



Historic Vote for Fisheries Conservation

“Let Them Spawn” passes NC House, and the Senate awaits

In a major victory for conservation, the North Carolina House passed House Bill 483, known as “Let Them Spawn,” in a bipartisan vote of 58 to 47. This is the first time in decades that any marine fisheries policy has moved this far forward in the legislative process.

“We applaud the House members who were able to wade through all the noise and see this resource bill for what it is—a remedy founded on the most science-based, culturally sensitive, and economically resilient thinking ever put before the state legislature on this issue,” said Tim Gestwicki, CEO of the North Carolina Wildlife Federation. “Fostering reproduction is the most basic tenet of population biology, which is the entire premise of this bill.”

HB 483 “Let Them Spawn” offers a straightforward approach to address the current inertia obstructing fisheries management in North Carolina. It works through the application of simple fishing rules that establish minimum size limits or slot limits for several recreational and commercial fish species that are in critical decline. The bill establishes a minimum size limit for historically significant marine fishery species to ensure that 75 percent of the juvenile fish reaching that size are mature and have the opportunity to spawn at least once. Using the 75 percent maturity threshold for minimum size limits will guide the process of fishery management plan development.

North Carolina boasts two million acres of estuary—the rich, fertile nursery grounds required by so many fish and shellfish species—more than any other state in the Lower 48 other than Louisiana. The bedrock policy to ensure that fish stocks have the opportunity to spawn at least once will significantly and quickly add to the populations of declining and collapsing fish stocks. A healthy spawning class of adult fishes will increase yield and subsequent resiliency and growth of the fishery to the benefit of all user groups.

The Federation points out that the basis of the bill is focused on enhancing the fishery resource and is not a rehash of the typical recreational-versus-commercial fishing battles that have derailed earlier efforts to address North Carolina’s declining marine fish populations.

Manley Fuller, vice president of conservation policy for the Federation, underscores the biological focus of the bill. “This bill is all about resource conservation,” he said. “The species selected for HB 483 were based on scientific analysis that indicates these species are in trouble and are experiencing some or all of the following: declining biomass, declining landings, reduced age structure, or declining indexes of abundance. Whether these species are tasty, valuable, or used as bait is not a resource issue and was not considered. The recreational versus commercial battles over the decades has gotten us nowhere, so the approach is resource-focused. These species are important not only to the commercial and recreational harvest sector, but to the ecosystem as a whole.”

As with all fisheries-related bills over the years, the water has been muddied by special interests wishing for the status quo to remain. The Federation and other conservation proponents were disappointed in the opposition by state agencies and their misrepresentation of the bill’s clearly defined intentions and potential to accomplish meaningful improvement. DEQ and DMF warned of dire unintended consequences which were refuted and rebutted using the agencies’ own data and science.

Severe declines in landings and other measures of fisheries health demand immediate action. In the past two decades, commercial landings have plummeted for many species such as Atlantic croaker (85 percent decline), kingfishes (54 percent decline), striped mullet (47 percent decline), and spot (reduced by a staggering 94 percent). The other two species contained in the bill, southern flounder and bluefish, have seen landings decline by 88 percent and 78 percent respectively since 1997. During 1997, total commercial landings for the six species contained in H483 were 24.7 million pounds compared to 5.2 million pounds in 2018, which is a decline of 79 percent.





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Even some recreational anglers jumped on the misinformation bandwagon, declaring the suffering they would incur over regulations protecting bait fish. Commercial interests continued their decades-long opposition to any bill that mentions fish, offering the same hyperbolic arguments that common-sense regulations would end fishing in North Carolina. The industry's lobbyists resorted to typical methods of deny, defend, deflect and delay, the very strategies that have led our fish stocks to near collapse.

But there were heroes in the House, and they deserve to be named. Representatives Jay Adams (Catawba), Jon Hardister (Guilford), Carla Cunningham (Mecklenburg), Michael Wray (Halifax, Northampton), Brian Turner (Buncombe), and Billy Richardson (Cumberland) all worked to whip votes to make sure this victory for the resource was possible. Representative Larry Yarborough (Person, Granville) was a champion throughout the legislative process and steadfast in carrying the bill on the floor. Special thanks also go to Reps. Adams and Richardson for their impassioned floor speeches in support of our coastal public trust resources during the debate.

And more heroes will be needed. The bill now moves to the North Carolina Senate, and as this issue of *NCWF Journal* was headed to press, it remains likely to be taken up in the short session. Stay tuned.

Twist and Shout

Opponents of Let Them Spawn relied on false comments and twisted facts to fight the basic science promoted by this legislation. For more on how officials with the North Carolina Division of Environmental Quality and the Division of Marine Fisheries distorted this issue, visit:

<https://ncwf.org/wp-content/uploads/HB483-Let-Them-Spawn-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

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Let Them Spawn: How They Voted

In favor (Democrat)

Ager, Alexander, Autry, Ball, Batch, Beasley, Belk, Brewer, Carney, Clark, Clemmons, Cunningham, Dahle, Everitt, Garrison, Harris, Hawkins, Holley, Hunt, Insko, Jackson, John, Logan, Lucas, Martin, Pierce, Queen, Reives, Richardson, R. Smith, B. Turner, von Haefen, Willingham, Wray

Opposed (Democrat)

Black, Brockman, Butler, Farmer-Butterfield, Fisher, Floyd, Gill, Graham, Harrison, Hunter, Lofton, Majeed, Meyer, Montgomery, Morey, Russell, Terry

Excused Absence (Democrat)

Adcock, *Gailliard, Quick, K. Smith

In favor (Republican)

Adams, Bell, Blackwell, Boles, Brisson, Corbin, Davis, Dixon, Fraley, Grange, D. Hall, K. Hall, Hardister, Humphrey, Jones, McGrady, Riddell, Rogers, Saine, Sauls, Strickland, Szoka, White, Yarborough

Opposed (Republican)

Barnes, Brody, Bumgardner, Carter, Cleveland, Conrad, Dobson, Elmore, Faircloth, Goodwin, Hanig, Horn, Hurley, Iler, Jarvis, Kidwell, Lambeth, Lewis, McNeill, Murphy, Pittman, Potts, Presnell, Sasser, Shepard, C. Smith, Speciale, Torbett, R. Turner, Warren

Not Voting (Republican)

Johnson, Moore (Speaker)

Excused Absence (Republican)

Arp, Hastings, *Henson, *Howard, McElraft, Ross (bill co-sponsor absent for both votes), *Setzer, Stevens, *Zachary

**denotes members that voted "yes" the day before who weren't in session for the final vote*