Finally, some good news on the menhaden fishery

Some years ago, I read a book called “The Most Important Fish in the Sea: Menhaden in America” by H. Bruce Franklin. First published in 2007, the author presented the argument that menhaden were much more valuable as a forage species for just about every predatory fish and mammal of the eastern Atlantic coast and to allow their harvest without regard to their place in the food chain was folly.

I recall going to a lecture at Save the Bay headquarters where Mr. Franklin spoke and was heckled by representatives of the commercial menhaden fleet, including one fellow who came up from Virginia to “set the record straight.”

I am writing this now because on February 20, 2020 the ASMFC published a news release, *ASMFC Atlantic Menhaden Board Prepares to Move Forward with Menhaden Ecological Reference Points*.

This is a milestone in a fight that recreational fishing groups and marine biologists have been carrying on for decades. Time and time again, the introduction of the idea that using Ecological Reference Points (ERPs) assessments to set the harvest level, instead of the single species assessment, has been attacked by the reduction industry and other harvesters as lacking enough science to justify its use and until now they have prevailed.

Finally, it appears there is enough data to make a scientific claim that the ERP assessment indicates that the fishing mortality reference points for menhaden should be lower to account for menhaden’s role as a forage fish.

Chair of ASMFC Menhaden Management Board, Nichola Meserve, stated, “On behalf of the Menhaden Board, I commend the ERP Workgroup and the dozens of state, federal, academic, and ASMFC scientists for their countless hours of dedication to this formidable task. The Board has long recognized the importance of Atlantic menhaden as a forage fish for a variety of predators as reflected in its setting of conservative harvest limits for menhaden and its emphasis on the development of ERPs as one of its highest priorities for managing the species. The ERP assessment is an impressive body of work and a huge step towards fully realized ecosystem.”

I doubt that this fight is over, but this is one giant step forward in establishing that the ecological value of menhaden is worth more alive and available as forage than in the hold of huge factory vessel for a single industry.

Also, on the good news front, and to everyone’s surprise, both houses of the Virginia legislature have passed a bill taking the management out of the hands of the legislature and moving it to the Virginia Marine Resources Commission.

It appears that Omega’s deliberate overfishing of menhaden in the Chesapeake Bay which resulted in the U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross ordering that the fishery be shut down in June unless Virginia comes into compliance with the limits. The threat of a Federal takeover of the fishery seems to have been the stimulus needed for the legislatures to finally pass this, moving responsibility to (hopefully) the professional fisheries managers.

**RIDEM PUBLIC HEARING - FEBRUARY 10**

On February 10, RIDEM held a public hearing on recreational and commercial fishing regulations for 2020. For recreational anglers, we learned that there will be no changes in regulations for black sea bass, fluke, scup and tautog.

The #1 issue was, of course, striped bass. This ASFMC approved option:

- **All Modes:** 1 fish/day • 28” to <35” slot • Jan 1-Dec 31
  - (This option will be effective in ME, NH, MA, CT, NY)
- **RISAA supported this option, and noted we “strongly oppose” any split modes between recreational anglers and charter boats.**
- But at the hearing, the charter boats came out in force and pushed for the option that would benefit them with a split mode:
  - **Rec anglers:** 1 fish/day • 32” to <40” slot • Jan 1-Dec 31
  - **For Hire:** 1 fish/day • 30” to <40” slot • Jan 1-Dec 31

So, as of the writing of this report, the only issue settled is that there will be some kind of slot limit for this fishery. There is still a lot of uncertainty. The issue will go to the RI Marine Fishery Council meeting on March 2 and they will also weigh in on **Commentary on split sector management**.

When you start to favor one sector over another, somebody gets the bill and that always seems to be us, the recreational anglers. This is an ongoing issue for discussion as the number of sector size/possession/season limits are created we are the ones who get less of an already decreasing pie.

There are valid points on each side, but it is the recreational fishermen buying licenses and generating an estimated **$412 million** to the Rhode Island economy. There were 48,737 saltwater recreational licenses sold last year. Of those, 12,151 were either yearlong or 7 day out of state licenses. These in state and out of state anglers are a large plus for the economy of Rhode Island. Reduction of resources and making it more difficult to catch legal fish by the recreational shore and private boat fisherman will at some point inevitably start to discourage anglers and make it less likely that new anglers from new generations will join our sport. That would not be good for either private or for hire sectors. Spring yet?