

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Blue Crab Management Advisory Committee Meeting
VMRC Conference Room

August 19, 2013

Members Present

Hon. Jack Travelstead (Chair)
Hon. S. Lynn Haynie
David Bell
Ken Diggs, Jr.
Dan Dise
Ty Farrington
Wayne France
John Masiak
Chris Moore
Pete Nixon
Tim Wivell (Proxy for Marshall Cox)

VMRC Staff

Rob O'Reilly
Joe Grist
Joe Cimino
Lewis Gillingham
Reneé Hoover
Samantha Hoover
Stephanie Iverson
Adam Kenyon
Laurie Beth Williams

Members Absent

John Graham
Paige Hogge
Ronnie Jett
Tom Powers
Kevin Wade
Ken Smith

Others Present

Jen Aiosa
Jerome Bonnaville
Danny Crabbe
Tom Freeman
Dennis Halheid
Paula Jasinski
Doug Jenkins Sr.
Rom Lipcius (VIMS)
Danielle McCulloch (VIMS)
Bonnie Miller
George Pauls Jr.
Mike Seebo (VIMS)

The minutes were recorded by Adam Kenyon.

I. Introductions/Announcements

The meeting was called to order at 6:05 pm. Hon. Jack Travelstead announced that he will chair this committee until other Associate Commissioners were able to contribute to these issues.

II. Approval of minutes from the July 16, 2013 meeting

The minutes from the July 16, 2013 meeting were approved by unanimous consent.

III. Report: Blue Crab Dredge Fishery Field Study of Incidental Mortality

Ms. Daniele McCulloch from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) presented the study design, objectives, and methods of the Blue Crab Dredge Mortality Project (CDP) that was conducted. This study was designed to assess the effects of water quality, divers, and bottom type on blue crab incidental mortality in the blue crab dredge fishery. The CDP sampled 41 sites

in the Chesapeake Bay from December 20, 2012 through March 15, 2013. Project sites were established based on daily crab abundance in scouting tows. The project conducted 114 hard sand bottom tows and 132 soft mud bottom tows, both with and without divers. Pre-trials tows were conducted at each site before the site was dredged, followed by at least 20 impact tows at each site, conducted by four boats to mimic crab dredging in the site. Finally post-trial tows were conducted after each site was impacted.

Dr. Rom Lipcius, from VIMS, presented the results of the CDP. Dr. Lipcius stated that water quality (water temperature, dissolved oxygen, and salinity) had little to no effect on discard mortality. Bottom type, whether the site was sand or mud, had the largest effect on blue crab discard mortality in the CDP. In pre-trial tows, all of which used divers for standardization, blue crab discard mortality was about 13% on sand bottom and 2% on mud bottom. Post-trial tows, which also used divers, assessed the effect the four dredge vessels had on discard mortality during the impact tows. Impact tows (the tows occurring between the pre- and post-trial tows) were performed both with divers and without divers. In post-trial tows blue crab incidental mortality was about 27.9% on sand bottoms with divers, 19.7% on sand bottom with no divers, 4.2% on mud bottom with divers, and 0.1% on mud bottoms without divers. The standardized post-trial tows measured the amount of dead crabs that would have been left on the bottom by the dredge gear. Dr. Lipcius said that the study showed that to minimize discard mortality of blue crabs in the blue crab winter dredge fishery, if the season were opened, dredging would preferably be conducted on mud bottom without divers.

IV. Discussion of possible future management options

a. Dredge fishery season (2013-2014)

Mr. Joe Grist presented background information to help CMAC develop possible future management actions pertaining to the blue crab dredge fishery season, crab pot fishery season extension, and possible daily bushel limits that would be needed to achieve either of those options. He presented results from the 2012/2013 Bay-wide Winter Dredge Survey, which indicated the blue crab population is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. Overall crab abundance declined from last year however, the Bay-wide fishery remained below the exploitation target and threshold. Mr. Grist presented trip and harvest data for the past blue crab dredge fishery season participants to the Committee. This data could be used to establish possible criteria for who would be eligible to participate in the 2013/2014 blue crab winter dredge fishery season, if opened. There were 37 individuals that were active in all five of the dredge seasons from 2003/2004 through 2007/2008, and another 21 unique individuals that were only active four of those five seasons. Two members of the public commented that they would like CMAC to consider allowing other interested crab dredgers and exemptions to participate, if the season were approved by the Commission.

