

Draft Minutes
Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament
Committee Meeting
October 22, 2007

Members Present

B. W. Beauchamp
David Elliott
Lewis Gillingham
Bill Hall
Jon Lucy
Ken Neill
Craig Paige
William Seymour
Christine Snook

Jerry Thrash

Members Absent

Charles Randolph
John Thurston

Public Attendees

Claude Bain
Steve Wray

VMRC Attendees

Sonya Davis
Jack Travelstead

I. Introduction; Announcements

At 6:50 pm Tournament Director Lewis Gillingham welcomed the public and called the meeting to order. A quorum for the meeting was noted. Mr. Gillingham announced John Thurston was unexpectedly called out-of-town and would be unable to attend. There were no other announcements.

II. Public Comment Period

The public comment period was opened and Steve Wray addressed the Committee. Mr. Wray's comments were specific to the night's agenda items. Mr. Wray thought the spot (1-pound) and flounder (7 pounds) minimum qualifying weights should be maintained "as is," but asked the Committee to consider lowering the 10-pound minimum qualifying weight for blueline tilefish, since a possession limit (7 fish) had been adopted by the Marine Resources Commission this year for tilefish. Mr. Wray's logic for reducing the blueline tilefish qualifying weight was to reduce the number of tilefish that would be returned to the water and likely die as an angler attempted to catch a blueline tilefish heavy enough to qualify for a Citation. Mr. Wray did not think houndfish or any other species should be added to the list of species eligible for a Citation at this time. Mr. Wray supported the continued VSWFT policy of awarding release Citations for eligible species during a closed season, if catch-and-release fishing was legal. Specific to striped bass Citations, Mr. Wray indicated this practice was good for the tackle and charter industry. With no other public comment forthcoming, the public comment period was closed.

The Committee addressed Mr. Wray's request for consideration of a lower minimum weight for blueline tilefish. Committee felt the 10-pound minimum was an appropriate benchmark for blueelines and noted fish twice that weight had been landed since tilefish were added to the list of Citation list of eligible species in 2007. The consensus was the some anglers would "high grade" and throw smaller tilefish over board regardless of the Citation weight, thus lowering the Citation minimum would not guarantee more ethical angling.

III. Review 2007 Program—Overview of Entries for 2007

Committee members were asked to review the charts depicting Citation numbers for most of the Tournament's eligible species for the entire 49-year history of the program and preliminary Citation numbers for 2007. The numbers for 2007 are "year-to-date," reflecting Citations received and processed in this office by October 10th. The weekly press release with the Citation tally through October 17, 2007 was distributed to the Committee members as a further update to the 2007 total. Since Committee members had the Citation information in their packets and had several days to review the material, Mr. Gillingham dispensed with a review of each individual species. The Committee was asked if any species warranted detailed discussion and was reminded the review of flounder and spot were separate agenda items and will each be reviewed separately.

Bill Hall suggested the Committee consider lowering the minimum qualifying weight for swordfish. The current minimum is 200 pounds, although any size swordfish is eligible for a release. Some of the scientific literature suggests male swordfish are congregated the Mid-Atlantic waters off the Virginia coast. Male swordfish grow slower and do not grow as large as female swordfish. This situation would justify a lower minimum weight requirement. Ken Neill stated he originally proposed a swordfish weight Citation with a 100-pound minimum qualifying weight but the Committee opted for 200-pound minimum. Since that time, Mr. Neill and anglers fishing with him have landed several swordfish and the heaviest weighed "about 80 pounds." Mr. Gillingham wondered how a 100-pound Citation weight would be viewed by anglers from other areas. Mr. Neill stated swordfish tournaments held in Florida are often won by "100-pounders," and he felt a 100-pound swordfish landed in Virginia was a trophy-sized fish. Mr. Hall moved to adopt a 100-pound minimum qualifying for swordfish. Mr. Neill seconded the motion. The vote was called and the motion carried 9-0.

Several Committee members noted changes in Citation numbers of several species from 2006 to 2007 but the consensus was Citation minimums were not and could not track year to year fluctuations. Mr. Hall stated several of his constituents from the Eastern Shore were interested in lowering or even eliminating the minimum size requirement for tarpon releases, feeling that any size tarpon was a trophy catch. Mr. Hall indicated an initial minimum size limit of 30 inches (1996) was established for tarpon releases to eliminate misidentification with shad, ladyfish, or other similar fish. In 2004, the release minimum was raised to 48 inches but the measurement could be an estimated length. Recently, tarpon less than 48 inches have become more common during

the summer months on the Eastern Shore seaside but even these smaller tarpon are still a relatively rare catch. As with billfish, the policy of the VSWFT had been to recognize any size tarpon for a release but the minimum size limit was established to lessen the likelihood of misidentification. The Committee discussed whether a release minimum of 30 inches was sufficient to insure ladyfish would not be misidentified as a tarpon. Craig Paige moved to adopt a 36-inch minimum for a tarpon release. Wally Beauchamp seconded the motion. The vote was called and the motion carried 9-0.

