

Finfish Task Force Meeting Minutes
Thursday, February 26, 2026, 10:00am
LDWF Headquarters
2000 Quail Drive
Baton Rouge, LA 70898

I. Pledge of Allegiance

II. Roll call and introduction of guests

Voting Members Present:

James Pelas
David Alphonso
Stuart Billeaud
Ben Graham
George Huye
Steve Rockwieler
Adam Guillory
Daryl Simon

Voting Members Absent:

Wayne Rollo
Daniel Edgar
Senator Hensgens
Jay Trotter

Non-Voting Members Present:

John Walters
Davis Madere
Gene Cavalier

Non-Voting Members Absent:

Jason Adriance
Jack Isaacs

III. George Huye motioned to approve the August 27, 2025 meeting minutes, 2nd by James Pelas Huye. Motion carries.

George Huye motioned to approve the February 26, 2026 meeting agenda as amended, 2nd by David Alphonso. Motion Carries.

V. New Business

A. To Discuss the Migration of Bull Redfish into Coastal Bay and Marshes

Ben Graham stated that Daniel Edgar put items A. and B. on the agenda but he was unable to attend the meeting. Ben Graham stated that he was unsure of Daniel's intent for discussing the items and asked if anyone had any input on the items.

George Huye motioned to defer items A. and B. until the next meeting, 2nd by Daryl Simon. Motion carries.

B. To Discuss the Use of Bait Seine Nets on Sand Bars at the Mouth of Rivers

Item deferred until next meeting.

C. To Discuss the Regulations for Checking and Rebaiting Set Lines Every 24 Hours

Daryl Simon stated that in the past the task force discussed changing the law from 24 hours to 48 hours because events that may take place that does not allow fishermen to get back within 24 hours. Daryl Simon stated that there were discussions about going to 48 hours and he would like to amend the current law that is in place now to go back to the 48 hours.

Ben Graham asked if someone could explain exactly how that law currently works.

Daryl Simon stated that fisherman have 24 hours to go back and check the lines after they drop it out.

Patrick Banks stated that the law is a commission rule that was put in place a year or two ago for passive gear to encourage fishermen to continue to monitor their gear to reduce litter issues in waterways.

Patrick Banks stated that the department understands if there are difficulties and concerns with adhering to the law. Patrick Banks stated that since the law is a commission rule that task force would need to a motion to request that the Commission adjust the rule on the timing.

Ben Graham asked what the time period was before the 24 hour rule went into effect.

Patrick Banks stated that previously there was no time period attached to the passive gear. Patrick Banks stated that it was part of a larger statewide effort to address neglected gears in some of the waterways that people just leave and don't check them. Patrick Banks stated that the department did its due diligence to talk to some of the members in the industry who the law would impact and this issue was not brought up at the time.

Ben Graham asked if the law affected other gear like crab traps or set nets.

Patrick Banks stated that the law does not affect crab traps but it does affect all other passive gear such as trot lines, gill nets, and yo-yos.

Daryl Simon stated that the topic came up because there were issues with some fisherman who fish north of the I-10 that were not checking their lines. Daryl Simon stated that some Wildlife and Fisheries agents said that they didn't have any issues with areas south of I-10. Daryl Simon stated that there should be a line drawn such as the north of I-10 to implement the 24 hours and south of I-10 should be 48 hours. Daryl Simon stated that due to certain weather conditions, some fishermen don't have control when fishing in bays versus in bayous or small lakes.

David Alphonso asked if some type of stipulation with weather permitting within the 48 hours could be added to the law.

Daryl Simon stated that a statement regarding the weather could be added.

Ben Graham stated that LDWF enforcement should comment on adding something regarding the weather because it could be difficult to enforce.

Davis Madere asked if this issue was specific to black drum set line fishermen.

David Alphonso confirmed that the issue was specific to the black drum fishery.

Davis Madere stated that he would recommended, from the enforcement perspective, to add something specifically for black drum set lines. Davis Madere stated that there was a gentleman and his son from St. Mary Parish who had the concern regarding the issue. Davis Madere stated that LDWF enforcement has not had an issue or a citation for the issue in 20 years. Davis Madere stated that it is enforceable whether it's 24 hours or 48 hours but LDWF enforcement would not oppose the change. Davis Madere stated that he knows the law was changed in order to have consistency statewide on all trot lines or passive gear.

Ben Graham asked if it would be workable if the task force specifically stated that the change applies to black drum set lines.

Davis Madere stated that the only issue would be lack of consistency which is why it was changed before but from an enforcement perspective, where it's 24 or 48, the law is enforceable.

David Alphonso stated that he is not familiar with commercial fishing on bait line but he could recommend not targeting just drum. David Alphonso asked if anyone fished for sheepshead.

Daryl Simon stated that there is not much sheepshead but catfish because sheepshead are usually fished with a pole.

Ben Graham stated that he thinks 48 hours is reasonable and he believes that the 24 hours law was put in place by the Commission for a reason but it should be for areas either north of I-10, freshwater, or non-coastal areas.

David Alphonso asked if there was a specific reason why the 24 hour law was implemented.

Patrick Banks stated a recommendation was made to the Commission to set a time limit to encourage fishermen to tend to their gear but there was nothing data-driven by the 24 hour time frame.

James Pelas asked how is it determined when a line is set and when is it tended to.

Davis Madere stated that if an agent is present when the line is set and if the agent is there when the line is tended to then it's enforceable.

Ben Graham suggested to increase the time frame to 48 hours and then allow the Commission to adjust it as they see fit for keeping the 24 hours on certain bodies of water.

