HB889.pdf
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Queen Anne's Counties

Environment and Transportation
Committee

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Motor Vehicle and Transportation

Natural Resources, Agriculture,
and Open Space

Local Government and Bicounty Agencies

Joint Committee on Administrative,
Executive, and Legislative Review

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

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HB889-Fisheries-Striped Bass or Rockfish-Juvenile Survey

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

Today I am here to present HB889 which expands the scope of the annual young of the year juvenile survey of striped bass by adding more sites in the mid bay region of the Chesapeake Bay.

Currently the Department of Natural Resources conducts samplings in 4 areas of the Chesapeake Bay and tributaries consisting of the Upper Bay Region, the Potomac River, the Nanticoke River and the Choptank River. These areas are located basically in the north and the south regions of the bay. The total number of sites surveyed in these 4 areas is 22. This young of the year sampling has been done in these areas since 1954.

The sampling is done on a monthly basis in July, August, and September in these 4 areas. As you can notice by the chart provided in my testimony, there is no sampling done in any of the mid bay region, or in the Magothy, Severn, Chester, South, West, and Miles rivers, or the Eastern Bay. I know that spawning does take place in many of these areas because I have witnessed it myself.

This legislation seeks to expand sampling sites in the above-mentioned areas from 12 to 20 additional sites. We all want good and accurate science when making proper conservation decisions. For the last several years, an estimated 90% of the biomass including female spawning fish along with the unlimited 14, 16, 18 inch fish which are juveniles 1, 2, and 3 years old have stayed in the mid bay area. We know that because that is where the majority of recreational and charter boats have fished consistently.

Due to climate change, a lack of sav's, the shifting of bottom areas from silting and pollution from harmful nutrients entering from the Conowingo Dam's reservoir, in addition to the massive number of the invasive and predatory blue catfish and snake head, the normal pattern of the juvenile rockfish has undoubtedly been changed.

By adding these additional sites to the historic 4 river locations that have been an area of sampling for 71 years, the Department of Natural Resources will have a more complete understanding of the bay wide juvenile numbers which will be a much more comprehensive understanding of the juvenile indices.

I ask for your favorable vote for HB889

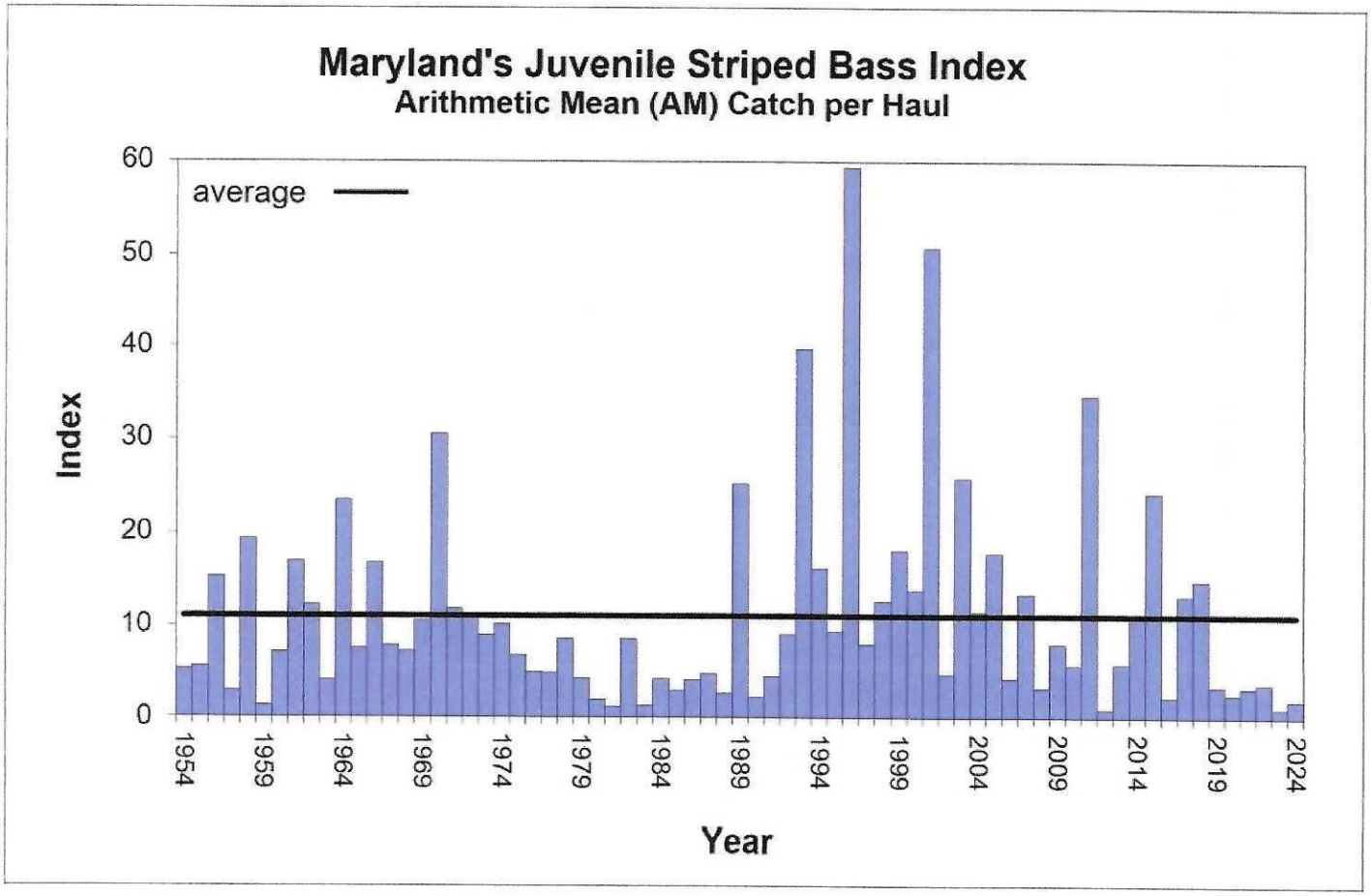
Efforts to rebuild the Atlantic Coast population of striped bass have been ongoing for several years. Although recent population estimates indicate improvement, low levels of reproduction will influence future conservation measures under consideration by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