IV. Review of the Release Program

a. Discussion of Policy Regarding the Rewarding of Release Citations to Anglers for Fish that Are Caught During a Closed Season

Mr. Gillingham stated the initial goal of the Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament (VSWFT) was to recognize outstanding catches by persons fishing recreationally with a rod-and-reel. In recent years, public education, the promotion of conservation and assistance in the management of the Commonwealth's fisheries have become equally important elements of the Program. When the program began in 1958 few fishing restrictions existed. Few species had minimum size or possession limits. The use of a closed season as a fishery management tool did not become an issue until recently. Prior to 2002, the VSWFT policy was no Citation was issued for fish caught during a closed season in a closed area. At the 2001 Tournament Committee meeting, the group adopted a policy that release Citations would be issued for any eligible species in either a closed area or during a closed season if targeted catch-and-release fishing was allowed. The Committee based their decision on the resurging striped bass fishery and its absence of serious mortality concerns during the winter months. The potential economic importance of the fishery and the acceptance and legality of catch-and-release fishing were also factors the Committee pondered in reaching their decision. The Committee likewise considered the "spill over" effect to other very important recreational fisheries including bluefin tuna, shark and large red drum (ASMFC mandates no red drum greater than 28 may be possessed, Virginia's current maximum size limit is 26 inches).

Since the Committee reviewed this issue in 2001, closed seasons have become a very important and common component in several FMP's including summer flounder and tautog. Both species have been added to the list of species eligible for release Citations. Other popular species eligible for release Citations, such as gray trout, will likely be added to the list of species with closed seasons in the future.

The focal issue concerning the existing release Citation policy erupted in early January of this year. An unusually warm early winter left Baymouth water temperatures in the 50's as the Chesapeake Bay Striped Bass season came to a "close" on December 31 but large striped bass remained concentrated in the lower Bay. Many anglers reportedly targeted these fish in hopes of earning a

release Citations during the first several weeks of the closed Bay season. Additionally, the method used by a majority of these anglers was live-baiting eel, which could substantially increase the release mortality level. The Tournament's policy regarding release Citations was publicly questioned. Mr. Gillingham directed the Committee's attention to a letter included in their folder written by Richard Lockhart. The striped bass issue was resolved when Bay waters cooled and the fish moved out into Virginia's coastal waters in late January, where the season was open.

Subsequently, in April 2007, when it was learned Virginia's summer flounder season would be closed during July 23 through 28, 2007, the VSWFT issued a press release suspending weight and release Citations for summer flounder during the closed period. The issue before the Committee was whether to maintain its current policy, or if not, how should it be modified.

The Committee had significant concerns regarding the potential impact to the striped bass stock from the late winter, directed catch-and-release fishery, particularly since the huge increase in the practice of using live eel as bait. Several members of the Committee mentioned the recent Executive Order signed by United States president George Bush, making it unlawful to sell any striped or red drum caught in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ; ocean waters 3 to 200 miles) and wondered what impact this would have on the future recreational striped bass fishery.

Jack Travelstead, Deputy Commissioner, Chief of Fisheries and member of the ASMFC Striped Bass Management Board, addressed the Committee and provided guidance regarding this issue. Mr. Travelstead stated the striped bass stock is healthy and has been declared recovered. Managed by the ASMFC Striped Bass FMP, the stock was able to flourish within a relatively brief period of time and catch-and-release fishing was allowed during the recovery period. Likewise, the red drum stock has responded positively to management and although drum greater than 28 inches cannot be possessed (26 inches in Virginia) catch-and-release fishing is permitted on these large, trophy fish. Mr. Travelstead felt a key factor for the Committee to consider on this issue was the current status of the stock, as well as the level of directed hook-and-release fishing during a closed season.

Chris Snook described the live eel "bobber" fishery for striped bass that has become so popular off Cape Charles for large striped bass during the winter months. Ms. Snook said because the eel is suspended beneath a float, the striped bass were hooked quickly and not given a chance to swallow the eel as is the practice in other styles of enticing striped bass with live eel. For this reason, hooking mortality should be no greater for "the bobber fleet" than for other methods used to catch striped bass.

