



Maryland Department of Agriculture

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Legislative Comment

Date: February 22, 2021

BILL NUMBER: House Joint Resolution 1

SHORT TITLE: Natural Resources – Fishing – Wild–Caught Blue Catfish

MDA POSITION: Support

EXPLANATION:

House Joint Resolution 1 urges the United States Congress to amend specified federal law and return federal oversight responsibilities related to the processing and inspection of wild invasive catfish caught in the Chesapeake Bay to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The blue catfish is an invasive species that is found in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. In order to control the population, it is crucial to increase the commercial harvest and consumption of this fish. By exempting blue catfish from inspection rules promulgated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, this would enable more blue catfish to be processed and harvested.

The blue catfish harvest has increased steadily in Maryland. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) and the Department of Natural Resources, the most recent records, for 2018, show a harvest of 2.8 million pounds. In 2017, 1.7 million pounds were harvested.

The harvest in prior years is as follows: 2017 - 1,741,955 million pounds; 2015 - 935,132 pounds; 2014 - 528,546 pounds; and 2013 - 316,760 pounds.

Maryland Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Seafood Marketing Program has promoted blue catfish through advertising, media relations and direct to consumer sampling since 2017. In the most recent NOAA information, from 2019, it shows the value of the blue catfish caught by Maryland watermen to be \$1,134,435 in that year. In 2018, it brought in \$1,082,032 and in 2013, \$164,907.

MDA's advertising – billboards, radio, events – has created more than 13 million impressions for blue catfish among consumers. Additionally, MDA worked with the Maryland Restaurant Association in 2020 on a blue catfish cooking competition for chefs to advance to the World Food Championships Chef Challenge in Dallas, Texas.

Blue catfish processors, Capital Seaboard, JJ McDonnell, Reliant Seafood and ProFish in Washington, D.C., could benefit with more flexible processing schedules. One of the state's largest seafood companies, Congressional Seafood no longer is processing blue catfish due to difficulties with the USDA inspection processing schedule. With more available processing capacity and steady supplies, the market for the fish has the potential to increase, thus potentially increasing the profitability of seafood processors and opening additional markets for watermen. The Department of Natural Resources reports that 55 watermen harvested blue catfish in 2019.

If you have additional questions, please contact Cassie Shirk, Director of Legislation and Governmental Affairs, at cassie.shirk@maryland.gov or 410-841-5886.