



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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NEWPORT NEWS, VA. – The Virginia Marine Police have concluded an unprecedented two-day sweep through hundreds of miles of state waters in search of crab pots violations. The law enforcement arm of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission found plenty. More than 3,000 crab pots were pulled up and inspected on Wednesday and Thursday, and more than 200 crab pots were confiscated in a first-of-its-kind operation by Marine Police Officers operating from the Potomac River to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. More than 100 watermen were issued citations for violating crab conservation laws. “We are doing our jobs and we insist that watermen do their jobs within the law. We will not tolerate those who violate the natural resource laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia,” said VMRC Commissioner Steve Bowman. “The crab population is a precarious state and the rules must be followed if we are to prevent disaster from befalling this prized species.” Most of the confiscated pots did not have the proper number of escape rings, also known as cull rings, or the rings were too small. Officers impounded those pots to ensure they would not be used to catch crabs until they are reclaimed and modified to meet requirements. Under regulations passed three months ago, watermen are required to have two additional cull rings in each crab pot, for a total of four cull rings. Two rings must be at least $2 \frac{3}{8}$ th of an inch in diameter; one must be at least $2 \frac{3}{16}$ th and the fourth must be $2 \frac{5}{16}$ th of an inch in diameter. These rings in the side of crab pots allow undersized crabs to escape to grow and spawn a new generation. Cull rings cost .15 cents each and take less than a minute to install. Several dozen confiscated crab pots didn’t have any escape rings at all. The sweep was intended to send a message that the Virginia Marine Resources Commission is committed to strictly enforcing new crabbing regulations aimed at rebuilding a perilously low blue crab population.

More than 50 officers, including the Chief of the Marine Police, Col. Rick Lauderman, pulled up and inspected more than 3,000 crab pots and issued citations on the spot to more than four dozen individual watermen.

Officers will go through the confiscated pots, photograph them as evidence, identify the owner and issue a citation.

The watermen will be summoned to court on Class III misdemeanor charges and a judge will set the amount of the fine. State law permits a maximum fine of \$500. Those who are repeat violators will face Class I misdemeanor charges, which carry a maximum fine of \$2,500 and up to a year in jail.

The sweep also put the watermen who were issued citations on notice.

A second blue crab conservation violation within a year will result in a license revocation hearing before the Commission, as required by conservation regulations passed this spring.

“Those who violate the rules are taking crabs out of the pots of hard-working watermen who are having a tough enough time as it is,” said Bowman. “I commend the watermen who are abiding by the regulations that protect blue crabs for current and future generations.”

Peer-reviewed scientific surveys of 1,500 locations throughout the Chesapeake Bay have shown the blue crab population has plummeted 65 percent from what it was just 15 years ago and is hovering at dangerously low levels.

In April, the VMRC cut the female crab harvest by 34 percent this year, partly by abolishing the winter dredging of hibernating pregnant crabs, closing the season for female crabs a month early, and enacting gear and crab size restrictions.

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 to a serious problem by enacting matching harvest cuts.

The job of enforcing the new regulations in Virginia falls to Marine Police Officers, who are the frontline defenders of our natural marine resources and have full arrest powers throughout Virginia.

Many are deputized by the federal government to enforce federal fish and wildlife laws.

For more than a century, Marine Police Officers have patrolled the Atlantic Ocean, Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, enforcing fishing and boating safety regulations and conducting search and rescue operations.

Here is the regulation pertaining to crab pots:

Crab Pots are devices made of wire or thread net with a mesh size of at least 1.5 inches. All crab pot buoys must display the licensee's VMRC ID from their Commercial Registration License, preceded by a "C". Each pot must have at least four unobstructed cull rings: one at least 2 5/16 inches inside diameter and the other at least 2 3/16 inches inside diameter, located one each in opposite exterior side panels of the upper chamber of the pot; and two 2 3/8 inches diameter cull rings in opposite exterior side panels of the upper chamber of the pot, however, pots set on the seaside of Eastern Shore are exempt from having the 2 3/8” cull rings. Pots may not be placed in government marked navigable channels [Code 28.2-700, Code 28.2-705, Code 28.2-710, Code 28.2-712, 4 VAC 20-700-20].

Virginia crab regulations in their entirety can be found here ...

<http://www.mrc.virginia.gov/regulations/commercialcrabbingrules.shtm>