

# Freshwater Fisheries Monthly Report – February 2026

## Freshwater Fisheries: Regional Operations

### 1. Stock Assessment

**Monitoring and Assessment** – The following work was conducted in support of assessing the health and status of sportfish populations in Maryland:

- Eastern Regional staff completed maintenance of Eastern Region, Western II Region, and Central Region electrofishing boats for the upcoming sampling season.
- Western I Region staff completed maintenance on its electrofishing boat and work boats for the upcoming sampling season.
- Western I Region staff conducted creel surveys with ice anglers on Frostburg Reservoir (Piney Reservoir) during the month of February.

### 2. Habitat and Water Quality

**Environmental Review** – Provided aquatic resource information for the following environmental review projects:

- Central Region staff updated the Coldwater Resources Mapping Tool with sampling data from the summer of 2025.
- Reviewed and commented on a culvert replacement project in Fikes Run (Garrett County). Fikes Run is located in the Bear Creek watershed and supports a brook trout population. Recommendations included requests for project scheduling that follows Use Class III time-of-year restrictions for instream work and the use of strict sediment and erosion control best management practices. Additionally, Fishing and Boating Services recommended the use of a bottomless structure sized to pass high flow events at this location rather than replacement with an in-kind culvert.
- West I Region staff reviewed and commented on a project in Garrett County for an access road to be installed for a solar farm. Comments were provided for strict sediment and erosion control measures, proper working conditions, and to complete the project in phases to reduce soil exposure.
- West I Region staff reviewed and commented on a stone revetment project to take place on Deep Creek Lake. Comments were provided for sediment and erosion control, material use, time-of-year restrictions, working conditions, and proper monitoring and inspections.

## **Additional Work with Habitat and Water Quality**

- Central Region staff presented preliminary findings of a 2025 watershed assessment in a brook trout catchment to the Carroll County Water Resources Coordination Council (WRCC). Findings prompted additional meetings with Carroll County Resource Management Division and Potomac Valley Trout Unlimited.
- Southern Region staff attended the 2026 Pest Management Conference in Frederick to recertify the Public Agency Permit for Aquatics. In addition, a Declaration of Intent was sent to MDE for Hughesville Pond, a Fishing Management Area, for vegetation control this spring or summer to improve fishing conditions.
- Western I Region staff, with assistance from Maryland Wildlife and Heritage, and Trout Unlimited, delivered and placed high calcium lime into Muddy Creek located in Garrett County. The purpose of the liming project is to buffer the stream pH during spring melt/runoff events to prevent fish kills from acidification.

### **3. Stocking and Population Management**

- Central Region staff completed the new Monthly Trout Stocking Schedule for the upcoming spring stocking season. This monthly schedule was posted on the Trout Stocking webpage and is accessible to the public.
- Central Region staff put together the trout stocking volunteer schedule for closure stockings in May. Over 40 trout stocking volunteers are active in the Central Region.
- Central Region staff provided Natural Resources Police with dates and locations for all upcoming closure 1 stockings across the state. Over 50 new officers were provided access to the schedule. Keeping officers informed of stocking activities will enable more targeted and efficient enforcement strategies for put-and-take trout fishing.
- Central Region staff coordinated with the Potomac Patuxent Chapter of Trout Unlimited to float stock the Upper Patuxent and the Patuxent River below Brighton Dam. Over 20 Trout Unlimited members participated. Central Region staff has been supporting this Potomac Patuxent Trout Unlimited effort for many years.



*Float stocking the Upper Patuxent and the Patuxent River below Brighton Dam.*

- Eastern Regional staff along with Unicorn Hatchery staff completed trout stocking at Beaverdam Creek, Unicorn Branch, Shad Landing Pond, Tuckahoe Creek, Howards Pond, and Big Elk Creek.
- Southern Region staff assisted Manning Hatchery with seining rainbow trout out of the production ponds and loading them onto trucks for stocking 12 Southern Region put-and-take areas. Stocking required punching through ice in some areas and Lake Artemesia and Greenbelt were delayed due to the thickest ice found.
- Western I Region staff assisted Bear Creek Hatchery staff with general work duties during the extreme cold temperatures this winter season.

