

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

**CORRECTED MINUTES  
March 20, 2012**

**Members Present**

Hon. Rick Robins  
Hon. Joe Palmer  
H.M. Arnold  
Ty Farrington  
Wayne France  
Tommy Leggett (for Chris Moore)  
Peter Nixon  
Ken Smith

**VMRC Staff**

Jack Travelstead  
Rob O'Reilly  
Joe Grist  
John Bull  
Joe Cimino  
Sonya Davis  
Renee Hoover  
Adam Kenyon  
Allison Watts  
Sharon Wilson  
MPO Mark Hill

**Members Absent**

Jim Casey  
Marshall Cox  
Jeff Crockett  
Dan Dise  
Pete Freeman  
Johnny Graham  
Paige Hogge  
Ronnie Jett  
Tom Powers

**Others Present**

Dr. Rom Lipcius  
Danielle McCullough  
Roger Parks  
Douglas Jenkins, Sr.  
Ken Diggs, Jr.  
James Diggs

The minutes were recorded by Allison Watts.

**I. Introductions/Announcements**

Mr. Rick Robins made opening comments, and the meeting began at 6:05 pm.

**II. Minutes from the August 18, 2011 meeting.**

The minutes were approved with no changes.

**III. Results of 2011/2012 Winter Dredge Survey (IF AVAILABLE).**

Rick Robins stated that the results of the Bay-wide Winter Dredge Survey are not yet available, and that the committee should anticipate meeting when they are available (possibly within the next couple of weeks).

#### **IV. Update: 2012 regulation changes proposed by PRFC and MD DNR**

Mr. Rob O'Reilly handed out a summary sheet of proposed regulation changes for the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC) with information on minimum sizes, seasons, and possession limits, and he explained that all regulations are status quo to 2011. Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MD DNR) is looking at the possibilities of either matching Virginia's fall prohibition on harvest of female crabs (November 21<sup>st</sup> through November 30<sup>th</sup>), or starting the female harvest closure earlier in November. They are also considering a June closure to female harvest. Any actions will be based on the Bay-wide Winter Dredge Survey results. Maryland differs from Virginia in that they have bushel limits on crab harvesters, which would be difficult for Virginia to implement because Virginia has five pot categories. Mr. Robins asked about PRFC's pot tagging program, and Mr. Joe Palmer explained that they are employing a pilot program where licensees use either removable tags or stickers for buoys and trot lines. Mr. Robins asked if this was by regulation, and Mr. O'Reilly clarified that it is by order, which is similar.

#### **V. Results of VIMS Crab Pot Cull Ring Studies**

Ms. Danielle McCullough presented the summary. The Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) has undertaken three separate cull ring and bycatch reduction device (BRD) studies, with this presentation focusing on the results from the Spring and Fall 2010 cull ring study. There were five different treatments ranging from no cull rings to 2 7/16" size cull rings, and crab pots were each fished for eight total days. She pointed out that one treatment included cull rings that are the same size as those currently mandated by regulation (2 3/8"). All crabs caught during the course of the study were measured and sexed. When no cull rings were present, the largest percentage (39%) of sublegal crabs was observed. The smallest percentage (13%) of sublegal crabs was found in crab pots with the largest cull ring (2 7/16"). In both spring and fall, a slight trend of decreasing abundance was observed with increasing cull ring size for both legal males and legal females. For sublegal crabs, a more apparent trend of declining abundance was observed with increasing cull ring size for both spring and fall. Ms. McCullough explained that with bigger cull rings, there is more escapement. Carapace width of legal male and legal female crabs increased with increasing cull ring size, and she suggested there are bigger, better quality crabs found in crab pots with bigger cull rings. There was little variation between cull ring sizes, as all sublegal crabs can probably move in and out of crab pots regardless of the cull ring sizes in this study. The investigators have looked at preliminary biomass estimates (abundance multiplied by size) and observed no trend in legal males, a slight decrease in legal females, and a strong decreasing trend in sublegal crabs with increasing cull ring size.

Ken Smith asked for the definition of a sublegal crab, and Ms. McCullough stated that a sublegal female crab would be a peeler that is not fully mature, and that the measurement does not matter. Mr. Robins asked about the percentage differences between cull ring sizes in terms of number of animals retained (savings associated with the different measures). Ms. McCullough said she would send the exact numbers later in terms of legal crabs, and Dr. Rom Lipcius stated that the percentage differences are probably very small. Mr. Robins explained that it would be helpful to know, for example, the total number of legal size crabs kept in pots with 2 5/16" cull rings compared to number of crabs kept with 2 3/8" cull rings. Dr. Lipcius pointed out that it is interesting that there is not a lot of tradeoff in total biomass of what you catch with a larger cull ring, but you are getting fewer sublegal crabs and more large crabs. Mr. Pete Nixon explained a theory that larger crabs do not like going into crab pots full of small, immature crabs. A cull ring large enough to allow smaller, sublegal crabs to escape will retain a larger percentage of bigger crabs. Another theory is that adding extra cull rings to the bottom of the crab pot will assist smaller crabs in escaping.

