

[From Summer 1995]

Weakfish Study

Did you ever wonder if the undersized weakfish you have been releasing back into the channels and bays of the Eastern Shore actually survive? As the total population of weakfish has continued to decline, strict harvest quotas, bag and size limits for commercial and recreational fishermen have been implemented. Currently, researchers rely on information they have on the spotted sea trout in the Gulf of Mexico to estimate the discard mortality rates for weakfish along the Mid-Atlantic coast. Tagging studies for such species as red drum, black drum and spotted sea trout are ongoing and successful. But weakfish pose a particular problem due to their sensitivity to standard collection procedures. Consequently, the development of effective capture, handling and tagging techniques are needed before a large-scale tagging program would help researchers learn more about stock size, migration patterns and the overall health of the weakfish population.

On May 30, 1995, a research project to analyze the effects of catching and releasing weakfish was started by the Fish and Wildlife's Office of Fishery Assistance in Gloucester, Virginia. The project is being conducted in cooperation with Chesapeake Bay ecosystem fisheries field stations, Lamar Fish Health and Technology Center, Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia Institute of Marine Science, Virginia Marine Resources Commission, Kiptopeke State Park, and Northampton County. Ten cages, located in the bay near Kiptopeke State Park, are being used as holding areas for weakfish.

The fish are caught on hook and line, then released into one of the cages for observation. Each cage can hold up to thirty fish. The weakfish are being checked at twenty-four hour intervals for up to seventy-two hours. During the observation period, deceased fish are counted to determine the survival rate in each cage. This first phase of the study is scheduled to end on June 30, 1995. Weakfish may be captured again in August to see if fish mortality is affected by the higher water temperature.

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