



Potomac River Fisheries Commission



MARYLAND - VIRGINIA
"Potomac River Compact of 1958"

**Minutes of the Regular Meeting
Potomac River Fisheries Commission
Colonial Beach, Virginia
March 6, 2026**

Commissioners Present: Chairman, William L. Rice, Sr. (MD), Joseph Grist (VMRC Acting Commissioner) – Vice Chairman, Robert A. Boarman (MD), S. Lynn Kellum (VA), Michael Luisi (MD), Dr. Jim Wesson (VA) - Secretary, Greg Gwaltney (MD), Spencer Headley (VA)

Officers Present: Ronald W. Owens, Executive Secretary, Ingrid Braun-Ricks, Assistant ES, Jack J. Billingsley– Legal Officer, Cathy Friend – Admin. Asst.

Law Enforcement Present: VMRC – Capt. Herbert Bell; MD NRP – Ofc. Tyler Neitzel

Public Attendees: Elgin Nininger, Ed Arnest, Bill Kilinski, Sammie Dorough, Sam Dorough, and Roger Hill

Chairman Rice called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. The Pledge of Allegiance was said, and an Invocation was given.

Two new Commissioners were introduced: Michael Luisi was introduced as sitting proxy for Josh Kurtz, MD DNR and Joseph Grist was introduced as Acting Commissioner of VMRC.

Approval of Agenda – There was one change to the agenda requested by staff stating that a nomination under New Business was mislabeled as BCAC when it should have been for the Finfish Advisory Committee.

Motion made by Commissioner Headley to approve the change to the agenda and was seconded by Commissioner Grist. There was no opposition to the motion and passed unanimously.

Consideration of Meeting Minutes – December 5, 2025

Motion made by Commissioner Boarman to approve the minutes as presented and seconded by Commissioner Gwaltney. There was no opposition to the motion and passed 6-0-2 (Grist/Headley).

Public Comment

Bill Kilinski asked the Commission to extend the maximum number of gill nets through the end of the season rather than the existing step-down requirement due to ice conditions in January and February citing Maryland's recent extension of their gill net season. Staff made note that there was an additional separate written request from Kenneth Pearson asking to extend the striped bass gill net season by two weeks. Commissioners raised several concerns including whether extending beyond March 25th would require smaller mesh sizes and concerns regarding the spawning stock, and staff indicated that an extension to the season would conflict with PRFC's conservation equivalency plan. Commissioners from both Virginia and Maryland cautioned against extending the season to overlap with the striped bass migration/spawning period. Some Commissioners emphasized the importance

of helping fishermen meet their harvest quota despite weather-related losses. During the discussion, staff confirmed that the gill net season officially ends March 25, 2026, and historically the Commission has not extended the harvest season past that date.

Motion made by Commissioner Headley to extend the 4-stand limit through March 25. After further discussion, **Commissioner Headley vacated his original motion and made a motion for an Emergency Order to allow 5 gill net stands through March 25th due to significant ice impacts limiting fishing opportunity. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Boarman and passed unanimously. This Emergency Order would go into effect immediately.**

**EMERGENCY ORDER #2026-09
GILL NET FISHERY RESTRICTIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

THE POTOMAC RIVER FISHERIES COMMISSION, having found the current striped bass harvest by gill nets is below its quota, having found winter storm conditions in January and February 2026 have caused considerable economic hardship to the gill net fishery in the Potomac River, having found an Emergency situation exist, and pursuant to its authority under Regulation I, Section 7(a),

HEREBY DECLARES AND ORDERS: that Commission Order 2025-17, 2025-2026 GILL NET SEASON AND RESTRICTIONS & COMMERCIAL STRIPED BASS CATCH AND SIZE LIMITS, paragraph b), sub-paragraphs ii) and iii) are amended to read as follows:

b) **Permitted Nets** – Each licensee, shall be permitted to set and fish a single properly identified net, in the number of his licensed locations (stands) as follows:

- i) November 10th through February 28th – all stands, and;
- ii) March 1st through March 5th – 4 stands, and;
- iii) March 6th through March 25th – 5 stands.

IT IS FUTHER DECLARED AND ORDERED: that no other conditions, terms or provisions of Order 2025-17 are changed in any way by this Emergency Order 2026-09.

