

Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Crab Management Advisory Committee (CMAC) Minutes
2600 Washington Avenue, Newport News, VA
VMRC Commission Room, 4TH Floor
Thursday May 17, 2018 – 6:00 P.M.

ATTENDANCE

Members Present

Hon. Ed Tankard
Mark Sanford
James Hudgins
Bernard Wayne Morris
Marshall Cox
Dan Dise (via teleconference)
Chris Moore
Ernest George
Kenneth Diggs

VMRC Staff Present

Rob O'Reilly
Pat Geer
Alex Aspinwall
Sara Blachman
Jill Ramsey

Members Absent

Peter Nixon
Johnny Graham
Kevin Wade
Tom Powers
Donald Porter Sr.

Others Present

Dan Knott
Jim Delbene
Doug Jenkins
Jay Holt
Lynnee Squires
George Pauls Jr
Tim Wivell

Minutes were prepared by Jill Ramsey and Sara Blachman.

I. Introductions; announcements

The Hon. Ed Tankard called the meeting of the Crab Management Advisory Committee to order at 6:00pm. Chief of Fisheries Rob O'Reilly introduced the new Deputy Chief of Fisheries Pat Geer and the issues on the agenda. Mr. O'Reilly briefed the committee about the meeting with Maryland, PRFC and VMRC that took place to discuss the 2017/2018 Winter Dredge Survey results. The consensus between jurisdictions is that no significant management changes will take place this year as a result of the survey.

II. Approval of minutes from the April 19, 2016; February 21, 2017; May 17, 2017; and March 1, 2018 meetings.

Nine committee members were in attendance, a quorum was reached. The minutes from the April 2016, February 2017, May 2017, and March 2018 were reviewed and

approved. A motion for approval of the minutes was made by Mr. Marshall Cox and seconded by Mr. Mark Sanford. The motion passed unanimously.

III. New Business

1. Review the Chesapeake Bay Winter Crab Dredge Survey 2017/2018 preliminary results & discussion of management responses

Deputy Chief Pat Geer introduced himself to the committee and began a presentation on the Winter Dredge Survey. The dredge survey has been conducted since 1989 by VIMS and MD DNR. This survey samples 1,500 random sites annually (December-March). The total abundance in 2018 is estimated to be 371 million crabs. The abundance of juvenile blue crabs in 2018 is estimated to be 168 million crabs. This is 34 percent greater than 2017, which was the fourth worst year in survey history. These crabs will mature in the late summer to fall and represent next year's spawning stock. The abundances of adult male and adult female crabs are estimated to be 59 million and 124 million, respectively. The adult female abundance is 42 percent smaller than in 2017, which was the highest female abundance estimate in survey history, however, it is 19 percent greater than the twenty-year average and a 110 percent greater than the overfishing trigger of 70 million. Mr. Marshall Cox stated he thought the phrase overfished was a misnomer because the low abundance could be due to predation or environmental conditions. Mr. Geer stated that overfished is a status as defined in the 2011 stock assessment as when the spawning aged female crab abundance is below the control measure threshold of 70 million crabs.

The 2017 Bay-wide harvest was 54 million pounds, only slightly below the ten-year average of 55 million. The 2017 female exploitation rate was 21 percent, below the target rate of 25.5 percent. Mr. James C Hudgins asked how the exploitation rate increased by 9 percentage points from 2016 to 2017. Deputy Chief Geer responded that exploitation is the harvest divided by the abundance, so changes in either value affect the rate. Mr. Hudgins asked how a higher target could be set. Chief O'Reilly explained that the rate does not account for predation or natural mortality and that those factors must also be considered. Mr. Mark Sanford asked if management actions could be taken to help the watermen get closer to the target rate. Deputy Chief Geer pointed out while it is good to get close to the target rate that it is important that it is not regularly exceeded. He stated that the VMRC staff recommendation was that no management actions be taken at this time. This was also the recommendation of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDDNR), the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC), and the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee (CBSAC).

The Committee briefly discussed the need for an updated stock assessment and the associated cost. Mr. Hudgins asked what the cost to run the winter dredge survey was. Chief O'Reilly said he would look into an exact figure and let him know. Mr. Sanford asked if there could be a study done to determine the relationship between sponge crab discard mortality and water temperature. Chief O'Reilly stated that would be a good use of a Fisheries Resource Grant. Mr.

Sanford also asked if staff had any information on the effectiveness of the blue crab sanctuaries. He stated his concern about the spring dates and how they affect the harvesters, the market and the crab stock. Chief O'Reilly suggested a work session with the Committee and VIMS to discuss and reevaluate the sanctuaries.

