



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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NEWPORT NEWS, VA. – Virginia fishery regulators have voted to cut the crab harvest by 34 percent this year, partly by abolishing the winter dredging of hibernating crabs and by closing the season for female crabs a month early.

A series of harvest restrictions passed Tuesday by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission were in an effort to shore up a Chesapeake Bay blue crab population that has been teetering on the edge of collapse for several years.

“The scientific data is overwhelming and without doubt identifies a problem that must be addressed decisively,” said VMRC Commissioner Steven G. Bowman. “To delay or to take half measures would be irresponsible.”

The latest Bay-wide crab population survey, released last week, shows the number of crabs dropped by 16.1 percent below the already dangerously low levels documented over the past decade.

The survey prompted Maryland to agree to a 34 percent cut in that state’s crab harvest, through measures to be enacted in the next few weeks. The governors of both states support the cutbacks. The nine-member VMRC board led the way in voting Tuesday to:

- Eliminate Virginia’s winter dredge season for the 53 watermen licensed to participate in that fishery.
- Close the season for the taking of female crabs as of Oct. 27. The state’s crab pot season normally closes on Nov. 30.
- Abolish the recreational crab pot license, which allowed up to five pots per license holder. Current law allows Virginia residents to set up to two crab pots without a license.

- Reduce the number of crab pots and peeler pots permitted per license by 30 percent as of next year, and by 15 and 30 percent respectively this May. The number of pots currently allowed per license ranges from 100 to 500.
- Require two additional, wider crab pot escape rings -- known as cull rings -- as of July 1, except the seaside of the Eastern Shore. At that time, two cull rings in a crab pot must be 2 3/8ths of an inch in diameter, in addition to the currently required rings of 2 3/16ths and 2 5/16ths of an inch. This will allow larger crabs to escape.

The Commission also voted to summon any watermen convicted of two crab conservation violations in a one-year period before the board for a license revocation hearing.

Perhaps the most contentious of the regulations was the decision to the end the dredging of crabs in the winter.

Between half to three-quarters of the crabs dug out of the sand and mud in the winter are either cut up, smashed, or killed – just a few months before they emerge to spawn. Of the 300 comments received by VMRC in the past few months, a clear majority favored abolishing the wasteful winter dredge season.

The Commission formally asked for state assistance, if available, for crab dredgers who will be out of work this winter as a result of regulation changes.

The new harvest restrictions came on top of other VMRC regulation changes over the past two months aimed at protecting the blue crab, including:

- Prohibiting anyone else from entering the winter crab dredge season and capping the current number of licensed dredgers at 53.
- Requiring both cull rings on crab pots to be open at all times. One had been allowed to be closed in certain locations.
- Increase the minimum size of peeler crabs from 3 inches to 3.25 inches until July 15 and then to 3.5 inches for the rest of the season. This matched Maryland’s regulations.
- Allow only one other person to be authorized to work a waterman’s crab pots, instead of the many that had been allowed.

Despite conservation measures taken by Virginia and Maryland over the past decade, and lowered crab harvest targets set year after year, the total Bay-wide harvest of crabs dropped from 89 million pounds in 1997 to 44 million pounds last year.

And still the abundance of crabs in the Chesapeake Bay remains 70 percent lower than population estimates in the early 1990s.

Water quality, oxygen dead zones, loss of underwater grass beds that shelter juvenile crabs likely played a role in the drastic reduction of the Bay’s crab population.

But scientific data shows that overfishing has played a role as well.

Total crab harvest targets in Virginia have been exceeded in 12 of the past 16 years, and overfishing has cut into the species’ ability to reproduce in eight of the past 11 years.

Because the crab’s life cycle takes it from the ocean, through the lower Chesapeake Bay and into Maryland’s waters, both states decided to work together to find a Bay-wide solution.

“We hope and expect that acting together we can turn this around,” Bowman said. “The crab is resilient and a prolific breeder, and our actions should save the species and rebuild the population so that harvest levels for our watermen will return to where they should be.”

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