

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Crab Management Advisory Committee (CMAC) Minutes
380 Fenwick Road, Fort Monroe, VA
Thursday May 21, 2020 – 4:00 P.M.

ATTENDANCE

Members Present

Hon. Ed Tankard
Mark Sanford
James Hudgins
Bernard Wayne Morris
Marshall Cox
Tye Burns
Chris Moore
Tom Powers

VMRC Staff Present

Pat Geer
Adam Kenyon
Shanna Madsen
Alexa Kretsch
Jill Ramsey
Somers Smott
Lewis Gillingham
Olivia Phillips

Members Absent

Donald Porter Sr.
Kenneth Diggs
Daniel Dise
Ernest George
Johnny Graham
Peter Nixon

Others Present

Rom Lipcius (VIMS)
Mike Seebo (VIMS)

Minutes were prepared by Olivia Phillips.

I. Introductions; announcements

Due to the COVID-19 office closure, this meeting was conducted via electronic communication means (Webex). The Hon. Ed Tankard called the meeting of the Crab Management Advisory Committee to order at 4:10pm.

II. Approval of minutes from the February 19, 2020 meeting.

The minutes from the February 2020 meeting were not reviewed.

III. New Business

1. Review the 2019/2020 Chesapeake Bay Winter Crab Dredge Survey results and preliminary 2019 Virginia harvest data

Ms. Alexa Kretsch explained the results of the 2019/2020 Chesapeake Bay Winter Crab Dredge Survey to the members of the committee. In general, results indicate that the blue crab population in the

Chesapeake Bay remains resilient and within healthy ranges. Ms. Kretsch explained that all abundance estimates decreased compared to 2019. The adult female abundance remained between the abundance threshold of 70 million crabs and below the abundance target of 215 million crabs.

Ms. Kretsch also provided a review of the 2019 blue crab harvest, indicating that, in 2019, Bay-wide blue crab harvest increased by 10% compared to 2018. For the 11th year in a row, the bay fished below the female exploitation target and threshold. .

Ms. Kretsch then presented preliminary Virginia-specific harvest results. She noted that harvest increased by 22% in 2019, as compared to 2018. Harvest by crab pots and by peeler pots increased, but crab pot effort (in number of trips) increased while peeler pot effort decreased.

Mr. James C. Hudgins asked Ms. Kretsch for harvest data specific to the extended November season in 2019. Ms. Kretsch explained that the season had not actually been extended in 2019, rather the bushel limits were increased in November. The increased November bushel limit resulted in a 141,000 pound increase in harvest in 2019. Mr. Hudgins then indicated that he has witnessed a lower abundance of blue crabs which he attributes to the recent spring weather. He stated that he generally sees the survey results reflected in the harvest, and this year is no exception. He expressed that he was, however, surprised to see a decrease in juveniles considering the mild winter weather. Ms. Kretsch confirmed that the decreased juvenile abundance was a surprising result considering the mild winter, but clarified that there are other factors at play that may affect juvenile abundance (e.g., predation). Mr. Tye Burns stated that he's seen an increase in abundance of small crabs this spring.

At this time, Dr. Rom Lipcius, VIMS representative, explained that the observed differences between Mr. Hudgins and Mr. Burns may be explained by the changes in female abundance between the lower and upper Bay. Dr. Lipcius explained that low relative abundance of females were observed in the lower part of the Bay, but abundances increased as the survey sampled higher up the Bay. Dr. Lipcius also addressed the questions regarding decreased juvenile abundance, stating that the survey provides absolute estimate abundances for age-1 blue crabs. He explained that it is difficult to gather accurate abundance estimates for age-0 blue crabs (i.e., blue crabs hatched that year) because 60 to 80% of age-0 blue crabs reside in shallow waters, which are unavailable to the sampling gear. Dr. Lipcius explained that age-0 abundance estimates may be even less accurate this year because the mild winter allowed more of the age-0 blue crabs to remain in shallower areas instead of the deeper waters available to the dredge. Dr. Lipcius advised the committee not to worry about the decrease in juvenile abundance unless we see a substantial drop in abundance in future years. He further clarified that there was no obvious event that could have caused significant mortality of juvenile blue crabs this year.

