

## Environment Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No:** HB-5333 / [Bill Status](#) / [Public Hearing Testimony](#)

**Title:** AN ACT CONCERNING THE REGULATION OF FISHERIES IN THE STATE.

**Vote Date:** 3/18/2026

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute

**PH Date:** 3/4/2026

**File No.:**

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### SPONSORS OF BILL:

Environment Committee

### COSPONSERS

Rep. Joseph P. Gresko, 121st Dist.

Rep. Brandon Chafee, 33rd Dist.

### REASONS FOR BILL:

Proposes several changes to statutes governing striped bass, horseshoe crab, and lobster fisheries in Connecticut.

### SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE (IF APPLICABLE):

Substitute language establishes fines for violations of striped bass regulations in Connecticut, escalating from \$150 for a first offense to \$500 for subsequent offenses, with fines paid to the local municipality. It also prohibits taking, possessing, or landing striped bass in the state from December 1 to March 31 each year.

### RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

#### **Katie Dykes, Commissioner- DEEP**

DEEP supports much of this bill with recommendations for some sections.

**Section 1 – Striped Bass Penalties:** DEEP supports increased fines as a greater deterrence, however, suggests the initial fine be lowered. This would increase the likelihood of people actually paying it instead of contesting it in court. **Section 2 – Horseshoe Crab Provisions:** DEEP is neutral on this section. There is already a ban on hand harvesting horseshoe crabs in CT, which account for 99% of the total harvest. New York State will have a moratorium on horseshoe crab harvest by 2029. These actions already provide much protection for the region. DEEP does not know if fisherman purchase horseshoe crab bait from horseshoe crabs in New York or from areas with more stable populations. **Section 3 –**

**Lobster Size Provisions:** DEEP recommends clarifying this section's intent and welcomes the opportunity to work with the Committee to incorporate appropriate regulatory safeguards. If the intent is to allow restaurants to possess lobsters up to the largest legal size on the Atlantic coast, currently 6-3/4 inches, the bill language should reflect that maximum. Additionally, if the intent is to allow possession of lobsters that are legal in other LMAs (Lobster Management Areas) but are smaller than LMA6 minimum size limits, then DEEP has concerns that this could create opportunities for undersized lobsters harvested from Long Island Sound to enter the marketplace. **Section 4 – Winter Striped Bass Closure:** DEEP supports this because it would assist enforcement officers. They recommend minor changes to the language to align with existing regulatory closure language. **Section 5 – Housatonic River Bait Restriction:** DEEP is neutral on this proposal as we do not have data demonstrating that a bait restriction would provide measurable conservation benefits for striped bass. DEEP suggests shortening the restriction to December through March to avoid unintended impacts on other early spring fisheries and welcomes the opportunity to modify language to clarify the section's intent.

### **External Affairs, Judicial Branch**

They take no position but request the language in Section 1 be clarified to aid in implementation. Section 1 states "any person who violates any regulation concerning the taking of striped bass ... shall have committed an infraction and shall pay a fine of two hundred fifty dollars." The maximum fine for an infraction is ninety dollars. We respectfully request that the language be updated to say "violation" instead of infraction. Additionally, should the proponents intend for this new violation to be paid by mail, the new subsection must be added to C.G.S. section 51-164n.

### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

#### **Keith Cagle, President, Friends of Connecticut Sportsmen**

Friends of Connecticut Sportsmen supports this bill because they are concerned about the health and sustainability of the striped bass population in Connecticut. Increasing the fine in Section 1 is important. However, after discussions with ENCON, they suggest the first offense be lowered to \$150. They also support the bait fishing prohibition, but request the date change from April 13<sup>th</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup>.

#### **Scott Dolch, CEO, CT Restaurant & Hospitality Association**

CT Restaurant & Hospitality Association supports this bill with some changes to Section 3. Allow Connecticut restaurants to buy and sell lobsters legally harvested in other states (non-LMA 6 waters) under the size rules of the state where they were caught, as long as Connecticut merchants provide documentation like what's required under Conn. Gen. Stat. § 26-157c-1(c)(4). This is important because many restaurants rely on lobsters caught in other states, and their minimum length is shorter than CT's. This would prevent restaurants in CT from buying lobsters caught in Maine that meet Maine's minimum length, because they would be forced to buy lobsters that meet CT requirements. Even though the lobster was not caught in CT. This would increase the cost for CT restaurants because Maine lobstermen would have to sort out lobster that would specifically meet CT requirements. The association asks that this section be revised so that CT restaurants can buy lobster that meet that state specific requirement.