David Alphonso recommended increasing the time frame to 72 hour to allow one to three days because it's just a line and shouldn't be much of a problem. David Alphonso stated that other gear such as the crab traps have a program in which derelict traps are picked up and there is no time frame for crabbers to tend to their traps.

Davis Madere confirmed that crab traps don't have a set time frame for checking and rebaiting traps.

David Alphonso stated that fishermen should not be singled out for a fishing line when there's other derelict crab traps.

Daryl Simon stated that the issue stated because of untended lines in the north part of the state.

David Alphonso stated that even though the recommendation was 48 because it's double 24, he would like to see the fishermen have more time.

Ben Graham stated that the request was 48 and the task force should honor the request. Ben Graham stated that it is just a suggestion to the commission and they should keep it the same as the request.

James Pelas asked if the law applies to both recreational and commercial passive gear.

Davis Madere stated that it does apply to both and one of the reasons it was set to 24 hours was to get all set line fishermen on the same page.

George Huye asked if the recommendation should be specific to black drum set lines.

Ben Graham stated that the recommendation should not be specific to black drum but the recommendation should just honor the 48 hour request and the commission could also decide where it goes and whatever else.

David Alphonso stated that he would recommend going just an extra day longer because there is no scientific information to go against not giving them an extra day.

Daryl Simon motioned to amend the law to 48 or 72 hours.

Ben Graham stated that the request was for 48 hours.

Kindra Arnesen stated that weather could be an issue and the time frame should be more. Kindra Arnesen stated that if a motion is made there should be some kind of line draws as to where the changes are requested so that I-10 would be the barrier.

Ben Graham asked if anyone wanted to make a motion.

Daryl Simon motioned to amend the law to 72 hours, motion 2nd by George Huye.

Ben Graham opened the floor for any further discussion for the motion on the floor, to make a recommendation to the Commission that the checking and re-baiting of set lines be amended from every 24 hours to every 72 hours, no opposition, motion carries.

D. To Discuss an Update on Notice of Intent (NOI) to Reduce the Buffer Zone for the Commercial Menhaden Industry

Ben Graham stated that he added item D. to the agenda to hear the latest update for the NOI that was passed by the Commission. Ben Gram stated that the NOI might go to oversight with the legislature but he just wanted to know the status and what to expect.

Chris Schieble stated that the letter was sent with the oversight summary and public comments to the legislature. Chris Schieble stated that there is a 30-day period where they can call an oversight hearing

and that period ends on March 8, 2026. Chris Schieble stated that if there is no oversight hearing, then the earliest that the rule could go into effect would be March 20th in the State Register.

Ben Graham asked if we were still waiting to see if they will call an oversight hearing.

Chris Schieble stated that they still have until the 8th of March for the meeting.

David Alphonso asked if they have until the 8th of March to have the meeting or to call for the meeting.

Chris Schieble stated that they must call for the meeting at least 24 hours before the final date and they would have to notice the meeting by the 7th of March.

David Alphonso asked what the purpose of the Finfish Task Force is. David Alphonso asked if the task force is supposed to make recommendations to the Commission and to Wildlife and Fisheries.

Ben Graham confirmed that the purpose of the Finfish Task Force is to make recommendations.

David Alphonso stated that the Menhaden NOI is one of the biggest issues that has come up and the Finfish Task Force recommended to keep the current buffer and not make any changes. David Alphonso asked how the Commission was notified of the task force's recommendation. David Alphonso asked if a letter was sent to the Commission from the Finfish Task Force and who is responsible for the recommendation from the Finfish Task Force.

Chris Schieble stated that Jason Adriance specifically stated the Finfish Task Force's position during his presentation to the Commission but there was no official letter generated by the task force.

Ben Graham stated that although the Finfish Task Force makes a recommendation, the Commission does not have an obligation to honor that recommendation. Ben Graham stated that during the Commission meeting, the vote for the menhaden NOI was very close. Ben Graham stated that the vote was only 4 to 3 and there was a lot of discussion on the issue. Ben Graham stated that the Commission was aware of the recommendation from the Finfish Task Force but that does not mean that they have to abide by the recommendation. Ben Graham asked about the start date for the 2026 menhaden season.

Chris Schieble stated that the season starts the third Monday in April and if passed the law would be in effect for the season.

David Alphonso asked what oversight is.

Chris Schieble stated that oversight is a joint hearing between the House and Senate Natural Resource Committees but it does not require both to vote. Chris Schieble stated that both the House and Senate can be present but only one or the other needs to vote.

David Alphonso asked if the Finfish Task Force should draft a letter to send to the House or Natural Resources to request an oversight hearing for the recommendation from the Finfish Task Force for no changes to the law.

Ben Graham stated that the Finfish Task Force's oversight would have been at the Commission and beyond that it goes to another level. Ben Graham stated that David Alphonso can do that on a personal level or in his capacity with the Charter Boat Association. Ben Graham stated that it would not be proper protocol for the Finfish Task Force to do so since the recommendation went to the Commission.

Chris Schieble stated that the Finfish Task Force is an advisory panel to both the Commission as well as the department, depending on the issue, but Ben Graham is correct in saying that at the point before it went to the Commission that would have been the time to draft a letter. Chris Schieble stated that when the Finfish Task Force originally discussed the issue the task force could have made a formal motion that encourages the Commission to do XYZ. Chris Schieble stated that it is very late in the process to send the recommendation.

David Alphonso asked why the task force didn't have this meeting on January 28th as it was originally scheduled.