Mr. Mark Sanford reported his observations, stating that he knew gill netters who reported catching blue crabs in the ocean. He stated that there are plenty of crabs, but they are not in the bay because the

winter was so mild. Dr. Lipcius agreed that the mild winter may have affected the distribution of the blue crabs this year, and indicated that the survey had made adjustments by adding more sampling sites. Mr. Sanford asked if one of the supplemental sampling sites was on hard bottom or in the Cape Henry hole at a depth of 90-100ft of water. Mr. Mike Seebo, a VIMS representative, explained that 20 to 25 stations were added outside the bay on some hard and soft bottom at both deep and shallow depths. He explained that even with the additional sites, the survey did not observe blue crabs outside of the Bay.

Mr. Sanford asked Ms. Kretsch what percentage of crabbers reached their limit in November when bushel limits were increased. Ms. Kretsch explained that 130 trips and 23,765 pounds were reported for the 255 pot license category and 267 trips and 117,263 pounds were reported for the 425 pot license category. Mr. Sanford asked how many individuals with the 425 pot license achieved their limits, and Ms. Kretsch explained that she did not have that data prepared, but would look into it for him.

2. Discussion of possible management response

Ms. Alexa Kretsch explained that in light of lower survey abundances, staff recommendation was to maintain status quo. Mr. Hudgins agreed, and recommended the rest of the committee consider maintaining status quo. Mr. Sanford asked if the increased bushel limits in November were status quo. Ms. Kretsch clarified that maintaining status quo meant that all regulations would stay the same in 2020 as they were in the previous year and would include the increased bushel limits in November. Mr. Sanford explained that he would rather see an extended season into December than the increased bushel limits in November. Ms. Kretsch indicated that staff would host another CMAC meeting in person in the fall to discuss changes to the fall season. Mr. Marshall Cox indicated that he would prefer we maintain status quo until CMAC can meet in person in the fall to discuss changes to the fall blue crab season. **Mr. Cox made a motion to maintain status quo until the committee can meet in person in September or when feasible due to COVID-19 restrictions. Mr. Tom Powers seconded this, and the motion passed unanimously.**

3. Online reporting transition

Deputy Chief Adam Kenyon explained that staff plans to transition mandatory harvest reporting from paper reporting to online reporting. He explained that VMRC has had the online reporting system in place since 2009, but unfortunately, it is not used by many harvesters. He further explained that of about 850 active crabbers, only 106 report their harvest online. Deputy Chief Kenyon explained that the oyster fishery will be required to report all harvest online only as of October 2020, but that the blue crab fishery will follow, in March 2021.

Deputy Chief Kenyon explained that paper reporting is inefficient and expensive for VMRC. With paper forms, it takes about 83 days from the day of harvest to the day the agency has the data in hand. However,

when reports are submitted online, the data is available to the agency in only 18 days. Deputy Chief Kenyon ended by urging those committee members who already report to provide feedback, so the online reporting program can continue to be improved. Deputy Chief Kenyon urged committee members to email suggestions to Stephanie Iverson in Mandatory Reporting. He also explained that staff brought this to CMAC early, so that committee members can work with staff to inform and prepare their constituents of this transition as soon as possible.

4. CARES Act Update

Chief Pat Geer explained that on March 27, 2020 the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) was passed. The CARES act will provide \$300 million for states, tribes, and territories with coastal and marine fishery participants who have been negatively affected by COVID-19. Virginia was allocated \$4,520,475. Chief Geer expressed the agency's disappointment in the sum Virginia received, and explained that it was much less than the agency was expecting. He stated the eligibility requirements: 1) applicants must show a 35% loss compared to their 5-year average, 2) applicants cannot be minors, and 3) the funds awarded must account for other COVID-19 assistance. Chief Geer explained that the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission will disseminate the funds to the states, but that the states need to develop a spending plan and get approval from both ASMFC and NMFS. Chief Geer indicated that staff are working hard to develop the spending plan, and that the agency will provide information as it is received. Chief Geer also encouraged committee members to share the VMRC COVID-19 Fishery Disaster Relief Survey, which will be used to help develop the spending plan for Virginia.

Mr. Powers urged Chief Geer and the agency to develop a plan that would ensure only people who are in need and are active in the fisheries receive these funds. Chief Geer assured Mr. Powers and the rest of the committee that staff is just getting started with this, but that the agency's goal is to distribute the money to as many eligible people as possible.

IV. Other Business

There was no discussion of other business.

V. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 5:12 pm by Hon. Ed Tankard.