

NUISANCE SPECIES — Alabama Bass and Spotted Bass

What is being considered?

The department would like to add Alabama bass and spotted bass to its list of prohibited species for import, transport, purchase, possess, propagate, sell, or release into State waters.

Why is this change necessary?

Alabama bass (*Micropterus hensalli*) is one of at least twelve recognized temperate black basses indigenous to freshwater rivers and lakes of North America. It is an aggressive species that generally does not grow as big as largemouth bass, can rapidly become abundant when introduced into an ecosystem, competes with other black bass for food, and can genetically pollute populations of smallmouth bass (*M. dolomieu*) and largemouth bass (*M. salmoides*), as well as other species of black bass (e.g., shoal bass, spotted bass). Because of its fighting ability, anglers from black bass fishing clubs have illegally introduced Alabama bass to Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia waters. It has been introduced by government agencies in Texas and California, and possibly abroad in South Africa. Where introduced, the species has not been eradicated, though harvest may be encouraged. Anglers have debated the merits of a control program dedicated to Alabama bass because some enjoy fishing for the species, while others recognize the problems it poses to other black bass species. The species is highly valued for its catchability along with its fighting ability. Alabama bass has not been reported in Maryland but there is concern anglers could introduce the species into Maryland. Additionally, out-of-state suppliers might sell Alabama bass to Marylanders. Because Alabama bass and the more widespread, spotted bass (*M. punctulatus*) were once considered the same species, can be indistinguishable to the naked eye, and regularly hybridize in Tennessee and Georgia, the department is including spotted bass in order to prevent introduction of it or hybrids.

If introduced, Alabama bass, spotted bass, and their hybrids could pose a risk to existing black bass fisheries in Maryland. The species could become successfully established in meso-oligotrophic impoundments such as Deep Creek Lake, Prettyboy, Lock Raven, and Liberty Reservoirs and lotic, fast-flowing systems with cobble or small boulder substrates, such as the nontidal Potomac River and its major tributaries. The species could also pose a threat to some areas of the tidal Chesapeake Bay, particularly locations where smallmouth bass occur (e.g., lower Susquehanna River) and mesotrophic habitats where competition could occur for limited prey resources. Once established, Alabama bass may outcompete largemouth bass in some habitats, hybridize with smallmouth bass, and create fisheries with smaller adult bass than anglers can currently catch.

Climate matching data and risk assessments performed by the department indicate overall medium risk of Alabama bass to Maryland. If the department adds Alabama bass and spotted bass to the list of prohibited species, a person may not import, transport, purchase, possess, propagate, sell, or release into State waters Alabama bass or spotted bass. By adopting a regulation for these species: 1) anglers will learn about the dangers of introducing Alabama bass or spotted bass (and other unpermitted introductions); and 2) out-of-state suppliers will not sell Alabama bass or spotted bass to Marylanders.

Who will this affect?

Since these species pose a risk to existing species in Maryland, this idea affects everyone in Maryland. If a regulation is proposed it is expected to have no economic impact on the agency, on other state agencies or local governments, on anglers, or on vendors that sell black bass species. The idea is a preventative measure.

When will this be effective?

The department expects this change to be effective in the spring or early summer of 2021, however the exact date cannot be determined. The department will follow our normal scoping and proposal procedures.

This idea is in the scoping process (October 19—November 3). The goal of scoping is to identify issues, potential impacts, and reasonable alternatives associated with the issues so that management actions can be developed. After the public has had an opportunity to comment on possible management actions during the scoping process, the department considers these comments and develops an appropriate management strategy.

If the action is necessary and appropriate, the rules will be promulgated following the Administrative Procedures Act described in Title 10, Subtitle 1 of the State Government Article Annotated Code of Maryland.

- The General Assembly's Administrative, Executive, and Legislative Review Committee reviews the regulatory proposal for fiscal and legal analysis.
- The proposal is printed by the Division of State Documents in the Maryland Register.
- A 30 day public comment period begins on the day of publication.
- After review of the comments, the department may adopt the changes.
- If the department adopts the changes, they become effective after a notice is published in the Maryland Register that announces approval and the effective date.

Has this change been discussed with stakeholders?

This idea was discussed with the Black Bass Advisory Committee during the July and October 2020 meetings and reviewed by the department's Invasive Species Matrix Team (August 2020). This idea directly and effectively addresses concerns voiced by bass anglers and fishery chiefs in the southeastern United States, as discussed during the Conservation Director's meeting of B.A.S.S. (March 2020).

Has this change been discussed with advisory commissions?

The idea was discussed with the Sport Fisheries Advisory Commission and Tidal Fisheries Advisory Commission at their October 2020 meetings.