Ben Graham stated that the meeting was not held because there were no agenda items that were sent in. Ben Graham stated that the Commission was aware of the task force's position when they had the meeting to review the NOI. Ben Graham stated that Jason Adriance told the Commission the task force's position but they chose their own path.

David Alphonso stated that at the last meeting when the task force chose to have the next meeting on January 28th, 2026 he presumed that everyone would keep that meeting. David Alphonso stated that he was not aware that the task force had to submit new agendas in order to keep a meeting that was already scheduled. David Alphonso stated that the task force could have been discussing the current agenda items and he didn't see why the meeting was pushed back a month. David Alphonso stated that the change for the law will happen before the task force's next meeting.

Ben Graham stated that Jason Adriance went to the Commission and informed them of the task force's position based on the previous meeting prior to their Notice of Intent Commission meeting.

Stuart Billeaud stated that the task force voted at the last meeting but was then told that there was not a quorum so the vote didn't mean anything.

Ben Graham stated that regardless of the task force's quorum, Jason Adriance made it clear to the Commission the task force's position on the time. Ben Graham also stated the meetings that are set by the task force are placeholders but if there is nothing to discuss then task force should not meet to have a meeting. Ben Graham stated that he would be happy to have meetings more regularly and virtually.

David Alphonso asked regarding items A. and B. of the agenda, when were they brought up for discussion.

Ben Graham stated those items were brought up about 2 weeks ago.

David Alphonso asked regarding item D. for the Menhaden NOI, when was it brought up for discussion

Ben Graham stated that he added the item for an update on where things were in the process.

David Alphonso the item just being discussed now and not a month ago during the meeting scheduled for January 28, 2026.

Ben Graham stated that it wouldn't have changed anything because the process was already done and the NOI had already been approved by the Commission. Ben Graham stated that the Finfish Task Force

makes recommendations just like the Oyster, Shrimp, and Crab Task Forces but the Commission takes everything into account and they sometimes make a decision that may go against the task force's recommendations. Ben Graham stated that if any of the task force members want to reach out to a representative to call oversight. Ben Graham stated that the purpose today was just to get an update of where the NOI was at in the process.

Stuart Billeaud asked why there is an issue with Menhaden now because the law was already set.

Ben Graham stated that the law was set by the Governor a couple years ago and then the Menhaden industry came back to change it again. Ben Graham stated that the decision is already done and the only reason the item is on the agenda was to get an update on the process.

George Huye stated that the Commission does not have to follow anything that the task force recommends and they are a political entity just like a legislator.

E. To Receive the 2025 Total Menhaden Catch – FTF

Ben Graham stated that item E. was added to the agenda to receive the total menhaden catch for 2025 because at the time the NOI was discussed the data was not available. Ben Graham stated that he wanted to see the information because the menhaden industry stated that they needed less regulations.

The 2025 Total Menhaden Catch information was provided to the task force from the department.

Ben Graham requested the total menhaden landings for the previous 3 or 4 years to compare the trends.

David Alphonso asked why the information is needed if the Commission has already made a decision.

Ben Graham stated that there may be another opportunity in a year from now to establish a pattern of where they were and how their catch was. Ben Graham stated that the department did not have the numbers back in December when the Commission voted.

David Alphonso stated that he doesn't see how the data is going to affect anything who.

Ben Graham stated that it would have been good to have the data to bring up to the Commission meeting but the data was not available until recently.

David Alphonso asked if the data was available before January 28, 2026.

Chris Schieble stated that yes the data was available.

Ben Graham asked if the data was available before the Commission voted on the NOI.

Chris Schieble stated that the data was not available until after the season ended.

David Alphonso asked when was the date for the last public comment period.

Chris Schieble stated that it was February Commission meeting.

David Alphonso stated that if the task force had the data then it could have been discussed during the public comment period.

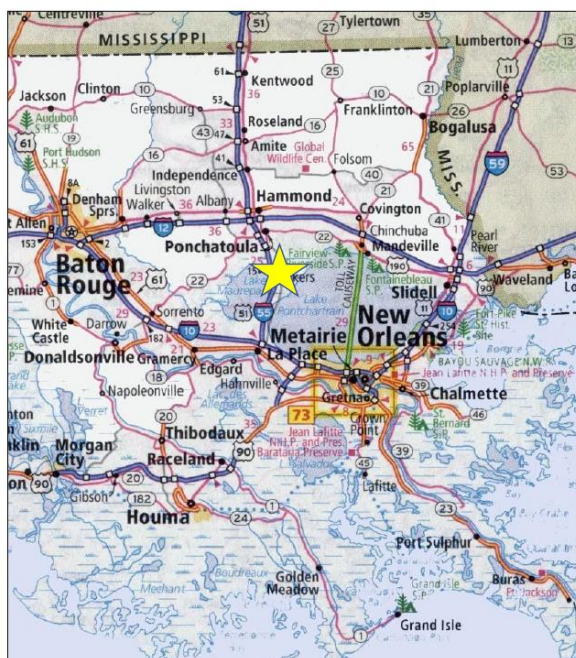
Ben Graham asked if anyone from the department knows how the 2025 landings compare with the landings from 2023 and 2024.

Chris Schieble stated that the department can provide the specific information at the next meeting. Chris Schieble stated that roughly in 2024 their landings were a little lower than 2025 but in the previous two years they were higher. Chris Schieble stated that it has a lot to do with environmental variables that may cause the numbers to vary.

Ben Graham requested the total menhaden landings for the previous 4 years to get the 5-year total.

