



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Marine Resources Commission

Building 96

380 Fenwick Road

Fort Monroe, VA 23651

Matthew J. Strickler
Secretary of Natural Resources

Steven G. Bowman
Commissioner

PRESS RELEASE

VIRGINIA MARINE RESOURCES COMMISSION

Contact: Ellen Bolen ellen.bolen@mrc.virginia.gov

Results of the 2019 Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey

FORT MONROE, VA. – Today, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission released the results of the 2019 Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey, which shows the blue crab population in Chesapeake Bay remains resilient and within healthy ranges.

"We know blue crab populations fluctuate, so we must continue investing in Chesapeake Bay water quality and habitat restoration to ensure those fluctuations stay within a healthy range," said Secretary of Natural Resources Matthew J. Strickler. "But while crabs are doing ok, the Trump Administration's misallocation of fisheries disaster relief funds has left Virginia watermen high and dry. I hope Congress will ensure a more equitable distribution."

While abundance did decline in most aspects in 2020, it remains within the normal, healthy range. The combined abundance of all ages of blue crabs declined by a third, from 594 million crabs in 2019 to 404 million crabs in 2020. This change was largely driven by a 43% decrease in the recruitment of juveniles. While 2019 saw a year of excellent recruitment with 324 million new crabs, 2020 saw only 185 million juveniles added to the population.

"The recent blue crab winter dredge survey shows us we have a healthy and robust blue crab population in the Chesapeake Bay" said Commissioner Steven G. Bowman. "However, it also tells us we need to continue with our precautionary, science based management approach to ensure we do not see further decreases. We don't expect this will change our 2020 management measures for blue crab, and we will continue to manage blue crabs based on the best available science"

Blue crabs are a highly variable species, with an annual crop size dependent on winds, currents, temperatures in the bay, as well as predation by the many other species that rely on them as a food source. Scientists and managers measure one year's abundance against a healthy range derived from results of years past, because annual population increases and decreases are to be

An Agency of the Natural Resources Secretariat

www.mrc.virginia.gov

Telephone (757) 247-2200 (757) 247-2292 V/TDD Information and Emergency Hotline 1-800-541-4646 V/TDD

expected. A healthy population of spawning-age female crabs is the key to maintaining a healthy population throughout the bay. While the population of adult female crabs decreased from 191 million crabs in 2019 to 140 million crabs in 2020 and is below the target abundance of 215 million crabs, this year's female abundance is still twice the minimum safe level of 70 million crabs. The female population has been above the threshold in 9 of the last 10 years, demonstrating a healthy spawning stock and resilience to annual variations.

The 2019 estimated exploitation rate, or percent of of both female and male crabs harvested, decreased, but was well within a healthy range. Even with lower exploitation, the 2019 bay-wide commercial harvest increased by nearly 6 million pounds for a total blue crab harvest of 61 million pounds. **Virginia's commercial harvest alone was over 28 million pounds and had a dockside value of \$34 million.**

The Annual Bay-wide Winter Dredge Survey is a collaborative effort between the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources in which crab dredges sample blue crabs from December through March at 1,500 sites throughout Chesapeake Bay. Blue crabs regularly migrate throughout the year, but winter temperatures cause crabs to bury in the sediment and remain stationary, allowing the survey to estimate the total bay-wide population.

The Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee, a subcommittee of the Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team, will review the new survey results in mid-May and will release a full analysis in their annual Blue Crab Advisory Report this summer. The annual advisory report is used by managers for Virginia, Maryland, and the Potomac River as they review and update fishery regulations. The Bay jurisdictions have a long history of cooperative management of the shared blue crab stock and will continue to do so to preserve our blue crab population and fisheries.