CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Senate Bill 610

Natural Resources - Invasive Blue Catfish Pilot Program - Alterations

Date: April 1, 2026
To: Environment & Transportation Committee
Position: **FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENT**
From: Dr. Allison Colden, MD Executive Director

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) **SUPPORTS Senate Bill 610 WITH AMENDMENTS.** SB 610 expands the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) blue catfish pilot program to include the "Blue Catfish Gill Net Program." The bill specifies that the pilot program, which includes the use of gill nets, the finfish trotline license, and the allowance for for-hire charter trips to keep and sell catfish, will be carried out until 2030.

CBF has long supported regulations that would facilitate the commercial harvest and removal of blue catfish to minimize its negative effects, including many of the provisions included in the existing pilot program. However, gill nets are a non-specific fishing gear, meaning the nets can capture and kill any species that encounter them, not just catfish. Given the likelihood of interactions with other commercial species (*e.g.* striped bass, white perch) and federally endangered species (*e.g.* Atlantic sturgeon), expanding the use of gill nets should be considered carefully.

Additionally, the other programs within the blue catfish pilot program and the provisions already in law (*e.g.* 2,400 foot-long trotlines, the use of non-corrodible hooks, etc.) carry with them an additional risk to other non-catfish species. This is especially important for Maryland's iconic striped bass fishery which is currently under significant stress due to six consecutive years of reproductive failure.

In order to ensure that the cumulative effects of the blue catfish pilot program are having negligible effects on native and endangered species that the program intends to protect, we urge the Committee to **include amendments that require DNR to place observers on gill net trips and to require reporting of bycatch in gill net fisheries**, whether or not that catch is retained for sale.

Additionally, we encourage **amendments that require an interim report to this Committee no later than December 31, 2028 on the frequency of bycatch, species caught, and mortality associated with the gill net fishery.** Striped bass is due for an updated assessment of population sustainability in 2027 and if there are significant impacts to striped bass from this pilot program, an interim report would allow this Committee to determine whether the benefits of removing blue catfish outweigh the negative impacts to striped bass when they are struggling to rebuild their population.

CBF urges the Committee's FAVORABLE report WITH AMENDMENTS on SB 610.

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

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) is a non-profit environmental education and advocacy organization dedicated to the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay. With over 200,000 members and e-subscribers, including 71,000 in Maryland alone, CBF works to educate the public and to protect the interest of the Chesapeake and its resources.