F. To Discuss Catfish User-group Conflict in Pass Manchac and Potential Restrictions on Hoop-netting – LDWF

Brian Heimann from Inland Fisheries District 7 presented on the conflicts in Pass Manchac with the catfish and hoop nets that have been going on for about a year in the area. Brian Heimann stated that the issue was regarding commercial catfish harvest in Pass Manchac that connects to Lake Maurepas to Lake Pontchartrain.



Brian Heimann stated that current catfish management is the standard statewide with limits for all three major species, blue, channel and flathead, with the same undersized allowances. Brian Heimann stated that there are no special restrictions in the area currently and most commercial catfish landings come from hoop nets. Brian Heimann stated that there are a smaller number from set lines and slap traps and other devices but the vast majority is hoop nets.

CURRENT CATFISH MANAGEMENT

- Minimum length limit (MLL) varies by species (blue – 12" / channel – 11" / flathead – 14")
- Undersized fish allowance is 5% (by number) for blue/flathead, channel catfish allowance is 10%.
- No area-specific restrictions exist for Lake Maurepas or Pass Manchac.
- Most commercial catfish landings in the basin are from hoop nets; small number from lines, slat traps, or wire nets.



Brian Heimann stated that in the fall of 2024 there was some social media reports of a hoop net containing dead catfish that were apparently dumped in the area. Brian Heimann stated that in the spring and summer of 2025 there was widespread low-dissolved oxygen fish mortality events which were not uncommon in the area. Brian Heimann stated that the issue is because of the adjacent freshwater swamp and occasionally south winds blow for week or so, there is high water from rain, and tidal movements and when the water recedes it pulls all the swamp water out which contains high amounts of organic material. Brian Heimann stated that the organic material that has been sitting in the swamp doesn't decompose because lack of oxygen. Brian Heimann stated that when it gets into lakes, rivers, and bayous where there is oxygen the decomposers start using that oxygen to start breaking down the organic material which leaves less available oxygen for the fish and they perish. Brian Heimann stated that one of the things that the department noticed with this one was the dead fish consisted of mostly of catfish as opposed to other species. Brian Heimann stated that the reason for this was because of the density of catfish in the Pontchartrain Basin. Brian Heimann stated that unfortunately many people in the area assumed that the dead catfish was because of the hoop netters. Brian Heimann stated that the 2024 social media post continued because dead catfish kept being seen but it had nothing to do with the hoop netters at all. Brian Heimann stated that the issue was not commercial or even recreational but was a natural mortality event.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

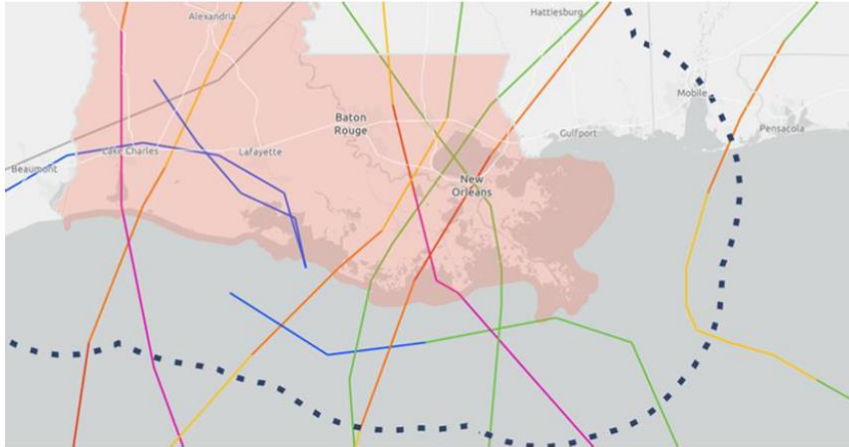
- Fall 2024 – Social media reports of a hoop net containing dead catfish being dumped in the Pass Manchac area. Floating dead fish caused conflict among various user groups.
- Spring/early Summer 2025
 - Repeated widespread dissolved oxygen depletions led to sporadic fish mortality events.
 - Dead fish consisted primarily of catfish due to **high population density**.
 - Many people mistakenly assumed that the dead fish were again caused by hoop netters, when that was not the case.



Brian Heimann stated that there were so many catfish because tropical systems moved over the area in the last 5 to 6 years with certain conditions such as water filling up the swamps, organic material and stress on fish which causes fish mortality. Brian Heimann stated that catfish tend to fare a lot better than other fish species based on their physiology and where they live on the bottom of water bodies where the dissolved oxygen is already low. Brian Heimann stated that some scaled fish and other predatory fish are unable to survive and the department may not see bass, brim, or other fish species during sampling. Brian Heimann stated that if the predatory pressure is reduced then catfish can have great reproductive success and the population can rapidly expand.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CATFISH IN THE BASIN?

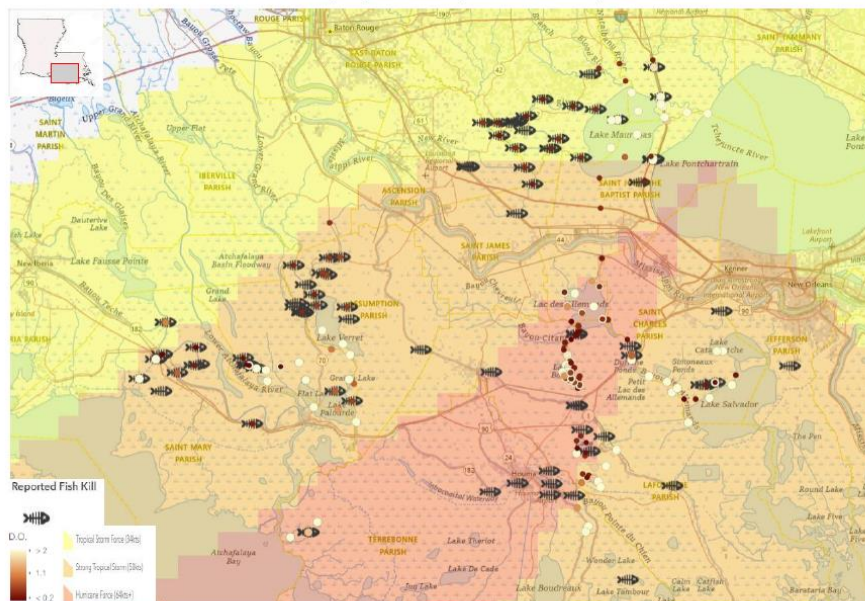
- Hurricanes/Tropical Storms from 2020-2025
- Catfish tend to fare much better than many other fish species
- Resulting decline in predatory species abundance contributes to increased catfish population density