Wally Beauchamp remained concerned regarding hooking mortality rates for these large striped bass and was uncomfortable encouraging anglers to target

these trophy striped bass by issuing a release Citation. “Even if it’s only a small amount, we just don’t know.”

Mr. Travelstead suggested the Committee consider the impact of release mortality in Virginia with respect to the entire coast. The hooking mortality rate used in the ASMFC FMP for striped bass is 8%. Given the huge number of large striped bass caught and released off Massachusetts the resulting calculated mortality would dwarf the Virginia fishery.

After considerable debate, the Committee re-affirmed its policy adopted in 2001. Dave Elliott suggested the policy remain “as is for at least one more year” (meaning the Tournament would continue the rewarding of release Citations during a closed season in 2008 as long as catch-and-release is legal). But some members were not convinced a blanket policy regarding a strictly release fishery in a closed area was the correct solution. There was particular concern for a fishery where live bait was employed since the potential for gut-hooking should increase. Ken Neill moved to maintain the current policy (award release Citations during a closed season so long as catch and release was legal) providing such practice does not jeopardize the health of the stock. The latter determination would be an inner-annual modification of species specific policy and left up to the discretion of the VSWFT Director. Dave Elliott seconded the motion. A vote was called and the motion carried 9-0.

Ken Neill informed the Committee of a proposed research study seeking funding approval from the Recreational Fishing Advisory Board (RFAB). The Committee discussed the particulars of this project (RFAB project number 0607-09), a pilot study to assess the post release survival of large striped bass, caught on live eels rigged with either J-hooks or circle hooks in the Virginia winter recreational fishery at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, through the use of archival satellite tags. The RFAB is scheduled to make its final evaluations and vote whether to recommend funding of this project at their November 5, 2007 meeting. The VSWFT Committee felt this project would be extremely useful to assess hooking mortality in one of Virginia’s premier fisheries. Further, the Committee was enthusiastic the research was scheduled to begin this winter and data would be available for evaluation in a short period of time. A motion was made to support this project and the VSWFT Committee voted unanimously to recommend this project receive support by the RFAB. The Committee directed Mr. Gillingham to send a letter of support for this project to the RFAB.

b. Review of Changes Made to the Program in 2007, which Reinstated Release Recognition for spot (13 inches) and Spanish Mackerel (26 inches) but Removed Yellowfin and Bigeye Tuna for Consideration of Awards

The Committee was informed that only one spot release Citation and just two Spanish mackerel release Citations had been issued for 2007 as of October 17, 2007. Mr. Gillingham said the VSWFT office had received no complaints

regarding the suspension of release Citations for either yellowfin tuna or bigeye tuna. There being no additional discussion, the Committee moved to the next agenda item.

V. Flounder—Impact of Maintaining 7-pound Citation Weight Minimum

The Committee decided to maintain a 7-pound minimum citation for flounder at their 2006 annual meeting, rather than raise the qualifying minimum to 8 pounds. Citation numbers for 2007 are down from 2006. Forty-eight percent of the 584 entries received and processed by October 10, 2007 were for flounder weighing 7 pounds but less than 8 pounds (280). Virginia anglers continued to catch an above average number of very large flounder of 10 pounds or more (54) in 2007. The Committee felt they had made the right decision to keep the minimum qualifying weight for flounder at 7 pounds and moved on to the next agenda item.

VI. Spot—Impact of Lowering the Minimum Citation Weight from 1-pound, 2 ounces to 1-pound

For 2007, the VSWFT lowered the minimum qualifying weight for spot from 1-pound, 2-ounces in 2006 to 1-pound for 2007. Through October 10, 2007, Citation numbers for 2007 are well below average. Committee members were directed to the data from the VMRC/ODU Age and Growth Lab included in their information packet that reveals spot are very short lived and the trophy fishery consists of just one or two year classes. The Committee felt the Citation increase up to 1-pound, 2-ounces in 2005 was warranted at the time because of the historic level of spot citations in 2004. However, the 1-pound qualifying weight seemed the better benchmark throughout the VSWFT history and should be continued at this time.

