

FINFISH ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT

April 8, 2026

PRFC Office

Colonial Beach, VA

Members Present

Russell Sullivan (MD) - Chairman
Chip Crowder (MD)– Vice Chair
Jamie Bowling (MD)
George Willett (MD)
John Dameron (VA)
Alan Polk (MD)
Dusty Remington (VA)
Michael Lightfoot (VA)
David Butler, Jr. (VA)
Robert T. Brown, Sr (MD)
Richard Turner (MD)
Todd Cook (Proxy for Chris Palicia)
Ryan Rogers (VA)

Absent

Kris Johnson (VA)

PRFC Commissioners

Greg Gwaltney (virtual)

Support Staff Present

Ronald W. Owens – Executive Secretary
Ingrid Braun-Ricks – CFS/Admin. Officer

Law Enforcement

None

Other Attendees: Carrie Kennedy – DNR (virtual), John Green, Victoria Brown, Carl Kirk, Tommy Crowder

Chairman Sullivan called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and a quorum was confirmed.

Committee Vacancies and Reappointments

Staff informed the committee that there are still two committee vacancies on the advisory committee for a Maryland recreational fisherman at-large and a Virginia upper river recreational fisherman. There are no nominations for the Maryland vacancy, but we have received two nomination forms for the Virginia vacancy. These nominations will go to the Commission for approval in June. There are also two current committee members whose terms expired as of March 31, 2026 (Turner and Dameron).

ASMFC Items

Staff provided the following updates on ASMFC actions from the winter meeting in February

Atlantic Menhaden: The Board worked on Addendum 2 to Amendment 3 which addresses the Chesapeake Bay recreational reduction fishery cap which proposes ranges from 0-50%. The Board will consider approval of the draft that will go out to public comment at their spring meeting in May.

Black Sea Bass: The Board approved a regional distribution of a coastwide 20% liberalization for the 2026 and 2027 season. The southern region (DE-NC) will have a 12.5 minimum size, the season will start on May 1st, and there will be no change to the bag limit.

Striped Bass: The Board approved Addendum 3 state implementation plans and gave initial guidance for a new work group to be formed to address post-2029 management goals. This will be discussed further at the May meeting. It was noted that there is a benchmark stock assessment underway with an anticipated completion by the spring of 2027.

Finfish Annual Report

2025 total landings for finfish were 3,364,155 pounds, a 24% decrease from 2024, and the estimated dockside value was \$3,926,835 million, a 20% decrease from 2024. The trend continues where commercial landings decrease as dockside value increase over time.

Blue catfish accounted for 78% of the commercial landings, striped bass accounted for 13%, menhaden accounted for 5%, and all other species accounted for 3%. Of the \$3.93 million in dockside value, blue catfish accounted for 45%, striped bass accounted for 50%, menhaden accounted for 1%, and all other species accounted for 4%.

Blue Catfish: A total of 2,634,901 million pounds of blue catfish were harvested in 2025, down 17% from 2024. Fish trot line remains the dominant gear for catching blue catfish and accounts for 66% of the landings, fish pots account for 18%, haul seines account for 13% and all other gears such as pound net, gill net, eel pot, and hook and line account for 3% of the harvest. All gears decreased from the 2024 values. Haul seine increased their harvest of blue catfish by 33% (348,059 pounds). The committee talked about ideas about what the significant drop was mainly attributed to which included potentially fewer active harvesters, low dockside prices, and rising costs with limited processing infrastructure. There was a consensus that abundance has not limited harvest, but economic incentives and the infrastructure are the driving forces behind the decline in landings.

Striped Bass: A total of 452,167 pounds of striped bass were harvested in the 2024/2025 gill net and 2025 fishing seasons. Gill nets reported 64% (290,537 pounds) of the harvest. For the 2025 fishing season, pound nets harvested 23% (106,020 pounds), hook and line harvested 10% (48,810 pounds), and miscellaneous gear harvested less than 2% (6,801 pounds) of the total harvest. The 2025 season had a 2% increase over the harvest from 2024. The PRFC quota was 532,761 pounds and 85% of that quota was utilized in 2025. Being a limited entry fishery, staff explained that each year, a percentage of the quota is allocated to each fishery. Pound nets and gill nets both reached 89% of their respective quotas, hook and line achieved 65% of their quota, and miscellaneous gears used 53% of their quota. Chip Crowder asked if the landings are increasing while the PRFC quota keeps decreasing, if the cuts to the quota have been effective over the past 8 years. Staff responded that harvest is still at a lower level from 2014 to 2025 than it was in the previous 10 years. It is hard to say how effective fishery management measures are because there are many other contributing factors of why a particular year you may catch more and the next you may catch less.

