

Environment Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6248

AN ACT CONCERNING THE PENALTY FOR ILLEGALLY TAKING STRIPED

Title: BASS.

Vote Date: 3/14/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/3/2025

File No.: 392

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Environment Committee

Co-Sponsors:

Rep. Brandon Chafee, 33rd Dist.

Rep. Patricia A. Dillon, 92nd Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

There is a growing concern that the striped bass population is starting to decrease due to fishing in the Housatonic River. In order to revitalize the striped bass population an effort is being made to institute a moratorium which would prohibit the fishing of striped bass in the Housatonic River. Through this moratorium it would allow the striped bass population to return to normal and rebound on their current numbers.

Substitute Language LCO 6223

The substitute language replaced the underlying bill, which would have required DEEP to place a moratorium on stripped bass fishing in the lower Housatonic River until the fish population came to a sustainable level to support the fishing.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Katie Dykes, Commissioner, CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP)

DEEP is opposed to H.B. 6248 since it will have little to no effect on the issue that it's attempting solve. First it is mentioned that even if there was a ban in this area, due to striped bass residing all along the Atlantic coast, a fishing ban "will not move the needle on striped bass conservation." Furthermore, if striped bass fishing was banned in the lower Housatonic

River, fishing in general would not be banned. This means that it would become an honor system for people fishing in this area, and unless an officer could prove one was specifically fishing for striped bass, poaching would continue the way it has been. From this, a way to better solve this issue was suggested as there should be "stricter fines" to whomever may violate this rule.

William Tong, Attorney General, State of Connecticut

Attorney General Tong supports H.B. 6248 as striped bass have been a large target by fishers over the past 10 years with "four million trips targeting striped bass" annually. Along with the amount of targeting that striped bass have faced from fishers, they have been affected even further due to climate change. Striped bass are not an animal that has an easy time reproducing along with staying alive in general as they (1) have a complex reproductive strategy, (2) limited number of spawns, (3) are especially sensitive to water temperatures, (3) especially vulnerable along with other factors. There is belief that to help striped bass all stops need to be put out, making sure that every effort is made to help the fish. Not only would the bill prevent fishing for striped bass in the Housatonic River, but it would also require DEEP to heed recommendations from the Connecticut Conservation Officers Association that has to deal with the amount of staffing officers of environmental conservation has.

Paul Aresta, Executive Director, Council on Environmental Quality (Council)

The Council supports, as signed by Acting Chairman Keith Ainsworth, H.B. 6248 as the moratorium would help revitalize the population of striped bass. The Councils suggests that a timeframe for the moratorium or provisions for reopening of striped bass fishing on the river.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

37 residents submitted testimony in support of H.B. 6248

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Michael Roy, Owner, Reel Cast Charters

Mr. Roy opposes H.B. 6248. As a full-time guide Mr. Roy notes that striped bass fishing it a "vital part of our coastal heritage and economy." If this bill were to be passed it would affect "thousands of anglers, businesses, and communities" who successfully operate thanks to striped bass. It is noted that there is no evidence that suggests a low population of striped bass in the Housatonic. The striped bass population is "very abundant" based on the sonar technology that Real Cast Charters uses and suggests the true reason to the population decline is "low spawning recruitment." The areas that striped bass spawn in most of the time is the Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay, and the Hudson River with no evidence showing spawning in the Housatonic River. Further, catch and release mortality is next to none, as there were zero mortalities during recent DEEP catch and release study. By passing this bill Reel Cast Charters would face even more pressure on top of the already short season. Instead, the problem to be solved is spawning, where the primary concerns are the "Menhaden Commercial Fleet, commercial striped bass gill netting and the water quality in the Chesapeake Bay."

Capt. Marc Berger, President, et. al. (The Officers), Connecticut Charter and Party Boat Association

The officers of the Connecticut Charter and Party Boat Association oppose H.B. 6248 as there is belief that if the bill were to pass what would end up happening is a curtail to confidence to fisheries management along with undermining the legislative process amongst the fishing community in the state of Connecticut. There is belief that by passing this bill there will be both "direct and indirect negative economic effects" which there is no evidence that suggests there is a low population in the Housatonic River. The Housatonic River is not an area where striped bass typically spawn as the bodies of water are typically Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay, and the Hudson River. Even if there is a suggestion that mortality rate could be high on catch and release, there was a study done that concluded there was "zero mortality."

