

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
Office of the Governor

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**\$7.5 MILLION APPROVED FOR VIRGINIA'S
BLUE CRAB DISASTER AID PLAN**

*~Federal funds are major infusion for Commonwealth's program to boost
Chesapeake Bay crab population; aid commercial fishermen ~*

RICHMOND – Governor Timothy M. Kaine announced today the National Marine Fisheries Service has approved \$7.5 million of federal funds for the state's ongoing program to boost the Chesapeake Bay's blue crab population and aid struggling commercial fishermen.

With the first part of Virginia's multi-faceted, three-year blue crab disaster relief plan already underway, the new infusion of federal fishery disaster funds will help ensure the continued success of the statewide effort to reduce harvest pressure on the blue crab, and to continue an innovative marine debris clean-up program using out-of-work crab dredgers.

“Virginia is already a leader on Chesapeake Bay issues including rebuilding the Bay's blue crab population and helping our commercial crabbers during these difficult economic times,” said Governor Kaine. “This funding will support an important plan that provides both environmental and economic benefits to citizens of the Commonwealth as we work to rebuild our depleted blue crab fishery.”

Last winter, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission funded a marine debris removal program in which 58 out-of-work crab dredge fishermen were paid to retrieve and dispose of marine debris and derelict crab pots. Through the program—projected to cost roughly \$1 million a year for three years—those watermen were paid \$300 a day and were reimbursed for their fuel costs. They used side-imaging sonar to pinpoint the debris and specially-designed grapples to haul the material into their boats. Once photographed, the debris was disposed of in an environmentally friendly manner.

The program ran from mid-December through mid-March, with watermen recovering more than 8,600 lost crab pots containing thousands of trapped crabs and fish and 61 abandoned nets. The pots were found to have trapped fish, shellfish, reptiles (turtles), mammals (muskrat), and birds (merganser diving duck) in over 376,000 acres.

“A lot of these watermen were skeptical at first but now are great partners in this program,” said Dr. Kirk Havens, who oversees the program at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science in Gloucester. “Tens of thousands of crab pots each year are lost through no fault of the watermen. This is important and necessary work that greatly benefits the marine habitat in general and blue crabs in particular.”

In addition to continuing the marine debris program, and reimbursing for its first year of operation, the federal funds will be used for:

- License Buybacks – Reducing harvest pressure on the blue crab population by buying crabbing licenses back from commercial watermen through a reverse auction process.
- Blue Crab Stock Assessment – Significantly improving the scientific knowledge of various biological processes affecting the health of the blue crab population.

The NMFS has not yet approved an additional \$7.5 million in crab fishery disaster funds. Virginia has proposed that money be used to train and supply crabbers interested in transitioning into oyster aquaculture, either via “spat on shell” or cage-grown oyster aquaculture. If approved, the money also would be used to hire commercial crabbers for scientific studies on the impact of various potential crab management measures, and to provide competitive grants to watermen focusing on experiments with new fishing gear or equipment, aquaculture, and water quality and fisheries habitat improvements; and

On May 19, NMFS said it would release the remaining funds once its technical, budget and environmental reviews are complete on the remaining facets of the proposal. A time frame for release cannot be established.

Last spring, Governor Kaine began working with Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley to rebuild the Chesapeake Bay’s iconic blue crab population by reducing the harvest of reproductively critical female blue crabs by 34 percent. In September, the two governors, with strong support from their respective Congressional delegations, successfully petitioned the U.S. Department of Commerce to declare a federal fishery disaster for Chesapeake Bay, a designation that made each state eligible for up to \$15 million in federal assistance for commercial fishermen who have suffered economic hardships from the abnormally low and unstable blue crab abundance.

Recent results from the most recent Bay-wide winter crab dredge population survey, which is conducted annually by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), show that Virginia’s management actions are working. The estimated total number of crabs over-wintering in the Chesapeake Bay during 2008-2009 has increased from 280 million in 2007-2008 to just over 400 million.

The increase in abundance is primarily due to a striking increase in the number of adult female crabs, nearly double last year’s estimate.

For more information on the Marine Debris Program, visit the Virginia Institute of Marine Science website at http://www.ccrm.vims.edu/marine_debris_removal.

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