

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Crab Management Advisory Committee (CMAC) Minutes
380 Fenwick Road, Fort Monroe, VA
Thursday, August 3, 2023 – 4:00 P.M.

ATTENDANCE

Members Present

Ed Tankard
Mark Sanford
Tye Burns
Marshal Cox
Wayne Morris
Tom Powers
Johnny Graham
JC Hudgins
Pete Nixon
Kenneth Diggs

VMRC Staff Present

Alexa Galván
Somers Smott
Shanna Madsen
Joe Grist
Jill Ramsey
Patrick Geer
Lewis Gillingham
Captain Chris Miller
Lt. Colonel Herbert Bell

Members Absent

Ernie George
Chris Moore

Others Present

Dr. Rom Lipcius
Mike Seebo
Alex Schneider
Gabby Saluda
Spencer Headley
Lynn Kellum
James E. “J.J.” Minor, III
Nathan Reynolds
Lynnee Morris
Ed Arnest
Richard Costin
Robert Halloway

Minutes were prepared by Somers Smott.

I. CMAC Introductions; announcements

The meeting was called to order at 4:09 PM. Chief Pat Geer informed the committee that Mr. Joe Grist is the new Deputy Chief of Fisheries. Ms. Alexa Galván thanked committee members for submitting their CMAC re-applications and announced there were two openings available. Ms. Galván requested that the committee reach out to contacts that may be interested, especially if they are from Accomack County or Tangier.

II. Approval of minutes from the May 24, 2023, meeting.

The minutes from the May 24, 2023, meeting were approved by consensus.

III. New Business

1. Fall Management Measures Discussion

Ms. Galván began the meeting by informing the committee that at the June Commission meeting, staff were tasked with coming back to CMAC with fall management measure options. She presented preliminary results from the fishery so far this year, including March harvest well above average. Mr. Mark Sanford asked about effort, and Ms. Galván said there were 30 more harvesters and 600 more trips in 2023. Mr. JC Hudgins wondered about the change in effort and assumed it was because of aftereffects from COVID-19 and a lack of market in 2022.

Ms. Galván reminded the committee that the current regulation will have high bushel limits until September 30, and lower limits from October 1 through November 30. The floor was opened for committee discussion. Mr. Hudgins asked for clarification on the high bushel limits, and Ms. Galván reminded the committee about the equitable amendments made at the June Commission meeting. Mr. Wayne Morris asked if the committee could also vote on spring measures, and Ms. Galván said this discussion was only about this year's fall management measures. Mr. Johnny Graham reminded the committee that they need to be specific about what changes they would prefer, knowing the Commission has the final say and status quo could always be an option. There was general consensus that everyone would benefit from the season extending into December. In addition, Mr. Hudgins asked the committee about continuing the larger bushel limits further than September 30. Mr. Pete Nixon reminded the committee that the hard pot season used to end in December because of the winter dredge fishery. Mr. Marshall Cox introduced the idea of a year-round fishery with no start or end date because of the increasing water temperatures. Mr. Sanford agreed with a year-round fishery, saying that market conditions would help the watermen know when to go crabbing.

There was general consensus that the season should extend into December with lower bushel limits not starting until November. Chief Geer asked the committee to pick a specific date in December. Some members wanted to suggest through the end of the month, others agree with a middle date like December 16. Chief Geer also addressed Mr. Cox's comments on water temperature, saying he agreed that temperatures are increasing but now is not the time to have a completely open season due to survey results.

Chair Ed Tankard asked for public comment. Mr. Nathan Reynolds provided comments on the VIMS trawl survey results, asking for clarification and explanation on some of the numbers he found concerning. He also told the committee that the crab fishery has no trigger or threshold for management measures, and most of the management measures are done to err on the side of caution. He introduced the idea to let crabbers keep two limits per boat when they are doubled up with two watermen, and splitting off the seaside crab population and creating a separate regulation for those crabs since they are so different. Mr. Nixon responded and asked if staff could pinpoint exactly which regulations on crabs are beneficial to the species, since there have

been so many regulations since 2008 and crabs are still struggling. Chief Geer provided more insight on the issue in 2008, explaining that the situation was serious given a federal fishery disaster was declared by NOAA. VMRC and the other Bay states adopted management actions requiring a 34% reduction in harvest and we continue to adhere to those required changes. He agreed that the fishery is much different now but reminded the committee that staff need a recommendation for this year's fall season. Mr. Hudgins read a letter from watermen Corey Rice with concerns about the VIMS crab dredge survey.

A motion was made by Mr. Tom Powers to extend the season until December 16 with lower bushel limits beginning November 1. Mr. Sanford seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Reynolds provided more public comment on the motion, reminding the committee that there was no reason to lower bushel limits or have a season. He questioned the threshold to get the winter crab dredge season back and wondered why the committee wouldn't just make a motion to have a year-round fishery with crab dredging.

Mr. Nixon asked what would happen if we did that, and Chief Geer said it would be unwise and a possible violation of the bi-state agreement between Virginia and Maryland. Mr. Nixon said that the worst outcome of that could be that the entire crab fishery would be closed.

2. Dr. Rom Lipcius Presentation

Dr. Rom Lipcius from VIMS presented data from the Bay-wide blue crab winter dredge survey and the VIMS juvenile trawl survey. He went over the blue crab life cycle, the methods of each survey, the results of each survey and how they mirror each other and answered questions about sanctuaries and black sponge regulations. He reminded the committee about a previous study done on the winter dredge fishery where there was a lot of mortality associated with sandy bottom dredging versus muddy bottom dredging. He informed the committee that VIMS is working on a vessel conversion factor for some older data as well. At the suggestion of Mr. Graham, Dr. Lipcius agreed to look closer at a previous study done on black sponge crab mortality to see if it would be possible to relax management on those crabs. He also agreed to compare sponge crab data from within and outside of the sanctuaries.

3. Winter Dredge Fishery Discussion

Ms. Galván presented a map of the bottom substrate types within the Chesapeake Bay but noted that it was about 10 years outdated. Dr. Lipcius said he had a more updated one that he could provide staff and the committee. Ms. Galván asked the committee how they felt about the feasibility of a winter dredge fishery, knowing that it would increase harvest pressure and therefore would require reductions from other gear types. Mr. Hudgins presented the idea that it could start as an experimental fishery just like shrimp trawling with just a few vessels and a strict bushel limit to see if the market could handle the product. **Mr. Hudgins made a motion to ask staff to put together a proposal for a tightly managed experimental crab dredge fishery for 4-6 boats to establish and understand the economics of the fishery. The motion passed 6-3.** Mr. Reynolds provided more public comment on this motion, reminding the committee that this

fishery would cut the hard crab fishery because of the increased harvest pressure. Mr. Cox agreed and does not think that it should be an experimental fishery again since that was already done once. Mr. Tye Burns said the experimental fishery was fine, but he was concerned that the hard crab potters would not be agreeable to cuts just so a handful of people could crab dredge.

IV. Other Business

Mr. Cox wants to discuss cull rings at the next CMAC meeting. Mr. Sanford wants to discuss a crab sanctuary off Virginia Beach at the next CMAC meeting.

V. Public Comment

There were no additional public comments.

VI. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:05 PM.