Menhaden: In 2025, only 169,423 pounds were reported, which is a 76% decline from 2024 which also had a 66% reduction from 2023. As was mentioned earlier, the ASMFC has a workgroup specifically dedicated to trying to understand what happened in the Chesapeake Bay. Staff noted it seems if the menhaden show up by May, then things will be okay. If they don't, then most likely will not get them at all this season. Mike Lightfoot commented that there is a strong early-season presence in the Virginia portion of the lower Potomac and they are catching big menhaden down there now. It was noted by another member that even if they can catch them, there is nowhere to sell them which adds another contributing factor. Staff noted that the number of fishing days has decreased from

previous years. PRFC utilized 3.1% of the quota (5,547,444 pounds) in 2025 which is the lowest value in PRFC history. Some expressed concern about misinterpreting the low landings as stock declines.

American Eel, American Shad, Bluefish, Summer Flounder: Total American eel harvested in 2025 was 26,704 pounds, 3,465 pounds of American shad bycatch, 4,820 pounds of bluefish, and 3,886 pounds of summer flounder. Shad, bluefish and summer flounder are 99% harvested by pound nets. Staff pointed out that although there is not a market for American eel, there is a market for eel as blue catfish bait. However, that seems like an expensive bait fish and wanted the committee insight on this. Ryan Rogers noted that if you cut it into chunks to put it on a drop line, it lasts for about five days when the water is cold. Mike Lightfoot noted that eels are also being sold to Asian restaurants. Another comment is that when blue catfish are going for \$0.50 per pound, eels are an expensive bait. Staff asked if people are shifting to other species for crab pot bait. It was stated that they aren't using any other species for bait and it is just harder to crab. As for bait for hooks, they are using shad when the water's cold and eel when it's hot.

Other Species Notes – White perch landings doubled, butterfish landings tripled, and Spot landings were about six times the level harvested in 2024. A committee member expressed his concern with how some of the fish data is collected and would like to see Virginia, Maryland, and the Potomac River work together on a better system to also collect recreational data. The PRFC doesn't collect recreational data, therefore all the data that is presented is based off commercially harvested fish. Another committee member explained that the ASMFC collects recreational data using a federally funded MRIP survey and the total number of recreational saltwater licenses sold compared to the actual MRIP reports is very low. Carrie Kennedy spoke about the legislation that is currently going through Maryland right now. The bill has amendments that would require the DNR to hire a person and evaluate a process for how they would collect additional recreational harvest information and evaluating how that would potentially be tied to the license. The recreational harvest information is critical to our stakeholders right now, but it requires money to hire a person to do that work and will take time to develop. NOAA has a new recreational effort called RAPID, which is about working with the states to expand recreational data collection. NOAA's RAPID effort is likely to be available very quickly.

Kennedy also spoke to the impact of blue catfish on spawning striped bass. She stated that diet studies of blue catfish during this time of year have indicated that there are striped bass eggs in their diet, but they also have white perch eggs and yellow perch eggs. Blue catfish are indiscriminate, therefore, wherever they are there, they have some of the eggs from whatever is spawning there. That's not to say that it's not a cumulative impact, but at this point you don't have any data to indicate that blue catfish have a significant impact driving the decline in striped bass recruitment. A stock workshop held last year, and an evaluation of all the data around striped bass spawning and recruitment appears to be more about environmental condition, whether it's temperature that is driving the changes in when they spawn compared to when the larvae's food is available, or a host of other sort of conflicting issues. Blue catfish could be one part of it but it's probably not the major part.

Order 2026 Commercial Hook and Line and Gill Net Limited Entry

This update to the Order reflects the change in the number of gill net to hook and line conversions that were made during the renewal period. There were 17 gill nets that were converted to hook and

line licenses and, in line with the regulation, the total hook and line licenses increase to 246 and total gill nets drop to 669.