Mr. Grist presented a timeline for management decisions, which included a request for public hearing in August, a Blue Crab Industry Survey in September, a Dredge Working Group meeting in September, a CMAC meeting in early October, and finally a public hearing on October 22, 2013. This process will determine possible season lengths, areas for dredging, reporting requirements, as well as any observer requirements if the blue crab winter dredge fishery season were opened by the Commission.

Mr. Grist asked CMAC if there was a quota that the Committee would be willing to endorse so that staff can calculate possible scenarios for the opening of the blue crab dredge fishery season. Mr. Ty Farrington made a motion to recommend the crab dredge fishery season be opened with a 1.5 million pound limit and to limit eligibility to the 37 individuals who participated in the dredge fishery, every season, from 2003/2004 through 2007/2008. This motion was seconded by Mr. Ken Diggs Jr. The motion passed 6 for, 3 against, and 1 abstention.

b. Crab pot fishery, extension of season

Mr. Grist presented different possible scenarios for extending the 2013 crab pot season. Currently the 2013 crab pot season will end on November 20 for females and November 30 for males. He presented options that would extend the season for both males and females until December 5, December 10, and December 15. The CMAC recommended by unanimous consent that they would like to see scenarios that involved all of those possible extensions, particularly how different extensions would affect related bushel limits.

c. Conservation equivalency: 2014 daily bushel limits

Mr. Grist presented two different options to achieve conservation equivalency if either an opening of the blue crab winter dredge fishery season, a crab pot season extension, or both were approved by the Commission. The CMAC recommended by unanimous consent that opening the crab pot season on April 1, 2014 as a trade off for extra harvest of blue crabs was not a viable option. Instead, CMAC recommended using bushel limits in 2014 to offset any extra harvest.

Mr. Grist presented two different methods staff has explored to implement bushel limits in 2014. The first method, provided by CMAC from the July 2013 meeting, applies a simple formula to estimate reasonable ranges for daily harvest. The CMAC suggested using a ratio to determine bushel limits from 1 bushel of blue crabs per 10 crab pots as a “Good Day” and 1 bushel of blue crabs per 5 pots as an “Exceptional Day.” The second method used actual data from the Virginia Mandatory Harvest Reporting Database, which was also used to calculate the 2013 bushel limits. Mr. Grist presented examples comparing both the ratio range and the statistical range of the mandatory harvest reporting data. He said that actual bushel limits would be available to CMAC at the next meeting.

d. Limitations on the use of agents in 2014

Mr. Joe Cimino presented information on continuing the limitations on agents used in the blue crab fishery in 2014. This was a discussion item initiated at the July CMAC meeting. He reminded CMAC of its decision to limit blue crab license eligibility for agents in 2013 to those who had an approved agent in 2012, plus a ten percent first-come, first-serve buffer. In addition, Commission-granted hardship exemptions were allowed. Of the 168 licensees eligible to register an agent in 2013, 140 have done so. Mr. Cimino presented information requested by the Committee at the July 2013 meeting showing that the majority of individuals in the blue crab pot fishery (73 of 114) that used an agent did so 100% of the time. He also presented a possible way to determine agent eligibility in the future using a system that has recently been used for Virginia American Shad Bycatch Permits. Mr. Nixon commented the use of agents in the blue crab fishery should be eliminated entirely, and that the original provisions for agent use were as a mechanism for temporary situations, as opposed to full-time use of agents. Mr. Farrington asked

if staff could provide information that would show what percent of harvest is taken by agents in each license category. Limiting the use of agents in the blue crab fishery for 2014 will continue to be discussed at the next CMAC meeting.

V. New Business

No new business items were discussed.

VI. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:10 pm.