

**VIRGINIA MARINE RESOURCES COMMISSION
FINFISH MANAGEMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
380 FENWICK ROAD, FORT MONROE, VIRGINIA
VMRC COMMISSION ROOM
March 10, 2026 – 5:00 to 7:00 PM**

Members Present

- Ernest Bowden (Virtual)
- Will Bransom (Virtual)
- Alex Aspinwall
- Michael Lightfoot
- George Trice
- Skip Feller
- Mark Sanford
- John Bello
- Tom Powers
- Chris Ludford
- Alexander Perez

VMRC Staff Present

- Adam Kenyon
- Alexa Galván
- Jill Ramsey
- Catherine Wilhelm
- Chris Davis
- Ethan Simpson
- Joshua McGilly
- Lisa Pyle
- MPO Allen Marshall
- Jack Dearstine
- Matt Hargis

Members Absent

- Scott MacDonald
- Meade Amory
- Marcus Simes
- Jeff Deem

Others Present

- Charles Dryden
- Michael Brown
- Ernie Hux
- Monica Schenemann
- Nathan Everett
- John Balderson
- Todd Elder
- 1 other member of the public

Minutes prepared by Catherine Wilhelm

I. FMAC Welcome

Mr. Skip Feller was acting Chair to accommodate Chairman Ernest Bowden and Vice Chair Will Bransom, who attended the meeting virtually. Mr. Feller called the meeting to order at 5:03 pm.

II. Approval of Minutes from the August 28, 2025, Meeting

The minutes the August 28, 2025, meeting were approved unanimously.

III. Recreational Black Sea Bass Season

Mrs. Alexa Galván provided information about an estate planning resource for commercially licensed fishermen, now available on the VMRC website.

Mrs. Galván then presented the proposal for liberalization of the recreational black sea bass fishery and the payback of the February season. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries

Commission and Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council voted to liberalize the recreational black sea bass fishery by 20% coastwide, the southern region being granted a 16.5% liberalization. State management decisions are due on April 1, 2026. Two options were presented to the committee for input: 1) May 1 – Dec 31 season, 12.5” minimum, and a 15-bag limit or 2) April 1 – Dec 31, 13” minimum, and a 15-bag limit. Mr. Tom Powers clarified with staff that the February payback will be added to this new season, later asking if this closure could be taken at the beginning of option 2. Mr. Feller then asked if the March commission meeting time would conflict with the April 1st decision. Mrs. Galván replied if they chose the April 1st start, to the regulations would not be changed in time to open April 1, 2026, but would be able to open April 1, 2027, and the February payback could not be taken at the beginning of April. Several committee members expressed interest in maintaining the minimum size of 13” to match the February season. Committee members were also interested in the decision of Maryland and Delaware, stating that enforcement might be easier if all regulations match. Mrs. Galván stated that both states chose to open May 1 at 12.5”. Mr. Alex Aspinwall asked how many anglers were reaching the 15-bag limit, to which Mrs. Galván replied that bag limit had little effect on harvest, which implies that not many anglers are reaching their limit. Mr. Aspinwall moved to support option 1 for May 1 – December 31, 12.5 minimum size limit, and 15 fish bag limit, Mr. Powers seconded, and the motion passed, eight in favor, one against, and three abstains.

Mrs. Galván then presented the February black sea bass preliminary results. As of March 10th, 54% of anglers had reported a total of 88 trips with an estimated 26,958 lbs landed. Anglers have until March 15 to report, so staff are estimating total landings will be around 33,000 pounds. Staff asked for recommendations on the timing of the closure. Mr. Michael Lightfoot asked when the closure was taken in the past; Mr. Feller stated it was normally tacked onto the mid-season closure; Mrs. Galván said prior to the mid-season closure, it was generally taken starting June 1 at the recommendation of FMAC. Several committee members agreed with taking the closure as early as possible, desiring to have an uninterrupted season that minimized conflicts with other fisheries. Mr. Feller moved to support a closure from May 1 – 10, seconded by Mr. Powers. The motion passed, 11 in favor.

Committee members expressed concern over the number of out-of-state anglers participating in the February season, when all February landings must be paid back by Virginia. Members suggested limiting the February season to Virginia anglers only or requiring out-of-state angler landings to be removed from their respective states’ quota.

IV. Speckled Trout Cold Stun

Mr. Ethan Simpson presented information on the recent speckled trout cold stun events, including the Commission’s history of responses, and the management response of North Carolina during cold stun events, as well as the complications of adjusting the stock assessments for cold stuns. Stunned fish were observed at beginning of February, and sightings continued for several weeks. Cold stunned fish were sold commercially during this time, so staff closed the fishery in February when the quota was predicted to have been reached. Mr. Simpson clarified that staff are not necessarily looking for action from

the committee but are bringing it forward as a discussion point. Mr. Powers reminded staff that the cold stun was brought up at the FMAC meeting in February of 2025, and nothing was done. He suggested closing the fishery following such events to allow the remaining fish time to spawn. Mr. Aspinwall stated that there was no correlation seen between spawning stock biomass and cold stun events. Mr. Mark Sanford asked about the size of the fishery in the spring, and Mr. Simpson replied that it is a smaller fishery and a closure would be about an 11% reduction for the entire year. Acting Chief Kenyon told the committee that any closure would not be considered an emergency closure and could be in effect as soon as April 1st.

