

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Crab Management Advisory Committee (CMAC) Minutes
380 Fenwick Road, Fort Monroe, VA
Monday, May 23, 2022 – 4:00 P.M.

ATTENDANCE

Members Present

Hon. Ed Tankard
Mark Sanford
James Hudgins
Bernard Wayne Morris
Tye Burns
Chris Moore
Ernest George
Marshall Cox
Tom Powers
Peter Nixon
Johnny Graham

VMRC Staff Present

Pat Geer
Adam Kenyon
Shanna Madsen
Alexa Galván
Somers Smott
Joshua McGilly
Lewis Gillingham
Jill Ramsey
Jennifer Farmer
Andrew Button

Members Absent

Daniel Dise
Donald Porter Sr.
Kenneth Diggs

Others Present

Rom Lipcius (VIMS)
Michael Seebo (VIMS)
Alex Schneider (VIMS)
Lynnee Morris
Chris Ludford
Dan Holland
Hon. Will Bransom
Scott Wivell
Tim Wivell
Rich Murray
Andrew Stith

Minutes were prepared by Joshua McGilly.

I. Introductions; announcements

The meeting was called to order at 4:05.

II. Approval of minutes from the June 2, 2021 meeting.

The minutes from the June 2, 2021 meeting were approved by consensus.

III. New Business

1. Review the preliminary 2021/2022 Chesapeake Bay Winter Crab Dredge Survey results and preliminary 2021 Virginia harvest data.

Ms. Alexa Galvan summarized the 2022 blue crab winter dredge survey results collected by VIMS and Maryland DNR. Total abundance, juvenile abundance, and both male and female adult abundances decreased for 2022 compared to 2021. Adult female abundance declined by 39% and is above the abundance threshold but below the target. Ms. Alex Schneider from VIMS presented data from the 2021 VIMS summer trawl survey in the mainstem of the Bay which showed that average catch for mature females was low in 2021. Dr. Rom Lipcius of VIMS said two consecutive years of low abundance could put blue crabs in a low abundance regime, which was seen prior to the 2008 harvest reduction. Dr. Lipcius is concerned that immature females are being targeted by the fishery before reaching sanctuary areas.

Mr. James Hudgins asked if there is any way to look at larval production outside the Bay. Dr. Lipcius explained that studying larval offshore is very difficult and expensive; there was once a program set up to examine this that was not continued. Mr. Tom Powers said the die off of eel grass in the Bay in 1990 caused issues with settlement of juvenile crabs. Dr. Lipcius referenced his previous work which found no correlation between eel grass and settlement of juvenile crabs; marsh and red algae was determined to be adequate for a settlement area. Mr. Powers also brought up the second span of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel and if it could cause issues with juveniles reentering the Bay. Dr. Lipcius talked about the numbers of females and juveniles in the 1990's and suggested environmental factors caused low abundances. Mr. Hudgins asked if the VIMS trawl survey sampled outside the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. Dr. Lipcius said there was a study that had taken place outside the Bay mouth, which found small numbers of mature females, but it was discontinued.[Annual reports from the VIMS Juvenile Fish and Trawl Survey indicate their sampling area extends beyond the CBBT, with all sampling east of a transect line from Cape to middle of Fisherman's Island. However, due to the sampling scheme, limited samples are collected east of the CBBT.] Dr. Lipcius also mentioned that tagging studies show little evidence of mature females moving outside the Bay. Mr. Chris Moore asked about relationship between adult females