**John Ely, Executive Director, Project Oceanology**

Project Oceanology supports this bill with clarification regarding Section 2. They support the part in Section 2 that states the Commissioner of DEEP can permit hand harvesting of horseshoe crabs for scientific purposes. Currently, this is not allowed under their Scientific Collector Permit which limits their educational use. They request clarification that existing permit holder can retain one or two horseshoe crabs a year for educational purposes with a marine life-support system.

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

ASGA supports Section 1 of this bill because it strengthens enforcement of striped bass fishing. These new regulations would minimize winter targeting due to striped bass being overfished and would still allow anglers to enjoy the fishery. The fines are a meaningful deterrent for people not to illegally fish this species.

**Bill Hyatt, Vice Chair, CT Fisheries Advisory Council (FAC)**

FAC supports the intention of Section 1, 4, and 5 and offers some considerations. FAC recommends the fine in Section 1 be lowered to \$150 so people will pay it. FAC also asks the bait fishing prohibition end date be changed to March 31 so it would avoid interference with the existing fishery of white perch.

**Robert LaFrance, Policy Director, CT National Audubon Society**

The National Audubon Society supports Section 2 of the bill because horseshoe crabs are a food resource for many birds. Since the population of horseshoe crabs in the New York region are poor, birds have a hard time finding food. Protecting horseshoe crabs also protects the birds that rely on them for food.

**William Tong, Attorney General, Office of the Attorney General**

The Attorney General supports this bill as striped bass are one of the most important species in the Northeast. NOAA has identifies striped bass as increasingly vulnerable to climate change. It is critical that everything is done to protect this species. The drop of the striped bass population has impacted small businesses that rely on fishing resulting in a 40% drop in fishing trips since 2006.

The following individuals and organizations expressed general support for this bill.

**Jimmy Bloom, Operations Manager, Copp Island Oysters**

**Joyce Leiz, Executive Director, Connecticut Audubon Society**

**8 Citizens Also Expressed Support**

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

**Bonnie Brady, Policy Director, New England Fishermen's Stewardship Association (NEFSA)**

NEFSA opposes Section 2 because the horseshoe ban would eliminate the conch, or whelk, and American eel pot fisheries in Long Island Sound. Horseshoe crab bait is used because it is the most effective bait. Without it, these fisheries would disappear. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission states that the horseshoe crab population is poor in the Long Island Sound. There are two problems with this. Firstly, Connecticut is grouped with New York, so horseshoe crabs might be poor in New York waters and not Connecticut.

Furthermore, an independent study done just in Connecticut waters states that the population is increasing since 2012. It is wrong for the state to ban a species based on studies that were not even done in CT waters.

**Robert Smith, President, Southern New England Fisherman's and Lobsterman's Association (SNEFLA)**

SNEFLA opposes this bill because horseshoe crab bait is used to catch conch/whelks. These are known to destroy shellfish beds, so harvesting these animals actually helps protect the Long Island Sound's other species. They also oppose the regulation on lobster, as they are seeing an increase in their catch and a more stable market. They fear this bill would allow the poaching of smaller lobsters.

**Senator Heath Somers, State of Connecticut, 18<sup>th</sup> District**

Senator Somers opposed this bill because she represents a district with longstanding commercial fishing tradition. Striped Bass fishery is managed along the Atlantic coast through regional stock assessments. Putting specific mandates into statutes takes away the flexibility of fisheries managers. The fines in Section 1 are too big for small scale fisherman, the regulations on winter fishing in Sections 4 and 5 would hurt fisherman as this is an important seasonal opportunity. Section 2, horseshoe crab meat would be banned as bait. Fisherman still rely on this bait to catch whelk and eels. Any other kind of bait is less effective. This would hurt fisherman financially that already face many other burdens fishing in CT. Section 3 creates inconsistencies in how lobster regulations for restaurants.

**Joseph Gilbert, Owner, Empire Fisheries**

Joseph opposes this bill because the horseshoe crab problem is not caused by fishermen purchasing them as bait. Rather by people on the beach. Horseshoe crabs lay their eggs on the beach and they spawn in warm sand above the high tide line. The hatching time overlaps with the busiest beach weeks of the year. People end up trampling the eggs without knowing it. Regulations on beach use should be implemented and education be provided to people to make them aware of what is underneath their feet. Joseph also thinks there should be no winter striped bass fishing at all. He also recommends the legislature bring black sea bass into the same tri-state landing flexibility CT uses for summer flounder. Currently, the regulation is cumbersome to fisherman because if they drift over state lines while on the fish, they are no longer allowed to keep them.

**15 Citizens Also Expressed Opposition**

**Reported by: Henry Russell**

**Date: 03/26/2026**