MARYLAND
DEPARTMENT OF
NATURAL RESOURCES

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

February 4, 2025

BILL NUMBER: **Senate Bill 87 – First Reader**

SHORT TITLE**: Fisheries - Striped Bass or Rockfish - Juvenile Survey**

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: **OPPOSE**

EXPLANATION OF DEPARTMENT'S POSITION

The Department opposes Senate Bill SB87. The existing Striped Bass Young-of-the-Year (YOY) Survey provides results that have been proven scientifically valid and are mirrored by similar surveys in Maryland and other states along the Atlantic Coast.This survey helps scientists track how many striped bass are expected to be available to catch in the next 4-5 years.

The survey focuses on striped bass that are approximately 2 inches long in July, having just hatched from eggs in the previous 3 months. They are referred to as young-of-year (YOY) or juvenile fish. The survey does not study fish "approximately 18 inches in length." A fish this size is approximately 4 years old.

The study has been conducted since 1954, has been subject to independent peer review, and is accepted by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission as a reliable index of future striped bass abundance. Survey results have been reviewed and validated several times as reliable indicators of annual spawning success.

Striped bass spawning areas were first identified in the 1950s by documenting the presence of striped bass eggs. Eleven spawning areas were documented: Upper Bay, Potomac River, Choptank River, Nanticoke River, Patuxent River, Wicomico River, Blackwater River, Pocomoke River, Transquaking River, Chester River, Manokin River. Rivers sampled that did **not** produce striped bass eggs were the Big Annemessex, Bush, Gunpowder, Miles, Severn, and Wye East.

Twenty-two YOY survey sites are located in the 4 largest spawning areas: Upper Bay, Potomac River, Choptank River, Nanticoke River. These areas represent approximately 96% of the known spawning area in Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. At sites distributed through the areas that did not produce striped bass eggs, DNR staff routinely conduct fish surveys for other species, so data are available to validate the results from the spawning areas. Results of the juvenile survey indicate if annual reproduction was average, above-average, or below-average. This information is important to fisheries managers because striped bass populations are dependent on occasional years of above-average reproduction.

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The strength of the survey data is the consistent methods over a long time period. Consistent methods at the same locations allow year-to-year comparisons. Survey results are a measure of striped bass spawning success. Adding new survey areas will not allow valid comparisons to previous years.

Fish community data exists from multiple rivers listed in Senate Bill SB87. Survey methods similar to those of the Striped Bass YOY Survey have been used to monitor fish populations in several mid-Bay rivers since the mid-1990s. Results from Chester and Patapsco rivers offer the most complete time-series and closely resemble trends documented by the Striped Bass YOY Survey. Results from the South, West, Miles, Magothy, Patapsco, Rhode and Tred Avon rivers show poor reproduction in recent years, just as the Striped Bass YOY survey does. Results from these additional surveys are statistically correlated with results of the existing Striped Bass YOY Survey. These monitoring efforts would alert DNR scientists if striped bass spawning was shifting into other areas.

In 2024, DNR staff conducted fish surveys at 21 sites distributed through the West, Miles, Magothy, Patapsco, Rhode and Tred Avon rivers. Results from these areas were similar to those of the existing Striped Bass YOY Survey. If data from these additional rivers were included in the calculation of the Juvenile Striped Bass Index, the index would be lowered from 2.0 to 1.2. This is strong evidence that these rivers are not supporting unknown populations of YOY striped bass. Poor striped bass spawning success in recent years is a wide-spread phenomenon, with similar trends in New York, New Jersey, and Virginia surveys.

In February 2025, the Chesapeake Bay Program is bringing together regional fisheries scientists to review our survey designs and discuss factors that may be contributing to low recruitment in the Chesapeake Bay. Results will be shared with the public, and appropriate next steps will be addressed. DNR has concerns that if recommendations are provided by this workshop to conduct additional sampling, limited resources will be further strained if they need to comply with legislated survey design.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A similar bill was introduced in 2024 (SB711/HB1232).

BILL EXPLANATION

The bill requires the Department to add up to 20 additional survey sampling sites for the young-of-the-year juvenile striped bass survey in certain state waters.