

**VIRGINIA MARINE RESOURCES COMMISSION
BLUE CRAB MANAGEMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING
VMRC CONFERENCE ROOM**

August 21, 2006

MEMBERS PRESENT

Hon. Rick Robins
Mr. Pete Nixon
Mr. Marshall Cox Sr.
Mr. Jim Casey
Mr. Pete Freeman
Mr. Tom Powers
Mr. Chris Moore

MEMBERS ABSENT

Mr. Wayne Abbott
Mr. William Abbott
Mr. Jeff Crockett
Mr. John Graham
Mr. Wayne Harding
Ms. Paige Hogge
Mr. Ronald Jett
Mr. Lesney Miller
Mr. Billy Moore
Mr. Louis Whittaker
Mr. Woody Zember

VMRC STAFF

Mr. Jack Travelstead
Mr. Joe Grist
Mr. Mike Johnson
Dr. Rom Lipcius (VIMS)

PRFC STAFF

Mr. A.C. Carpenter

I. Introductions and Announcements

Chairman Roberts called the meeting to order at 6:58 pm. The Chairman thanked the CMAC members in attendance for their participation. He also thanked Rom Lipcius for his help in re-evaluating the sponge crab fishery.

II. Approval of the minutes from the July 10, 2006 meeting.

Chairman Robins noted there was not a quorum. The minutes from the July meeting were approved.

III. Old Business

A. Mr. Jack Travelstead: Statement of issues before the Committee

Mr. Travelstead restated the issues before the commission. The publication "Blue Crab 2005, Status of the Chesapeake Population and its Fisheries", published by the Chesapeake Bay Commission and Bi-State Blue Crab Technical Advisory

Committee, was provided to the Committee. He went on to suggest that the regulations pertaining to the harvest of sponge crabs be considered for repeal and that data supporting this would be presented by Dr. Lipcius. Mr. Travelstead also stated to better protect spawning stock other management methods should be considered such as increasing areas where harvest would not be permitted. Mr. Travelstead stated one problem with this method would be displacing waterman from those areas and forcing them to concentrate in other areas that continue to remain open.

Mr. Travelstead said that a public meeting would not be held in September for Blue Crab regulation proposals before the VMRC meeting that month. Chairman Robbins suggested that October would be OK for the CMAC to consider regulatory proposals for the November VMRC meeting.

Mr. Travelstead suggested that new CMAC Committee members should be identified, as attendance has been very low with several committee members unable to attend due to working schedules.

B. Presentation by Dr. Rom Lipcius on mature female crab standing stock

Dr. Lipcius presented data regarding spawning stock status. Recent data continue to show low abundances of spawning females. A 3-year study on the effectiveness of the Crab Sanctuary shows that survival is increased by a factor of 6 for crabs inside the sanctuary compared to those outside. Tagging of individual crabs showed them to be at large in the general population for 3 weeks in the sanctuary compared to an average of 1.5 weeks for those outside. Dr. Lipcius indicated that this might mean the female has an increased chance of spawning before being harvested.

Dr. Lipcius went on to present data, 2001-2004, concerning average survival rates of spawning female blue crabs from year one year to the next at 7-9%. This low survival rate indicates that Chesapeake Bay is highly dependent upon 1st time spawners for following years recruitment. This means that as few as two consecutive spawning failures could be a significant event for blue crab abundances. He stated there is a concern to protect these new mature females.

Dr. Lipcius then presented data on the distribution of mature female crabs in Chesapeake Bay. Spawning season typically runs from May 15 through September 15. Within the Crab Sanctuary egg bearing females occur in the upper parts in June, lower sanctuary in July, lower and historical parts of the Sanctuary in August and mostly found in the historic parts of the sanctuary in September.

Dr. Lipcius stated that survival of mature female released after capture in crab pots was low, mortality of approximately 80%. Egg mass loss after this handling was almost 100%. Dr. Lipcius stated that the regulations pertaining to the harvest of egg bearing females should be considered for repeal as it does not help the

fisherman or the crab. Instead measures protecting the mature female crabs from fisheries interaction should be considered such as expanding the sanctuary or a closed season of two weeks. He recommended expanding the sanctuary to include stretches of offshore waters north and south of Chesapeake Bay and two deep water channels north of the current sanctuary.

Pete Nixon stressed that loss of the brood is a key factor to be considered.

Commissioner Robbins stated that enlarging the sanctuary may displace effort into the tributaries. He questioned Rom if females were solely limiting for spawning success. Rom answered that there can be some male/sperm limitations. Yet they are still capable of mating with a female crab approximately every two weeks so he considered this to be of low importance.