AND IT IS FURTHER DECLARED AND ORDERED: having determined an emergency exists, this Emergency Order 2026-09 shall become effective March 6, 2026, and remain in effect through March 25, 2026.

Mr. Kilinski also stated that Maryland has extended their oyster season by two weeks and asked the Commission to consider extending the PRFC oyster season. The Commission noted that Mr. Kilinski’s second request to extend the oyster season would be addressed under Tab 3 on the agenda.

ASMFC Issues

Menhaden – The Board continued to work on Draft Addendum II to Amendment 3 to focus on how to better distribute the Chesapeake Bay Reduction Fishery into quota periods as well as consider reduction to the Bay Cap of up to 50%. ASMFC plans to review and consider Draft Addendum II for approval for public comment in the spring of 2026.

Black Sea Bass – The Board approved a 20% coastwide recreational liberalization over three regions. The PRFC is in the southern region (Delaware through North Carolina) and will take a 16.5% reduction. This will reduce the recreational size to 12.5 inches and the season opening on May 1st.

Striped Bass – The Striped Bass Management Board approved all of Addendum III to Amendment 7 state implementation plans. The plan outlined a new total length measurement definition with implementation by January 1, 2027. In light of low recruitment, the Board also gave initial guidance for the new workgroup on future striped bass management to extend beyond 2029 and will revisit this in May 2026.

Oyster Harvest Report – Harvesters have reported approximately 36,326 bushels with an estimated dockside value of \$1,632,546.96 and \$78,763 collected in oyster inspection tax. License sales have reached the highest levels since the 1990s with the majority being from Maryland (74%). There have been 505 licenses sold in total; including 35 hand tong harvesters and 218 hand scrape harvesters. Top three bars include: Jones Shore 19,059 bushels (52%), Swan Point 4,231 bushels (11%), and Ragged Point 2,660 bushels (7%). November and December historically report the highest harvest and that trend is continuing. Based on the average harvest during January through March in 2023/24 and 2024/25, staff has forecasted at least an additional 5,000 bushels of oysters to be harvested. This estimate of landings would represent the highest harvest reported since the 1992/93 season.

Oyster Strategic Planning Panel – January 22, 2026

The Panel met to discuss the rotational harvest scheme and proposed 2026 oyster plantings. The Panel recommended:

1. Continue the upper river seed relocation project by moving 10,000 bushels downriver and set a 200-count seed per bushel minimum to trigger moving to the next source site. This project is time sensitive because several bars in the upper portion of the Potomac River, which currently have relatively high counts of small seed oysters, remain in jeopardy of low salinity conditions that would be detrimental to their survival.
2. Move 5,000 bushels of seed from Cornfield Production Site upriver and set a 500-count seed per bushel minimum to trigger end of harvest. The Commission planted 33,000 bushels of shell provided by the State of Virginia on a 10-acre portion last spring. The MD DNR Fall Oyster Survey reported a successful spat strike in the area. It was recommended to move the seed this spring to expose the next layer of shell substrate for the next spawning event and continue the project cycle.
3. Plant shell on Jones Shore, even in modest amounts, to replenish the harvested area. With Jones Shore making up the majority of the harvest annually, a large portion of biomass is being removed from those areas and it is recommended to replenish it to ensure long-term success despite no signs of bar degradation.

Oyster/Clam Advisory Committee – February 25, 2026

The committee met to review the oyster harvest to date, the 2025 fall oyster survey, discuss the rotational harvest scheme, and plan upcoming projects. The committee approved of the proposed OSPP projects, and a motion passed unanimously to recommend planting 10,000 bushels of upper Potomac River seed on Ragged Point and Sheepshead oyster bars. The specific sites would be dependent on the salinities at the time of the projects. The committee also recommended 5,000 bushels of seed from the Cornfield Harbor Seed Production Site be moved to Ragged Point. The committee unanimously passed a motion to plant \$100k of oyster shell on Jones Shore Area 1. The committee unanimously passed a motion to plant \$70k of James River seed on Lower Cedar Point. This would leave a \$75k buffer in the public oyster fund. The bridge mitigation funding from the Maryland Department of Transportation Authority completed last year and the committee has interest in continuing that rotation. A motion was made to extend the oyster season until April 14, 2026 with

the same bushel and time limits citing ice impacts, depressed markets, and MD and VA adopting similar extensions. This motion passed with six in favor and one abstention.

