GREENPEACE
702 H Street, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20001
Tel: 202-462-1177 • Fax: 202-462-4507
1-800-326-0959 • www.greenpeaceusa.org

Comments to the ASMFC **February 23, 2006**

According to the most recent assessment, Atlantic menhaden stocks are at historic lows. It is now difficult to imagine that it was once not unusual to find age-10 menhaden in the Atlantic, as even age-5 menhaden are now extremely rare. The impact the industrial reduction fishery has had on menhaden population structure is of particular concern, given the high spawning capacity of these older and larger fish. Overfishing has dramatically reduced the spawning stock biomass coastwide, but this is masked in the models by a failure to accurately account for predation.

Recruitment failure has been a problem for several years, but as this doesn't fit the computer model, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) seems to consider climate or cyclical factors to be more likely culprits than overfishing. It is highly unlikely that heavy fishing on adult populations has had no relation to their ability to produce offspring. In any case, it is clear that the unknown impacts of climate change and other factors must be accounted for in setting fishing levels, rather than using these factors as excuses for why management measures have failed to prevent fish stock declines.

The ASMFC's decision last August to put a cap on the menhaden reduction fishery in the Chesapeake Bay was a response to concerns about localized depletion in the most important spawning area for what is left of the menhaden population. In fact, menhaden stocks have experienced serial depletions, starting with overfishing in the Gulf of Maine and moving down the Atlantic coast. In 1999, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Peer Review Panel recommended that the ASMFC set a firm limit on the coastwide catch.

This is not just a problem for menhaden. This is a problem for the many species that feed on menhaden, as well as the substantial commercial and recreational industries that depend on those species. Of further concern is the impact the decline of menhaden stocks has had on water quality. With the collapse of the Chesapeake oyster population, the importance of maintaining healthy populations of filter feeders cannot be overstated.

Numerous reports over the past several years have highlighted the need to move from the type of single-species management currently practiced by the ASMFC to an ecosystem-based approach. Perhaps the most relevant example of precautionary, ecosystem-based management involving the US is the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources' (CCAMLR) management of krill. Given the critical role that krill play in food webs, CCAMLR sets fishing levels such that median krill spawning biomass is predicted to be 75% of its pristine size. As menhaden and krill fill the same role in their respective food webs, it is hard to understand the ASMFC's unwillingness to take ecosystem concerns into account.

As Virginia Governor Tim Kaine said in October, while running for his current office, "if the menhaden are harvested too vigorously, then it reduces a source of food that can be helpful to a healthy rockfish population, for example. It's a question of balance."

Greenpeace maintains that the Bay cap, passed by a 12-2 vote last August, does not go far enough to strike this necessary balance to protect coastal ecosystems or fishing communities. However, by the Commission's recognition that limits on the fishery are overdue, it is an important step in the right direction. Now that the Virginia General Assembly has bowed to pressure from Omega Protein and refused to ratify the cap, the buck has been passed to Governor Kaine. If the State of Virginia fails to comply with this decision, we hope that the ASMFC will urge the Commerce Secretary to place a moratorium on the reduction fishery in Virginia waters. In the end, Omega's refusal to honor the ASMFC's decision may well provide the Commission with an opportunity to do, at long last, what is necessary to protect coastal ecosystems.