

STRIPERS UNDERFED (from page 8)

We would not be lamenting reduced striper abundance anymore; we would be talking about record abundance.

The truth is that stripers are not being *Overfished*, but rather, **Under-Fed!** We are simply starving them with excessive fishing of their principal prey! Regulators, commercial and recreational fishers need to begin focusing on the supply side of the abundance equation. Menhaden are far more valuable when left in the water to play their essential ecological role as a major source of protein for charismatic predators like striped bass, weakfish, bluefish, bluefin tuna, and other species like ospreys and whales.



Omega Protein facility, Reedsville

One foreign-owned company, Cooke Inc.'s Omega Protein, is literally taking menhaden from the mouths of stripers at the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay. They are single handedly responsible for starving our East Coast stripers. They purse seine hundreds of millions of pounds of this premium prey fish, annually, turning them into animal feed, fertilizer and cosmetics.

Menhaden are currently valued at pennies per pound, to be served to dogs, cats and pigs. Last time we looked, there was no problem with an abundance of cats and dogs! Menhaden are significantly more valuable if left in the water.

The ASMFC seems to bend over backwards to accommodate Omega Protein's requests. This is quite surprising since the striped bass fishery alone is worth billions of dollars to states along the U.S. East Coast. So, one paltry company with a little over \$300 million in revenue is literally starving the fish that provide billions and billions of economic value from commercial and recreational fishing to east coast states. Who thought that was a good idea?

Even more distressing is that Virginia is the only east coast state that still allows Atlantic menhaden reduction fishing in state waters. ASMFC annual quota is 476,198,486 pounds of fish! Over 80% of that is allocated to Virginia (aka, the Omega Protein fleet).

Virginia refuses to implement the Atlantic States Marine Fishery Commission's generous regional management plan that sets a huge cap on the menhaden catch inside the Chesapeake Bay. That Bay cap is larger than the average Bay catch over the past five years, and they still refuse to agree to it! In addition, they have convinced the ASMFC that they can catch 40% more fish, without effecting either recruitment or abundance!

This is nothing but power politics in action!

Why should Rhode Island and other east coast states allow one industrial fishery in Virginia to effectively starve their striped bass? If we do not immediately change this we will continually fight over smaller and smaller pieces of the dwindling striper pie. All, while one company in Virginia turns striped bass' main source of protein into cat, dog and fish food and even fertilizer!

SOLVE THE PROBLEM

There are two relatively easy, common sense steps to take.

One, Virginia can single-handedly slow the decline in coastwide striped bass and other predators by taking the simple step of banning reduction fishing in VA state waters. Every other east coast state has done so, many years ago.

Two, VA can lobby the ASMFC to leave enough menhaden in the water for consumption by predators other than Omega Protein's purse seining nets (scientists call this Ecological Reference Points).



If VA did these two things, they could change the quality and quantity of fisheries on the east coast. The economic benefit alone would be huge. Every fishery would also benefit! We would soon be raising catch limits and catching record numbers and record sizes of stripers!

The time for change is now. Without focused pressure from other states, Virginia will continue to favor their tiny fishing industry and not lead on this issue.

Rhode Island though, has the status to lead. We have the second largest estuary on the east coast; plus, we have been leaders in fishery conservation for years. Omega Protein has the VA legislature tied up in knots. It's up to the other east coast states to step up and engage in this process. The striped bass fishery is way too important to all our local economies to allow this status-quo "Starvation Regime" to continue.

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We didn't inherit the Earth from our parents. We're borrowing it from our children.