Michael Waine, Atlantic Fisheries Policy Director, American Sportfishing Association (ASA)

The American Sportfishing Association (ASA) opposes H.B. 6248 as the mortality from fishing has reached a low that has not been seen in the past 30 years. From a DEEP study completed in 2023-2024 there was "virtually no mortality among released fish." If H.B. 6248 is passed, instead of helping striped bass recoup population, all it will do is "unfairly penalize local, law-abiding anglers" that have the same conservation goals and follow the current rules. The real concern is that of poaching on the river. The fine that DEEP imposes for illegal fishing of striped bass is too low and should be raised from \$75 to \$150 or more, which could serve as a better deterrent to illegal fishing.

Bill Hyatt, Vice-Chair, Connecticut Fisheries Advisory Council (FAC)

The Fisheries Advisory Council opposes H.B. 6248 as a "g a moratorium on the Housatonic River will do nothing" to increase the population. Instead, there must be a larger fine penalizing illegal fishing of striped bass in the Housatonic River. In the estimation of FAC, a larger fine should be imposed; the most effective way to restore the population is through "more restrictive coastwide fishing regulations" which should start in 2026. Providing history and background on the fishery, FAC notes that most striped bass spawns occur in the Hudson River and Chesapeake Bay (which accounts for 80% of the spawn total). Thus, the conditions in and proportion of successful spawning in these waters are the primary factors in determining the quantity and health of the fishery.

Tony Friedrich, President, American Saltwater Guides Association (ASGA)

The American Saltwater Guides Association (ASGA) opposes H.B. 6248 since the bill would affect the striped bass market (which brings in \$7.8 billion each year) and does not address the real issue: poaching. Most anglers do not violate the rules that are set in place so to reduce poaching, so ASGA made a few recommendations. (1) DEEP has increased law enforcement funding, (2) Significantly increasing poaching fines to \$1,000 in addition to confiscating gear. (3) Adopt single hook artificial lures for catch-and-release. (4) Educate anglers on best practices. ASGA advocates for taking steps to punish poachers rather than the fishery itself.

Christian Ragosta, Assistant Manager, Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF)

The Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) opposes H.B. 6248. They note that overfishing is not the main issue at hand rather attributing the cause to "environmental variables" such as warmer water and a shorter spawning window in the Chesapeake Bay which accounts for approximately 70% of originating striped bass in the Atlantic. These issues are seemingly overlooked when discussing overfishing which is typically attributed to

the mortality rate. It is believed that this issue would be best left in the hands of DEEP and ASMFC who have the authority to take the necessary precautions. With this the Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) is "evaluating future stock projections based on the latest information and exploring a new striped bass management addendum that will achieve further fishing effort reductions if warranted."

Keith Cagle, President, Friends of CT Sportsmen

Friends of CT Sportsmen opposes H.B. 6248, arguing that a moratorium will not increase the striped bass population but will instead penalize responsible, law-abiding. While illegal commercial fishing has risen over the past two years (and which has been addressed by ENCON police), illegal fishing continues due to insufficient penalties. Since the value of illegal harvests often outweigh penalties, fines should increase from \$75 to \$150. This would better deter illegal fishing, rather than restricting lawful anglers' access.

Capt. Michael Pirri, Owner, Flying Connie

Mr. Pirri opposes H.B. 6248. Although the term recovery regarding population is being used, the estimated stock for striped bass sits at 191 million which leaves a 57% chance for the population to be 100% rebuilt, with a target of 247 million by 2029. Using the term "recovery," is misleading and suggests that numbers are much lower than they are. The dam, and resulting fish concentration, at Derby makes the Lower Housatonic a striped bass destination and allows fishing from the shore. Although this is a positive to the local economy, it facilitates easy poaching. Stories of harvests of more than 24 fish outside of size limits are frequent. In addition, there are no commercial quotas in Connecticut. It is suggested that "the biggest benefit" to this issue would be to have two dedicated EnCon officers whose sole duty would be patrolling the Housatonic River. Two charts were submitted one providing numbers on MRIP catch time series from 2014-2024 and the "Atlantic Striped Bass Female Spawning Stock Biomass and Recruitment."

Doug Wells, Owner, The Surfcaster

Mr. Wells opposes H.B. 6248 although it is suggested that there should be some type of temporary closure. This temporary closure would help fish breed along with having no significant effect on the recreational fishing industry. The Surfcaster, a local business located in Shelton that operates a brick and mortar along with an online store, admits that there would be no devastating effect to the business due to this bill passing. Although The Surfcaster would not be impacted greatly, it is suggested that "my local shop brethren who only operate a brick-and-mortar tackle shop would be dealt a significant blow to business." It is suggested that on one hand these local businesses educate and support ethical fishing practices and on the other a closure during the winter and spring months could both help striped bass while not dealing a large blow to local businesses.

45 residents sent in testimony in opposition of H.B. 6248

Reported by: Joshua Dontigney

Date: 3/27/2025