Brian Heimann stated that there were fish kills after Hurricane Francine in 2024 and areas of low dissolved oxygen was detected in the week following the storm. Brian Heimann stated that areas with better dissolved oxygen, particularly in passes, is where there are a lot of catfish.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CATFISH IN THE BASIN?

- Hurricane Francine (Sept. 2024) fish kill map



Brian Heimann stated that to back up some of the information studies are being done. Brian Heimann stated that Dr. Kyle Pillar with Southeastern Louisiana University has done some independent studying for the last 2 or 3 years as part of carbon sequestration studies to determine a baseline for not just fish but invertebrates, bacteria levels, toxins and water quality. Brian Heimann stated that part of the study is fish and he is trying to compile a snapshot of what's out there now and down the road if something changes they can track it. Brian Heimann stated that they are using a number of different gear to collect the fish which include trawls, gill nets, electrofishing, seines, and other gear. Brian Heimann stated that three of the top four most abundant species in that area are catfish. Brian Heimann stated that if you compare bass or black crappie their numbers in samples are in the tens whereas the catfish are in the hundreds.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CATFISH IN THE BASIN?

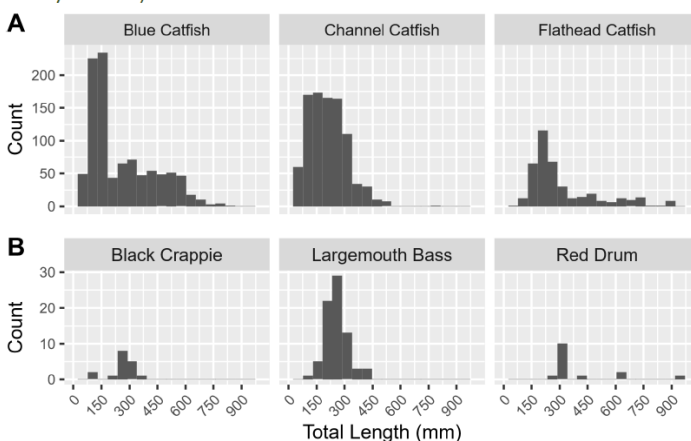
- Southeastern Louisiana University Comprehensive Study (Dr. Kyle Pillar)
- Most recent results (Nov. 2023 through Nov. 2024)

“Aside from Bay Anchovies, which dominated the total catch, the **most abundant** fish species (with a total catch quantity of at least 100 individuals) across all gear types were (in descending quantity): **Blue Catfish**, **Channel Catfish**, **Flathead Catfish**, Clown Goby, **Flathead Catfish**, Freshwater Drum, Gizzard Shad, Gulf Menhaden, Hogchoker, Naked Goby, Spotted Gar, Striped Mullet, and Threadfin Shad—all of which were caught using more than two gear types.”



WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CATFISH IN THE BASIN?

- Southeastern Louisiana University Comprehensive Study (Dr. Kyle Pillar)



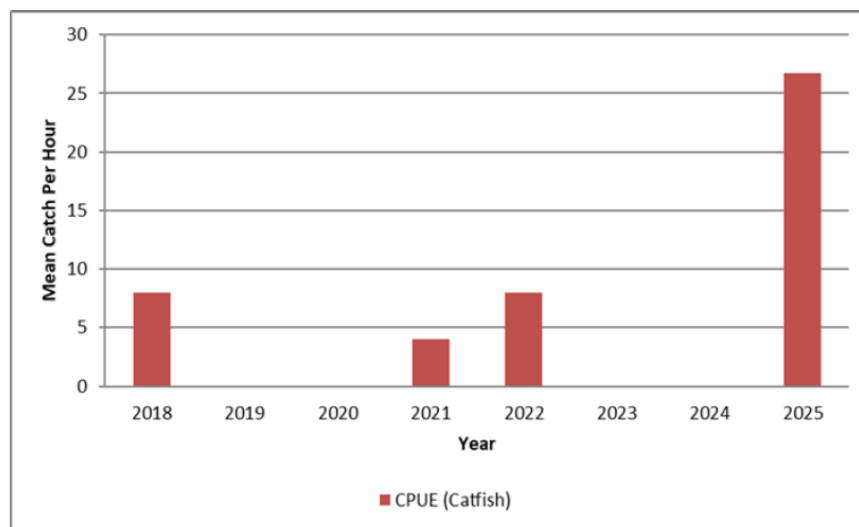
Count of individuals of major game species caught in Lake Maurepas, including (A) catfish and (B) other game species.



