WHITE PERCH - Recreational and Commercial Management Measures

What is being considered?

The Department is considering declaring white perch as a species in need of conservation and potential management options for both the recreational and commercial sectors of the white perch fishery. Currently, there are no closed seasons and no daily or annual catch limits established for the recreational or commercial white perch fisheries in Maryland. In addition, there is no minimum size if a white perch is caught with hook and line. A minimum size limit of 8 inches applies to both the recreational and commercial fishery if a white perch is caught with any gear other than hook and line. Recent (2023-2025) commercial hook and line gear accounted for approximately 0.5% of total harvest as opposed to recreational harvest in which hook and line gear approximates 100% of total harvest.

Options for management that are being considered:

1. Option 1: Establish an 8-inch minimum size for the harvest of all white perch in all tidal waters and in streams and rivers in nontidal waters. The minimum size would apply for all gear used in the recreational and commercial fisheries, including hook and line. The minimum size would apply to both recreational anglers and commercial harvesters and would provide a consistent size limit for all fisheries; *or*
2. Option 2: This option is similar to Option 1 but includes an exception. The exception would allow commercial harvesters with the appropriate license authorization to harvest white perch under 8 inches with hook and line for the month of June. The commercial hook and line fishery for striped bass utilizes small white perch in June for bait until spot become available. Any white perch harvested in the commercial fishery that are under 8 inches in length must be harvested with hook and line and used as bait in the commercial hook and line fishery. They cannot be used or sold for any other purpose.

Why is this change necessary?

For a species to be designated as "in need of conservation", the Department must conduct an investigation and develop information relating to population, distribution, habitat needs, limiting factors, and other biological and ecological data to determine conservation measures necessary for the species' continued ability to sustain themselves successfully.

Survey data has indicated adult population levels have declined over the past several years, and juvenile production was below average in eight consecutive years (2019 to 2026). Consecutive years of low juvenile production will likely cause population levels to continue to decline over the next several years. Additionally, invasive species, particularly the blue catfish, has contributed to increased predation pressure on white perch and represents an additional concern for the population.

White perch have historically provided robust commercial and recreational fisheries in Maryland. Since 2000, annual commercial and recreational fishery landings have averaged 1.26 million pounds and 1.67 million pounds, respectively. From these levels, commercial landings have decreased 75% since 2020 and recreational harvest has decreased 29% since 2022.

The Department believes a minimum size is necessary to increase the number of white perch that survive to spawn and thereby improve the potential for spawning success and recruitment. White

perch typically reach sexual maturity at approximately age 2–3, while individuals generally do not reach 8 inches until approximately age 5–6. Establishing an 8-inch minimum size would therefore provide additional opportunities for white perch to reproduce before becoming vulnerable to harvest. Applying the minimum size to all harvest gears in both the recreational and commercial fisheries would provide a consistent and equitable approach to achieving this conservation objective. To ensure the commercial hook and line fishery for striped bass has bait available prior to spot becoming abundant in Maryland waters, an exemption to the 8-inch maximum length limit is being considered only for white perch used as bait in the commercial hook and line fishery in June.

These changes will allow for a greater chance of increasing spawning stock size and in turn potentially lead to better year class strength in subsequent years.

Who will this affect?
This has the potential to affect recreational anglers, commercial white perch harvesters, and seafood dealers who deal in white perch.

Has this change been discussed with advisory bodies or other interested or impacted individuals?

1. Ideas were discussed with the Sport Fisheries Advisory Commission (SFAC) and the Tidal Fisheries Advisory Commission (TFAC) at their meetings in October 2026.
2. TFAC commissioners noted that white perch are used as bait in the commercial hook and line fishery for striped bass prior to spot becoming abundant in Maryland waters and asked the Department to consider an exemption to the minimum length for June.
3. The Department added the option and noted the change when scoping information was sent to commissioners.

Additional Information

1. "Species in need of conservation" means any species which:
   (a) May become threatened in the foreseeable future;
   (b) Has a limited or declining population; and
   (c) Has been determined by the Secretary to be in need of conservation measures for its continued ability to sustain itself successfully.
2. Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 08.02.12.03A - Species listed as in need of conservation

Regulatory Process
Fishing rules in Maryland may be created by either the General Assembly or the Department. When the Department creates a fishing rule, it is called a regulation. When the General Assembly creates a rule, it is called a statute. The Department often has to create a regulation to implement a statute. The regulatory process begins with scoping and the Department follows normal procedures as concepts move forward.

During the scoping process, the Department gathers suggestions and ideas from stakeholders and others about how to solve a fishery problem or address a need. 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.

When could this be effective?
The Department projects that this change could be effective in the spring of 2027. However, the exact date cannot be determined at this time.