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Maryland DNR Response to 2014 Chesapeake Bay Striped Bass Quota

In response to concern among some sports fishermen about Maryland, Virginia and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission's decision to increase the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Striped Bass quota while maintaining the same fishing mortality rate compared to 2013, the following reasoning is being provided to explain Maryland's decision.

The State of Maryland, the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission manage their striped bass fisheries in adherence with Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) Amendment 6 to the Interstate Fisheries Management Plan for Striped Bass which mandates that Striped Bass fisheries be managed to the established target fishing level. Because the Chesapeake Bay is a producer area, the fisheries working within the Bay have access to striped bass that are of a smaller size than the large migrant fish that range along the coast. As a result of this difference in available sizes of fish, Amendment 5 (1995) initiated management allowing the Bay jurisdictions to fish on smaller sized striped bass in exchange for fishing at a lower target fishing rate than is applied to the Coastal stock.

The primary management goal of the Bay jurisdictions is to ensure that the Bay fisheries do not exceed the established Chesapeake Bay fishing target. To accomplish this, the Bay jurisdictions coordinate each year to establish a quota for the Bay fisheries. This quota is set annually at a level that fluctuates with the estimated amount of exploitable striped bass present in the Bay. By adjusting the quota relative to the abundance of exploitable fish, a consistent fishing rate that is well below the target is maintained and there is a substantive amount of buffer for scientific and management uncertainty. The quota is calculated for the entire Bay and is then split, according to an allocation established in the mid 1990's, among Maryland, Virginia and PRFC. Each jurisdiction then divides its own quota among its sectors: commercial and recreational.

The effectiveness of the Bay quota at constraining fishing to a level below the target is monitored by ASMFC through the annual calculation of fishing rates within Chesapeake Bay. Over the past decade, the Bay States have maintained a consistent fishing mortality rate that is well below the established target (Figure 1). The Bay quota has fluctuated through the years, declining from 10.5 million pounds in 2003 to 7.6 million pounds in 2013. During this time period the Chesapeake Bay states lowered the quota to mirror the decline in exploitable stock present in the Bay as well as the decline in the Coastal spawning stock. Reductions during this time period occurred only in the Bay. Coastal quotas were held constant.

The Bay states set the 2014 quota in early September of 2013. Analyses indicated that exploitable stock available in the Bay would increase in 2014 and that fishing rates through 2012 in the Bay remained well below the target. The Bay states were aware that, based on outcomes of the 2013 assessment, the ASMFC would likely consider actions to reduce fishing levels in 2015. Given the fact that the 2013 stock assessment determined that the striped bass stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring; and without knowing the extent to which ASMFC would lower fishing rates for 2015, the Bay jurisdictions chose to maintain a conservative and consistent fishing rate in the Bay in adherence with Amendment 6. This action provides some opportunity for recreational and commercial fisheries with no risk to the stock, and will also ensure sufficient preservation of the 2011 year class to provide future contribution to the Coastal Spawning Stock. The Bay jurisdictions stand ready to act in concert with the Coastal states if reductions are called for in 2015.

Chesapeake Bay Quota Facts

What is the Chesapeake Bay quota?

The Bay quota is set by the Bay jurisdictions as a tool to ensure that the Bay target fishing level is not exceeded. It decreased 27% between 2003 and 2013 and was increased 14% for 2014. In 2015 the quota may decrease depending on actions of ASMFC and on the estimated abundance of exploitable fish in the Bay. In 2014 the Bay quota is 8,652,528 pounds as compared to the 2013 quota of 7,589,937 pounds. After the 2014 quota is divided among jurisdictions and sectors, the 2014 Maryland Bay quota is 4.5 million pounds with 1.9 million pounds going to the commercial sector and 2.6 million pounds allocated to the recreational/charter sector. In 2013, the Maryland commercial quota was 1.69 million pound and the recreational quota was 2.3 million pounds. While the 2014 quota is higher than 2013, the 2014 quota was set at a level to achieve the same rate of fishing mortality compared to 2013.

