

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

April 22, 2013

Members Present

Hon. Joe Palmer
David Bell
Marshall Cox, Sr.
Ken Diggs, Jr.
Ty Farrington
Wayne France
Chris Moore
Pete Nixon
Tom Powers
Ken Smith

Members Absent

Hon. Rick Robins
Dan Dise
John Graham
Paige Hogge
Ronnie Jett
John Masiak
Kevin Wade

VMRC Staff

Rob O'Reilly
Joe Grist
Joe Cimino
Lewis Gillingham
Reneé Hoover
Samantha Hoover
Sally Roman
Allison Watts
MPO Jaime Hogge

Others Present

Bryan Dalheim
Douglas Jenkins
Roger Parks

The minutes were recorded by Allison Watts.

I. Introductions/Announcements

The Hon. Joe Palmer called the meeting to order at 6:03 pm. It was noted that Tom Powers was present for the meeting via conference call.

II. Approval of minutes from the February 11, 2013 meeting

The minutes from the February 11, 2013 meeting were approved by unanimous consent, after a quorum was present.

III. 2012/2013 Bay-wide Winter Dredge Survey: preliminary results

Joe Grist presented the preliminary results of the 2012/2013 Bay-wide Winter Dredge Survey (2013 WDS). The 2013 female crab exploitation rate will not be available until final harvest data for 2013 is known, but has been projected as 29%, by using 2012 harvest data and 2013 WDS abundance data. The 2012 female crab exploitation rate is estimated as 10%. Female spawning-age abundance for the 2013 WDS is estimated as 147 million age-1+ female crabs, which is below the target (215 million age-1+ female crabs), but above the threshold (70 million age-1+ female crabs). Male crab abundance declined from the previous survey to 42 million male crabs. There was a record high abundance of juvenile crabs in the 2012 WDS, which declined in 2013 to 111 million age-0 crabs. While this is the second lowest juvenile abundance estimate in the time series, it is not unprecedented to see a big decline in juvenile abundance. Mr. Chris Moore asked for a definition of juvenile crabs, and Mr. Rob O'Reilly explained that juvenile crabs are defined as up to 2.4 inches in carapace width. Mr. Grist reviewed recent years' crab pot and peeler pot harvests. The 2012 fall crab pot season was extended to December 15, 2012 (which included six days allotted to the fishery from Hurricane Sandy). While staff had originally projected that 349,000 pounds would be harvested during this extension by commercial crab pots, the actual harvest was 277,000 pounds (which includes the six extra days for Hurricane Sandy). Bushel limits are in place in 2013, which are individual daily limits by license category. Harvest in 2013 will need to be maintained at the same level as in 2012 in order to prevent overfishing from occurring in 2013.

Mr. Grist also provided an update on the crab dredge gear study that was conducted from December 2012 through March 2013. A final report from VIMS is due to the Commission by the end of July 2013, and will be presented at the August Commission meeting. A total of 6,172 bushels were harvested by the four crab captains. Mr. Moore asked if the dredge harvest was a research set-aside or if it counts as crab harvest, and Mr. Grist clarified that it will be counted as harvest. The majority of the crabs harvested by dredge were harvested in January through March 2013.

Mr. Wayne France asked about similarities between the present and 1992 (the last time juvenile abundance was estimated as very low). Mr. Grist responded that during that time, there was also a decline in male abundance though not to the level estimated in the 2013 WDS. He explained the various potential causes for the current decline in juvenile crabs: recruitment is naturally variable, the juvenile red drum (puppy drum) population in the Bay was very high in 2012, and submerged aquatic vegetation coverage is down to the low levels of the 1980s. Mr. Ken Smith inquired about management of red drum in the Chesapeake Bay, and Mr. Grist explained that red drum are managed by an interstate fishery management plan through the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). The Chesapeake Bay serves as a nursery for red drum. The Hon. Palmer reminded the committee that red drum levels were very low two years ago, and added that no stock can be managed one year at a time, but must be managed for the long term.

Mr. Doug Jenkins from the public provided anecdotal reports of increased puppy drum, and added his opinion that increased rainfall washed crabs out of rivers in fall 2012.

Mr. O'Reilly explained that while Maryland and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC) are attempting to reduce 2013 crab harvest by up to 10% in response to the 2013 WDS results, Virginia will not need to implement any additional measures because of the bushel limits already in place for 2013. Mr. O'Reilly also explained that the committee will consider combining pot limits during this meeting, and then during a future meeting can provide a recommendation on the 2013/2014 crab dredge season, examine the bushel limits in place for 2013, and consider another season extension in fall 2013 with conservation equivalency.

IV. Consideration to allow crab pot licenses to be combined

Mr. Cimino explained to the committee that this item came up during the February 2013 Commission meeting, when one individual crab harvester recommended that crab pot licenses be combinable. The Hon. Palmer had asked this issue be reviewed by CMAC. Mr. Cimino presented various possible license combinations with the new maximum number of allowable crab pots. Mr. Moore asked if a regulation change would be required by the Commission, to allow for two-for-one license surrenders. Mr. Cimino responded that this would be the case, though some combinations of licenses would exceed the current maximum of 425 crab pots. Mr. Ken Diggs, Jr. asked about the maximum number of allowable pots in Maryland, and Mr. O'Reilly stated it is 900 crab pots. Mr. David Bell recommended the committee address those on the waiting list before addressing those who want to combine licenses. Mr. Marshall Cox stated that those on the waiting list can purchase another license at any time from an active licensee. Mr. Farrington asked about requesting that inactive eligible licensees give up their licenses for those on the waiting list, and Mr. O'Reilly said a list of names and addresses of eligible licensees can be provided but it would be preferable that staff not contact those individuals to arrange transfers. The Hon. Palmer tabled the discussion and no recommendations were made.

IV. New business

Mr. Farrington asked when the 2013 WDS results will be finalized, and Mr. Grist said the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee (CBSAC) will likely have its report out in June. Mr. Farrington also asked about determining who would be eligible for the 2012/2013 dredge season if opened. Mr. O'Reilly explained that the issue would involve calculating the expected harvest of a dredge season, and then examining how to scale back the crab pot fishery to allow for that dredge harvest (specifically in March following a dredge season). Mr. Pete Nixon asked about closure of certain areas to dredge harvest, and Mr. O'Reilly explained that staff has considered this. Mr. Nixon added that the blue crab industry panel should look at the issue of

reopening the dredge season, as it is a long-term issue. Mr. Smith informed the committee that all are welcome at the industry panel meetings.

V. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:34pm.