Brian Heimann stated that the department goes out annually and does high frequency electrofishing to look for bass, crappie, and brim but not catfish. Brian Heimann state that the high frequency electrofishing doesn't really work the well on catfish because they have to be really within close proximity of your anode for the catfish to get stunned. Brian Heimann stated that if catfish are seen it typically means there are a lot of them. Brian Heimann stated that in 2025, there was three times the amount of any other year the department has ever seen catfish which means there are a lot of catfish out there right now.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CATFISH IN THE BASIN?

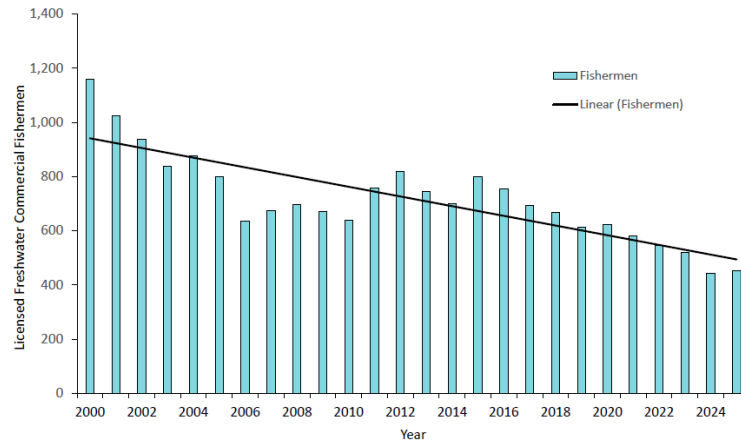
- Boat electrofishing data from nearby Blind River
- Catfish not typically targeted/encountered with high frequency electrofishing



Brian Heimann stated that out of several thousand licensed commercial fishermen, there is only about 500 statewide that contribute to freshwater finfish landings. Brian Heimann stated that over the past 25 years it has gone down significantly with a 60% decline so there is less pressure on the abundant catfish stock. Brian Heimann stated that if you look at just catfish fishermen there is a 65% decline with less than 500 individuals that fish commercially for catfish.

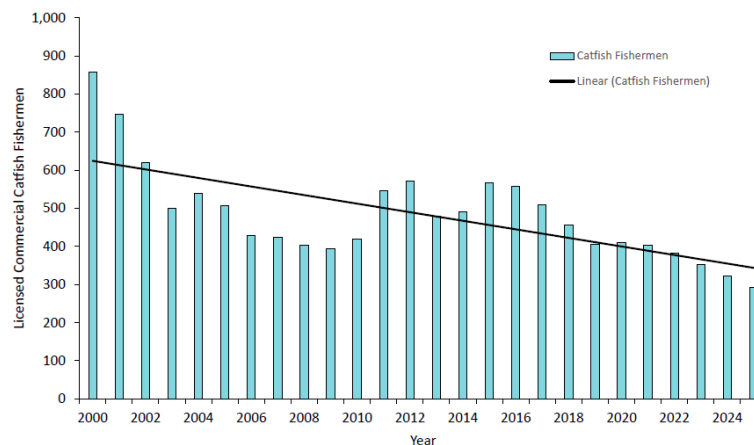
LDWF COMMERCIAL TRIP TICKET DATA

- Of approx. 4,000 licensed commercial fishermen statewide, less than 500 contribute to freshwater finfish landings.
- 60% decline in commercial freshwater finfish fishermen from 2000 to 2025.



LDWF COMMERCIAL TRIP TICKET DATA

- Similar trend in number of freshwater commercial fishermen targeting catfish.
- 65% decline in commercial freshwater catfish fishermen from 2000 to 2025.



Brian Heimann stated that comparing basin to basin, the Lake Pontchartrain Basin is almost twice the size of the Atchafalaya Basin but the Atchafalaya has over 5 times the amount of pressure on it. Brian Heimann stated there is a similar trend in the Barataria Basin.

LDWF COMMERCIAL TRIP TICKET DATA

- Atchafalaya Basin is smaller than the Pontchartrain Basin and in 2025 had nearly 5 times the number of licensed commercial fishermen.

Land area
and
fishermen
by basin.

	Size (% total acres)	Fishermen (% of 2025 total)
Atchafalaya	4	39
Barataria	5	11
Calcasieu River	8	2
Lake Pontchartrain	7	8
Mermentau River	4	4
Mississippi River	19	4
Ouachita River	2	4
Pearl River	15	0.5
Red River	15	6
Sabine River	6	1
Terrebonne	7	9
Vermilion-Teche	8	11



LDWF COMMERCIAL TRIP TICKET DATA

- Atchafalaya Basin and Barataria Basin are both smaller than the Pontchartrain Basin and in 2025 both had higher numbers of licensed commercial catfish fishermen.

Land area
and
catfish
fishermen
by basin.

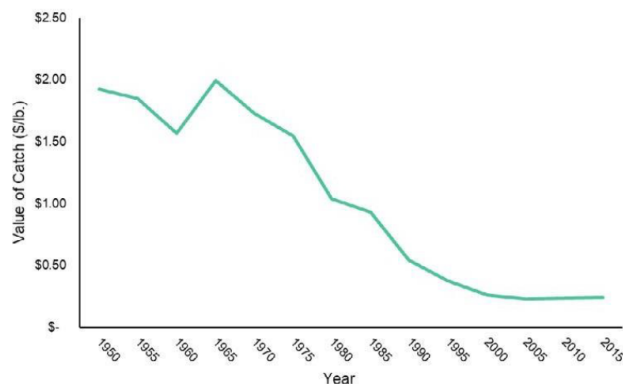
	Size (% total acres)	Catfish Fishermen (% of 2025 total)
Atchafalaya	4	31
Barataria	5	16
Calcasieu River	8	2
Lake Pontchartrain	7	11
Mermentau River	4	6
Mississippi River	19	2
Ouachita River	2	4
Pearl River	15	0.8
Red River	15	6
Sabine River	6	0.8
Terrebonne	7	6
Vermilion-Teche	8	14