#### 4. Outreach

**Customer Service** - Provided customer service information for inquiries regarding:

- Ice fishing opportunities in Western I Region.
- Trout fishing opportunities in Western I Region.
- Put and Take trout stocking and schedule.
- Potomac River walleye fishing.

#### **Additional Outreach Events**

- Central and Western II Region staff presented at the newly formed Central Maryland Fly Fishing Council. The talk focused on recreational trout management in Maryland Piedmont. Attendees from multiple Trout Unlimited chapters, local fly fishing clubs, the Maryland Park Service, and the National Park service were in attendance.

- Central Region staff met with the Central Region Maryland Park Service management team to discuss how the Freshwater Fisheries and Hatcheries Division manages trout resources in the region. Topics covered included wild trout management, the trout stocking program, and enforcement. Staff from Gunpowder State Park, Seneca Creek State Park, Patapsco State Park, and Natural Resources Police were in attendance.
- Central Region staff presented the annual “State of the Gunpowder” presentation on wild trout populations in the Gunpowder tailwater to the Maryland Chapter of Trout Unlimited in Hunt Valley, Maryland.
- Central Region staff participated in the first Central Region Regional Teams meeting of 2026 at Seneca Creek State Park. Multiple departmental agencies had representation and discussions mainly focused on hiring and purchasing difficulties. Unit specific topics included loss of angler parking and access in the central region, coordination with Natural Resources Police officers on enforcement, and discussion with Land Acquisition and Planning on upcoming property acquisitions for additional angler access.
- Southern Region office had new carpet installed for improved health of visitors and staff alike. The old carpet was dusty and moldy and a bit embarrassing with duct tape patches. Here are before and after photos:



*Before and after: the new carpet installation at the Southern Region office!*

## 5. Angler Access

- Central Region staff received a list of qualified candidates for a creel clerk and scheduled interviews for early March.

- Central Region staff coordinated with volunteers from Patuxent Potomac Trout Unlimited to ensure adequate signage for the Patuxent River Catch and Release and Flies Only sections are visible to anglers.
- Southern Region staff worked with Annapolis Recreation and Parks to get consent to stock trout in Waterworks Park Pond. This will add a new location in an urban area that has never received trout before. Trout regulation signs saying "2-trout-per-day" were delivered to the Park office so their staff can post them.



*Photos of Waterworks Park being stocked for the first time!*

- Western I Regional staff placed regulation signs at access points along the managed fisheries in Garrett County and Allegany County.

## 6. Fish Health

- Southern Region met with Mark Matsche about Largemouth Bass Virus testing and planned testing of fish from some of our smaller impoundments. It was discussed that some of the smaller impoundments may have been stocked with largemouth bass from the Potomac River and could also contain the virus, so it will be good to test these areas.

## **Freshwater Fisheries: Statewide Operations**

### **1. Invasive Fishes Program**

Invasive Fishes Program staff were selected to begin the Maryland Department of Natural Resources' Fly Fishing class at Patapsco State Park. The class educates staff on fly fishing techniques and how to teach new anglers to use the gear. Fly fishing has been used to capture some invasive fishes, especially snakeheads.

Staff hosted blue catfish fillet demonstrations at the Chesapeake Bay Boat Show in Timonium and Explore the Shore in Cambridge, Maryland. Demonstrations were well-attended and served to educate the public.

Invasive Fishes Program staff met with partners, including Maryland Parks Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' Maryland Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office, and Washington D.C.'s Department of Energy and Environment, to plan two upcoming fishing events that promote invasive fish harvest for recreational anglers.

