

SUPPORT SB 1388

Topic: Virginia Institute of Marine Science Menhaden Study

Bill Patron: Senator Lynwood Lewis

Overview:

Menhaden are an essential resource to the Commonwealth as they play an important ecological role as a key forage species for predators such as striped bass, osprey, and dolphins. Their economic importance cannot be overstated as numerous recreational and commercial fisheries depend on a healthy menhaden stock for their success. Menhaden also support Virginia's largest fishery, which catches menhaden throughout the tidal waters of the Commonwealth. The majority of the catch is landed by the reduction fishery and processed at a factory in Virginia's Northern Neck into fish meal and oil.

Coastwide menhaden are managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). Due to their importance to the broader ecosystem, menhaden became the first species to be managed using ecological reference points in 2020. Although this level of management is generally effective, ASMFC doesn't have the resources to determine the population dynamics of menhaden in the Chesapeake Bay and is likely be missing important regionally-specific population information. Concerns about the removals of menhaden from the Virginia portion of the Chesapeake Bay where the primary reason ASMFC implemented a harvest cap on the Virginia's reduction fishery in 2006. Unfortunately, this cap is based solely on historic landings and not scientific data on the population of menhaden in Chesapeake Bay.

The studies identified in SB 1388 would help increase the knowledge about the ecology of menhaden and the economic importance of the Commonwealth's various menhaden fisheries. This is especially important as the Chesapeake Bay region has been suffering from low menhaden recruitment for over 20 years. In addition, factors including water quality and climate change may alter both the number of menhaden in the Bay and the times they are here.

Reasons to support:

- Menhaden are currently managed on a coastwide basis, which cannot provide important information on recruitment and abundance in the Chesapeake Bay.
- Recent fish spills by the industry have highlighted the need to find ways to mitigate the impact to local economies.
- Information on the by-catch for the reduction fishery is dated and needs to be updated to better understand the impact of this fishery on non-target species.
- Bait and tackle shops, fishing guides, retailers, and tourism-related businesses depend on healthy fisheries that in many cases rely on a robust menhaden population.
- Virginia's blue crab fishing industry relies on menhaden as bait to fill their crab traps, but the economic importance of the growing fishery is not well documented and the studies proposed will help the Commonwealth understand the economic importance of this fishery.



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This position was taken by Virginia Conservation Network (VCN)'s Legislative Committee and Board of Directors and is supported by Virginia's conservation community. For a complete list of VCN positions, visit www.vcnva.org/bill-tracker. VCN is committed to building a powerful, diverse, and highly-coordinated conservation movement focused on protecting our Commonwealth's natural resources today and for tomorrow.