



# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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May 9, 2018

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## **Resilient Blue Crab Stock Weathers Harsh Winter Conditions**



*~ Total blue crab abundance remains healthy and sustainable despite above average overwintering mortality ~*

NEWPORT NEWS, VA. – The Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) today released the results from the 2018 Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey that show the Chesapeake Bay's blue crab stock remains healthy and able to support quality commercial and recreational harvests.

Colder than average temperatures in January and March resulted in higher than normal mortality for adult crabs this past winter. Those environmental conditions combined with very low juvenile abundance last year resulted in lower adult male and female abundance estimates for 2018. The recent survey estimates a total adult male and female crab abundance of 206 million. Although this estimated abundance is 38 percent lower than in 2017, it remains above the 29-year average of 196 million.

Abundance of female crabs that will spawn in late May or mid-summer of 2018 was estimated as 147 million and that is above the 1990 – 2018 average of 124 million. This 2018 abundance of

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potential female spawning crabs is less than 2017, which was the highest ever recorded for spawning crabs. The abundance of spawning-age female crabs has averaged 160 million during the last 10 years, as compared to the 1998 – 2007 average of 82 million, and those years coincided with a number of overfishing events. Since 2008, overfishing has not occurred. The 2018 female spawning stock is the ninth largest since the survey began and remains well above the minimum safe threshold of 70 million crabs.

This year's survey results include an increase in the juvenile crab abundance. These crabs measure 2.4 inches or less in carapace width and their abundance increased by nearly 34 percent from last year to 168 million. These young crabs will grow large enough for harvest by commercial and recreational fisheries late in the season and represent the 2019 spawning potential. Successful recruitment events and subsequent additions to the blue crab population varies annually, as many environmental and biological factors contribute to the fate of the juvenile abundance.

The combined abundance of all sizes of blue crab in the Chesapeake Bay in 2018 was above 371 million crabs and ranks 16<sup>th</sup> within the nearly 30 years the Bay-wide Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey has been conducted. Successful commercial and recreational harvest within the Chesapeake Bay depends on all sizes of blue crab, at one time or another during the season, and those benefits will be supported by this year's overall crab abundance.

The 2017 Bay-wide commercial harvest decreased by 9 percent from the previous year, down from 60 million pounds in 2016 to 54 million pounds. However, the 2017 harvest was 54 percent higher than in 2014 which was the lowest annual harvest in nearly three decades. The 2017 Virginia commercial crab harvest was 23.5 million pounds, comparable to the ten-year average (2008 – 2017) of 24 million pounds. Virginia commercial crab harvests are moderated by blue crab abundance, as well as marketing and processing constraints.

"We are fortunate that a shift to more responsible management of blue crabs in the past decade—including the closure of the winter dredge fishery—is allowing for sustainable harvests even in years with challenging environmental conditions," said Secretary of Natural Resources, Matthew J. Strickler. "Continuing to manage for higher spawning female abundance will ensure we have enough blue crabs to support both commercial and recreational harvests and the Bay ecosystem."

The December – March Bay-wide Winter Dredge Survey is the primary census of the Bay's blue crab standing stock. Since the winter of 1989 – 1990 the survey has been conducted by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and Maryland's Department of Natural Resources. The survey employs crab dredges that sample blue crabs at 1,500 sites throughout the Chesapeake Bay. Sampling during winter, when blue crabs are usually buried in the mud and stationary, allows scientists to develop, with good precision, estimates of the number of crabs present in the Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee, a subcommittee of the Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team, is reviewing the recent survey results and will release its full analysis in their 2018 Blue Crab Advisory Report this summer. The annual advisory report is

used by managers as they review and update fishery regulations. The Bay jurisdictions continue to work together cooperatively to manage the crab stock.

VMRC will begin discussions with the Commission's Crab Management Advisory Committee to provide guidance to the Commission concerning the course of action for 2018 that promotes the health of the blue crab stock and its fisheries. The Commission will be briefed on these survey results at its May 22 meeting.