### **2. Coldwater Fisheries Program**

Developed the coldwater survey plan for 2026 and coordinated with regional staff to prioritize data collection needs and identify survey leads. Statewide and regional staff plan to conduct approximately 92 depletion surveys for population estimates, 53 single pass qualitative surveys, and deploy 139 in-stream temperature data recorders. Coldwater surveys provide critical population, occupancy, and habitat data that guide management decisions and actions.

Collaborated with Garrett County Department of Public Works and Trout Unlimited to submit a project application for a U.S. Department of Transportation BUILD grant. The project application identifies six culverts in Garrett County that are aging and need to be replaced. The culverts are partial or complete barriers to aquatic organism passage and are located in watersheds that support coldwater fisheries. The culverts will be replaced with larger structures that will both improve the flood resilience of the road network and allow passage for coldwater fish species and other aquatic organisms.

Met with Fishing and Boating Services Fish Health Program to coordinate coldwater fisheries health sampling needs for 2026. The teams collaborated to determine where and when fish health testing is needed, identified priorities for testing, and developed a rough schedule for testing activities. The data collected from this collaboration will contribute to the Fish Health Program's database for statewide fish testing and improve our understanding of coldwater fisheries health. The information will also minimize fish health risks associated with wild trout translocation and propagation for new population establishment.

Met with Bear Creek Hatchery staff to plan the approach for brook trout propagation activities in 2026. This project was initiated in 2025 and will continue in 2026. Wild

brook trout eggs will be collected in the fall and brought back to the Bear Creek isolation hatchery for culturing. Raised brook trout will be released to streams that have suitable habitat but do not support existing wild trout populations. The goal of the effort is to establish new brook trout populations and expand occupancy in the state.

Attended the first meeting of the Central Maryland Fly Fishing Council. The mission of the council is to bring together fly-fishing organizations, aquatic resources stakeholder groups, and natural resource management agencies to improve communication, conservation, outreach and education, and advocacy for coldwater resources and other aquatic habitats. The council plans to meet quarterly with additional events planned to facilitate community activities.

### 3. Tidal Bass Program

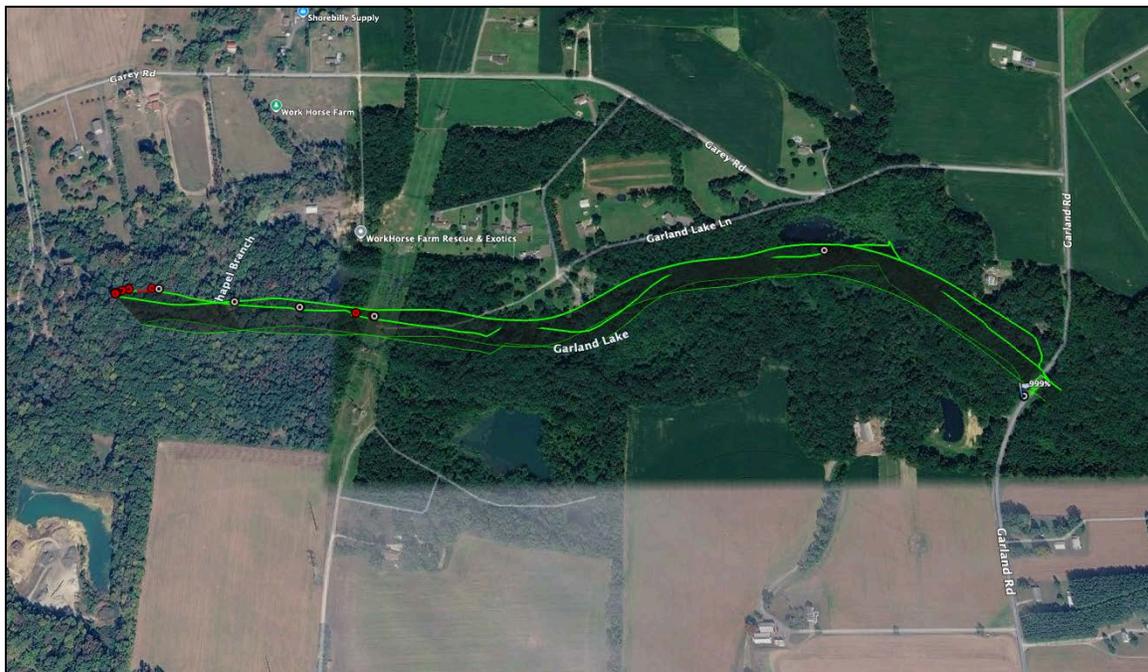
In February, the Tidal Bass Program consolidated data for the 18th volume of the Black Bass Annual Review, the annual tournament report, and the 2025 Tidal Bass Survey. This year's annual review highlights key management and conservation initiatives, including efforts to prevent the introduction of invasive Alabama Bass into Maryland waters, research regarding the impact of Live-imaging Sonar (LIS) on catch rates, and an overview of the state's supplemental stocking programs.

