

**Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Blue Crab Management Advisory Committee Meeting
VMRC Conference Room**

March 19, 2007

Members Present

Hon. Rick Robins
Dr. John McConaugha
Tom Powers
Peter Nixon
H.M. Arnold
Jim Casey
Chris Moore
John Freeman
Johnny Graham

Members Absent

Jeff Crockett
Louis Whittaker
Paige Hogge
Marshall Cox Sr.
Ronald L. Jett

VMRC Staff

Jack Travelstead
Rob O'Reilly
Joe Grist
Mike Johnson

VIMS Staff

Dr. Rom Lipcius

I. Announcements

Chairman Rick Robins called the meeting to order at 7:02 PM and noted a quorum was present.

II. Approval of the minutes

The CMAC voted to accept the minutes from the January 22, 2007 meeting.

III. Old Business

A. Crab Pot Season Extension - final recommendations

Mr. Travelstead stated that at the last Commission meeting, the recommendation by CMAC for an emergency regulation to open the Crab Pot Season on March 17 and close it on December 1, with a 51-bushel limit from March 17 until May 31, was approved. Staff will recommend making this change permanent at the next Commission meeting.

Mr. Travelstead stated there was one complaint from a crab dredger that opening crab potting season this early will interfere with his operation.

Mr. Robins asked if anyone else had heard of complaints from dredgers. There

was no response.

Mr. Travelstead stated that before 1995 there used to be a period where both the potters and dredgers operated at the same time.

Mr. Robins asked how long before we see landings data for this early opening.

Mr. O'Reilly responded it would be sometime in July.

B. Minimum Size Limits – update

Mr. Travelstead stated that hard crab size limits are set by Virginia State Code, and peeler size limits are set by VMRC regulation. If we want to change the minimum hard crab size limit, we would need to know by July, so staff can ask the Governor to add this to his legislative agenda, for the upcoming session. Mr. Travelstead also noted that individuals could also ask their state legislators to submit a bill.

Mr. Robins stated that he would be hesitant to change peeler crab size limits as a single management measure, and it would be better to look at a suite of options.

Mr. Powers asked what size a 3-inch peeler crab turns into when it molts.

Dr. McConaugha stated that a molt results in 25% to 35% increases in carapace width.

Mr. Moore asked about the history of fishery size limits in state code.

Mr. Travelstead stated that everything used to be defined in state code but over time most items have gradually shifted over to VMRC.

Mr. Robins asked if the state would give VMRC regulatory authority for hard crab size limits.

Mr. Travelstead responded that they probably would.

C. Use of Agents; multiple license per vessel

Mr. Travelstead stated that staff does not know how many people use agents or how many waterman someone may agent for at one time, and that this practice could be a way to exceed crab pot limits.

Options for agent use presented by Mr. Travelstead included: not allowing a person to act as an agent, except for exemptions for medical hardships and military service, limiting a person to act as agent for no more than two license holders, limiting any commercial fisherman to act as an agent for no more than one other license holder, and limiting agents to two per vessel.

Mr. Nixon stated he would only support the no agent use option with exemptions for medical hardship and military service. He added that should be a 3-5 year period between transfers.

Mr. Robins asked what could we do in terms of data collection to get a better handle on agent use and how often transfers occur.

Mr. Grist responded that we cannot currently track non-CRL agents, and we have to wait till next year to change the mandatory reporting system.

Mr. Powers stated this is a limited entry fishery, with the two-year delay that is in place.

Dr. Lipcius added this fishery is on the edge and if we enforced hardship rules that it would help.

Mr. Casey asked what the rules were for buying from non-CRL crabbers.

Mr. Travelstead responded that all they need to do is show the card of the person you are acting as an agent for to the buyer.

Mr. Robins felt that this practice is prevalent and questioned to what extent is this complicating state effort to manage this fishery.

Mr. O'Reilly suggested we could cap the number of licenses at two that you could agent for, limit two licenses per vessel, and allow people to keep a license when they are not using it.

Mr. Robins stated the original intent for agents was for medical hardships when a person could not fish their pots.

Dr. McConaugha warned of latent effort coming back into the fishery, if the resource rebounds.

Mr. Robins requested an in depth analysis of the options for limiting agent use and latent effort.

Mr. Nixon stated our goal should be to reduce effort and increase CPUE.

D. Upriver Sanctuaries for Male Crabs

Mr. O'Reilly presented preliminary harvest data for 2006 with approximately 21 million pounds landed compared to 24 million pounds for 2005. 2006 harvest totals may increase some, once the data is finalized.