Biologists use a seine net to capture fish for the annual striped bass juvenile index survey in the Nanticoke River. Photo by Joe Zimmermann, Maryland DNR

In recent years, Maryland has implemented management actions aimed at rebuilding the spawning stock, including reductions to catch limits, increased protections for spawning fish, tighter slot limits, and season closures. However, warm conditions in winter continue to negatively impact the reproductive success of striped bass, whose larvae are very sensitive to water conditions and food availability in the first several weeks after hatching. Other species with similar spawning behavior such as white perch, yellow perch, and American shad also experienced below-average reproduction this year.

The below-average year classes will likely become more apparent among the adult population of striped bass in the coming years, as the juveniles reach maturity. While environmental conditions hamper reproductive success, fisheries managers focus conservation efforts on adult striped bass so that the spawning population can produce a strong year class when environmental conditions are favorable.

The Virginia Institute of Marine Science conducts a similar survey in the southern portion of Chesapeake Bay.



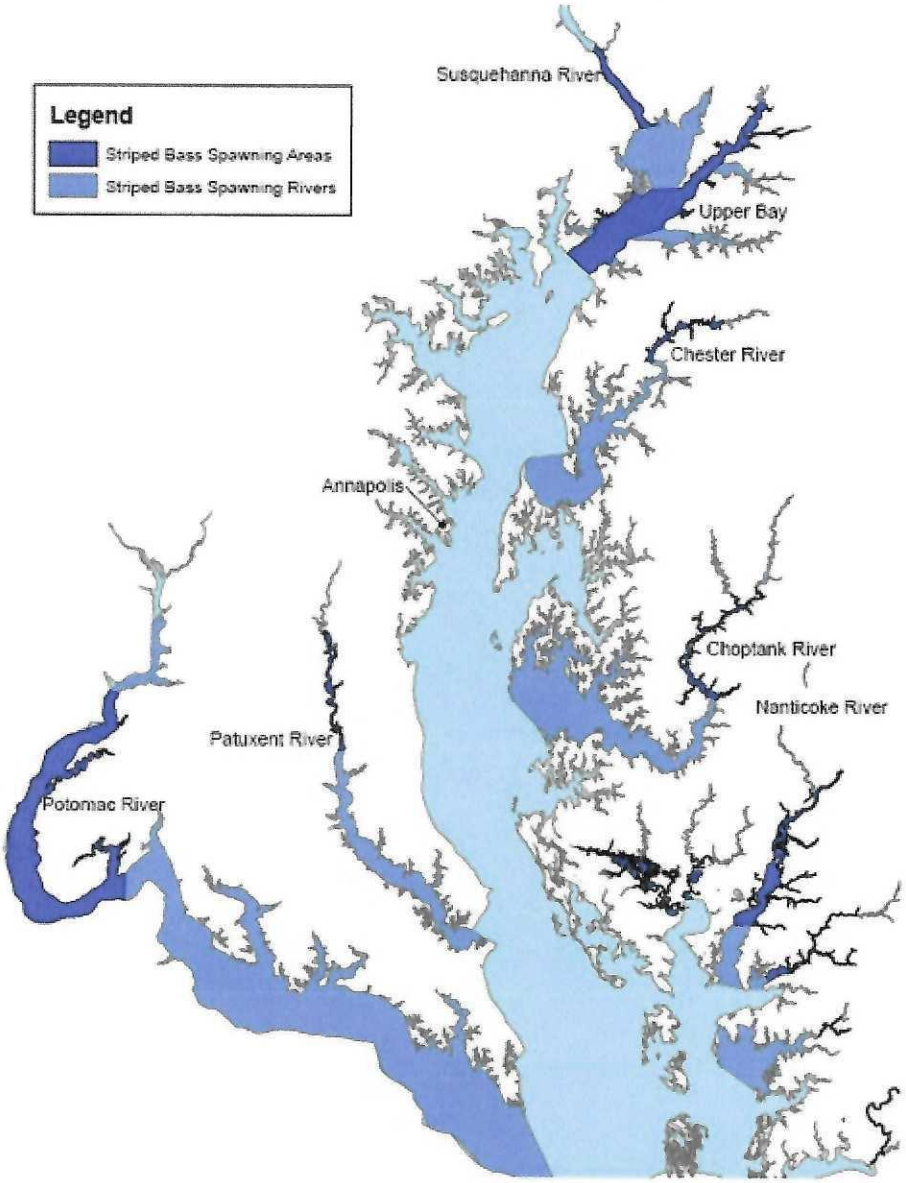
A juvenile striped bass caught and released by a survey crew in the Nanticoke River. Photo by Joe Zimmermann, Maryland DNR.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources announced results of this year's juvenile striped bass survey, which tracks the reproductive success of Maryland's state fish in the Chesapeake Bay. The 2024 young-of-year index is 2.0, well below the long-term average of 11.0, and marks the sixth consecutive year of poor reproduction.

