MARYLAND

Maryland decided that, instead of adopting the Addendum VI rule of a one-fish bag and 18-inch minimum size for striped bass in the Chesapeake Bay, it would instead establish a complicated set of regulations that prohibited catch-and-release striped bass fishing prior to May 1, and pushed back the start of the season until that date.

For the first two weeks of the season, the size limit was set at 35 inches, to give Maryland’s recreational fishermen a chance to kill the big, fecund females that are protected from anglers everywhere else on the coast; for the remainder of the season, the size limit falls to 19 inches, with a 2-fish bag for anglers on for-hire vessels and a 1-fish bag for everyone else.

The commercial fishery would take a 1.8 percent cut in quota; since Addendum VI called for an 18 percent cut for both the commercial and the recreational sector, Maryland anglers will have to take a greater than 20% cut in fishing mortality to make up the difference.

In Maryland, the commercial and for-hire sectors won at the expense of the recreational sector and the striped bass.

After Maryland announced the new rules on its Facebook page, it received well over 100 comments, almost all of them critical and many downright hostile. One commenter wrote, “To call them ‘conservation measures’ is a joke. Maryland Department of Natural Resources Fisheries has failed yet again to make meaningful changes to protect the future of our fishery. Pathetic.”

Another noted that the Maryland announcement said that, “The department will announce a public comment schedule for those regulations in the coming weeks,” and responded, “Why bother? You ignored the overwhelming, collective voice this go around in favor of self interest. Your sole responsibility is to protect the fishery and you’re wholeheartedly failing in that regard.”

A third person speculated for the reasons behind the Maryland regulations, writing, “It’s time the appointees stopped handing out political favors to their base and started working to conserve our fisheries resources for everyone in Maryland. These regulations look more like feathering the nest for a future run for office—not even close to conservative action to protect the resources…”

NEW JERSEY

A day later, in New Jersey, anglers intent on speaking in favor of striped bass conservation and a 28 to 35-inch coastwide slot limit arrived to the scheduled 5:00 p.m. meeting to find the small meeting room already packed and the doors locked; anyone wanting to speak would have to wait outside in the small foyer or, in many cases, outdoors in the cold and the rain.

Some did get inside to speak, including those who warned that New Jersey’s failure to adopt the coastwide slot would threaten the striped bass’ recovery. NJ.com reported that George Bucci, president of the Cape Atlantic Striper Club, clearly stated that, “Conservation equivalency has not proven to be effective in the past,” but that “New Jersey has proven to be a thorn in the side of the states trying to turn this [striped bass decline] around.”

However, such comments were in vain. Those who managed to get into the meeting were confronted with a list of all of New Jersey’s possible striped bass management options, including the 28 to 35-inch coastwide slot. But a few of those options, for a 28 to 38-inch slot limit, and a continuation of New Jersey’s “bonus” program, which turns over bass supposedly “saved” when the state outlawed commercial striped bass fishing to the recreational sector, which kills them in the commercial fishermen’s stead, were already highlighted in red.

As part of its new regulatory package, New Jersey will move up the start of the bonus program, which targets 24 to 28-inch striped bass, from September to May 15, thus giving the state’s anglers the chance to remove even more of the big 2015 year class from the population before it matures and has a chance to contribute to the spawning stock.

Given that the highlighted options were selected before the first angler even entered the meeting room, making many anglers agree with the sentiment that, as one for-hire fishing boat operators’ association expressed it, “The fix is in.”

The reason for that was perfectly clear, and perfectly understandable, given the mentality of the people making the decision. As the Asbury Park Press reported on its website, “The [New Jersey Marine Fisheries] council settled on the option it felt gave fishermen the most opportunity to keep a fish.”

Of course, the whole point of Addendum VI was to end overfishing and reduce fishing mortality to the point where the spawning stock might have the opportunity to begin rebuilding, so providing fishermen with “the most opportunity to keep a fish” might not be the best way to achieve the addendum’s goals.

But, of course, it suits New Jersey’s goals quite well. The bass will just have to look out for themselves.

The question now is what responsible anglers, in Maryland, in New Jersey, and everywhere else along the stripers coast, ought to do.

First, everyone must recognize that change needs to come from within the angling community. It cannot be imposed from outside. So responsible anglers must continue to do what they’re doing, releasing most or all of their bass, handing them properly, and setting an example for other anglers to emulate. Each of us has the opportunity to educate other fishermen on the need for conservation every time we set out on the water.

A good example of that comes from Maryland.

Although that state bent over backward to let its for-hire fleet kill as many fish as possible, some charter boat owners are making their own, principled stand. Capt. Nick Lombardi, who operates his Redbeard Charters out of Annapolis, is one person trying to lead the way.

As reported by television station WUSA 9, Capt. Lombardi refuses to take advantage of Maryland’s planned regulations, and will not permit his customers to kill striped bass over 35 inches long.

“Throwing trophies back is not real popular around here. We need to make a drastic shift in culture here on the bay…Just because it’s legal doesn’t make it right.”

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