and juveniles. Dr. Lipcius said a previous publication showed a significant stock recruitment relationship between females and juveniles, which is why management focuses on females. Mr. Peter Nixon asked when the new sanctuaries were formed within the Bay; Dr. Lipcius answered that they were formed in 2001 and 2002. Mr. Moore asked if Dr. Lipcius has seen any geographic trends with crabs. Dr. Lipcius said there's usually high abundance of mature females in different areas of the Bay (Off Cape Henry, mainstem of the Chesapeake Bay around the Rappahannock River, within the York River, and Mobjack Bay) and this information has been used to recommend where to avoid placing dredge spoils. Mr. Hudgins disagreed that there are pockets of mature female crabs in Mobjack Bay. Dr. Lipcius suggested limiting the influx of crabbers to fishing areas that others are catching in. Mr. Cox suggested stopping the influx of Maryland crabbers from coming and fishing in Virginia portions of the Bay. Dr. Lipcius said that crabs that move down from Maryland remain in Virginia. Mr. Cox asked why the female crabs come down into the Virginia portion of the Bay. Dr. Lipcius said the dead zone in the middle of the Bay causes crabs to move down after August when the water has cooled down.

Ms. Galvan described 2021 Bay-wide harvest which includes harvest from Virginia, Potomac River, and Maryland and totaled 36 million pounds. Ms. Galvan mentioned Maryland has a delay in reporting and their numbers will likely increase once all their data has been processed. Ms. Galvan said the adult female exploitation rate is currently below the target and overfishing threshold levels and the male exploitation rate is below the conservation trigger. Ms. Galvan said Virginia's 2021 harvest was 18,280,116 pounds of crabs with a value of \$35,452,724. Due to high crab prices, harvest decreased by 15% from 2020 but total dockside value increased by 14%. Ms. Galvan also showed graphs describing total harvest, number of trips, and licensing trends for both the hard crab pot and peeler pot fisheries.

2. Discussion of possible management responses.

Ms. Galvan said another CMAC meeting would be held in two weeks and another in the fall to discuss management changes for the following crab season. Mr. Hudgins mentioned that multiple licensed crabbers will fish together because it is financially lucrative. Mr. Hudgins also asked if VMRC knows how

many Marylanders have licenses in Virginia. Ms. Galván said she didn't have that number at that time but could present it at a future meeting. Mr. Powers suggested staff show the graph of eligible licenses with the total number of allowed pots at the next meeting. Mr. Johnny Graham asked why the exploitation rate reference points are at different levels for males and females. Ms. Galvan explained it was due to the different impact each sex has on recruitment.

Ms. Galvan presented a list of potential management measures for discussion by the committee. Measures for 2022-2023 included lower bushel limits, season reductions, recreational 5-pot season reduction, changes to the agent and license transfer systems, pot tagging, and peeler pot bushel limits. Mr. Sanford asked about a different crabbing season for out of state licensees. Mr. Kenyon said there are reciprocity agreements in place with Maryland and that any license changes may have to be applied to all licensees. There cannot be any type of discrimination against fishermen from other states, but they can be charged a different fee compared to instate fishermen. Mr. Kenyon also said there are only a small number of agents from out of state, but if an out of state resident has a Virginia address, staff would not be able to differentiate. Mr. Hudgins said many people are not able to catch their full bushel limit currently and brought up ideas of starting the season later and cutting out March. Mr. Kenyon asked the committee if eliminating March and November would be acceptable in all areas of Virginia and reminded the committee that that if nothing can be restricted then management is difficult. Mr. Cox brought up the idea that the past 20 years this idea has been discussed and that closing January through March does next to nothing because the fishery is based on water temperature. Mr. Hudgins brought up the lack of penalties for breaking rules, like having a cull ring closed. Mr. Cox said pot tags would be difficult since crabbers change their buoys during the year. Mr. Hudgins said the closed cull rings are an issue of law enforcement. Mr. Powers asked about the comparison between recreational and commercial harvest. Ms. Galván said it's very difficult to quantify recreational harvest since Virginia code allows anyone to fish two crab pots without reporting harvest. Mr. Powers talked about the 2008 license buyback program and how regulations were changed that allowed those who sold their licensees to rejoin the fishery sooner. Mr. Powers said the agency should limit

the amount of gear in the water. Mr. Kenyon explained that changes to the transfer system would limit latent effort because a licensee would have to be an active crabber to transfer their license, like in the oyster fishery. Mr. Powers does not agree that “one in one out” is the proper answer. Mr. Powers has concerns that agents are not legal due to the Code of Virginia banning license transfers. Mr. Tye Burns asked how much of a difference getting rid of agents would make. Mr. Kenyon said by only allowing temporary agents, it could remove up to 10% in any given year.

