

JAY A. JACOBS
Legislative District 36
Caroline, Cecil, Kent, and
Queen Anne's Counties

Environment and Transportation
Committee

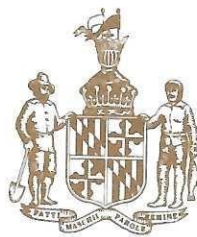
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Joint Committee on Administrative,
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 309
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3449 · 301-858-3449
800-492-7122 Ext. 3449
Fax 410-841-3093 · 301-858-3093
Jay.Jacobs@house.state.md.us

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HB1249 Natural Resources-Blue Catfish-Population Control

Chairman, Korman, Vice Chair Boyce and the members of The Environment and Transportation Committee:

Today I present HB1249 which is legislation for the purpose of establishing regulations of the Department of Natural Resources governing the catching of blue catfish. First the Department shall establish a pilot program to permit the use of electrofishing. The legislation also requires the Department to authorize the use of finfish trotlines of up to 2400 feet in length, also not set a limit on the number of hooks and authorize the use of hooks that are not corrodible.

Currently, Virginia is the only jurisdiction in the bay watershed to permit commercial electrofishing for blue catfish, though even there it's tightly limited. The state has issued just three permits, one each for portions of the James, Rappahannock and Pamunkey rivers. Electrofishing is allowed from April 30 to mid-October, and for only 4 ½ days per week.

In Virginia, the three electrofishing permit holders account for around 11% of Virginia's overall blue catfish harvest, a disproportionate share of the record

3.2 million pounds landed in 2023 by a total of 114 commercial harvesters. Virginia's watermen, anxious to counter the losses of crabs and native finfish to voracious blue catfish, want the Virginia Marine Resources Commission to relax its curbs on electrofishing.

Maryland, which tried unsuccessfully to get a federal disaster declared in its waters, is seeking to deplete its invasive catfish population. It has no limits on the size that can be caught, and it has expanded the types of gear that can be used for commercial harvest though it does not permit electrofishing. Unlike many other types of fishing gear, this type of electrofishing does not affect any fish with scales because of the low frequency. This allows the electrofishing boats to target only catfish, without affecting any other fish nearby. Any catfish not scooped up in the nets will swim away after a few minutes, resulting in an efficient fishing method with no by catch.

As some of you may recall, while we visited Lake Habeeb at Rocky Gap, we witnessed a similar practice of stunning the fish for scientific reasons. Those fish all had scales, so the power frequency used was much higher than the frequency proposed for the catfish. But the two had similar results.

This legislation also proposes to authorize the trotline length to 2400 feet instead of the current 1200. The legislation also removes any limit of hooks on the trotline and removes the corrodible hook provisions because those hooks barely last 5 days in the upper bay regions of the Chesapeake Bay.

I ask the Committee for a favorable vote on HB1249