

January 23, 2025

Chair Don Scott
House Rules Committee
General Assembly Building
201 North 9th Street,
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Chair Scott,

The undersigned organizations represent hundreds of thousands of members in the conservation, recreational boating, angling, and hunting community nationwide, including thousands of Virginians who strongly support HB 2713,¹ which would provide funding for critical research into Virginia's largest fishery – Atlantic menhaden. This bill is a crucial step toward ensuring the long-term sustainability of Virginia's fisheries and safeguarding the health of Chesapeake Bay.

HB 2713 provides funding to the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC), in collaboration with the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) to conduct necessary research into the ecology, fishery impacts, and economic importance of the menhaden population in the waters of the Commonwealth. It does not alter or introduce any new management efforts, but instead focuses on gathering vital data to improve sustainable fisheries management for the future. The findings from this research will be reviewed and addressed by the VMRC, which holds the sole authority and responsibility for menhaden management in Virginia.

Establishing a solid baseline of knowledge about the menhaden fishery in Chesapeake Bay is essential for managing Virginia's menhaden resource. Menhaden play a vital role in the bay's ecosystem, serving as a primary food source for iconic predators like striped bass, bluefish, and osprey. Accurate data regarding this critical species will benefit all stakeholders, including commercial fishermen, recreational anglers, charter captains, and wildlife, by enabling VMRC to make informed decisions about the management of the Commonwealth's largest fishery.

This study was developed through a collaborative effort led by VIMS and VMRC, as well as other stakeholders, including the menhaden reduction industry and the recreation and conservation community. Most importantly, all stakeholders including the menhaden industry have already endorsed the study's methodology, and VIMS has made the full study plan publicly available.² This transparency ensures that the research will be balanced and thorough.

While Atlantic menhaden are managed on a coastwide basis, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the population of menhaden specifically within Chesapeake Bay and the potential impacts of reduction fishing on this delicate ecosystem. Virginians have been waiting for this crucial study for over 20 years. In 2005, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission initiated a research program to assess the status of menhaden in the bay and determine whether localized depletion was

¹ <https://lis.virginia.gov/bill-details/20251/HB2713>

² <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2023/RD528/PDF>

occurring.³ However, despite the passage of two decades, we still lack this necessary data. HB 2713 would provide the funding needed to answer our questions and finally address this longstanding concern for the health of Chesapeake Bay.

By improving our knowledge of the bay's menhaden population, HB 2713 would complement existing management efforts and allow for better precautionary measures in managing the bay's fishery resources. Without this crucial research, the future of Virginia's fisheries – both commercial and recreational – could face significant economic and ecological consequences.

HB 2713 would help provide Virginia with the information it needs to control its own destiny in managing this vital fishery. Right now, researchers at VIMS do not have the necessary data to help the VMRC make informed decisions about Virginia's menhaden management, and are effectively operating in the dark without solid information to guide management decisions. Inaction on this bill would further jeopardize the economic stability of our commercial and recreational fisheries, as well as the health of Chesapeake Bay.

For all these reasons, we strongly urge you to support HB 2713. This study offers a critical opportunity to ensure that Virginia can sustainably manage its menhaden fishery and continue to safeguard the health of our recreational and commercial fisheries, and our precious bay for generations to come.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter and for your continued support of Virginia's fisheries and the health of Chesapeake Bay.

Sincerely,

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Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

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Director - Water + Land Conservation Programs

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³ http://www.asmfc.org/uploads/file/546b96ecAtlMenhadenAddendumII_05.pdf

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