A discussion on the causes of documented decreases in size of spawning females began. Rom stated that this was probably due to crab pot fishery interactions but did not know what specifically if it was caused by: genetic changes, phenotypic reactions of the populations or mechanical results of culling. Mr. Nixon questioned these conclusions stating that other states with commercial crab potting for blue crabs are not seeing this decrease in size. He thought the growth of the peeler crab fishery might be playing a role.

Commissioner Robbins asked what other management tools were available to reduce fishing pressure.

Mr. Travelstead stated he did not believe a closed season was feasible due to logistical reasons and felt area closure was a better alternative.

Mr. Powers stated he felt area closure would only relocate fisherman to other areas already fished and not reduce fishing pressure. He offered the idea of limiting crab pot numbers.

Commissioner Robbins asked for data on the number of fisherman that would be affected by the proposed new closure areas.

Mr. Moore asked about extending the amount of time the sanctuary is in effect by starting two weeks earlier. Mr. Cox stated he felt the current timing for the sanctuary was correct.

Mr. Travelstead stated we should examine the harvest data for the areas affected by month to determine when those areas contained sponge crabs. He went on to state that a lot of people have supported basket limits in the past, but this is hard to enforce.

Mr. Freeman stated he did not think bushel limits would reduce mortality as pots would not be fished when daily limit was reached.

Commissioner Robbins charged the committee to consider other options for the next meeting.

B. Presentation by A.C. Carpenter on PRFC proposed size limit changes for Potomac River Tributaries

Mr. Carpenter detailed a proposal to change size limits of blue crabs in the Maryland and Virginia Potomac River tributaries match the size limits currently in force for the main stem. This proposal has already been presented to Maryland DNR. From April 1 to July 10 the size limit would be 5 ¼” and from July 11 to November 30 the limit would increase to 5 ½”. The size limit on peelers would be 3 ½”. There would be no size limit on mature females and on soft crabs. The regulations would be for four years and would automatically end at the end of the period.

The purpose of this change in size limits would be to maximize the size of #1 Jimmy’s harvested in the Potomac River. Larger male crabs command a higher price on the market and it is hoped this increase in market value will provide the Potomac River crab industry with the best return on this fishery. A.C. stated that Potomac River landings had increases of 15 to 19% of the #1 Jimmy’s compared to years before the current larger size limits were put into place.

PRFC would like an answer by the end of the year so they can consider it for their meeting in February.

Mr. Travelstead stated this will be part of the package that goes out for public hearings for consideration at VMRC meeting in November.

IV. New Business

A. Mr. Jack Travelstead: Discussion of use of multiple licenses by a single individual

Mr. Travelstead asked the Committee if it was worth pursuing the number of individuals serving as agents for multiple licenses. The intent of this rule was to allow agents to fish someone else’s pots in times of emergencies. Now it may be becoming abused with one person using large numbers licenses to fish more pots.

Commissioner Robbins asked how much this is currently happening and if it can be controlled to lower fishing pressure. Mr. Travelstead stated it may be difficult to determine the scope of this issue. Mr. Cox did not think that this was currently a widespread problem. Mr. Freeman did not think that number of pots was enforceable and that he felt effort in the area where he fished was actually less than in previous years.

Commissioner Robbins felt that this issue falls under effort control and that it should be addressed.

Mr. Carpenter stated the PRFC was considering this proposal issue as well. The question of what kind of fishery is being fostered by policy is important, whether it is a corporate fishery or one promoting individual fishermen.

Dr. Lipcius stated an ITE (effort system) where number of pots is limited should be considered.

Mr. Travelstead stated that the CBC adopted a pot marking system to control effort two years ago, but was never used.

Mr. Carpenter stated that pots could be marked with a tag system cheaply and that this would help track number of pots used by the fishery to measure effort.

B. Other Items

Mr. Travelstead asked if the season for crabbing should open on March 1 or 15 instead of April for crab potting.

Mr. Freeman questioned if winter dredge season should close December 15 and open March 15.

Mr. Cox said thought should be given to eliminating open season and let the fishery work as it had in the past, fishing as the conditions dictated.

Mr. Freeman suggested making the size limit for peelers 3 ½”

Mr. Cox stated the Commissioner needs to appoint new committee members who can attend meetings to allow a quorum to be present. Jack stated individuals nominated should reflect a regional distribution.

Commissioner Robbins thanked everyone for their attendance and thanked Rom and A.C. for their presentations. He also stated that a package of regulatory proposals should be developed in October for the November VMRC meeting.

V. Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled for Monday, September 18 at 7:00 PM.

VI. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 8:48 PM.