Mr. John Bello stated the need for a quantifiable reason for the closure, to which staff asked if the committee had suggestions on how to estimate the size of the event, in conjunction with the in-progress hotline for observations of a cold stun event. Several of the committee members suggested a water temperature monitoring system to capture the number of days below a certain temperature. Mr. Powers moved to suggest a closure of the recreational fishery from May 1 – July 1, Mr. Lightfoot seconded, and the motion failed, three in favor, seven against, and one abstain. Mr. Bello made a motion that staff work on defining the metrics for what constitutes a fish kill in terms of area, dead fish, temperature, and the effects on spawning stock biomass. The motion passed, seven in favor with four abstained. Mr. Ludford stated he believes the data is already available and the staff are being given a lot of work.

V. Striped Bass Temporary Quota Share Cap

Mrs. Jill Ramsey presented to the committee the history of the 2% striped bass temporary quota share cap regulation and activity. There are currently 337 Bay area permanent quota holders, 228 active Bay fisherman, and 11 fisherman who capped out at the 2%. Committee members agreed that increasing the percentage of the temporary quota cap would be the most useful to commercial watermen, though there were split opinions on whether this would increase the harvest of quota and if an increase would be beneficial. Mr. George Trice brought forward the motion to increase the cap to 4%. Acting Chief Kenyon stated that a 4% cap would bring the allowance of quota for one fisherman to ~36,000 lbs and Mrs. Ramsey clarified that this would eliminate some of the quota transfers. Mr. Lightfoot seconded Mr. Trice's motion to raise the temporary quota cap from 2% to 4% and the motion passed, 10 in favor and one against.

Mr. Bransom recommended tags be made available sooner in the year to start the season earlier, a suggestion committee members had split opinions on. During public comment, Mr. Charles Dryden, commercial waterman, agreed with the increase in the quota cap to 4%, but did not agree with the earlier season, citing price reasons.

VI. Commercial Amberjack and Spadefish Discussion

Mr. Joshua McGilly presented the background information on the SG-1 permit and the Virginia amberjack and Atlantic spadefish fishery. The SG-1 permit is a limited entry permit for states in the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC). Virginia is not a part of this council, has no way to report harvest to them, and does not receive quota from them. Therefore, the SG-1 permit does not and can not apply to Virginia.

Amberjack and Atlantic spadefish are both managed by SAFMC. Current VMRC commercial regulations on these species are as follows: there is a 2-fish possession limit for amberjack, and 6-fish limit for commercial hook-and-line for Atlantic spadefish. Recreationally, there have been no amberjack landings reported from 2019-2024, and Atlantic spadefish are experiencing declining landings. This discussion was brought forth at the desire of Mr. Todd Elder, who wished to use this permit to land more amberjack and Atlantic spadefish in Virginia.

Mr. Powers stated that Atlantic spadefish currently have a 4-fish recreational limit to keep the population viable, so increasing the limit for commercial would not be beneficial. Mr. Ludford wanted to increase commercial availability, as the current limits on Atlantic spadefish have no scientific base. Mr. Sanford thought the commercial hook-and-line licensees should be able to catch the same amount of Atlantic spadefish as any other gear commercially. Mr. Powers expressed concern about conflicting user interest due to the limited number of wrecks where these species are found. Mr. Alexander Perez stated that the offshore windfarm may change these numbers and asked if staff think that it will affect these numbers. Mr. McGilly replied that he did not know. Acting Chief Kenyon then clarified for Mr. Elder that outside of state waters, the limit of 6 Atlantic spadefish does not apply to spearfishing. Mr. Sanford made a motion to increase the commercial hook-and-line gear limit to be increased to a 500 lbs landing limit, which was seconded by Mr. Ludford. The motion passed with seven in favor, two against, and two abstains.

Mr. Lightfoot stated that this may be the beginning for more discussion of these less caught species and asked for a conversation at a later meeting on southern species experiencing a range expansion into Virginia waters.

VII. Public Comment for Items not on the Agenda

Mr. Bello reminded staff that the committee asked for a discussion on tarpon on the next agenda, to which Acting Chief Kenyon replied staff wanted to include the topic on a less busy agenda.

Mr. John Balderson, commercial waterman, agreed with the increase in striped bass temporary quota cap and expressed a desire to have the committee discuss an earlier start to the striped bass season. Acting Chief Kenyon replied that staff have received several suggestions supporting an earlier opening, and there would need to be more thought on the structure of the striped bass tag program to allow this due to administrative burden. Mr. Ludford remarked that Mr. Dryden stated earlier his opposition to an earlier season and suggested the committee should talk to the fisherman more. Ms. Monica Schenemann, commercial waterman, stated that all watermen appreciate Mrs. Ramsey and suggested the committee and watermen should find a way to relieve the administrative burden while allowing an earlier start time. Acting Chief Kenyon agreed to put the early season discussion on the next FMAC agenda. Mr. Nathan Everett, commercial waterman, asked for clarification on the striped bass temporary quota cap discussion, and appreciates the suggestion to increase quota cap. He stated the striped bass fishery has been ignored except for imposing restrictions on the fishery and

questioned if items brought before the committee make it to Commission. Mr. Lightfoot asked Acting Chief Kenyon about the presence of ice further up the river effecting the striped bass harvest and about extending the maximum size further into the season. Acting Chief Kenyon stated the Commission discussed this in February and there were no motions to make regulatory changes to the season.

Mr. Elder commented on the amberjack and cobia quota, stating that the cobia limit of 2-fish commercially should be increased since he doesn't believe Virginia meets their quota. He asked the committee if spearfishing should be allowed in Virginia state waters. Mr. Feller asked about the removal of Mr. Elder's experimental spearfish fishery permit. Acting Chief Kenyon stated the use of the experimental gear permit was to explore potential fisheries for viability and because the experimental spearfish permit only had one user for several years and not enough data to determine its use, it was not renewed. Mr. Sanford told Mr. Elder to reapply for the permit, see what staff say, and then bring it back to the committee.

VIII. Adjourn

Meeting was adjourned at 7:37 pm.