

**Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Crab Management Advisory Committee Working Session
Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Watermen's Hall, Director's Conference Room
Gloucester Point, Virginia**

March 18, 2008

Members Present

Hon. Rick Robins
Dr. John McConaugha
Tom Powers
Pete Freeman
Peter Nixon
Paige Hogge
Johnny Graham
Chris Moore
Doug Jenkins

VMRC Staff

Jack Travelstead
Rob O'Reilly
Joe Grist
Mike Johnson
Laura Lee

Members Absent

Louis Whittaker
Marshall Cox Sr.
H.M. Arnold
Jim Casey
Ronald L. Jett
Jeff Crockett

VIMS Staff

Dr. Rom Lipcius

I. Introductions/Announcements

No introductions or announcements. Meeting convened at approximately 6:20 PM.

II. March Public Hearing: Early Closure of Crab Sanctuary – Final Comments

Mr. Robins opened by stating that the committee needs to address the issue of when to start the Blue Crab Sanctuary. The issue is on the agenda for the VMRC to take action on at the March meeting. The possible starting dates advertised for the meeting is April 15, May 1 and May 15, as recommended by the Committee last month. The Committee needs to recommend one of these to the VMRC.

Mr. Travelstead summarized that the Committee, at the last CMAC meeting, seemed to favor an earlier starting time for the Sanctuary, possibly as early as May 1. He reiterated the need to protect female crabs as they prepare to spawn.

Mr. O'Reilly presented data for the female crab harvest, by two-week intervals from March 17 through June 1, in the mainstem of Chesapeake Bay. It is hard to estimate what is harvested in the Sanctuary because the VMRC does not

specifically collect harvest data for inside the Sanctuary. The last two weeks of March crab harvest, for 2007, was small but dominated by female crabs (90%). The harvest of crabs increases for April to approximately 2 million crabs for the last two weeks in April, and continues to be dominated by females, but estimating the number harvested from the Sanctuary is difficult. It is probably safe to say a large number of those crabs were harvested within the Sanctuary boundaries. In the first two weeks of May the number of crabs harvested in the mainstem of the Bay drops off by about 50%.

Dr. Lipcius presented a slide showing where female crabs are located within the Sanctuary according to the Winter Dredge Survey. Moderate and high densities of female crabs were seen, for the fall and winter, within a narrow corridor of deeper water, down the mainstem of the Bay and major river tributaries feeding into the Bay. This data shows that protecting a narrow corridor-like area year-around, where these crabs are concentrated, would be of benefit. It indicated where they moved down in the fall, remain for the winter, and are preparing to spawn in the spring. If a part or all of the Sanctuary were closed year-around those crabs are not lost commercial crabbers, as they do move into shallow water to feed where they can be caught by crab potter outside of the Sanctuary.

Mr. Robins stated that a year-around closure is too broad for this current discussion but can be taken up for action by this committee at a later meeting. What date should we be focusing on for closing the Sanctuary to crabbing?

Mr. Freeman stated that when these crabs start moving and spawning depends on water temperature. He thinks the closure should start May 1.

Mr. Travelstead asked if crabs are harvested from the tributaries at this time of year as well. Mr. Freeman responded that they are caught in the deeper waters of tributaries as well.

Mr. Freeman stated that by May 15 most crab potters are moving to shallow water.

Mr. Powers asked about closing a lower part of the Sanctuary early.

Mr. Travelstead said while there should be no issue for enforcing this type of closure there are considerations of equity for people who fish lower vs. upper areas of the Bay.

Mr. Nixon asked if closing the original part of the Sanctuary in the lower part of the Bay, for one or more years, would help to save the fishery.

Dr. Lipcius replied that the crabs would still move out of the deep water to the shallows and be susceptible to harvest. It's more important to protect the narrow,

deep water corridor, year-around, that the crabs are moving down to stage for spawning.

Dr. McConaugha stated protecting that deep water corridor year-around, and perhaps an area down at the mouth of the Bay, would protect a large portion of spawning crabs.

Mr. Graham asked what our goal was for the measures we are considering.

Mr. Robins replied that the goal is to rebuild the crab population to 200 million age 1+ crabs in the Bay.

Mr. Travelstead stated that Maryland is considering a number of issues but we won't know anything until late April as to what they actually do.

Mr. Robins said we need a recommendation for the Commission.

Mr. Freeman made the motion to close the Sanctuary to crabbing starting May 1.

Mr. Nixon asked if this measure would be for 2008 only.

Mr. Robins stated it will be in effect until the Commission votes to change it.

Motion passed 7 to 0 with 2 abstentions.

III. The Big Picture: Initial Discussions

Mr. Robins started the discussion with stating that industry needs to identify what constitutes a successful crab fishery. We need to start thinking of ideas like these to help identify how we should approach future measures that protect the fishery. Another item that will need to be scoped by this Committee includes how to control effort in relation to the status of the fishery. Consideration also needs to be given to new issues that will arise if a pot tagging system is instituted. These issues include: transfers, agency, tag replacement, and maximum amount of tags owned.

Mr. Travelstead stated that the best way for us to control effort in this fishery is by limiting the number of pots that are in the water. This is where the pot tagging system would come in by allowing VMRC to adjust the effort by changing the number of pots that will be fishing in that year.

Mr. Travelstead then said this Committee needs to also think about how we deal with crabbing licenses which have been inactive or used sparingly, in terms of future effort control.

Mr. Nixon stated that keeping a consistent supply of crabs is important to maintaining the market for these crabs. If you decrease the effort too much or make it too unpredictable they the market will look to somewhere else where they can get a consistent supply.

Presentation and Discussion on Latent Effort and Effort Controls

Mr. Travelstead presented data to the Committee showing that a large percentage of harvesters eligible to catch crabs, for example almost half of the 300 pot licensees did not report a single pound of landings.

Mr. Powers expressed concern about looking at the crab harvesting activity of fishermen only. There should be consideration of all of their commercial fishing activity and to focus limiting the true part-time commercial harvesters.

Mr. Robins replied that in the allocation of allowable effort to each harvester then there will be a need to look at their historical participation in the crab fishery, over some defined qualifying period of time, to determine their allotments.

Ms. Hogge expressed concern that a few individuals could monopolize the harvest under an effort transfer system.

Mr. Robins replied that there would be a maximum share that a single person could possess.

Presentation on Pot Tagging Options

Mr. Grist gave a power point presentation on pot tagging options that could be utilized in Virginia. This included the types of tags that could be used such as zip-ties, decals and soft plastics and their positive and negative attributes. The presentation also gave information on decal tags being tested for use by the Potomac River Fisheries Commission. The states on the West Coast currently use soft plastic tags and have had considerable success with them. The price is more expensive then any other type of tag we are currently considering but have proven to be very durable and have allowed easy identification of the owner. They can come in a variety of sizes and shapes and can be easily labeled. Payment options were also presented, ranging from VMRC covering the initial cost of the tags, to a combination of costs split between VMRC and the harvester to license fees being increased to cover the cost of the tags. Options to replace lost tags were presented to the Committee including: lost tags requiring an affidavit to issue replacement tags, an automatic distribution of an extra 10% at the beginning of the season, and in the event of catastrophic loss, due to storms, tags would not be required.

IV. and V. Next Meeting and Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at approximately 9:00 pm.