



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

House Bill 947

Department of Natural Resources – Commercial Blue and Flathead Catfish Finfish Trotline License – Alterations

Date: February 27, 2026

To: House Environment & Transportation Committee

Position: **UNFAVORABLE**

From: Dr. Allison Colden,
MD Executive Director

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) **OPPOSES House Bill 947** which expands the scope of the existing finfish trotline license for blue and flathead catfish to allow licensees to use gill nets with mesh sizes up to 7 inches.

Blue catfish were first introduced in the 1970s and 1980s in Virginia to develop a recreational fishery. Since then, these highly invasive fish have rapidly expanded their range into nearly every Chesapeake Bay tributary. Blue catfish are voracious generalist predators that feed on native species such as menhaden, striped bass, eel, shad, river herring, and blue crabs. In areas where blue catfish populations have been established, catfish make up approximately 75% of the total fish weight of all fish inhabiting the river.

CBF has long supported regulations that would facilitate the commercial harvest and removal of blue catfish to minimize its negative effects, including the creation of the special commercial trotline license that is the subject of HB 947. However, gill nets are a non-specific fishing gear, meaning the nets can capture and kill any species that encounter them, not just catfish. Given the likelihood of interactions with other commercial species (e.g. striped bass, white perch) and federally endangered species (e.g. Atlantic sturgeon), expanding the use of gill nets should be considered carefully.

For example, Maryland's iconic striped bass fishery is currently under significant stress due to six consecutive years of reproductive failure. Since striped bass spend most of their early life in Chesapeake Bay waters, protecting these resident fish so they may grow to a mature, reproductive size is critical. Because of these concerns, commercial striped bass gill nets are limited to a mesh size of 5 to 7 inches to avoid catching under- and oversized striped bass to minimize the number of fish discarded from the net. HB 947 has no such protection, allowing gill nets up to 7 inches, which could include bycatch of striped bass larger than 31 inches. This is of particular concern because 31 inches is the expected size of the 2015 year class of striped bass – the last strong year class currently contributing most to spawning. Allowing the proliferation of non-selective gear with small mesh size to an additional approximately 400 trotline license holders annually could significantly jeopardize striped bass recovery.

Before expanding the gear types used to target catfish, more attention must be paid to the barriers to catfish processing and distribution that limit the market for Maryland's invasive catfish. Without markets and infrastructure to sell catfish into, actions that increase catfish harvest will only serve to drive down the price per pound of catfish and further disincentivize harvesters from targeting them over other high-value species.

CBF urges the Committee's UNFAVORABLE report on HB 947.

For more information, please contact Matt Stegman, Maryland Staff Attorney, at mstegman@cbf.org.

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The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) is a non-profit environmental education and advocacy organization dedicated to the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay. With over 200,000 members and e-subscribers, including 71,000 in Maryland alone, CBF works to educate the public and to protect the interest of the Chesapeake and its resources.