"These results underscore the complexity of managing a coastal migratory species whose life-cycle is influenced by environmental conditions during a brief spawning period," said Maryland DNR Fishing and Boating Services Director Lynn Fegley. "We will continue to explore ways to conserve and enhance the spawning population during this time when we are adding fewer young fish to the population."

During this annual survey, fishery managers examine 22 sites located in four major striped bass spawning areas: the Choptank, Nanticoke, and Potomac rivers, and the upper Chesapeake Bay. Biologists visit each site three times per summer, collecting fish with two sweeps of a 100-foot beach seine net. The index represents the average number of young-of-year striped bass found in each sample. The juvenile striped bass average less than 3 inches long and are not usually encountered by anglers. Similar fish surveys conducted this summer in the Patapsco, Magothy, Rhode, West, Miles, and Tred Avon rivers found fewer striped bass, also known as rockfish.

Biologists captured more than 56,000 fish of 56 different species while conducting this year's survey. Encouraging results were documented regarding two species lower on the food chain. Menhaden abundance was nearly equal to last year, which was the highest measured since 1990. Spot abundance was the highest measured since 1988. These species are vital to the ecology of the Bay as a food source for many other species of fish and wildlife.


Legend
Striped Bass Spawning Areas
Striped Bass Spawning Rivers
Susquehanna River
Upper Bay
Chester River
Annapolis
Choptank River
Nanticoke River
Patuxent River
Potomac River

HB889 Fisheries - Striped Bass or Rockfish - Juven

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February 19, 2025

The Honorable Marc Korman
Chair, Environment and Transportation Committee
The Honorable Regina T. Boyce
Vice Chair, Environment and Transportation Committee
250 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Chair Korman and Vice Chair Boyce,

We are writing to express our **support** for **House Bill 889 Fisheries - Striped Bass or Rockfish - Juvenile Survey.**

HB889 expands the scope of the annual young-of-the-year juvenile striped bass survey by adding additional sampling sites in the Chesapeake Bay. Each year, Maryland's Young-of-Year Striped Bass Survey provides important information on the reproductive success of striped bass. The survey, which has been conducted since the 1950s, also helps identify trends through the collection of long-term data. Biologists, fisheries management experts, and commercial industry members, however, are noting shifts in the migration and spawning patterns of Maryland's striped bass. These shifts are likely driven by changing weather patterns, water quality, invasive species, and habitat loss. We believe it is important to better understand these shifts by collecting additional data in other regions of the Bay. Adding new sampling sites will help build on the success of the Young-of-Year Survey and provide informative data that acknowledges our changing environment.

We thank you in advance for your consideration and respectfully request a favorable report for HB889.