What is the Chesapeake Bay target fishing level?

The Bay states manage their striped bass fisheries to stay below the target fishing rate of 0.27 (Figure 1). The Bay fishing target is lower than the Coastal target of 0.31 which allows the Bay fisheries to harvest smaller striped bass. The 2014 Bay quota was set to maintain a consistent and conservative fishing level in 2014. The Chesapeake Bay and all Coastal states will operate under these reference points until new reference points, included in results of the 2013 assessment, are officially adopted. The 2013 striped bass assessment changed the fishing reference points for the Coastal stock, but did not address the Chesapeake Bay target fishing level. The ASMFC Striped Bass Technical Committee is currently working to develop a new fishing target for the Chesapeake Bay based on the new Coastal fishing target. Concurrently, ASMFC is working on Draft Addendum IV to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan that will officially change the Coastal and Chesapeake Bay reference points for striped bass. This document is expected to be approved for public comment at the February 2014 meeting of the ASMFC. Once a new Bay target is established, the Bay states will utilize a quota to ensure the new target is not exceeded.

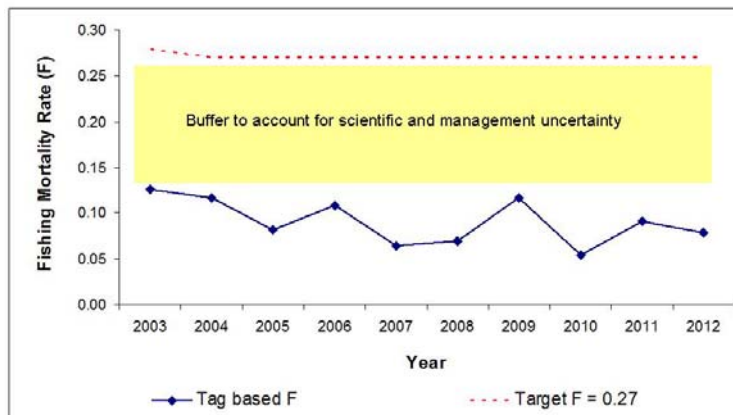


Figure 1. *The ASMFC monitors the effectiveness of the Bay quota by monitoring annual levels of fishing mortality within Chesapeake Bay compared to the established target Bay target. Levels of F are estimated using tagging studies. The Bay jurisdictions strive to maintain a conservative and consistent level of F to ensure that there is a buffer for scientific and management uncertainty which includes factors such as error in F estimates, dead discards, poaching, etc. The 2014 quota will maintain conservative fishing mortality rate. A new Chesapeake Bay target F will soon be developed based on the outcome of the 2013 assessment.*

How will the recreational fisheries benefit from a 14% increase in the Bay quota for 2014?

The recreational sector is expected to experience an increased harvest level in 2014. This increase is expected to occur without any changes to the current season, creel and size limit because catch rates will be higher due to the increased availability of Striped Bass. Modifying the current recreational fishery rules to extend the season or increase the creel limit for 2014 adds an unacceptable level of risk of increasing the Bay's fishing mortality rate.



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Why not maintain the Bay quota at the 2013 level until ASMFC determines actions for 2015?

All of the states along the Atlantic Coast are operating under the current reference points (target fishing levels) for striped bass. As such, the Bay states are proceeding in 2014 with the objective to maintain a consistent and conservative fishing level relative to the Bay fishing target of 0.27. Because of the increased availability of striped bass in the Bay as the 2011 year class enters the fishery, the Bay can increase the quota 14% and maintain a low level of Fishing Mortality as shown in Figure 1. Because the fishing level will remain conservative in 2014, there is no threat to the overall health of the striped bass stock and a substantially number of fish from the 2011 year class will survive to join the Coastal spawning population in future years. Given the history of conservative management in the Bay, it is unknown what level of action will be needed in 2015. The Bay states will be committed to managing the future quota to the new reference points.