

#. FISHERIES



Fisheries

Maryland law requires that all counties located on tidal waters include a Fisheries element in their comprehensive plan. This chapter focuses on the designation of areas for loading, unloading, and processing finfish and shellfish, and for docking and mooring commercial fishing boats and vessels.

Worcester County has a strong connection to commercial fishing, given its proximity to the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The County is home to some of Maryland's most prominent seafood operations, particularly in towns such as Ocean City. These operations process various types of seafood including blue crabs, oysters, and finfish.

In 2021, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources issued an estimated 2,000 commercial fishing licenses, with approximately xxx of these being issued in Worcester County.

Worcester County has more than **15 public boat ramps** that provide access to local waters for both recreational and commercial fishing. The County also has several private and commercial docks, especially in and around Ocean City.

The Ocean City Inlet allows smaller vessels to travel between the Atlantic Ocean and coastal bays. Most commercial boats moor in the West Ocean City (WOC) Harbor, which is adjacent to the inlet. The WOC Harbor enables commercial fishing operations to offload their catch, and it also features dedicated facilities for seafood processing and shipping.

Commercial fishing boats have Federal fishery catch quotas that require their harvest to be landed in a Maryland port. These catches, which are processed and sold in Worcester County by Southern Connection Seafood and Martin Fish Company, have an annual market value of more than \$3.7 million (2022).

Near WOC harbor is the site of the world's largest billfish tournament, the White Marlin Open. In 2023, this annual tournament generated 130 jobs, attracted 3,500 anglers, and awarded roughly \$10.5 million in prize money.

Worcester County's commercial and sport fishing industries depend on the commercial marine support provided in and around the WOC harbor, the only harbor in Maryland with direct access to the Atlantic Ocean.

While the County supports commercial fishing licenses and operations, it faces challenges from seasonal and supply fluctuations, state regulations, and pressures to rezone.

To support fisheries, Worcester County should focus on:

- **Preserve Working Waterfronts:** Maintain commercial marine zoning at the West Ocean City Harbor, rejecting rezoning requests for residential uses.

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- **Support Aquaculture:** Encourage sustainable aquaculture to supplement traditional fisheries and promote water quality improvements.
- **Tourism Integration:** Develop secondary tourism attractions around the harbor to complement commercial marine activities without compromising their primacy.

Industry-specific objectives have been identified as critical to fulfilling recommendations and supporting the ongoing success of fisheries in the County:

- Protect seafood landing and processing facilities through zoning and land-use incentives.
- Sustain fisheries and recreational fishing through water quality and habitat protection measures.
- Promote aquaculture, including fish, clam, and oyster farming, to support the local economy.
- Maintain the West Ocean City Harbor as a commercial harbor and explore opportunities for compatible tourism development.
- Implement zoning incentives to protect existing seafood landing and processing facilities.
- Promote recreational fishing opportunities through marketing campaigns targeting regional anglers.
- Create a regional marketing cooperative with commercial watermen to sell local products directly to consumers (for example, a fish market).
- Invest in sustainable aquaculture research and development, including new methods for fish, clam, and oyster farming.
- Enhance water quality initiatives to ensure long-term sustainability of local fisheries.
- Develop tourism initiatives around commercial fishing to create additional revenue streams.