Oyster Season Extension Discussion

Virginia adopted a two-week extension for oyster harvest areas impacted by ice and depressed market conditions. The season extension in those areas are until March 15, 2026. Maryland adopted a two-week extension for oyster harvest to make up for lost harvesting opportunities due to ice conditions in January and February. Their season was extended until April 14, 2026.

Mr. Dean was asked to come to the podium to answer questions the Commission had on extending the oyster season. Asked what his opinion is on a season extension and the impact to Jones Shore, Mr. Dean responded that although it is taking them longer to get their limits, but they are still getting them. They are also working on Cornfield Harbor and Kitts Point with good harvest. He commented that due to the weather conditions, Jones Shore, effectively, was shut down for two weeks. Commissioner Headley cited that Jones Shore has produced a lot of oysters and even with the market conditions, there's been a lot of oysters harvested and asked him if the Commission voted for a two-week extension but shut down Jones Shore, would that be an issue considering they could work on other bars. Mr. Dean responded that they had other areas to work. When asked about how many days harvesters are working, Mr. Dean responded that they are still working four to five days a week. Commissioner Boarmans's concern is that if Jones Shore is closed, there will be an influx on Swan Point and Cobb Bar, which can't sustain that potential number of boats. He further stated that the only way he could go along with a season extension is if Cobb Bar and Jones Shore are shut down. Bill Kilinski, Vice Chair of Charles County Watermen's Association, stated that the market has been flooded as far as what buyers want with regard to size of the oysters and the oysters coming off of Jones Shore right now are premium. The oysters in the upper river are fairly small, so even two days a week on Jones Shore would be helpful and understands the need to conserve what is there for future use.

The Commission discussed different scenarios in relation to the number of days to extend, specific days, areas to potentially close during an extension versus keep open, and the effect on the market wanting only big oysters. There was some concern whether an extension to the season would hurt to stock already there and the trade off for allowing an extended harvest.

Motion made by Commissioner Boarman to extend the 2025-2026 oyster season by two weeks until April 14, 2026, and was seconded by Commissioner Headley. A roll call was taken and the motion passed with six in favor and two opposed (Grist, Wesson).

**N E W O R D E R # 2026-10
2025-2026 OYSTER SEASON EXTENSION**

THE POTOMAC RIVER FISHERIES COMMISSION, having found winter storm conditions in January and February 2026 have caused considerable economic hardship to the oyster fishery in the Potomac River, and pursuant to its authority under Regulation II, Section 2(b) and Regulation I, Section 7(a),

HEREBY DECLARES AND ORDERS: that Commission Orders 2026-07, 2025-18, 2025-19, 2025-20 and 2025-21 are amended and revised such that the season ending and effective through dates are changed from March 31, 2026 to April 14, 2026, to effectuate the extension of the oyster

season to April 14, 2026.

IT IS FUTHER DECLARED AND ORDERED: that no other conditions, terms or provisions of Orders 2026-07, 2025-18, 2025-19, 2025-20 and 2025-21 are changed in any way by this Order 2026-10.

AND, IT IS FURTHER DECLARED AND ORDERED: that this Order 2026-10 shall become effective March 16, 2026 and remain in effect through April 14, 2026.

Oyster Projects

Cornfield Harbor – Move up to 5,000 bushels to an upper river location.

Upper-River Seed Relocation – Move 10,000 bushels downriver to Sheepshead and Ragged Point.

Jones Shore Area 1 – Plant \$100,000 worth of oyster shell on Area 1 to replenish the most recently harvested area.

Lower Cedar Point – Plant \$70,000 worth of James River seed to continue rotational plantings.

All projects are funded by oyster surcharges and oyster taxes. Commissioner Wesson asked how much money is available at this time for projects. Staff noted that there is approximately \$334,000 in the public oyster fund. The oyster projects are estimated to be approximately \$260,000, leaving a \$75k buffer in the account, note that oyster taxes and surcharges brought in approximately \$146,000 this fiscal year.

