

Carolina Journal Weighs in: H353 Game Fish Bill: 'Beginning of the End for Commercial Fishing'

RALEIGH - The General Assembly is moving forward with a proposal by the Coastal Conservation Association that would make red drum, spotted sea trout, and striped bass off-limits to commercial fisherman and thus, fisherman say, the majority of the public.

By designating the three species "game fish," they only could be caught recreationally, by hook and line, making them unavailable to the 97 percent of North Carolinians who do not fish for themselves.

Commercial fishermen say these are not the first fish to be taken off the market and they won't be the last. If the CCA has its way, they say, commercial fishing would cease to exist in North Carolina and in most of the United States.

House Bill 353 - the Game Fish Bill - appeared to be dead in the water last summer, but it resurfaced last week in a new study committee called the Marine Fisheries Committee. Rep. Darrell McCormick, R-Yadkin, heads the study committee. Among other things, the committee is charged with assessing the economic impact of redesignating the three fish as game fish.

McCormick has estimated the new designation would increase economic activity in the state by billions of dollars. He and the CCA say the three species of fish are worth much more to the state recreationally than they are commercially. That's because of tourism, as McCormick told Carolina Journal last summer:

"The dock value of one red drum is about \$1.50 a pound," he said. "Its value to our state, as a recreational fish, is \$300 a pound."

McCormick derived that number by dividing the total amount an average vacationer spends on a fishing trip by the number of fish he is allowed to catch on that trip. He says North Carolina's fish attract tourists from all over the country, especially the Northeast.

"Those guys come down and bring \$2,000, \$3,000, \$6,000, and they stay for a week and go fishing," McCormick said. "They go to the restaurants. They stay at the hotel. They buy a boat. They spend a few hundred bucks in the tackle shop. They buy bait. Then they go out one day with a guide or on a charter boat."

In the Marine Fisheries Committee meeting Jan. 5, Sen. Don East, R-Surry, took issue with McCormick's economics.

"How can we put a number on the economic impact of recreational fishing?" East asked. "If I drive from Pilot Mountain to the coast and I take my own rod and reel with me, I pack my lunch, I don't buy anything and sleep in my car, the economic impact is nothing."

McCormick argued that even if East drove from Pilot Mountain and took his

own groceries, "he bought those groceries in North Carolina at the Food Lion in King, and stopped in Burlington and filled up with gas, and stopped in Neuse Sporting Goods and picked up hooks and bait, and he had to buy a truck in Mount Airy, and he insured that truck probably in Mount Airy or Elkin. So you can't get there without traveling through North Carolina and spending a dollar along the way."

East further argued that if you're going to use all of those multipliers to assess the economic impact of recreational fishing, you should also use them for commercial fishing.

"Do you place a value on all those jobs that come along with the commercial fishing industry?" East asked. "The fish houses that have 25 or 30 people processing shrimp or other fish? Do you put a value on the fact that those jobs are feeding the family?"

'It's not all about money'

Fisherman Ernie Foster said the legislators were missing the point. Fish are a public resource that anyone should be allowed to catch, not just those who are going to produce the most taxable dollars for the state.

Foster makes his living as a recreational fishing guide, but comes from a long line of commercial fishermen on Hatteras Island. He enjoys fishing for fun, but believes fishing for food and for a living is more important. Since only 3 percent of North Carolinians have the means to catch their own fish, the other 97 percent rely on commercial fishermen to catch their dinner for them, he said.

Foster and several other commercial fishermen drove from the Outer Banks - some driving more than four hours - to attend the meeting in Raleigh. So did members of the North Carolina Coastal Conservation Association.

Foster said most CCA members are genuinely concerned about the environment and about preserving the fish for all. But he characterizes the leadership of the group as wealthy and politically connected sportsmen, who want to keep the fish all for themselves.

McCormick and the CCA have argued that the three species they want to designate as game fish have very little value to commercial fishermen.

The three fish make up only 2.6 percent of the commercial fishermen's aggregate catch, said Louis Daniel, executive director of the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries. "There are only about 87 fishermen who landed more than \$2,000 worth of those fish in the last couple of years."

The reason the species represent such a small portion of the average commercial fisherman's income, said Foster, is that the state and federal government already have placed strict limits on the number they are allowed to catch.

There are federal limitations on how many striped bass they can catch, and

state limitations on red drum, he said. Commercial fishermen can catch only a certain number of red drum incidentally. They cannot target them. After catching their limit of incidentals, any additional ones must be thrown back, dead or alive.

Foster said recreational fishermen already catch 80 percent of the red drum, spotted trout, and striped bass that are allowed to be caught in North Carolina. "They want to catch 100 percent."

Commercial fisherman Jonathan Robinson took issue with that. "Those resources belong to the public," he said. "They're not just exclusively for the rich, who can afford boats and trips to the coast. Commercial fishing is a channel that provides access to these resources for all the citizens - for the blacks in the cities and the poor working people in farm towns in North Carolina."

Commercial fisherman Chris McCaffity of Morehead City echoed his sentiment. "I recently had a disabled veteran thank me for defending his freedom to eat the fish he once caught himself," McCaffity said.

Over the course of its next three meetings, the Marine Fisheries Committee also will be studying the impact of eliminating trawl boat fishing in North Carolina.

Foster said that would mean the end of shrimping in North Carolina, which he estimates makes up almost a quarter of the state's commercial fishing industry. It also would eliminate much of the state's flounder fishing. "It would wipe out all of the fishing communities on the west side of Pamlico Sound," he said.

McCaffity is scheduled to speak at the next meeting of the Marine Fisheries Committee at 1 p.m. Feb. 2 on the third floor of the state legislative building. There was no public comment period at the first meeting.

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