

Background, Status, and Maryland DNR's Future Steps Regarding the Upper Savage River Watershed Brook Trout Regulations

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A Zero Creel Limit (ZCL) regulation to protect brook trout was enacted for the Upper Savage River (USR) watershed on January 1, 2007. Brook trout cannot be harvested, only artificial lures and flies are allowed, and bait fishing is prohibited (due to higher mortality). Historical and more recent data from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MD DNR) and the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science Appalachian Laboratory (UMCES-AL) indicated brook trout numbers in the USR watershed had decline to very low levels, despite the continued presence of relatively pristine habitat. In particular it was noted that reductions in overall numbers of brook trout and large brook trout (>8") were more severe closer to angler access points, indicating fishing pressure was having an adverse impact. The USR watershed is Maryland's only remaining brook trout stronghold and the most intact brook trout watershed still present in the Mid-Atlantic region. The ZCL and no bait regulations were implemented to ensure conservation of this unique resource, reverse the population declines, and to protect and improve the angling opportunities and economic benefits afforded by this fishery. This action also was supported by a recommendation in the Maryland Brook Trout Fishery Management Plan (BTFMP; 2006) for the USR watershed to "*Institute angling regulations to provide for maximum protection of brook trout while still ensuring angler use of the resource, i.e. no closed season, no harvest, single hook barbless lures only, no bait*". Additionally, the regulations are in agreement with the priorities and goals of national and regional partnerships working for brook trout conservation, including the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture (EBTJV) and the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement.

Public outreach efforts in regard to this issue include: public meetings and open houses (2006, 2009, and 2012) and presentations to the Maryland Sport Fisheries Advisory Commission (2006 (twice), 2011, and 2014). At the 9/26/06 Sport Fisheries Advisory Commission (SFAC) meeting, there was unanimous approval supporting the regulation proposal. Annual monitoring of USR brook trout populations by MD DNR has been ongoing since 2006 utilizing a plan designed by UMCES-AL researchers. Results through 2014 indicate that the regulations are working to achieve the four management objectives developed for measuring success. Key results include:

- 22% increase in large (>8") trout per 75m station (2006 = 15.8, 2014 = 20.1)
- Maximum size trout collected: prior to regulations <12", post regulation: 13.5"
- 2014 population attributes at high angler access sites > than average, approaching that of the less accessible sections
- Numerous anglers reporting improved fishing success for numbers and size of brook trout caught, USR watershed has now become a destination fishery
- Trout abundance at 4 streams at study highs, 3 trending upward near study highs
- Adult, large adult (>8"), and young-of-year numbers remain higher than found in the MBSS Sentinel sites that are open to harvest and bait-fishing

Maryland DNR's ongoing and future efforts related to this issue include: 1) Secretary Belton (with staff) will be meeting with western Maryland legislators to discuss the USR watershed brook trout regulations, 2) continued outreach/education will be provided to various fishing groups, 3) continued monitoring of the resource, and 4) an angler survey of constituents will be conducted to determine opinions and attitudes towards the regulations and management strategy. Inland Fisheries staff plan to update the SFAC in 9-12 months once the aforementioned actions are completed.