



Maryland Department of Agriculture

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Legislative Comment

Date: January 21, 2021

BILL NUMBER: Senate Joint Resolution 4

SHORT TITLE: Natural Resources – Fishing – Wild-Caught Blue Catfish

MDA POSITION: Support

EXPLANATION:

Senate Joint Resolution 4 urges the United States Congress to amend specified federal law and return federal oversight responsibilities related to the processing and inspection of wild invasive catfish caught in the Chesapeake Bay to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The blue catfish is an invasive species that is found in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. In order to control the population, it is crucial to increase the commercial harvest and consumption of this fish. By exempting blue catfish from inspection rules promulgated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, this would enable more blue catfish to be processed and harvested.

The blue catfish harvest has increased steadily in Maryland. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the most recent records, for 2018, show a harvest of 2.8 million pounds. In 2017, 1.7 million pounds were harvested.

The harvest in prior years is as follows: 2017 - 1,741,955 pounds; 2015 - 935,132 pounds; 2014 - 528,546 pounds; and 2013 - 316,760 pounds.

The Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) Seafood Marketing Program has promoted blue catfish through advertising, media relations and direct-to-consumer sampling since 2017. In the most recent NOAA information, from 2019, it shows the value of the blue catfish caught by Maryland watermen to be \$1,134,435. In 2018, it brought in \$1,082,032, and in 2013, \$164,907.

MDA's advertising – billboards, radio, events – has created more than 13 million impressions for blue catfish among consumers. MDA worked with the Maryland Restaurant Association in 2020

on a blue catfish cooking competition for chefs to advance to the World Food Championships Chef Challenge in Dallas, Texas.

Blue catfish processors, Capital Seaboard, JJ McDonnell, Reliant Seafood and ProFish in Washington, D.C., could benefit with more flexible processing schedules through the FDA. One of the state's largest seafood companies, Congressional Seafood, is no longer processing blue catfish due to difficulties with the USDA inspection processing schedule. With more available processing capacity and steady supplies at the FDA, the market for the catfish has the potential to increase, thus potentially increasing the profitability of seafood processors and opening additional markets for watermen while combating an invasive species. DNR reports that 55 watermen harvested blue catfish in 2019.

If you have additional questions, please contact Cassie Shirk, Director of Legislation and Governmental Affairs, at cassie.shirk@maryland.gov or 410-841-5886.