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AMENDMENT 3 FOR ATLANTIC MENHADEN

Background

Menhaden, which anglers lovingly refer to as “bunkers,” play key roles as forage for iconic Chesapeake creatures like rockfish (striped bass) and ospreys, but their numbers in the Bay have sunk alarmingly low over the past twenty years. The downturn has damaged both the Bay ecosystem and the watermen who depend on the fish for bait.



Restoring menhaden numbers will benefit both ecological and economic interests throughout the Bay region. A healthy stock in the future will lead to increased harvest opportunities for the commercial fisheries that depend on this vital species, including the crab fishery, which uses menhaden as bait in the hundreds of thousands of crab pots set every day up and down the Chesapeake; and the industrial “reduction” fishery based in Reedville, Virginia.

To rebuild the menhaden stock for both their ecological and economic roles, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) in May of 2015 initiated development of Amendment 3 to the fishes’ current management plan. Since then, ASMFC staff, scientists, and advisors have worked to produce a range of ecological models and management options.

Amendment 3 will update state-by-state quota allocations for the fisheries and establish a system for ecological management. It is critical that the ASMFC establish *interim* ecological reference points now that account for the important role menhaden play in coastal ecosystems, as the fish and the predators that depend on them need that protection without further delay. This amendment is an historic opportunity to protect menhaden, for both fish and fishermen.

CBF believes the following issues in Draft Amendment 3 are the most important to ensure a robust population of this important forage fish.

Reference Points

Now is the moment to implement ecological management for menhaden by adopting Option E for Issue 2.6. It’s high time to move away from “single species” management and adopt an ecosystem approach that takes the menhaden’s ecological roles into account. The best available science supports

Option E: managing to a target of 75 percent of the total menhaden biomass before allowing large-scale fishing. It is crucial for us to manage a key forage species like menhaden to maintain the population at its target level so the fish can fulfill their roles in the coastal food web. Aiming for the target will ensure that the stock never drops below the overfished threshold of 40 percent. Science tells us that this plan will reduce the impact of fishing on menhaden predators and help menhaden continue to expand back into the northern and southern parts of their former range, while still providing ongoing and substantial yields to fisheries.

Quota Rollovers

Quota Rollovers should not be allowed (Option A). There is no reason to implement a quota rollover program for any segment of the menhaden fishery. Menhaden are available to the various commercial fisheries throughout much of the year, leaving ample time for the various fisheries to catch their quotas. In addition, due to the importance of menhaden to the Chesapeake Bay and coastal ecosystems, rolling quota over to the next year can inflate the catch in that year beyond the level determined to be ecologically sustainable.

Incidental Catch and Small-Scale Fisheries

The current management plan exempts bycatch from inclusion in the quota, allowing millions of pounds of fish to go uncounted. To ensure a managed fishery, all landings of menhaden should be included in the coastwide Total Allowable Catch (TAC). To accomplish this objective, **Option F—counting all catch—is clearly the best choice.** By more fairly distributing quota, the plan can count all fishing methods under the limit.

Chesapeake Bay Reduction Fishery Cap

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest nursery for menhaden on the Atlantic Coast. Thus, the Chesapeake Bay Reduction Fishery Cap remains an essential fisheries management tool for minimizing localized depletion. To help rebuild the population of menhaden in the Bay, **Option B—reducing the cap for the Chesapeake, is the best option** to further protect this important nursery area. As with the Atlantic Coastal Fishery, quota rollovers in the Chesapeake Bay should not be allowed.

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