Brian Heimann stated that back in 2019, Louisiana Fisheries Forward did a freshwater fishery report which looked at a number of different factors with the commercial fishing industry to identify good things, bad things, what can help, and what can hurt. Brian Heimann stated that they talked to management agencies, commercial fisherman, universities, buyers, and sellers to try to get an idea of what the industry is like and how could they help. Brian Heimann stated a quote directly from the report, *"The threat to commercial fishing is not overfishing. It's an aging fleet and limited buyers and markets."* Brian Heimann stated that with the 60% decline the fishers are getting older and there is no new ones coming in to take their place and when you're not getting a good price for it.

LA FISHERIES FORWARD – FRESHWATER FISHERY REPORT (2019)

- “The threat to commercial fishing is not overfishing, it is an aging fleet and limited buyers and markets.”



Price per pound for freshwater finfish (averaged buffalo, gar, and catfish) in 2019 dollars.



LA FISHERIES FORWARD – FRESHWATER FISHERY REPORT (2019)

- Strength of the industry – “No concerns of overharvesting.”
- All stocks seem plentiful or even overpopulated. Concern that there are underutilized and overpopulated areas of the state.
- 76% of commercial fishermen believe the fishery is overpopulated.
 - Overpopulation: Without sufficient harvest, especially in the absence of significant predation, catfish populations increase, and can exceed the carrying capacity of their environment.
 - Overcrowding limits food resources, causing fish to stop/slow growth and become stunted.



Brian Heimann stated that on the flip side, one of the things that's going for the industry is that there are no concerns of over-harvest but the stocks seem plentiful and they are even overpopulated. Brian Heimann stated that 76% of the commercial freshwater fisherman believe the fishery is overpopulated. Brian Heimann stated that an overpopulation is a population of fish without sufficient harvested and limited predators. Brian Heimann stated that those populations are going to increase to the point where they exceed the ability of their environment to maintain the population and you see things like fish kills where nature is trying to correct the imbalance on its own. Brian Heimann stated that the commercial industry is not able to take advantage of it enough to overcome those overcrowding issues. Brain Heimann stated that the risks included stunted growth and habitat limits. Brian Heimann stated that part of what is being discussed is closing Pass Manchac to commercial hoop netting but the risk of doing so would strain an industry that is already in a state of contraction. Brian Heimann stated that this would increase costs for fishermen because they would have to travel further and they would have to

learn new spots. Brian Heimann stated that there is a reason fishermen fish in Pass Manchac and it's because the fish are there seasonally.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF PROHIBITING COMMERCIAL FISHING IN PASS MANCHAC

- Strain an industry already in a state of contraction.
- Increase costs for commercial fishermen. Will have to travel farther and fish more nets/time in an attempt to harvest similar numbers/pounds.
- Risk of overpopulation/stunting of catfish stocks.



Ben Graham stated that it sounds like this as an isolated incident and there was not really any correlation between the fish kill and the hoop netting.

Brian Heimann stated that this was an isolated event that happened back in 2024 that was spread on social media. Brian Heimann stated that the department received a call about a fish kill and there may have been around 5 to 10 catfish floating.

Ben Graham asked if there was any type of recommendation from the department or has anything been requested to change regulations.

Brian Heimann stated that he is not aware of any.

Kindra Arnesen stated that the task force should consider supporting the hoop net fishery in that area and submit a recommendation to the Commission from the task force. Kindra Arnesen stated that she thinks it would be important to have something prepared for the legislators if someone tries to go around the department. Kindra Arnesen stated that the task force should show that this issue has been discussed before misinformation continues to be disseminated.

Ben Graham stated that a motion could be made to support this or recommend no change in regulations at this time.

Daryl Simon motioned to recommend to the Commission to have no changes to the hoop net regulations in the Pass Manchac area, 2nd by George Huye. None opposed. Motion carries.

David Alphonso asked if the department could release the information on social media.

George Huye asked if the meeting were made public.

Ben Graham stated that the Finfish Task Force meetings are all public information. Ben Graham stated that the task force can make that recommendation to the department.

Daryl Simon amended the previous motion and motioned to recommend to the Commission to have no changes to the hoop net regulations in the Pass Manchac area and for LDWF to provide information via social media, 2nd by George Huye. None opposed. Motion carries.

G. To Approve a Letter of Support for Responsible Anglers United (RAU) Grant Application for Habitat Restoration in Lafourche Parish

George Huye stated that item G. should be deferred because the grant writer for the group stated that the acknowledgment letter had to be in the month that they apply for the grant. George Huye stated that they are still researching information to apply for the grant.

VI. Public Comment

James Hickman stated that he was involved in the isolated incident that was discussed by Brian Heimann. James Hickman stated that he runs hoop nets in the Manchac area and catches a lot of catfish. James Hickman stated that Lake Pontchartrain came into existence approximately 5,000 years ago and the area became a fishing community name after the gentleman that settled in the area whose last name was Akers. James Hickman stated that the Lake Maurepas and Lake Pontchartrain areas which are around 60,000 acres and 400,000 acres, respectively are inundated with catfish. James Hickman stated there are a lot of studies to get the information but he has a number of units of state-of-the-art sonar equipment to look for catfish throughout the state. James Hickman stated that he has thousands of images showing that there are certainly more catfish in the water than any other species. James Hickman stated that some areas that didn't have catfish now do from areas in Hopedale, Empire, Venice, Lake Salvador, and in the Rigolets.