Public Hearing Consideration Items

Staff introduced general and finfish related items that will be brought forth to the Commission in June for their consideration of a public hearing.

1. Amend Reg. III, Sec. 1(b) Resisting or Impeding Officers – This is a housekeeping item removing the word “curse” from the language to comply with US Constitutional First Amendment Rights.
2. Amend Reg. III, Sec. 13(d) Individual Striped Bass Allocation Transfer from Gill Net to Hook and Line – This regulation defines the policy and the procedures for an individual striped bass allocation transfer from gill net to hook and line. The amendment is housekeeping to clarify the dates for when the transfer can occur.
3. Amend Reg. III, Sec. 9(a) Gear Specific Fishing Seasons – This item is being considered due to a committee motion to extend the pound net season to December 25th. If this were to go forward, then there are a few other regulations that would need to change to reflect the new date.

This item prompted committee discussion on allowing pound net licenses to be transferred to gill net licenses. **Chip Crowder motioned to propose to have a pound net transferred to a gill net stand and seconded by Richard Turner.** There were discussions regarding a whether it would be a one for one transfer, if the gill net location would be the same as the current pound net location, would it be a one-time transfer (similar to gill net to hook and line or would they be able to come and go from the fishery as they wanted. Rationale for the motion included reference to the decline in pound net users, climate change impacting menhaden landings and the biggest buyer of menhaden in the region is now out of business. Staff noted at the March 2026 Quarterly meeting, the Commission tasked staff to develop a work group to specifically address this topic. Preliminary research has begun but membership of the work group is still being completed. Chip Crowder, Robert Brown, David Butler, Tommy Crowder, and Richard Turner volunteered to sit on the committee. **The motion to add pound net to gill net transfer item to the consideration for public hearing passed with 12 in favor and 1 abstention (Cook).**

Going back to the original item for a pound net season extension to December 25th, staff noted this may impact the PRFC’s conservation equivalency plan for striped bass. There was a desire of the committee to keep this item on the list for consideration for a public hearing. **A motion was made by Robert T. Brown and seconded by Jamie Bowling to request a pound net season date extension to December 25th. There was no opposition, so the motion passed unanimously.**

4. Amend Reg. III, Sec. 11(b) Method of Measurement – This is a requirement from ASMFC and applies to all fish species. Staff believe that our current description for the Method of Measurement complies with the ASMFC’s language, but we are waiting for final approval. “The measurement shall be as total length. Total length means the length of a fish measured from the most forward projection of the snout with the mouth closed to the tip of the longer lobe of the tail caudal fin excluding the tail filament of a black sea bass measured with the tail compressed along the midline using a straight line measure, not measured over the curve of the body.”

Jamie Bowling asked staff where we were on adding a designated user to a license. Staff stated that we've had discussions on our current projects and since there are a lot of bigger, more involved projects, staff have it on their list to create a workgroup to gather more information. Mr. Bowling asked if it would need to go to public meeting and recommends it for this upcoming hearing. At the time the item came up, staff determined that the item would have to go to public meeting but couldn't take that initiative on at this time. Mr. Bowling expressed his frustration that this item hasn't been brought before a public hearing yet and that it may be put off to a future public hearing. He also feels that he should be able to assign a user to use his license if he is off work due to a meeting, doctor appointment, etc. Staff were unable to put this item on the list because of the current workload and budget constraints as public hearings are expensive. Staff further explained that it's not as simple as adding a line on our application, as Mr. Bowling suggested; there are legal implications and software development that must happen first. **A motion was made by Jamie Bowling to add allowing beneficiaries and designated users to all commercial licenses to the list for public hearing items for consideration. Motion was seconded by Robert Brown. There were no opposition or abstentions to the motion and passed unanimously.** Chip Crowder, Robert Brown, and Jamie Bowling volunteered to be on the workgroup.