Mr. Grist started the discussion on upriver sanctuaries by stating that the harvest data is not very detailed due to unclassified harvests. Mr. Grist also noted that trends vary by location, with no consistent trend evident. Mr. Grist provided the

committee a handout of male, female, and unclassified crab harvests from 1994 through 2005 by defined water areas. He explained that this is as high a resolution as the mandatory reporting database allows, and may not be the level or resolution needed for the previous meetings discussions on upriver sanctuaries and protection of jimmies. Mr. Grist provided a few examples, from just the defined upper river sections of the James, York, and Rappahannock, that indicated, over time, the male harvest has corresponded with the total crab harvest for each area.

Mr. Travelstead stated that he expected a noticeable decline in male crab harvest over last few years with Bay Crab Sanctuary in place but that we didn't see this trend.

Mr. Nixon stated that the quality of male blue crabs being harvested has been declining with the size of males getting smaller and that the number of male crabs being harvested reflects increased fishing effort.

Mr. Robins asked for data regarding total effort and CPUE for the last few years to be provided at a future meeting.

IV. New Business

A. Spring Bushel Limits

Mr. Grist started his presentation by stating we currently have a limit of 51 bushels for the period of March 17 through May 31, and no bushel limit from June 1 through November 30. Mr. Grist presented daily crab pot harvests, for 2006, showing a noticeably high catch during that period, in comparison to the rest of the year, but also during the same period when bushel limits are in place, unlike the rest of the year. He then went on to present data showing average crab pot daily harvest from 2003 through 2006, and noted, on average, there was very little noticeable difference between the time period with bushel limits, and the time period without, calling into question whether the current bushel limits are actually having the intended impact. Mr. Grist then presented data in response to a previous meeting request that showed the effects of a 35, 40, 45, and 50 bushel limit for the entire crab pot season. Harvest savings of approximately 1.5% to 3.5% of total yearly landings were estimated for the range of bushel limits, and the number of historical trips that would have been affected by bushel limits ranged from 400 to 1600 per year, out of an average number of trips per year of 65,715. Mr. Grist also noted that at the lowest limit presented, 35 bushels, the savings in pounds would be approximately 800,000 pounds of hard crab, versus an average yearly harvest of 22,771,038. When presented on a monthly basis, the greatest savings occurred in the months of October, July, and April, in pounds, but the greatest percentage of harvesters affected would be in April, October and November.

Mr. Powers asked how did this relate to the average number of harvesters each month? Mr. Grist presented additional information showing the greatest number of harvesters are during the summer months of June, July, and August, and to note that the average bushel harvest is 10 bushels.

Mr. Travelstead stated the take home message from this presentation was that crab pot bushel limits may need to be below 35 bushels to have any real impact on crab harvest.

Mr. Nixon noted that during the summer months there are a lot of part-time crab potters and that may explain why we don't see as many trips being affected by potential bushel limits.

Mr. Travelstead stated that in the past commercial crabbers have approached him about instituting a 25-bushel limit for crab potting.

Mr. Robins stated we should wait and see how landings are affected by the earlier opening before proposing any bushel limits.

Mr. Travelstead said staff is not ready at this time to recommend bushel limits for the crab pot fishery.

B. Additional Discussions

Mr. Freeman asked what ratio of active versus non-active crabbers is there right now, as well as the weight to number ratio of blue crabs.

Mr. Casey stated that we have a poor quality of female blue crab due to their small size. He would like to see the quality of the crabs being harvested improve, not only for conservation but also for the harvester, in terms of prices.

There was a general discussion of what may be causing female crabs to mature at smaller sizes such as evolution and phenotypic responses to harvest. Suggestions to help improve the quality of sooks included increasing cull ring sizes and raising peeler crab size limits.

Mr. Nixon also noted that some pots are put in at the beginning of the season, fished a few times early in the year and then left there without any additional fishing. He would like to see a regulation written requiring crab pots to be fished regularly or else they could be confiscated.

Mr. Robins said we should look into that.

Dr. Lipcius stated that Crab Dredge Survey data will be ready in approximately one month and that he would present this at the next CMAC meeting. Dr. Lipcius

also stated that they are starting research on habitat degradation effects on blue crab populations.

V. Next Meeting Date

To be determined, possibly April 30, 2007.

VI. Adjournment

Meeting was adjourned at 9:17 PM.