Chairman Rice stated that with the extension of the oyster season, tax money receipts will increase and expressed his interest in expanding the oyster projects to include moving an additional 2,500 bushels of upper river seed to Cobb Bar. He noted Cobb Bar has done extremely well and has been worked on quite a bit more this year so there is a need for more seed. Commissioner Wesson expressed concern with depleting the buffer in the oyster fund account to add this oyster project. He further said that although we should keep adding shell to Jones Shore regularly, conserving money for next year is important since the Commission doesn't have unlimited funds. There is a big chunk of shell coming from Virginia, similar to last year, and the Commission needs to be very cautious on what is being funded. The Commission should hold shells back and save some money for shells next year since the river is unpredictable due to high salinities, disease, mortality, etc.

Commissioner Headley asked staff if the Commission is going to get seed from Virginia as we did last year. Executive Secretary Owens stated that the funds allocated by Virginia were allocated with the stipulation that Maryland provides matching funds. Virginia originally set aside \$200,000 and the PRFC received \$100,000 from each state last year and Virginia gave us the shell. From his understanding, the remaining \$100,000 is set aside in Virginia for the PRFC, however, Maryland does not have the money to match. Therefore, we can't count on that money this year. Commissioner Grist would not comment on whether Virginia has the shell to give the PRFC this year or not.

Motion made by Commissioner Grist to adopt the oyster projects as presented. After discussion, a friendly amendment was made by Commissioner Headley to eliminate the Lower Cedar Point planting and increase the Upper-River Seed Relocation to 15,000 bushels. Friendly amendment

was accepted by the maker of the motion. A roll call vote was taken and the motion passed unanimously.

Crab Harvest Report

The crab landings for 2025 followed the similar trends to the 2022 and 2024 seasons. There were 76,439 bushels of hard crabs reported, 7,519 pounds of peelers and 740 pounds of soft crabs. There was a 3% increase in No. 2 males and female harvest remained stable at 32%.

Order 2026-08 – Limited Entry Crab Pot Fishery

This draft order is being presented to reflect the number of 300 pot licenses surrendered to create 500 pots licenses during the renewal season and decrease the maximum number of crab pots to 398, per Regulation I, Sec. 2(d)(4).

Motion made by Commissioner Grist to adopt Order 2026-08 as presented and seconded by Commissioner Luisi. There was no opposition to the motion and passed unanimously.

ORDER #2026-08 (replaces #2025-12) LIMITED ENTRY CRAB POT FISHERY

THE POTOMAC RIVER FISHERIES COMMISSION, having acted to declare the crab pot fishery a limited entry fishery and pursuant to its authority under Regulation I, Section 2 (d)(1),

HEREBY DECLARES AND ORDERS: that the maximum number of crab pot licenses allowable in the Potomac River for any license year shall be three hundred and ninety-eight (398).

AND IT IS FURTHER DECLARED AND ORDERED: that this Order #2026-08 shall become effective March 16, 2026 and supersedes and repeals Order #2025-12 and will remain in effect until further notice.

Financial Report

For the 2nd quarter the total disbursements were \$684,224 (25% of the budget). Contractual services totaled \$196,935 (35% of budget) which reflects ongoing professional services, support, and development related activities and Materials/Supplies were \$55,801 (64% of budget). Revenue for the 2nd quarter was \$828,788 (30% of budget) which includes strong revenues from oyster related license sales. Cash on hand across operating accounts and investment portfolios was \$2,329,548.13. Overall, the financial condition remained stable with sufficient resources to support our current operations and fishery management initiatives.

Motion made by Commissioner Kellum to approve the Financial Report as presented and seconded by Commissioner Grist. There was no opposition to the motion and passed unanimously.

Potomac River Interceptor Sewer Overflow Update

A recent Potomac interceptor spill showed no detectable discharge as of February 12, 2026 in the harvestable areas of the river. A precautionary closure from Upper Cedar Point to the 301 Bridge is

scheduled to be lifted on March 10, 2026. The Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) will continue routine water-quality monitoring under NSSP requirements, and the Potomac Riverkeeper Network, along with George Mason University, are conducting additional sampling. Officials emphasized that communication and oversight remain strong, and that shellfish harvesting areas have remained safe throughout.

Report of Nominating Committee (Commissioners Kellum and Gwaltney)

The nominating committee nominated Commissioner Headley for Chairman, Commissioner Boarman for Vice Chair, and Commissioner Gwaltney for Secretary.

Motion made by Commissioner Grist to approve the nominations as presented and was seconded by Commissioner Luisi. There was no opposition to the motion and passed unanimously.

