

DRAFT MINUTES

Blue Catfish Work Group
Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS)
Chesapeake Bay Hall, Room #236
1355 Greate Road
Gloucester Point, Virginia 23669

May 9, 2025

The meeting of the Blue Catfish Work Group (Work Group) convened at approximately 10:03 a.m. on Friday, May 9, 2025, at VIMS. Dr. Michael Schwarz called the meeting to order.

PRESENT

Jamie Green

Joseph Grist

Kenny Raiford (virtual)

Gregory MacDougall (virtual)

Bee Thorp (virtual)

Tom Dunlap (virtual)

Dr. Michael Schwarz

Dr. Shelby White

Tommy Herbert (virtual)

Dan Knott

Brian Peede

Chris Moore

Rachel Meyers

Jesse Phillips

Mike Bednarski (virtual)

Clinton Morgenson (virtual)

REPRESENTING

Commissioner, Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC)

Deputy Commissioner, VMRC

Agricultural Manager III, Virginia Department of Corrections

Science Specialist, Virginia Department of Education

Lead Farm to School Specialist, Virginia Department of Education

James RIVERKEEPER, James River Association

Director, Virginia Seafood AREC

Marine Business Specialist, VIMS

Director of Government Affairs, Virginia Restaurant, Lodging & Travel Association

Vice President, Virginia Waterman's Association

Plant Manager, Wanchese Fish Company

Virginia Executive Director, Chesapeake Bay Foundation

Manager, Office of Agriculture and Forestry Development,

Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS)

Director of International Marketing, VDACS

Chief of Fisheries, Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (VDWR)

Regional Fisheries Manager, VDWR

STAFF PRESENT

Stacy Metz, Administrative Coordinator, VDACS

Nicolas Robichaud, Policy Assistant, VDACS

GUEST PRESENT

Secretary Kevin Atticks, Secretary of Agriculture, State of Maryland

Beth Brewster, Food Service Manager, Caroline County, MD

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Schwarz began the meeting by drawing attention to the public comment sheet and clarifying that public comment sign-up would end thirty minutes prior to the end of the meeting.

DISCUSSION

Dr. Schwarz began the meeting by inviting Maryland's Secretary of Agriculture Kevin Atticks to share his perspective on the similar challenges Maryland faces in managing blue catfish.

Following his remarks, the Work Group engaged in several topics of discussion. From these exchanges, several points emerged regarding actions that the Commonwealth can take to promote and expand the market for blue catfish.

Institutional Pathways for Coproduct Valorization

Value-added products, such as fish cakes, represent a significant opportunity to boost profitability and create stable demand from schools and public institutions. Virginia can grow demand by promoting blue catfish as a viable protein source for schools and public institutions. Drawing on Maryland's successful integration of USDA-compliant catfish cakes into school meals, Virginia can collaborate with processors, nutrition professionals, and state agencies to develop appealing, affordable, and locally sourced options. This approach not only helps valorize underutilized portions of the fish but also supports market entry through reliable institutional channels, driving consumer awareness and eventual retail growth. Discussions noted that even modest increases in coproduct value could make harvesting blue catfish significantly more profitable for watermen and more viable for processors.

Expand Processing Capacity

Expanding in-state processing capacity is a key step toward scaling the blue catfish market in Virginia. While port infrastructure is strong, limited processing infrastructure presents a major bottleneck. Without reliable capacity, large domestic and international buyers are hesitant to commit. Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation introduced a grant and low interest loan program, in partnership with private banks to assist processors in getting their funding needs met

Develop Unified Branding

A coordinated branding campaign is essential to distinguish Virginia Wild Blue Catfish as a high-quality, sustainable product. Proposed strategies include chef partnerships, digital outreach, limited-time menu promotions, and a new Virginia seafood website. Messaging should emphasize "wild-caught" and avoid alienating aquaculture producers. Modeled on programs like Virginia Verified Beef, this branding can help build consumer trust and market identity.

PRESENTATIONS

Beth Brewster - Maryland's efforts to get blue catfish into schools and raise awareness
Jesse Phillips - International marketing presentation covering another workgroup's efforts to market blue catfish as an export item

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Staff noted that Deputy Commissioner Joseph Grist was incorrectly listed as present for the previous meeting.

With this issue addressed, Mr. Grist moved that the draft meeting minutes be approved. Mr. Knott seconded the motion. The Work Group voted unanimously to approve the minutes.

PUBLIC COMMENT

The Work Group did not receive any public comment.

ADJOURNMENT

At approximately 12:16 p.m. the Task Force adjourned.