

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Crab Management Advisory Committee (CMAC) Minutes
380 Fenwick Road, Fort Monroe, VA
Wednesday, May 29, 2024 – 4:00 P.M.

ATTENDANCE

Members Present

Marshall Cox
Kenneth Diggs
Spencer Headley
J.C. Hudgins
Chris Moore
Bernard “Wayne” Morris
Pete Nixon
Tom Powers
Nathan Reynolds
Cory Rice
Mark Sanford
John “Ed” Tankard III (chair)

Members Absent

Tye Burns
Ernest George
Johnny Graham

VMRC Staff Present

John Cosgrove
Andrew Button
Alexa Galván
Pat Geer
Lewis Gillingham
Brooke Lowman
Shanna Madsen
Joshua McGilly
Capt. Chris Miller (Law
Enforcement)
Jill Ramsey
Zach Widgeon

Others Present

Rom Lipscius (VIMS)
Michael Seebo (VIMS)
Gabby Saluta (VIMS)
Lynnée Morris
Tim Wivell
One additional (illegible sign-in)

Minutes were prepared by Brooke Lowman.

I. CMAC Call to Order

Upon confirming quorum was present, Alexa Galván (VMRC Fisheries Management Specialist) called the meeting to order at 4:10 PM. Chair Ed Tankard was delayed due to traffic, and Chris Moore served as chairperson in his stead.

II. Minutes of March 27, 2024 Meeting

Ms. Galván asked if there were any corrections or edits needed to the draft minutes of the March 27, 2024 CMAC meeting. None were raised, and Mr. Headley motioned that the meeting minutes of March 27, 2024 be approved. The motion was seconded by Mr. Powers, and the motion passed by unanimous consent.

III. Review Chesapeake Bay Winter Crab Dredge Survey Results & Preliminary 2023 Virginia Harvest Data

Ms. Galván presented results of the 2023-24 Chesapeake Bay Winter Dredge Survey. The estimate of adult female abundance (133 million crabs) moderately decreased but remains between the threshold (72 million crabs) and target (196 million) crabs. The estimate of adult male abundance moderately decreased to 46 million crabs. The estimate of juvenile abundance showed a moderate increase to 138 million crabs but remains below the time-series average (207 million crabs). The preliminary estimate of Bay-wide harvest in 2023 increased moderately relative to 2022, largely driven by Virginia's increased harvest. The estimate of female exploitation rate (25%) decreased, remaining below the threshold rate (37%) and dropping below the target rate (28%). The estimate of male exploitation rate is approximately equal to the conservation trigger (34%). The male exploitation conservation trigger is not a biological reference point but rather a precautionary indicator based on historical catch.

Mr. Nixon questioned how far the survey operates up into the tributaries (e.g. deep water in the James) to get at whether there was a point at which crabs are not observed in the winter. Mr. Seebo informed the group that in the early years of the survey, sampling occurred as far as 30 miles upriver but changed protocols due to large occurrences of zero catch. The extent of survey is approximately 25 miles upriver from the Chesapeake Bay. Mr. Nixon was concerned about depletion in higher reaches of the rivers related to blue catfish predation and lamented that management actions to improve blue crab abundance cannot address blue catfish predation. Dr. Lipscius noted that blue catfish predation is a question of interest and there is some ongoing work at VIMS. Ms. Galván noted recent efforts to increase marketing and processing capacity for blue catfish as well as the consideration of ecosystem affects, including predation, in the upcoming blue crab stock assessment.

Ms. Galván presented preliminary harvest data for Virginia in 2023. The harvest by weight increased 13% to approximately 18.6 million pounds, while dockside value increased 31% to approximately \$41.5 million (adjusted for inflation). Number of harvesters (772) and trips (48,342) both increased by approximately 5%.

Several members requested finer scale reporting (e.g. by time period, harvest area, and by sex), which was noted for future presentations. Concerns were raised about managing the seaside harvest based on the Chesapeake Bay abundance and exploitation metrics and about the lack of recreational harvest reporting.

IV. Discussion of Possible Management Responses

To open up discussion on 2024-2025 management measures, Ms. Galván presented the status quo (i.e., same season and bushel limits as were implemented in 2023 and closure of the winter dredge fishery) and potential changes that have been recommended (clarification of allowing for pots to be baited or set on Sundays and the expansion of daily time limits to 3AM – 3PM with elimination of alternate hours and medical exemption permits).

Discussion of the proposed change to the daily time limit hinged primarily on the differing conditions on the Bay versus seaside. The 3AM – 3PM expansion was generally viewed favorably for the Bay. However, questions on the necessity of time limits (given the existence of pot and bushel limits), safety concerns, and market impacts were raised for discussion. **Mr. Headley moved to approve alternate hours 3am to 3pm for everywhere except the seaside and to approve 5am to 5pm for the seaside. Mr. Cox seconded the motion. The motion passed by unanimous consent.**

Mr. Headley initiated discussion on opening the winter dredge fishery with a poundage cap (1.5 million pounds). There were some comments on logistics and procedure, noting that this had been a topic raised during the first work session. Mr. Cox pressed Dr. Lipscius for an opinion on the winter dredge fishery, who said that he could support a dredge fishery on the conditions that it would operate only on soft bottom and that the dredge harvest would be balanced by reducing catch from other gear types. Mr. Moore voiced the opinion that we are not in a position to open up a dredge survey, given that juvenile abundance is still low. Mr. Diggs insisted that fewer people would participate in a dredge fishery than say they will. The Committee was reminded that consideration of the winter dredge fishery is on the list of topics for further discussion and evaluation during work sessions.

Mr. Headley moves to open the winter dredge fishery in winter 2024-25. Mr. Cox seconded the motion. The motion carried 10-2.

Mr. Sanford raised the topic of opening part or all of Blue Crab Sanctuary Areas 3 & 4 to harvest. The area of interest overlaps a federally restricted area; per code (334.320 Chesapeake Bay entrance; naval restricted area) the closure is enforced by the US Navy. Making a change to the area would require coordination with the Navy and potentially other agencies including the Army Corps of Engineers and US Fish and Wildlife Service. In response, Mr. Sanford requested considering changing the dates that the sanctuary opens and closes. Mr. Powers suggested proposing legislation to their delegate to have it brought to staff and the Commission.

CMAC unanimously agreed to recommend clarifying language for baiting and setting pots on Sundays.

V. Other Business

Mr. Cox requested discussion of cull rings, which was tabled for a future meeting due to time constraints.

VI. Public Comment

No members of the public came forward with comments.

VII. Adjourn.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:09 PM.