

Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament Minutes
Committee Meeting Newport News, VA
December 15, 2015
7:00 pm

I. Introductions/Announcements

Lewis Gillingham informed the Committee that Commissioner Bull had appointed two new members to the Committee to fill existing vacancies, Virginia Morton, of Virginia Beach, manager of Long Bay Point Marina and former director of the VSWFT, Claude Bain, III, also residing in Virginia Beach. Ms. Morton was in attendance but Mr. Bain was unable to attend due to a prior legal commitment. Mr. Bain did submit a letter detailing his thoughts on the current minimum qualifying weights for eligible species (item V.) and the request to require additional verification for all release Citations (item VIII). That letter was provided to the Committee.

Wes Blow, an avid angler that requested the Committee consider changes to the requirements for all release Citations (item VIII), would not be able to attend the meeting but did provide the Committee with a letter detailing his request and why these changes were needed. That letter was also provided to the Committee.

II. Approval of minutes from the 2014 annual meeting

The minutes from the 2014 annual meeting were approved as written.

III. Public Comment Period

There was no public comment at this time.

IV. Briefing—Development of Wind Energy off the Virginia Coast

Gillingham provided background information plus an update on the current status of this project. The potential impact to anglers if the project proceeds appear positive--except during periods of construction, private vessels will have access to these structures which will serve as fish aggregating devices. Vessels may not be allowed to tie-up to the towers (the CBBT and other like

structures have similar restrictions) but vessels should otherwise have unlimited access during non-construction periods.

V. Review 2015 Program

The Committee reviewed the trend in Citation numbers by species, comparing the 2015 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 total number of Citations was well below recent years but that drop could almost entirely be accounted for by the winter cold shock event in the Elizabeth River in February of this year. Citation numbers for speckled trout were near 1500 in 2014 but dropped to just 68 for 2015. The Committee next considered whether modifying some of the minimum qualifying standards was warranted. Several Committee members weighed in noting most of the current Citation minimums are set at “true trophy” levels and tracking varying abundance levels of fish by altering Citations lengths and weights was not a good idea. Additionally, the long term value in maintaining static qualifying lengths and weights provided a better barometer of population structure. These ideas were also reflected in Mr. Bain’s letter. Craig Paige suggested summer flounder might be a candidate for lowering the minimum qualifying weight from 7 pounds to 6 pounds. A 6-pound flounder had always been considered a trophy fish and was the long-standing minimum until 2002 when the Committee voted to raise the minimum weight to 7 pounds following several years of increased catches of large flounder. The Committee discussed the rationale for decreasing the minimum weight at length and reasoned there was a valid argument for reducing the minimum qualifying weight to 6 pounds given the paucity of large flounder the past several years.

Following this discussion Mr. Paige made a motion to reduce the minimum qualifying weight for flounder from 7 pounds to 6 pounds (release minimum length would remain at 26 inches). The motion passed unanimously.

VI. Update State Records from 2015

Gillingham informed the Committee a 606-pound bluefin tuna caught on April 6, 2015 by Chase Robinson of Virginia Beach was certified as the new state record for that species. The fish easily exceeded the existing state record bluefin of 573-pounds, caught by Frederick “Bo” Haycox of Virginia Beach, in June 2007. The Committee was provided a copy of the press release that included several pictures of the record catch.

VII. Citation/State Record Appeals

There were no Citation or State record appeals. Gillingham did inform the Committee the VSWFT receives numerous incomplete or non-qualifying Citation registrations but these are handled administratively and only those applications rejected and protested are brought before the Committee.

VIII. Request to add additional verification for all release Citations where a measured minimum length is required

Gillingham directed the Committee's attention to a letter provided by Wes Blow that was received after the Committee's information packet was mailed and therefore could not be included in their information packet. Wes was unable to make the December 15 meeting date due to a prior commitment. In the letter, Mr. Blow requests additional verification for all release Citations where a measured minimum length is required in the form of a photo that clearly shows the total length of the fish measured on a flat surface. This would be in addition to witness verification.

Gillingham then provided the Committee with several comments from private individuals received by the office that opposed this change. Additionally Mike Avery, president of the Virginia Saltwater Sportfishing Association, provided a letter of the results of his club's online survey. The survey gathered 52 responses with 40 opposed to the change and 12 were in favor.

Gillingham directed the Committee's attention to Mr. Bain's letter regarding this request and his opposition to the request and detailed rationale.

Dr. Ken Neill provided additional background on Mr. Blow's request, as they are both members of the Peninsula Salt Water Sport Fishermen's Association and often fish together. Dr. Neill indicated he understood Wes's request but did not support it. Other members indicated requiring a photo for releases when a witness is available places a hardship on some anglers (a camera is not always available) and would lengthen the period of time the fish was out of the water and being stressed. By consensus the Committee agreed the additional verification was not warranted at this time.

IX. Other Business

The Committee discussed whether there was a need to further clarify some of the Tournament's Rules, such as the restriction of the use of a harpoon while allowing a flying gaff, the ban on the use of power-assisted reels and when the

fighting of a fish from a rod holder became a violation thereby providing anglers a better understanding of what accepted sport fishing practices are for the purpose of registering Citations and State Record catches. As the Committee began to focus on certain wording they agreed that no changes were best.

X. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:15 PM.