



PRESS RELEASE

Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association

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Catch and Release in the Chesapeake Bay

Monday, November 2, 2009

Dear Commissioners,

As Executive Director of the Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association (MSSA) and acting on behalf of our members and recreational fishermen, I must stand for their interests. It is clear in our mission statement that we must protect and preserve the rights, traditions, and future of recreational fishing. It should also be said that recreational anglers in Maryland make up the largest user group of the resource and have the greatest economic impact of all the user groups. The MSSA has read over all the catch and release only season proposals presented and would like to make clear our stance on the issue.

First of all, we appreciate the time and detail to which Secretary Griffin, Director O'Connell, and the department has taken to ensure a fair handling of this issue, which has become of the utmost importance to our members and recreational anglers in Maryland. The presentation clearly identified the issue, its potential impact on our fishery, and the actions to which the DNR believes to be most prudent.

The MSSA shares the DNR's beliefs that Maryland has a responsibility to its citizens to manage the resource towards sustainability and access. We also believe to err on the side of caution regarding management decisions when there are so many unknowns and the potential of overreaction is looming. This can be done, in part, through putting wise and justifiable measures in place to curtail the potential negative impact of fishing on the migratory striped bass during the catch and release only season and NOT on access and opportunity. However, given the uncertainties, estimated current low impact on the spawning populations, and economic benefits to our state and communities, we believe that the measures need not be extreme or unwarranted with no known basis. Given this criteria, the MSSA would like to focus the regulatory measures on those that reduce the mortality rate associated with the catch and release practice not access and opportunity. We believe that the DNR proposal presented at the Oct 20th SFAC meeting achieves this objective well and we support the measures with a reservation towards the 6 rod per boat restriction. We fear the rod restriction based on a per boat basis goes beyond reducing mortality rates; it discriminates against larger boats with larger parties, and unjustifiably targets restricting one method (trolling) of fishing without a clear indication that it has more negative impact on the fish. However, because the MSSA would like to see prudent action taken to ensure that catch and release only season has a minimal known impact on our fishery and in the name of compromise, the MSSA would concede gear restrictions based on per man basis.

Given the Maryland freshwater precedence of 3 rods per angler or 5 rods per angler in ice fishing, the MSSA would recommend that the gear restriction fall within that range. This would ensure a manageable amount of gear is deployed per angler regardless of party size on a given vessel. Rod restrictions beyond those just stated, we believe would be viewed as "extreme" given the unknowns associated with which method of fishing is more detrimental to the health of a fish.

We understand that some on the commission are of the mind that trolling should be eliminated or greatly restricted given the unknowns and perceived higher participation and stress it has on the fish. However, the MSSA believes there is enough science to show that the utilization of heavier gear, as used in trolling, can lead to landing of fish more quickly thus reducing mortality associated with the practice. Also, the trolling method also utilizes artificial baits which are shown to reduce deep hooking, a major factor in fish mortality. We do not believe this method to negatively impact the fishery more than other popular fishing methods used on the bay and do not believe it should be restricted as such. We also believe unwarranted targeting one method of fishing over another and or going beyond the precedence Maryland exhibits on the freshwater side would go against the DNR's own objective of fostering access and opportunity to Chesapeake Bay fishermen as it is a practice enjoyed by many recreational anglers.

Given that Maryland DNR recognizes its role on the issue as to (as presented at the October joint meeting):

- Ensure responsible use of the resource
- Foster access and opportunity
- Exercise caution when impacts to a resource are uncertain, and could be damaging.

We believe the following recommendations to be prudent:

- Prohibit the use of stinger hooks
- Require non-offset circle hooks for bait fishing with hook gap sizes greater than 1/2"
- Limit number of lines to 3-5 per angler
- Require barbless hooks
- Increase outreach and education on catch and release techniques.

The MSSA strongly encourages the other commission members to mindfully review the recommendations above in accordance with the objective role of the DNR as self described. We do not believe the limitations of the number of days in which one may fish to foster access and opportunity. The MSSA also believes that the excessive gear restrictions that go beyond those of the freshwater precedence or to target one method of fishing over another to go beyond "exercising caution". We believe the recommendations listed above to fairly meet all of DNR's objectives and encourage other commission members to willfully endorse these measures. Recreational angling is a significant part of the Maryland state economy and the socio-economic impacts of an overreaction due to uncertainty can permanently damage our future as recreational fishermen and local communities throughout the Chesapeake Bay.

Dave Smith

Executive Director