James Hickman stated that there are only about 8 or 9 wholesale/retail buyers for catfish due to the new USDA regulations that came into existence a couple of years ago. James Hickman stated that sometimes it is easy to catch catfish in the Manchac Pass and they generally arrive in April and May but leave because of storms or their typical time in October or November. James Hickman stated that a lot of catfish from the Lake Pontchartrain area are mostly full of clams.

James Hickman stated that the social media post was on a page called "The Manchac Fisherman" which showed an image of a hoop net with some dead catfish in it. James Hickman stated that a wrecked anchor caught the rope of his net and when trying to retrieve the anchor, it brought up the net. James Hickman stated that the net was cut and he was unable to retrieve it and unfortunately the catfish died. James Hickman stated that he used a graph in order to locate the net and it was found 2,376 feet away from where it was left and it took about 2 or 3 days to locate it.

James Hickman stated that he invited guys out of Lacombe to come on his boat to note the absence of any sort of species being harvested other than catfish and to note that all of the undersized catfish are at unharmed. James Hickman stated that we should try to implement management practices to reduce negative impacts on other species and his bycatch percentage is around .001%. James Hickman stated that he has catfish information and if it leads to regulations he hopes it will be a good impact on the state.

George Huye asked James Hickman what is the length of time that he fishes Manchac in a year.

James Hickman stated that he generally comes to Manchac around April or May and sometime the catfish leave out between August and November. James Hickman stated that he has YouTube videos should how to catch catfish with hoop nets. James Hickman stated that there are about 12 states that now list catfish as an invasive species and those state are receiving grant to upgrade equipment in order to harvest and process catfish. James Hickman stated that there is now a more established catfish market on the East Coast because of the grants.

Kindra Arnesen stated that if the catfish are eating clams then they are probably also eating juvenile fish and everything else in their path. Kindra Arnesen asked if catfish are not caught could they pose negative impacts on other species.

James Hickman stated that while cleaning catfish he noticed an algae in them and a number of native species in the stomach which included crabs, shrimp, and crawfish.

Joe Macaluso stated that he is the outdoors writer for *The Advocate*. Joe Macaluso stated that he is not sure who was present when they debated the idea about passive fish gear but one thing that came up was it was a safety hazard and a lot of hooks hang in the trees. Joe Macaluso stated that yo-yos hanging in trees at during high water periods became an issue when low water periods came and lines were not tended to which caused safety issues with lots of boaters and fishermen. Joe Macaluso stated that he has been a member of the Louisiana State Fish Records Committee for about 40 years and the committee was established by the Louisiana Outdoor Writers Association (LOWA) in the early 1950s. Joe Macaluso asked if the Finfish Task Force would allow LOWA to present the number of fish in their records for the last year during a task force meeting sometime between July and September. Joe Macaluso stated that they have about 50 saltwater species and about 23 or 24 freshwater species and every year they award fish of the year. Joe Macaluso stated that there is an awarded for both rod and reel and fly fishing divisions.

Kindra Arnesen asked Joe Macaluso about the location of the safety hazards from some of the lines that were found in trees.

Joe Macaluso stated that the issue first came up in the Tickfaw Basin, the Blind River Basin, and the Amite River Basin. Joe Macaluso stated that after the issue was raised there were other areas added mostly in some of the oxbow lakes, Lake Concordia, Lake St. John, Lake Bruin, and up and down the Mississippi River.

Kindra Arnesen asked if there were any injuries or accidents.

Joe Macaluso stated that apparently there were.

Kindra Arnesen asked if there were any reports from any state agency on those accidents.

Joe Macaluso stated that it was more than 20 years ago when the issue was raised.

Davis Madere stated that 2 years ago the Commission set forth a regulation that yo-yos and bush lines have to be tagged with the fisherman's name and license number so that if something like Mr. Macaluso brought up happens someone can be held accountable.

Daryl Simon asked how does the tagging work with recreational usage.

Davis Madere stated that it works the same with recreational jug lines and trot lines. Davis Madere stated that lines should be tagged with the recreational license number.

Kindra Arnesen asked about how the tags are attached to the lines and especially if a fisherman has multiple lines.

Davis Madere stated that they are tagged the same as with crab traps. Davis Madere stated that it could be written with a permanent marker as long as it's legible and enforcement can read it.

VII. The board considered future agenda item proposals

David Alphonso asked if the task force would allow Joe Macaluso to present his data at a future meeting.

Ben Graham stated that the task force would allow the data to be presented at a later meeting. Ben Graham asked about officer elections for the task force.

Daryl Simon motioned to amend the agenda to add officer elections, 2nd by Stuart Billeaud. No opposition. Motion carries.

Daryl Simon motioned to elect Ben Graham as chairman, 2nd by Adam Guillory. No opposition. Motion carries.

George Huye motioned to elect Stuart Billeaud as vice-chairman, 2nd by James Pelas. No opposition. Motion carries.

David Alphonso asked if the task force could get information on how imported seafood could be affecting the decline of the commercial catfishing industry and other fisheries. David Alphonso also request any other information that is impacting the commercial catfishing industry.

Kindra Arnesen requested trip ticket data for the number of catfish participants prior to the USDA regulation change with specific data for actual effort and not the landings data.

VIII. The next Finfish Task Force meeting is set for Tuesday, May 5th for 10am at LDWF headquarters.

IX. Adam Guillory motioned to adjourn the meeting, 2nd by Steve Rockwieler. Motion carries.