



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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NEWPORT NEWS, VA. – The Virginia Marine Resources Commission will buy back 359 commercial crab licenses, in a historic action to take more than 75,000 crab pots off the water as part of a multi-year species rebuilding effort.

The licenses will be retired permanently. The removal of 75,441 licensed crab pots represents an almost 20 percent reduction in the number of pots permitted for use in Virginia waters.

“This far surpassed our expectations,” said VMRC Commissioner Steven G. Bowman. “This is a great long-term benefit for this environmentally and economically important species.”

The license buyback program closed on Nov. 1. A total of 664 bids were received, in the first ever so-called reverse auction in which crabbers submitted non-negotiable bids and gave the lowest offer they would accept for the purchase of their licenses.

The bids were analyzed and matched to the harvest histories of each bidder. Purchase priority was given for the licenses used most often, and number of pots permitted for each license, in order to reduce the fishing effort in the most cost-efficient manner.

Acceptance letters to the holders of the 359 licenses accepted for the buyback were mailed on Nov. 20. Checks will be written within the next few weeks.

Payments will be made from a pool of \$6.7 million appropriated by the federal government as part of a blue crab disaster designation by the National Marine Fisheries Service last year. The VMRC’s license buyback program was enthusiastically approved by NMFS.

License buyback offers were accepted from 59 full-time commercial crabbers, 131 part-time crabbers and 169 crabbers who had not used their licenses since 2004 and were put on a waiting list until the crab population rebounds and stabilizes at high levels for three consecutive years.

Those full-time crabbers held licenses that permitted the use of 14,299 crab pots; 27,733 pots for part-timers; and 33,409 for those on the waiting list.

“It is especially important to ensure the long-term viability of our rebuilding efforts to retire licenses held by those on the waiting list. When the overall crab population returns to abundance, those licenses could significantly undermine the stability of the stock if they were put back in use,” said VMRC Fisheries Chief Jack Travelstead. “This is money well spent for the future of this fishery.”

Removing 75,441 crab pots from circulation is a reduction of 18 percent of the 423,000 crab pots that had been licensed for use in Virginia waters.

Retiring 359 crab licenses from the books will leave 1,649 licenses in circulation, including 314 licenses that cannot currently be used because they are on a waiting list. The number of crab licenses issued was capped in 1998.

The bids received varied widely. Full-time crabber bids ranged from \$5,000 to \$600,000; part-timer bids ranged from \$500 to \$634,000; and bids from those on the waiting list ranged from \$500 to \$300,000.

The accepted bids ranged from \$500 to \$175,000.

Last year, the VMRC and Maryland officials confronted a dangerously low crab population and enacted a bay-wide 34 percent harvest reduction strategy in an effort to rebuild a stock in danger of crashing in the event of a single poor year of reproduction.

At that point, the Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab population had plummeted 70 percent since 1993.

The VMRC banned the winter dredging of crabs last year and this year, shortened the season for harvest of female crabs, required larger escape rings on crab pots, and enacted a waiting list for inactive licenses.

Within a year, the bay-wide adult crab population doubled, according to a scientific crab population survey that has proven over decades to be highly accurate. Results of this winter’s survey will guide the VMRC in future crab management decisions.

“We are stewards of our marine resources and we take our jobs seriously,” said Bowman. “We will do what is necessary.”

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