

The Finfish Management Advisory Committee met on February 27, 2017. The Committee did not have a quorum. The Committee heard from Mr. George Martin, a charter boat captain who fishes on the Potomac River. Mr. Martin explained that in some of the Virginia tributaries of the Potomac there are haul seine operations that are working in shallow water areas. He expressed concern that the operations are damaging SAV and potentially hurting largemouth bass spawning areas. Mr. Martin stated that his hope would be FMAC would endorse regulatory changes to the Commission to make such fishing practices illegal. Fisheries staff will look into the issue and work with Law enforcement staff: a summary of those findings will be presented to the committee at a later time.

Staff provided the committee a summary of developments with species that are managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). There will be a draft amendment to the Fishery Management Plan for striped bass in 2017 to consider liberalizing the target fishing mortality rate. There was a motion at the winter meeting of ASMFC to require all states to increase their minimum size for summer flounder by one inch to account for overages to the 2016 recreational harvest limit (RHL). For Virginia, that will be the only required action unless the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announces the actions taken by ASMFC will not be enough to address the overage as required by the FMP. A public hearing to make this change will be held February 28, 2017. There was an overage in the RHL for black sea bass in 2016 as well. New estimates that were released by the NMFS on February 17, 2017 show an overage for the Atlantic coast that may require Virginia change their regulations to adjust the 2017 season. Staff will be requesting the Commission hold either a March or April public hearing once ASMFC and NMFS announce any needed adjustments. ASMFC is considering an amendment to the FMP for tautog to require all fish harvested commercially to be individually tagged for sale and staff presented this information the FMAC. Finally, the ASMFC cobia plan development team is working on a draft FMP for cobia, and the South Atlantic Board set up a working group to explore allocation options for the states involved.

Staff presented on the management structure of cobia, the estimated overage in recreational harvest in 2016, and potential management options for the 2017 recreational season. Twelve members of the public provided comment to FMAC: eight were charter captains and four were private recreational anglers. One charter captain and one private angler also provided public comment as lure/tackle shop employees. The majority of captains were against the prohibition on gaffing, while one said he preferred using a net and some said they could manage either way. These captains also cited losses in revenue and a growing hesitancy from potential customers to book trips because of uncertainty in regulations. A few members of the public were willing to accept the same measures as 2016, but many others wanted a higher vessel limit of four fish and no closure for the season. The overwhelming sentiment was a mistrust of recreational harvest estimates from NOAA's MRIP surveys and the belief that Virginia should not have to abide by these numbers, as the abundance of cobia seems healthy.

Staff was scheduled to present on updates to the Atlantic sturgeon incidental take program (ITP), which were in part guided by recommendations from FMAC. However, due to time constraints, this presentation was tabled until the next FMAC meeting.