Jamie Bowling brought up an item that has been discussed in the past, having one license number and one report per person for each fishery. **A motion was made by Jamie Bowling to add issuing a single commercial license number per individual and one harvest report per person for each fishery to the list for public hearing items for consideration. Motion was seconded by Chip Crowder.** Staff explained that this has been on hold due to the process of building a new system and the cost associated with large changes to the software. Since the Commission is already undergoing a new database project, the cost would be doubled since we would have to develop this in the current infrastructure and then pay the developer of the new system for the same thing later. When asked if this system has anything to do with eTRIPS, Staff replied yes, it is the same project and is funded by the ACCSP. This new system/infrastructure will replace our existing older software system. The project developers completely underestimated how much time it was going to take to recreate that on an Oracle database. E-trips is the ACCSP product for reporting online. Right now, a pilot program with crab harvest will start sometimes mid-summer. **Motion passed with 12 voting yes and one advisor who stepped out of the meeting when the vote was taken.**

Hook & Line Licensing Timeframe

This is an item requested by the chair to discuss the hook and line licensing time frame. The Committee discussed difficulties obtaining new striped bass for the next season during extended holiday office closures and the requirement that a harvester has to tag out prior to receiving their next seasons tags noting that harvesters use the remainder of the hook and line tags between Christmas and New Years Eve, and due to this, might not be able to fish the beginning of January. Multiple alternatives were discussed with staff mentioning concerns about ASMFC approvals and system impacts. One alternative was to change the entire season with a **motion made by Chip Crowder to adjust the striped bass harvest quota to be the same as Gill Net for all gear types.** Discussion on the motion: Striped bass year starting June of one year and ending March the next year and have the normal striped bass harvest closures as it is now. Change the renewal season to start on April 1st through May 31st. That way, those who fish up until December 31st, would still have tags for the beginning of January when the fisheries is normally closed for holidays. **Motion was seconded by Dusty Remington.** Due to the complexity of the motion and the discussion, **the motion was then retracted by the maker of the motion, Chip Crowder.** Staff did note that based on harvest reports

from 2025, not a lot of people are tagging out between Christmas and New Years Day. Changing the striped bass seasons would be a great change in the current for an impact to a very small group of people who are typically not tagging out during that time frame. There was still concern expressed regarding the number of days the PRFC is closed for holidays can directly impact the number of days someone can harvest if they run out of tags and/or want to fish January 1st. Staff reminded the committee that the Commission doesn't have to grant the extended closures to PRFC staff, but the PRFC follows Virginia and Maryland holiday schedules as well as being closed all federal holidays. There was some discussion on reporting unused striped bass tags, reporting, and renewing and receiving the next year's striped bass tags. Some of the committee didn't understand why they must tag out first before they receive the new striped bass tags if they are clearly labeled with a new year and can't be used anyhow. **Motion made by Jamie Bowling to give everyone their tags. Motion was retracted.** Staff committed to further internal and ASMFC review.

Small Mesh Drift Gill Net Study

This study was approved by the Commission in 2024 and, unfortunately, could not get off the ground due to lack of participation based on the approved parameters as well as no intern on staff to observe trips. The study approved by the Commission included (1) 3-4 participants, (2) one drift gill net per participant, (3) mesh size ranging from 2 7/8" to 4" with maximum length of 1200 feet, (4) nets must be attended while fishing with a soak time of 1-3 hours, and up to 15 fishing days per month per participant and be made available to a PRFC observer, (5) July – October, 3 a.m. – 6 p.m., (6) only allowed in portion of Potomac River south of St. Clements Bay, (7) log the counts and approximate lengths of all species caught in the net, (8) all legal fish are permitted to be commercial sold with no harvest of any striped bass. Discussion: The committee expressed concerns that the original limits of one net of 1,200 feet were not economically viable. Suggestions included increasing the net length, flexible soak times, and broader participation and several new volunteers expressed interest in participating. Staff noted that they are considering 1,800 feet. However, the study needs to be done first to see if it's even feasible due to concerns about bycatch of striped bass or possible conflicts with crab pots. An audience member expressed concern that the original study created in the workgroup allowed 6,000 feet of net, not 1,200 feet that was presented to the Commission shown and noted that they are targeting spot, bluefish, and perch with the small mesh drift gill net. More than one net at 1,200 feet would be acceptable to the participants. Mrs. Braun-Ricks reminded the committee that we must have data before we can go forward with a fishery, and you can't do an experimental permit until we have a baseline for the Potomac River. No motion was made and staff stated they will refine the proposal based on comments by the committee and bring it back to the Commission.

There was no old business or new business reported.

Meeting adjourned 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Russell Sullivan, Chair