms. Kretsch reminded everyone that the fish are stunned for up to 2 minutes before swimming away.

Mr. Deem asked for an explanation about the eligibility for the license. Ms. Kretsch showed the regulation gives a license to an applicant on an electrofishing Scientific Collection Permit, while the remaining licensees are chosen from eligible catfish harvesters by lottery. In the second year, licenses will be given to applicants who had the license the year before and reported harvest with it. Mr. Deem asked if there were plans to have more than 3 people in the future, and Ms. Kretsch said it depends on the results of the first years. Chief Pat Geer said any growth will be done slowly.

Mr. Michael Lightfoot expressed concern about the harvest areas, especially in the Rappahannock River. He said the watermen he spoke to want the electrofishing to take place downstream of Ware's Wharf because of concerns with pound nets in the river. Ms. Kretsch said that the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) reported that electrofishing gear will likely not work downstream of the wharf because of the conductivity. Mr. Lightfoot also asked about tributaries in the Potomac River, and Ms. Kretsch assured him that there are currently no plans to start electrofishing in that area. Mr. Deem worried about the geographic issues with the Rappahannock, and Ms. Kretsch said this first year would be a good indicator about the future of commercial electrofishing here since we have no prior knowledge of the commercial potential.

Dr. Cook asked what VMRC goals were with this new fishery. Mr. Meade Amory said catfish are moving across the bay and taking over areas important to native fish. He also spoke on how clean electrofishing was, stating that there was no bycatch and that the dip-netting method allows for size-selective harvest. Ms. Kretsch added that this fishery will selectively remove the smaller fish, thereby reducing competition among these smaller fish, which will ultimately allow them to find enough food and grow to the desirable trophy sizes.

Mr. Deem expressed concern with the processing capacity for catfish, and Mr. Amory said once the higher volume of fish start coming in, the processing and marketing will adjust and it will be profitable. Mr. Deem suggested that we could move licenses from area to area if, for example, the electrofishing fishery in Rappahannock didn't work as expected. Dr. Cook asked if there would be any daily or seasonal limits on pounds harvested, and Ms. Kretsch said there were not. Mr. Lightfoot then expressed concern about processors and buyers not being able to handle the amount of fish coming in, and Mr. Deem said as the fishery grows those problems will take care of themselves.

As far as a tolerance for oversized catfish on the boat, Mr. Deem suggested we do a count of fish instead of a percentage of the weight on the boat since it may be easier to enforce. Mr. Deem also worried about watermen working the gear near recreational fishermen. Ms.

Kretsch encourages a “good neighbor policy” with these licenses and the public using the same water.

Public comment was then taken by Mr. Bruce Connor. Mr. Connor is a recreational catfish fisherman who participates in tournaments on the James River. He expressed concerns about how this gear could eradicate the fishery and remove the small fish that had potential to become big fish. He wanted to make sure size limits are enforced. Mr. Deem assured him three commercial watermen would most likely not even begin to eradicate the large biomass of catfish in Virginia rivers. Chief Geer mentioned we are working with DGIF closely and will be monitoring the effects of the commercial gear. Ms. Kretsch addressed the enforcement aspect, mentioning that VMRC law enforcement officers would be in the area as well as DGIF’s conservation officers. Mr. MacDonald assured Mr. Connor that buyers want a long-term, sustainable fishery, so it is not to their advantage that the fish would be eradicated.

Mr. Deem called for a motion. Motion to approve the regulation was made by Mr. Amory, seconded by Mr. MacDonald. The final vote was 6-1-1, with Mr. Lightfoot voting against and by Dr. Neill abstaining.

III. Other Business

Chief Geer thanked the FMAC members for their input over the 9 meetings this year. He informed the committee that some members would be stepping down and that two new members were added, introducing Dr. Cook and Mr. Ed Sarfan, who was just appointed that day. He also mentioned VMRC is looking for up to three new commercial members for the committee, as well as potentially expanding membership to include someone from the scientific and NGO communities. He said that VMRC will be working on general bylaws for all their committees, outlining potential term limits and attendance requirements.

Chief Geer then outlined what regulations were in store next year. He mentioned the stock assessment for cobia being released soon, and that 2700 people did not report their cobia catch this year. There will be changes with commercial reporting of cobia as well. As discussed in the last meeting, spot and croaker changes will take place next year. He updated the committee on menhaden, mentioning that the governor sent a letter to ASMFC asking them to find the Commonwealth out of compliance. He finished with potential spotted seatrout bycatch changes and the bonus tag fishery for striped bass.

IV. Adjournment

Mr. Deem adjourned the meeting at 6:56pm.