Appointment of FY 2026-2027 Budget Committee

Commissioner Gwaltney and Commissioner Kellum were appointed to the FY 2026-2027 budget committee.

Motion made by Commissioner Rice to the appointments of the FY 2026-2027 budget committee as presented and seconded by Commissioner Grist. There was no opposition to the motion and passed unanimously.

Nominations for Finfish Advisory Committee

Two individuals were presented for appointment to the Finfish Advisory Committee. Ryan Rogers and Chris Palicia.

Motions made by Vice Chairman Boarman to approve the appointments of Ryan Rogers and Chris Palicia to the Finfish Advisory Committee. Motion was seconded by Commissioner Kellum. There was no opposition to the motion and passed unanimously.

New Business

Elgin Nininger spoke pertaining to sanctuaries in the Potomac River, specifically a sanctuary area in the middle of the river—referred to as the “bell buoy lumps”(Bluff Point Lumps)—which has only been minimally checked. Although it may not have been an official sanctuary historically, it has functioned like one because watermen rarely work there except during limited hours. He and another waterman observed larger oysters just outside a nearby area last year but avoided harvesting them this year to prevent accusations of illegal taking. He suggests considering a quota system for that location and argues it’s wasteful to leave harvestable oysters untouched when the area used to be a productive spot. He notes that Maryland, Virginia, and others have been working together on sanctuary management, and Maryland has already begun reviewing its sanctuary policies. He feels the issue deserved more discussion in the meeting. Commissioner Luisi responds that he does not yet have enough knowledge about Maryland’s current sanctuary review or related legislation but will gather information and report back. Commissioner Rice provided historical context relaying that sanctuary agreements with Maryland and Virginia began when oyster stocks were extremely low. Now, although multiple sanctuaries exist, some areas are not practical to work because the oysters

are too small or conditions are poor. He questions whether the longstanding “handshake agreement” that established sanctuaries is still binding and suggests the Commission may need to revisit how set-aside areas are managed.

John Dean raised concerns to the Commission about declining striped bass (“rockfish”) availability in the lower Potomac River, noting that (1) he and several other pound-net fishermen were unable to fill their rockfish quota last season, unlike previous years. (2) Fishermen report far fewer fish in their nets and believe the disappearance of menhaden may be a contributing factor. Because pound nets are producing fewer fish, they requested permission to switch to gill nets to try to meet their quotas. Mr. Dean emphasized he understands changes can’t happen immediately but asked the Commission to explore solutions. Staff clarified the request: pound-netters want temporary or alternative permission to use gill nets to catch their rockfish quota. Commissioners agreed the issue should be referred to the Finfish Advisory Committee for detailed review. Staff noted that this issue was previously discussed and a workgroup/subcommittee needs to be formed to explore options. Any regulatory change would require public hearing, and the timeline would be tight. The workgroup would be made up of industry volunteers who are needed to help shape recommendations. Mr. Dean agreed to help staff with spearheading this workgroup and make recommendations for membership of the workgroup.

Commissioner Rice asked Mr. Dean what the status was on the small mesh gill net experimental fishery that was discussed and planned last summer. Mr. Dean responded that it fell apart and isn’t sure why. Chairman Headley asked whether there is still time to implement a small-mesh gill net season this year via Order versus waiting for a regulation change and doesn’t feel a study would be necessary. Staff noted that the Commission approved an experimental small-mesh gill net fishery last spring, intended to study catch rates and bycatch using only one net per participating fisherman. Participation collapsed after watermen learned the study allowed just one net as they wanted to fish 4-5 nets to make the effort worthwhile. Only one or two people remained interested. The PRFC was supposed to have an intern to support the project (monitoring, data collection, observer scheduling), but the intern fell through, and staff capacity was limited. Because of low participation and lack of staff support, the project never got off the ground. Staff responded that if the Commission could rely on existing Maryland and Virginia small-mesh regulations, since both states already run similar summer fisheries, a new study may not be needed if the Commission adopted rules similar to the surrounding jurisdictions. The Commission agreed the issue needs to be placed on the agenda for the next FFAC meeting and the committee will revisit whether a study is required, review MD/VA models, and recommend whether and how to establish a small-mesh gill net season for 2026.

Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for Friday, June 5, 2026 at 8:30 a.m.

Meeting adjourned at 10:29 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Spencer Headley, Chairman

Greg Gwaltney, Secretary