Mr. Ernest George had concerns about crabbers fishing outside the daily time period. Mr. Powers asked about who would be funding pot tags if they are put into place. Ms. Galvan said the Potomac River Fisheries Commission charges \$75 as a flat fee for one tag per pot plus a 5% buffer for lost buoys. Ms. Galván asked the committee about closing harvest of females instead of closing the whole fishery in fall and the committee said females are all you catch then so it would be no difference in closing the whole fishery. Mr. George brought up that a season closure for crabs would put more pressure on oysters. Mr. Graham said he has been purchasing crabs from Louisiana because his business couldn't support only selling Virginia crabs. Mr. Graham said Virginia's crab availability is low and customers prefer Louisiana crabs to Virginia crabs due to differences in size and quality. Mr. Graham said management needs to protect males, juveniles, and sponge crabs and regulations need to be enforceable. Several members discussed that cull rings are selecting for smaller crabs in the fishery. Dr. Lipcius said cull rings may contribute to the decrease the size at maturity of crabs and females are smaller because of this. Dr. Lipcius explained that females are getting culled from the Bay as they move down the bay and referenced a previous suggestion to create a corridor for crabs to move down the bay to the spawning sanctuaries that Maryland disagreed with. Several committee members are concerned that the sanctuaries push too much effort into the tributaries. Mr. Powers suggested increasing the size limit of peeler crabs to increase the size and quality of crabs.

Mr. Graham asked if there is a harvest reduction target that looking to be reached, to which Ms. Galvan said Virginia, Maryland, and PRFC have agreed to look at a 5 to 10 percent reduction.

IV. Public Comment

Mr. Andrew Stith, a recreational crabber, asked about increasing diversity and opportunities for returning military in the fishery. Mr. Stith said more information about the crab fishery needs to be made available to the public.

Mr. Dan Holland, a recreational crabber, commented that he has seen low numbers of females in his pots. Mr. Holland does not fish his pots till July and by the end of the season he starts catching greater numbers of crabs but has to pull his pots at the end of the 5-pot season in September. At the end of the recreational season he begins seeing commercial crabbers moving into the area he lives. He does not agree with the reduction to the 5 pot fishery but said that if it does need to be reduced, the agency could reduce the number of days in June and extend the season till the end of September.

Mr. Scott Wivell, a commercial crabber, said high landings in April by out of state crabbers leads to low abundance of female crabs. Reduced bushel limits in April would limit the influx of Maryland crabbers. Mr. Wivell stated that Maryland boats out of Cape Charles fished Mobjack Bay this past year where high numbers of crabs were known to be and that he has witnessed crabbers from out of state with closed cull rings or fishing too many pots. Mr. Cox added that Virginia should not be punished for bad actors from out of state and these are enforcement issues. Dr. Lipcius discussed a compromise to reduce bushel limits and reduce the size of the sanctuaries to limit illegal crabbing and allow the crabs make it to the center of the sanctuary while pushing fewer crabbers into the tributaries. Mr. Burns wanted to know the savings by making cuts early in the year; Mr. Kenyon stated that could be answered at the next meeting. Mr. Sanford said that crabbers are going to take a hit regardless but something needs to be done. Ms. Galván brought up that a range of years are combined to calculate reductions and this would account for good and bad weather. Mr. Cox stated that VMRC has ideas that the crabbers don't often like but they are usually what is done, and working together works out better for the crabbers. Chief Geer said this meeting was to relay the winter dredge survey results and to solicit initial ideas on management measures. After this meeting and the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee recommendations are released, staff would

present options at the next CMAC meeting in June. Mr. Powers asked if the committee can receive the presentation through email the Friday before the presentation.

The committee agreed to meet again on Wednesday June 8th.

V. Adjournment

Meeting was adjourned at 6:23.