VII. Blueline Tilefish—Review Adequacy of 10-pound Minimum Qualifying Weight; Consideration of the Impact of the 7-fish Possession Limit

The VSWFT added blueline tilefish to the list of eligible species for Citation awards with a qualifying weight of 10 pounds in 2007. At the 2006 annual meeting there was vigorous discussion regarding the minimum qualifying weight. Some Committee members favored a higher minimum qualifying weight of up to 12 pounds. Through October 10, 2007, anglers registered 129 blueline tilefish weighing 10 pounds or more. Nearly 40 % of the Citation entries were for blueline tilefish weighing 10 pounds to 11.99 pounds (51 fish). Anglers registered 57 blueline tilefish weighing from 12 pounds to 15.99 pounds (44 %) and 21 tilefish weighed 16 pounds or more (16 %). After a brief discussion that included the merits of lowering or even eliminating blueline tilefish as an eligible species, the Committee decided to maintain the 10-pound minimum weight.

VIII. Houndfish—Request for Inclusion in the VSWFT Release Program

Mr. Gillingham stated the VSWFT office received a hand written letter requesting Houndfish be considered for a release Citation from 10-year old Scott Hammond.

The letter and the list of criteria used to consider new species in the VSWFT program were included in the Committee's information folder. The Committee felt houndfish were neither recognized as a gamefish by anglers nor provided an active, popular recreational fishery although there is some potential for houndfish to generate an active, popular fishery in the future. Since the Committee agreed by consensus adding houndfish to the list of species eligible for a release Citation was not appropriate at this time, no action was necessary.

IX. State Record Program—Status of Blueline Tilefish, Golden Tilefish and Snowy Grouper

This item was on the night's agenda since these three species were added to State Record Program following the 2006 annual meeting. Qualifying fish (those meeting the adopted minimum) had been received and processed for all three species in 2007. For blueline tilefish, the initial qualifying fish was caught by Doug Deese on; March 10, 2007 and it weighed 18 pounds, 10 ounces. On March 31, 2007, Rick Wineman landed a blueline tilefish weighing 19 pounds, 14 ounces and it holds the current State Record. For golden tilefish, the initial qualifying fish was caught by Jeffery Dail on April 29, 2007 and it weighed 44 pounds. On August 5, 2007, John Vescera landed a golden tilefish weighing 48 pounds and this fish is still pending final verification. On September 22, 2007, Charles Maresh caught a 53-1/2 pound golden tilefish and this fish is still pending final verification. For snowy grouper, the initial qualifying fish was caught by Roger Burnley on April 29, 2007 and the fish weighed 49 pounds, 9 ounces. On June 10, 2007, Robert Manus, landed a golden tilefish weighing 65 pounds, 8 ounces and it is the State record holder.

X. Citation Appeals

Mr. Gillingham stated the VSWFT had received several requests for appeals but the required documentation had not yet been received. With no appeals for consideration, the Committee took no action.

XI. Other Business

Mr. Gillingham asked if there was any other business the Committee would like to consider. Mr. Neill requested State records, once finalized, be processed and mailed to the angler as soon as feasible, rather than wait until the end of the season, when all other Citations are mailed. Mr. Neill indicated he had spoken to Claude Bain prior to Mr. Bain's retirement concerning this request and Mr. Bain indicated this was something that could easily be done by the "new" Director. Mr. Gillingham indicated this was a very simple request and the VSWFT would adopt this modification beginning in 2008. Mr. Neill said members of his fishing club had requested golden tilefish and snowy grouper be added to the list of eligible species for weight Citations. Mr. Neill added that he was not supporting this request, merely passing on the information. Mr. Neill said club members had also suggested the VSWFT track Citations by boat and provide recognition by boat at the end of the year. This process would be similar to how the VSWFT

tracks Citations by angler and perhaps include some type of award for most Citations landed on a particular vessel in a year. Other Committee members offered suggestions on how best to accomplish boat recognition and whether the or not the Virginia Charter Boat Association might be a better venue for this type of recognition. Depending on comments received by the VSWFT in the coming year, this request appears to have enough support to warrant consideration during the next annual meeting.

Chris Snook requested clarification regarding the how specific an angler had to be concerning the location of a catch. Mr. Gillingham responded that anglers should be accurate but there was no requirement as to how specific. For example, if a speckled trout was actually caught in Hungars Creek, and the angler reports lower bayside creek, this is accurate, not very specific, but acceptable. If this same angler reports the speckled trout was caught out of Oyster, on the seaside, this would be more specific but not accurate and not acceptable.

Bill Seymour said a local charter boat captain had inquired about becoming a Weigh Station, since no convenient weigh station existed in his area. Mr. Gillingham responded that in order to qualify as a weigh station the location must be a place of business, open to the public with regular hours and have certified or certifiable scales. Mr. Seymour said he would relay this information.

XII. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:05 PM.