Sincerely,

Herman Jeffrey Harrison
President

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Position: UNF

CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Environmental Protection and Restoration
Environmental Education

House Bill 889
Fisheries – Striped Bass or Rockfish – Juvenile Survey

Date: February 19, 2024
To: Environment & Transportation Committee

Position: **UNFAVORABLE**
From: Allison Colden, Executive Director

Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) **OPPOSES House Bill 889.** HB 889 would require the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to include additional sampling locations in its annual juvenile striped bass survey within the central portion of Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

Maryland's striped bass juvenile survey annually samples 22 fixed locations using a seine net. Each location is sampled multiple times, resulting in 132 samples collected each year. The data from this survey is used to determine the state's "juvenile index" which tracks the relative abundance and trends in juvenile striped bass. This survey, which has run continuously since 1954, is a critical source of data for the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's striped bass stock assessment and the longest running dataset included in the assessment (*see table below*).

Chesapeake Bay is the most important spawning ground for striped bass along the East Coast. More than 75% of all striped bass coastwide are spawned in Chesapeake Bay; therefore, the ability to monitor the spawning success and survival of young striped bass accurately and effectively in Maryland is critical for managers working to sustainably manage this iconic species.

HB 889 proposes adding several new sample sites to existing survey locations. While shifts in sampling locations and the inclusion of auxiliary sample locations have occurred in the past, changes to this long-running dataset should not be made lightly. Based on concerns from stakeholders and the General Assembly, DNR has initiated an effort to evaluate the efficacy of current survey methods and the root causes of recent poor striped bass reproduction in Chesapeake Bay. This Chesapeake Bay Program-sponsored review is scheduled to kick off in mid-February 2025.

We acknowledge that periodic evaluation of the efficacy and accuracy of these surveys, particularly in light of climate-induced changes in environmental conditions, is a wise and warranted exercise. However, instead of codifying specific sample locations, we urge the Committee to allow DNR to confer with academic partners on the latest striped bass science and vet any proposed changes with technical staff to ensure there would be no detrimental effects of changing the current survey design.

CBF urges the Committee's UNFAVORABLE report on HB 889.

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

Maryland Office ▪ Philip Merrill Environmental Center ▪ 6 Herndon Avenue ▪ Annapolis ▪ Maryland ▪ 21403

Index Name	Index Metric	Design	Time of Year	Years	Age
MRIP Total Catch Rate Index	Total catch per unit effort	Stratified random	Mar-Dec	1982-2021	1+
Connecticut Long Island Sound Trawl Survey (CTLISTS)	Mean number per tow	Stratified random	Apr-Jun	1984-2021	1+
New York Ocean Haul Seine (NYOHS)	Geometric mean per haul	Fixed station	Sep-Oct	1987-2006	1+
New York Young-of-the-Year (NYYOY)	Geometric mean per haul	Fixed station	Jul-Nov	1985-2021	YOY
New York Western Long Island Beach Seine Survey (NY Age-1)	Geometric mean per haul	Fixed station	May-Aug	1984-2021	1
New Jersey Bottom Trawl Survey (NJTRL)	Stratified mean per tow	Stratified random	April	1990-2018	1+
New Jersey Young-of-the-Year Survey (NJYOY)	Geometric mean per haul	Fixed station	Aug-Oct	1982-2021	YOY
Delaware Spawning Stock Electrofishing Survey (DESSN)	Geometric mean per tow	Fixed station	Apr-Jun	1996-2021	1+
Delaware 30' Bottom Trawl Survey (DE30)	Geometric mean per tow	Fixed station	Nov-Dec	1990-2021	1+
Maryland Spawning Stock Survey (MDSSN)	Selectivity-corrected CPUE	Stratified random	Mar-May	1985-2021	1+
Maryland Young-of-the-Year and Yearlings Surveys (MDYOY and MD Age-1)	Geometric mean per haul	Fixed station	Jul-Sep	1954-2021	0-1
Virginia Young-of-the-Year Survey (VAYOY)	Geometric mean per haul	Fixed station	Jul-Sep	1980-2021	YOY
Chesapeake Bay Multispecies Monitoring and Assessment Program (ChesMMAP)	Stratified mean per tow	Stratified random	Mar-Nov	2002-2018	1+

Summary of surveys used in the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's coastwide Atlantic striped bass stock assessment. Note Maryland's Young-of-the-Year survey is the longest running survey included in the assessment. Source: 2022 Atlantic Striped Bass Stock Assessment Update Report Including May 2023 Supplemental Report.

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Uploaded by: Lynn Fegley
Position: UNF

MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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

February 19, 2025

BILL NUMBER: **House Bill 889 – First Reader**

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

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: **OPPOSE**

EXPLANATION OF DEPARTMENT'S POSITION

The Department opposes HB 889. 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, and 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.

Contact: Emily Wilson, Director, Legislative and Constituent Services (Acting)
emilyh.wilson@maryland.gov ♦ 410-260-8426 (office) ♦ 443-223-1176 (cell)

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 the 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.