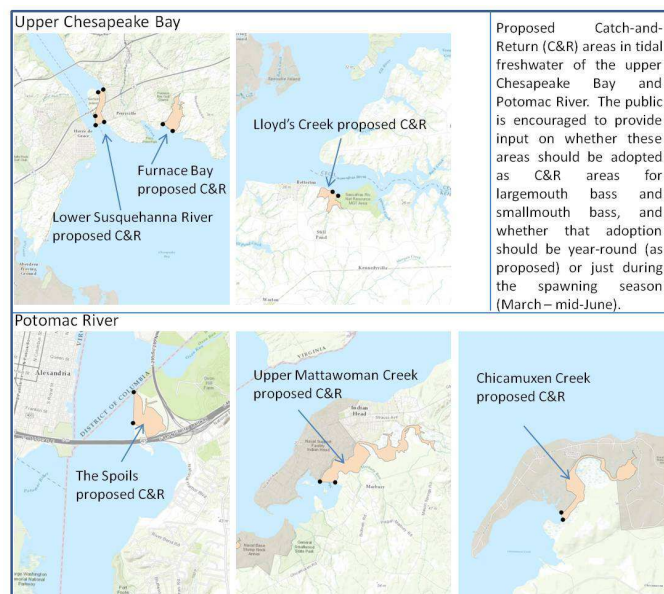


The Problem

Black bass anglers can move fish across many nautical miles to a single point of release (i.e., a release site) during black bass tournaments. Once released, black bass may never return to distant home streams. During years with many tournament anglers, a lot of fish can be permanently displaced. The two largest fisheries with significant tournament fishing pressure are in the Potomac River and upper Chesapeake Bay (areas north of Sassafras River). Anglers and Maryland Department of Natural Resources have noted declines in the Potomac River fishery and have expressed concerns for the upper Chesapeake Bay fishery. Widespread recognition of a problem with the Potomac River fishery was recorded in 2013 and 2014 from angler feedback and surveys, but anglers were split on whether to increase restrictions on black bass fishing or to maintain regulations and await improvement of spawning habitat, which includes native submerged vegetation. Submerged vegetation is improving in tidal freshwater of Potomac River and upper Chesapeake Bay, but that habitat is dynamic and can be influenced by climate and land use in the watershed. Catch-and-return areas have been suggested to minimize removal of adults from some areas in order to improve the number of fishable bass year-round and improve reproduction.

Methods

- Three catch-and-return areas are proposed in Potomac River and three in upper Chesapeake Bay (see Figure).
- To get feedback from the public on these areas, a 2015 on-line survey of nearly 1000 licensed anglers who target largemouth bass was conducted. Most anglers were Marylanders (82%) who targeted largemouth bass in the past 3 years (73%), but not during tournaments (86%).
- Most anglers (82%) responded that a catch-and-return area would not harm their fishing experience.
- Most anglers (81%) thought that a catch-and-return area would improve spawning success of adults and could be enforced year-round (53%) or only during the spawning season (39%).
- Of 5 options given for the size of a catch-and-return area, most (42%) thought that the catch-and-return area should be bigger than a cove, but smaller than a stream or river.
- Most anglers (72%) thought that catch-and-return areas should be evaluated every 3 years. If the area fails to achieve objectives (better reproduction, more big bass), then most (62%) thought it should be replaced.



Proposed Timeline

January 2016	Present findings of 2015 survey to Sport Fish Advisory Commission, Tidal Fish Advisory Commission, MDDNR, and general public.
February 2016	Open 2 week public comment period for catch-and-return areas; place signs at public boat launches to notify anglers and tournament directors of the public comment period; post notices on fishing blogs and social media.
March 2016	If there is not significant opposition to the regulation, then the regulation may be adopted.
July 2016	Regulation may go into effect; ask directors to list catch-and-return areas as off-limits areas during a tournament.
Fall 2016-2019	Survey and evaluate catch-and-return areas, and present findings to black bass roundtable in February 2020.