

Following worrying rockfish population data, Maryland looks to cancel spring trophy season for 2024

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After five straight years of troubling data on the population of young rockfish in the Chesapeake Bay, Maryland officials plan to enact emergency regulations canceling this spring's trophy season for

recreational anglers.

The rules would eliminate the once exciting two weeks each spring when anglers targeted large fish swimming up the bay to spawn. But this period had been delayed from April into May in recent years in an effort to protect the spawning fish, which diminished its allure.

"That's the time when Maryland fishermen have access to what is essentially a large, oceanic fish," said Lynn Fegley, director of fishing and boating services at Maryland's Department of Natural Resources. "But given the very low recruitment—baby striped bass numbers—we've had successively over the last few years, we are moving to just give the fish a break."

The emergency rules were spurred by a troubling so-called young-of-the-year survey, released in October, that found juvenile striped bass numbers in the Chesapeake Bay at their second-worst result since the survey began in the 1950s. It marked the fifth successive year showing numbers well below the historical average.

Under the new rules proposed by the department, Chesapeake Bay anglers wouldn't be able to catch and keep rockfish, also known as striped bass, until May 16 next year. In the Susquehanna Flats, located at the mouth of the Susquehanna River near Perryville, Maryland's newly proposed rules would push back the start date until June 1.

State officials said that the delayed opening in the flats, where many striped bass end their journeys from the Atlantic Ocean to spawn, is an attempt to further protect large adult fish lingering in the sprawling underwater grass beds near the Susquehanna, so they can produce more young.

"It's a broad, shallow area, and it's frequented by these spawning fish for

that month of May," Fegley said.

The regulations will go next before a General Assembly committee for review.

Maryland DNR officials also previously discussed extending the two-week summer closure, aimed to curtail fishing during the hottest time of the year, when the fish are the most vulnerable.

That option is "still on the table" for this year, Fegley said. But to address the springtime fishery, DNR needed to act more quickly with an emergency regulation, she said.

Extending the summer closure, which ran July 16 to July 31 this year, is unpopular among some anglers and charter boat captains, who argued that their businesses would face substantial losses by missing out on even more lucrative summer trips.

But the latest figures released by Maryland might necessitate a longer closure, in the eyes of natural resources officials.

During last summer's juvenile rockfish survey, at 22 sites in the Choptank, Nanticoke and Potomac rivers, as well as the upper Chesapeake Bay, researchers trawled a seine net, and—on average—only caught one recently hatched striper. Historically, they caught an average of 11 young fish per trawl.

Maryland officials think that warm, dry winters in the Chesapeake region could be drawing stripers up into the rivers to spawn earlier than normal, when there's less availability of a key food source for the hatching fish: zooplankton.

Allison Colden, Maryland executive director at the Chesapeake Bay

Foundation, said she was heartened by DNR's new regulations aimed at protecting fish in the springtime.

"I personally feel like we're at a point where every fish counts—even if it's not a huge slice of the pie," she said.

But to see change, Colden said, greater action is likely needed in Maryland and along the coast. For example, she feels that a longer summer closure is warranted for the Chesapeake.

Captain Brian Hardman of Kent Island-based Lead Dog Charters, said that while he will lose some business because of the trophy season closure, it isn't a huge amount. Last year, he only took a few trips during the two-week period in early May.

"The reality of it is: The fish are spawning earlier, and there hasn't been that many large, female fish in the beginning of May to begin with," he said.

Many customers opted to wait until the summer season started so that they'd be able to keep more fish, Hardman said. On a boat with six customers, Hardman said he only expected to catch up to three trophy-sized fish, if any.

Hardman said he was surprised that DNR is not also ending the catch-and-release fishery, which is allowed in certain areas of the Chesapeake through March, before striped bass fishing is banned in April for spawning time.

Hardman said that since warmer weather is prompting the striped bass to spawn earlier, he feels this might be a necessary step. During that period, many charter boats remain on shore for the winter, Hardman said, but recreational fishermen are among those still pursuing their catch.

"Everything is earlier, so their answer is: I'll have a closure later?" he said.

In addition to the Maryland-specific regulations proposed by DNR on Wednesday, the multi-state commission in charge of striped bass management along the entire East Coast also is considering big changes for the fishery.

A new proposal by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission would reduce the total catch for commercial fishing boats by up to 14.5%, compared to 2022 figures.

It also would set narrower size limits for recreational anglers in the bay and in the Atlantic. Called "slot limits," these rules set upper and lower restrictions on the size of rockfish that can be harvested. In some of the options suggested by the commission, boats would be allowed to keep only one fish per angler—even charter boats. In Maryland, charter boats previously were allowed to keep two fish per person while recreational boats could only keep one.

Hardman said he's concerned that a one-fish limit could "decimate" business. Many of his charter customers only come fishing once a year, and allowing them to keep just one fish feels unfair, when recreational fishermen with their own boats can go fishing day after day and take one striped bass on each occasion.

The Atlantic States commission will be accepting public comment on the different options for the new rockfish rules online and at a meeting Dec. 6 in Annapolis. The commission will vote on the new rules at its January meeting.

Next year, the commission also will release a stock assessment for the entire population of striped bass, as opposed to Maryland's numbers that

focused just on young [fish](#).

Those figures should be illustrative, Colden said, since they will show for the first time how significantly the bad population figures for young rockfish over the past five years are impacting the entire stock.

"A lot of people are really holding their breath for this 2024 stock assessment," Colden said. "I think that's when the rubber is really going to hit the road."

For the time being, it seems as though the overall stock level is high enough that fisheries managers will not need to pursue a full-fledged fishing moratorium for striped bass, which was last done from 1985 to 1990, rescuing the fishery from the brink of collapse.

"While [striped bass](#) are on a downturn, we're not back where we were in 1985," Fegley said, "and it's our hope that we can really be proactive as a state, and as a coast, and not have to go back there."

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