2. Discussion of potential recommendations to the Commission on the harvest of hard crabs by scrape gear

Data Analyst Mr. Alex Aspinwall presented a few slides about the crab scrape fishery and harvest. Mr. Aspinwall discussed a chart that showed the number of harvesters that are eligible for the crab scrape gear compared to the number of harvesters who are actively using the gear. In 2017, 264 individuals were eligible for the crab scrape license. Of those individuals, only 8% actively harvested. Staff and the Committee discussed effort in this fishery and how that may change in relation to the Bill that was just passed by the General Assembly. The General Assembly passed a bill that would allow harvesters using crab scrape gear to harvest hard crabs as a bycatch.

Mr. Dan Dise spoke (via teleconference) in reference to the history of the scrape fishery and its current state. He stated that in 1986 there were a large number of crab scrapers in the Pocomoke Sound area, and that there may be only ten scrapers left today. Most of the crab scrape harvesters are older and getting out of the fishery. Mr. Dise asked all the crab scrapers in his area if they would be ok with a bycatch of only females beginning on August 1, 2018. The consensus from the local harvesters was that a start date of August 1 was acceptable as was a two or three bushel-a-day limit. He believes that it would be easier for enforcement and less stressful to just allow the bycatch of sooks. Mr. Chris Moore asked why set the date of August 1. Mr. Dise stated that the scrapers do not have a preference on dates, but that the end of summer would be a good time. Chief O'Reilly thanked Mr. Dise for his input and for speaking to other watermen. Mr. Cox made a motion to allow a hard crab bycatch season to be open from August 1 through October 31 and to allow the crab scrapers to harvest three bushels of female hard crabs a day as bycatch. The motion was seconded by Mr. Dise and approved unanimously.

3. Discussion of predator-prey interactions between striped bass and blue crabs

Mr. Doug Jenkins, a member of the Twin Rivers Waterman Association and lifelong watermen, gave a brief presentation about his experiences with striped bass and blue crabs. He discussed the abundance of his harvest from the years 1960 through 1981. Mr. Jenkins believes that the predator prey interactions between striped bass and blue crab is something that managers need to focus on. He will be printing flyers and starting a website in hopes of getting the public more informed and involved with this issue. The Committee also discussed concerns about the predator prey relationship between blue catfish and blue crabs. Chief O'Reilly informed the commission about how menhaden is going to

an ecosystem approach for the upcoming stock assessment and maybe in the future other fisheries will follow suit.

4. Discussion of the use of fish pots in conjunction with crab potting

Mr. Bernard Morris asked if the limit of the number of fish pots that are allowed to be fished when that licensee is also fishing crab pots could be increased. He suggested this could be a potential solution to the problem of blue catfish predation on blue crabs. Chief O'Reilly provided background on why the fish pot limit was established initially in 2015, when law enforcement caught watermen using fish pots to harvest crabs. In Chapter 4 VAC 20-270-40, it states that it shall be unlawful for any person to place, set, or fish any number of fish pots in excess of 10% of the amount allowed by the gear license limit, up to a maximum of 30 fish pots per vessel, when any person on that vessel has set any crab pots. This subsection shall not apply to fish pots set in the following areas:

- a. In the James River the boundary shall be a line connecting Hog Point and the downstream point at the mouth of College Creek.
- b. In the York River the boundary lines shall be the Route 33 bridges at West Point.
- c. In the Rappahannock River the boundary line shall be the Route 360 bridge at Tappahannock.
- d. In the Potomac River the boundary line shall be the Route 301 bridge that extends from Newberg, Maryland to Dahlgren, Virginia.

Chief O'Reilly explained that Mr. Morris could set the number of fish pots that he is licensed for upstream of the Route 360 Bridge (the demarcation line VMRC uses to distinguish the saltwater/freshwater boundary in the Rappahannock River). While doing this, he would also be able to simultaneously work his crab pots in the lower Rappahannock according to current regulation. Mr. Morris responded that he was satisfied with that solution.

IV. Old Business:

1. CMAC members and staff input on additional items of concern or interest

Mark Sanford asked that an approximately 8 square mile section of Blue Crab Sanctuary areas 3 and 4 be opened to commercial crabbing as per the discussion at the March 1st CMAC meeting. He indicated that he would be willing to forgo fishing the remainder of Blue Crab Sanctuary Area 3 for the entirety of the year in exchange. Chief O'Reilly reminded the committee that VIMS scientist Rom Lipcius said he would be supportive of a one-to-two year pilot program for such a change, as long as the catch per unit effort in this section was tracked so as to allow for the determination of an effect on the stock. Mark Sanford made a motion to bring the proposed opening to the VMRC for their consideration. It was seconded and unanimously approved.

V. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 8:15pm by Hon. Ed Tankard.

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