The tidal bass program received 400 permit requests in 2025. Of those, 384 reports were successfully submitted, continuing a positive trend in director compliance following recent outreach efforts. These reports provide essential data on angler success across 21 different fisheries, including metrics such as mean lunker size, average winning bag weight, and average fish size. These statistics are currently being finalized for a year end summary.

The 2025 Tidal Bass Survey conducted sampling across 161 sites within the Bush, Chester, Choptank, Gunpowder, Middle, and Potomac rivers, as well as the Upper Chesapeake Bay. Field efforts resulted in the collection of 777 fish, 379 of which were juveniles. Overall, most fisheries appeared stable or improving. Environmental factors played a significant role in this year's data collection; specifically, a fall drought led to increased salinity across nearly all sites. High salinity prevented sampling in the Lower Chester River and may have made fish more difficult to detect in other systems. While catch rates decreased in the Upper Bay and the Gunpowder and Bush rivers, they remain above established target reference points. Continued monitoring in the coming years will determine if these lower rates were a seasonal outlier caused by environmental conditions or an actual shift in population abundance.

#### 4. Fish Passage Program

The Fish Passage Program spent much of February coordinating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on a multi-year project to identify and remove blockages in the Choptank watershed. We used the Fish Passage Prioritization Tool and the North Atlantic Aquatic Connectivity Collaborative database of culverts to narrow down priority projects for this effort. Priority sites for removal and additional data collection will be finalized in March. Staff are also working within the Unit to identify eDNA collection sites for invasive fish and targeted anadromous fish. This data will help us determine differences in populations of these fish and resident fish above and below select dams, determine the spread of invasive fishes, and help show effectiveness of fish passages at these dams. Staff have also been active in several projects with the Environmental Review Program, particularly a project to install pier protections at the Bay Bridge, provide comments on the Environmental Impact Statement for a new bay bridge crossing, and coordinating on construction of the new Key Bridge. Finally, staff have been working with American Rivers to provide comments on the Daniel's Dam Feasibility Study, which should be available soon. Looking ahead, staff will field check sampling sites for this coming spring and open/assess fish ladders for the spring migration.



*Screenshot of a recent drone survey of Chapel Branch in the Choptank River. Drones are a valuable tool for assessing fish blockages, particularly in the winter months with no leaf cover. Flight records can be retrieved from the drone and shown on Google Earth.*



