

N.C. watermen wary of latest legislative twists

Having failed this spring to reel in votes, the legislators who proposed declaring three species of fish off-limits to commercial fishermen are instead asking their colleagues to create a committee dedicated to studying that idea.

The sponsors of HB353, known as the "game fish bill," have resurrected the legislation for inclusion in the Studies Act of 2011, which lawmakers could pass when they resume work July 13. In its current form, the Studies Act calls for the creation of the Marine Fisheries Legislative Study Committee, whose members would consider a wide range of ways to overhaul fishing laws.

The original idea behind HB353 - to designate red drum, spotted sea trout and striped bass as game fish, making them illegal to sell - remains on the proposed committee's agenda. Additional ideas to study include the creation of a hook-and-line commercial fishery, changes to the process of appointments to the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission and the elimination of the trawl boat fishery.

Members would submit a final report, including legislative proposals, in 2012.

There's no guarantee, even if the Studies Act passes as written, that the Marine Fisheries Legislative Study Committee will become a reality. Rep. Bill Owens, D-Pasquotank, said committee appointments are solely at the discretion of House and Senate leaders.

"To tell you the truth, the bill is hardly worth the paper it's written on," Owens said last week.

It's not uncommon, Owens said, for the sponsors of controversial legislation to "appease the people that want the legislation by saying, 'We'll study it.' "

"If they don't appoint anybody, it doesn't get studied," Owens said. "If they do appoint a study committee, then I think would be the time to be concerned."

Still, those interested in commercial fishing are watching closely.

Rep. Tim Spear, D-Creswell, said he is concerned about the potential impact of HB353 and similar ideas on the commercial fishing industry. Spear, whose district includes Dare and Hyde counties, said he has spoken to the bill's sponsors. "I don't think they truly understand the impact of what they've asked for," he said.

The commercial fishing industry came under fire earlier this year after large numbers of dead striped bass were dumped back into the ocean by a commercial trawler off the Outer Banks, a spectacle caught on video and posted online by angry sport fishermen. The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries said the trawler had to cut its nets when they became too heavy to haul in.

Two months later, a bipartisan group of lawmakers - most from the middle and western parts of the state - introduced the game fish bill. The Coastal Conservation Association, a group for recreational anglers, supports the measure, contending the three species have been overfished and stating on its website that HB353 is "designed to help foster a recreational fishery currently worth exponentially more in dollars and jobs than the commercial fishery."

The North Carolina Fisheries Association, which lobbies for commercial fishing interests, opposes the bill. The president of that group, Sean McKeon, said the Coastal Conservation Association's economic and scientific claims are bogus.

McKeon said the game fish bill would put commercial fishermen out of work, reduce the public's ability to buy local seafood and open a door for opposing interests to further restrict commercial fishing.

"There's nothing wrong with fishing for fun," McKeon said. "But there is something wrong with the man that thinks it's OK to put another man out of business... so they can have more fun."

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