



Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor
Josh Kurtz, Secretary
David Goshorn, Deputy Secretary

March 4, 2025

BILL NUMBER: Senate Bill 960 – First Reader

SHORT TITLE: Natural Resources – Blue Catfish – Population Control

DEPARTMENT’S POSITION: SUPPORT

EXPLANATION OF DEPARTMENT’S POSITION

The Department supports and actively engages in controlling the distribution and impacts of invasive species. Within guidance of the state’s Aquatic Nuisance Species plan and the Fishery Management Plan for Tidewater Catfish, it has and will continue to support harvest by commercial and recreational means as a way of reducing biomass of invasive blue catfish.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Commercial landings for blue catfish lessens during July and August owed to poorer catchability of the fish using some commercial gears, as well as a reduced number of commercial harvesters in the fishery during that time. While fish processors supplement orders using frozen catfish during this time, it would be advantageous for biomass control to exert additional harvest and increase catfish removals during these months using a responsible approach.

The department has a catfish fishery management plan that includes invasive catfish. That enables the department to create pilot programs. There is currently a finfish trotline pilot program accepting applications for harvesting in areas currently prohibited. The logistics of these pilot programs are crafted by the agency’s biologists and species managers in coordination with the Invasive Catfish Advisory Committee, which is composed of members from commercial, recreational and other sectors of the invasive catfish fishery. The committee has been focused on working with the agency to develop a pilot project enabling trotlines in currently prohibited areas and allowing commercial sale of blue catfish harvested during charter trips, which is also currently prohibited.

The department currently permits electrofishing for scientific sampling of fishes and permittees are required in many cases to alert the department to days when sampling occurs. User conflicts can and do occur during the course of electrofishing, particularly when constituents fish areas where they see electrofishing is or has recently occurred. Additionally, there are safety issues relating to the use of electrofishing. Department staff are required through Standard Operating Procedures to take safety courses provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. For scientific collection, permittees are required to obtain training in order to use electrofishing.

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As for the changes to finfish trotlines, the agency does not have any rules prohibiting non-corrodible hooks for finfish trotlines or the number of hooks on a trotline. So those are allowed currently. There is also no limit on the maximum number of finfish trotlines a person may use. There is a 1200 feet length maximum, so the bill would double the length of the line. This may create user conflicts in some areas. The Invasive Catfish Advisory Committee voted in 2024 to maintain the current 1200 feet length maximum for finfish trotlines.

BILL EXPLANATION

The bill would require the Department to create a blue catfish electrofishing pilot program. It also allows the use of finfish trotlines up to 2400 feet in length, unlimited numbers of hooks, and use of non-corrodible hooks. It requires the Department of Agriculture to create a report by September 1, 2025.