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A jet skier in protest of Virginia's large menhaden reduction fishery ran inside a net in September and out again before the two purse boats came together. Photo: Larry Chowning

VA Governor Signs “Right To Fish” Law Protecting Menhaden Crews After Stunt Is Caught On Video

By Larry Chowning / April 15, 2024

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A [shocking incident](#) between an Omega Protein menhaden fishing crew and a jet skier prompted a new law to keep anyone from harassing commercial fisherman.

Delegate Hillary Pugh Kent, representing Virginia's Northern Neck and Caroline County in House District 67, announced that Governor Glenn Youngkin has signed into law “The

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Right to Fish” bill, (House Bill 928) to protect commercial watermen from interference, which she sponsored.

HB 928 was prompted by a dangerous engagement between a jet skier and an Ocean Harvesters menhaden fishing crew that occurred on September 23, 2023, which was documented in a video by a menhaden spotter pilot. The video shows menhaden fishing crews at work, and cuts to aerials from the spotter pilot. You can see the jet ski cut close to the menhaden boats, crossing inside their net.



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Video: Menhaden Fisheries Coalition

The incident occurred approximately 1.5 miles east of Buckroe Beach off Hampton, Virginia, in the Chesapeake Bay. As an Ocean Harvesters’ crew was making a set, the rider of the jet ski ran his boat between the two purse boats and was able to get inside the set and out before the set was completed. The jet skier rode inside the net, sprayed the crew with his wake and yelled obscenities at them, according to an account by the Menhaden Fisheries Coalition (MFC).

The incident on September 23 resulted in the arrest of the person driving the jet ski. He was found guilty and required to pay a \$500 fine.

Del. Kent said, “This bill recognizes the importance of our state’s seafood industry by creating protections for commercial watermen and deterring unlawful interference. This new law will provide restitution against those who purposefully inhibit fishing and destroy the property of commercial watermen,” she said. “It will reinforce the continued viability of our fishing and seafood industries, which are necessary to the economic and cultural fabric of the Northern Neck and all of the Commonwealth.”

The bill passed 38-1 by the Senate, and 99-0 by the House. It was signed by the Speaker of the House on March 5 and President of the Senate on March 7. It increases penalties for harassing watermen to a Class 1 misdemeanor, which is confinement in jail for not more than twelve months and a fine of not more than \$2,500, either or both.

The Class 1 misdemeanor is for any person who knowingly and intentionally interferes with or impedes the operation of commercial fishing activity of a commercial fishing vessel within the territorial waters of the Commonwealth.

The bill also deems a person to be ineligible for any hunting or fishing license for a period of one year upon a first conviction of this offense and for a period of three years

upon a second or subsequent conviction. The bill also requires any person convicted of a violation of this offense to complete a boating safety education class.

Ocean Harvesters in Reedville, Va, is the only large menhaden reduction fishery on Chesapeake Bay and the largest on the Atlantic coast. The company has been catching fire from environmental and sport-fishing groups that want the company to stop catching menhaden and to move out of the bay.

According to MFC, the Right to Fish bill was supported by the Virginia Manufacturer’s Association, Virginia Watermen’s Association, and United Food & Commercial Workers Local 400.

Tags: commercial fishing, General Assembly, menhaden, Omega Protein, watermen

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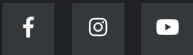


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