*Photo of Chapel Branch taken from the drone.*

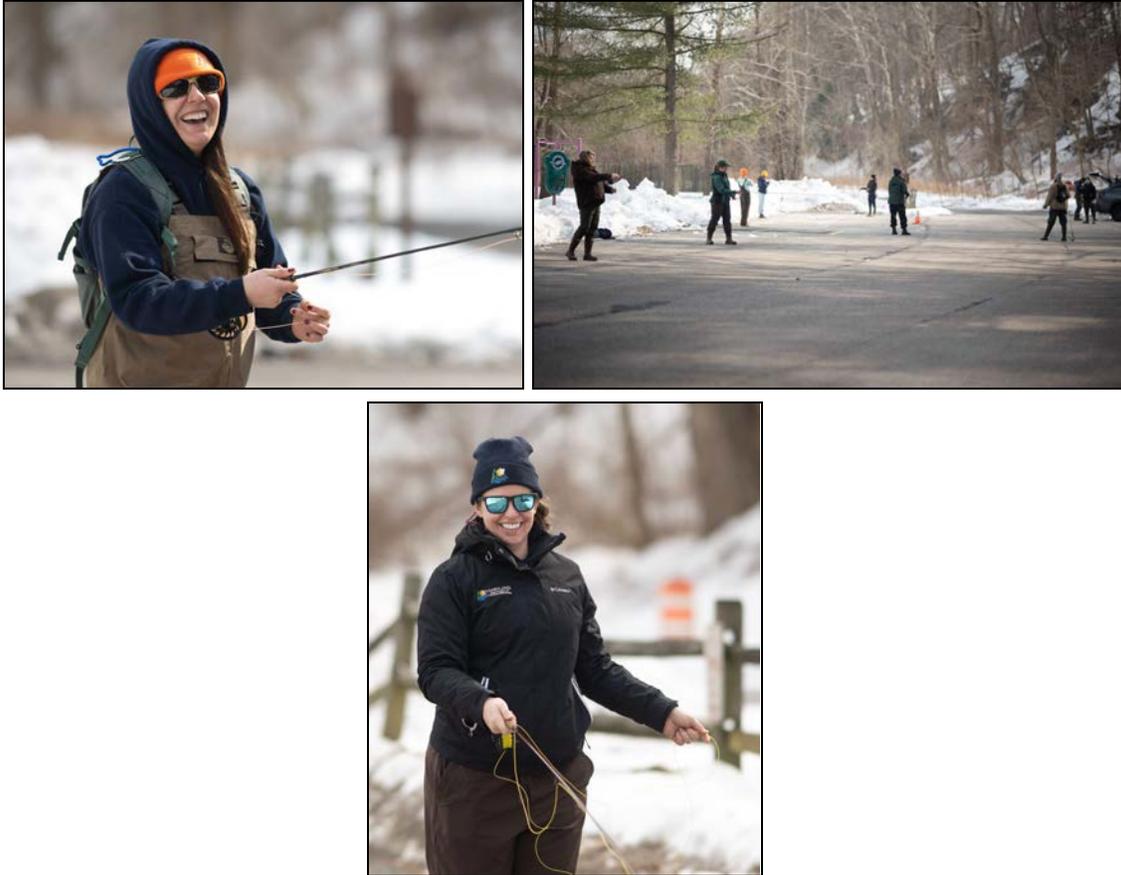


*Photo of NAACC Site 21477 - Little Gravely Branch at Boyce Mill Road taken via drone. This culvert has been listed as a priority for the Choptank River AOP project.*

## 5. Organized Freshwater Fishing

Assisted at the Chesapeake Bay Boat show in early February and engaged with over 80 participants. Most common topics were rockfish regulations, and fishing for blue catfish and Chesapeake Channa (northern snakehead).

The first session of the Aquatic R3 Matrix team's fly fishing skills training was a success! Participants learned and practiced the Four Core Casting principles. In the next session we'll get in the water and start putting our skills to the test!



*Session One of Aquatic R3 Matrix team's fly fishing skills training. Photos by Rachel Pacella.*

Attended the Maryland Biological Stream Survey (MBSS) spring training on February 17 and 18. Staff were taught how to conduct a physical habitat assessment and sample for benthic macroinvertebrates. The MBSS summer training will follow-up fish sampling and taxonomy.

Freshwater Fisheries staff, Aquatic Resource Education staff, and the Office of Outdoor Recreation participated in the Explore the Shore Outdoor Expo. Held at the packing house in Cambridge, over 600 attendees were able to learn a variety of outdoor related skills, including basic casting principles, fly fishing knots and more!