



Senator Stuart's Report From The Capitol

February 12, 2010

Dear Friends,

This has been the busiest session that I have observed since being elected to serve you in the Virginia Senate. Of course, this is only my third session, but the pace around here has significantly picked up this year. That is largely due to the fact that we are in a budgetary crisis. The budget process looms over everything that we are doing and people are trying to come up with ways to fill the gaps or make the cuts that will be necessary to balance our budget this year.

Aside from that, I have, to date, had twelve substantive bills pass the Senate of Virginia and are now headed for consideration by the House of Delegates. These bills encompass many public safety issues, natural resource issues, and property matters.

One of the most difficult bills that I have worked on was the menhaden fisheries cap. As many of you are aware, that cap to protect the fishery was negotiated a few years ago and is designed to ensure that we have a healthy and sustainable population of menhaden along the Atlantic Coast and in the Chesapeake Bay for both sport fishermen and the menhaden industry, which catches and processes these fish for oil. This year there was a strong push to have the Virginia Marine Resources Commission take over the management of the fishery in an attempt to have the fishery entirely shut down from commercial harvest. This was a push that was instigated by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. I will tell you that it was a difficult and tough fight to keep this fishery open and its closure would have meant the loss of hundreds of jobs for the Northern Neck at a time when unemployment is at an all time high and people are generally struggling to feed their families. This bill was one of my top priorities to protect those jobs and families. At the end of the day, we were able to hold off that measure and my bill to protect the fishery and maintain the cap and continue the commercial harvest passed the Senate with a unanimous vote. It is important to note that many folks will tell you that the fishery is suffering or that it hurts the sport fishermen or there are not enough menhaden for the rockfish to eat. I will tell you that over the past few weeks I have learned more about menhaden than anyone could ever want to know. I have spent countless hours on the phone with fish biologists from the federal government and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. What I have learned is that there is absolutely no science out there to indicate that there is any danger of the fishery being over-fished. Actually, to the contrary, all of the science indicates that we have an absolutely healthy and sustainable population of menhaden for both commercial fishing and the sport fishing industry. Others would suggest that fishing in the Bay is depleting the Bay's resource, but, in fact, the menhaden is a migratory species and they move up and down the Coast of the Atlantic states and in and out of the

Chesapeake Bay. So, frankly, there is no real way to determine what a population in the Bay is because those fish swim in and out on a regular basis. The caveat to that is the small fish swim up into the rivers, such as the Rappahannock and the Potomac, and that is where they grow up. The commercial fishermen are not allowed to fish for them there, so those areas are protected and they should be protected from harvesting.

At the end of the day, I believe that the General Assembly has adopted the correct policy on this. I will also tell you that we spend a lot more time than just cursory review of this fishery. This fishery is watched very closely by V.M.R.C. already, by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and by the Federal Fisheries Commission, who regularly monitor the stock and the health of the fishery. Any time there is any concern, they notify all of us and any other appropriate party so that we may take necessary action.

I also had quite a few other bills of interest to my district, which I will endeavor to explain as the weeks roll on.

As always, I appreciate the opportunity you have given me to serve you in the State Senate. If I can be of any service, I can be reached at my senate office, 804-698-7528, P. O. Box 396, Richmond, Virginia 23218 or my district office, 804-493-8892, P. O. Box 1146, Montross, Virginia 22520, or by email at richard@stuartforsenate.com.

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