Mr. Travelstead stated that the Crab Management Advisory Committee (CMAC) had concerns prior to this study that there are regional effects of cull rings, and he asked Ms. McCullough if the data can be broken down regionally. She answered that regional data are available and will be provided upon analysis. Dr. Lipcius added that the purpose of this summary for CMAC was to request more specific analyses, which should be summarized and sent to VIMS in an email. Mr. Robins asked if the regional data can be looked at when CMAC reconvenes, and Ms. McCullough responded yes. Mr. Nixon asked if data are available by upriver versus downriver, and Dr. Lipcius and Ms. McCullough affirmed this. Mr. Nixon also inquired about Mike Johnson's cull ring study, to which Mr. O'Reilly explained it was a limited study, and those data are still available. Mr. O'Reilly asked about variance estimates for the graphs shown in the presentation, and Ms. McCullough stated that they will be looking into those. Mr. Travelstead inquired about the linear nature of the graphs shown, and asked if the data could be extrapolated to cull ring sizes not studied. Dr. Lipcius pointed out that the differences between the cull ring sizes in the study are not even intervals, but they will model it so the information can at least be interpolated between sizes.

Mr. Robins summarized that VIMS personnel will look into regional, upriver and downriver, and cull ring size differences. Mr. Travelstead stated that staff will contact VIMS if further analyses are needed. Dr. Lipcius added that they will be looking at true biomass data.

There were no questions from the public.

#### **VI. Update: New Crab Management Long Term Vision Committee**

Mr. Travelstead explained that the Commission directed staff to form a committee that will begin to formulate long-term crab fishery plans, including what the industry wants the fishery to look like now that the population is reaching recovery. The new committee will not take the place of CMAC's seasonal meetings. Staff wants industry members to look at the issues of overcapacity, the closure of the dredge fishery, and the waiting list, while there may be additional issues industry would look to discuss. Mr. Travelstead has encouraged industry members to submit a list of who should serve on that committee, and CMAC members are encouraged to serve, as well. The final list is on hold until a new Commissioner is chosen. Staff is developing a Terms of Reference document for the committee, as well as a set of guiding principles. Co-management between industry and staff is desired and this process will take time. Maryland has a similar effort underway, and they have hired a full-time independent facilitator, which would be useful for VMRC, but our state budget may prohibit doing so.

Thus far, concerns from industry have been raised about the need for another committee. Mr. Travelstead explained that this committee will look long-range and will work to resolve issues between industry and staff. The committee should be geographically-balanced, with all gear types and sectors represented, while remaining at a manageable number of members.

Mr. Robins added that while Maryland had a rocky start, they have a better ongoing dialogue now with industry members. It is clear from Maryland's experiences that there are a number of issues, such as catch monitoring, which would allow more flexibility to improve the fishery. He stated that Virginia lacks real-time monitoring, and we are using input controls to achieve a target at the end of the year. It sounds like Maryland has made significant process and Virginia should be able to learn from them. Mr. Travelstead added that at some point, the two visioning committees will need to get together because it is a Bay-wide fishery. Mr. Robins stated that Maryland's dialogue with industry is giving rise to new economic opportunities, and it will be interesting to see these opportunities in Virginia.

There were no questions from the public.

#### **VII. Discussion: Possibilities for 2012 crab fishery season**

Mr. Robins stated that the Winter Dredge Survey (WDS) results are not yet available. Mr. Travelstead said that without the WDS numbers, no one is prepared to talk about 2012 management measures, but staff can get input from CMAC regarding what to examine. Mr. Joe Palmer said he has received calls from people who want to extend the crab potting season (either earlier in March or later into December), and that he would like to discuss that next month. Mr. Pete Nixon asked how any adjustments, such as changes to the female harvest dates in November or to the dredge fishery, will affect our achieving the raised abundance threshold and the new guidelines. Mr. Travelstead responded that the WDS results will allow us to see how close we are to the fishing mortality rate target (and if we are below the target, there may be room to grow the fishery). Mr. Nixon expressed that we must achieve a full-time fishery again and that the industry cannot survive any longer as part-time. Mr. Robins asked if staff can look at different scenarios for extending the crab pot season, and Mr. O'Reilly explained that any scenarios will involve historical data and harvest forecasting. Mr. O'Reilly also reminded everyone that at some point, agreements must be made with Maryland because the threshold and control rule are Bay-wide measures. Mr. Ty Farrington emphasized his desire to have the dredge season re-opened, and he suggested VIMS and VMRC unite to perform a study on this gear-type. Mr. Robins asked about potential funding sources, and Mr. Travelstead said staff could look into this.

Mr. Farrington also stated his opinion that black sponge crab regulations are not doing any good, and instead of a full prohibition, bushel limits should be implemented.

Mr. Travelstead explained that a large source of uncertainty is non-harvest mortality. If we are close to the exploitation target, in reality we are probably over it. Mr. Robins stated that this should be a priority, as the visioning committee will need estimates of non-harvest mortality in order to make informed decisions. Mr. Tommy Leggett inquired about pulling a scallop dredge behind crab dredgers, and Mr. O'Reilly said that there will be variability in non-harvest mortality by area.

There were no public comments.

#### **VIII. Next meeting: To be determined.**

Mr. Travelstead reminded the committee that the next meeting will be held without much advance notice. The WDS results will be the priority of that meeting. Dr.

Lipcius asked to delay the cull ring study results to a later date so that he can focus on the WDS results.

**IX. Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 7:25 pm.