

Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab Numbers Show Steep Decline

The Frederick News Post

AP | Posted: Saturday, April 20, 2013 2:00 am

ANNAPOLIS (AP) — The number of blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay has dropped steeply, according to an annual survey released Friday, and Maryland officials said they will work with the crabbing industry to reduce bushel limits by about 10 percent for female crabs this year.

On a positive note, the number of spawning-age females increased by 52 percent after troubling numbers last year. The 2013 winter dredge survey, which samples about 1,500 sites across the bay, found the total number of blue crabs fell from 765 million to 300 million. The number of juvenile crabs fell from 581 million to 111 million.

“The bottom-line message is that the population overall — the number of crabs that are in Chesapeake Bay upon which the 2013 fisheries will work — is quite a bit lower than it was,” said Lynn Fegley, deputy director of fisheries at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

The results are particularly disappointing, because last year’s survey noted the highest crab reproduction in the 24 years of the survey. Usually with a population increase like that, the harvest would be expected to increase.

“We didn’t see that, and what seems to have happened this year is that not only did we get low reproduction, but we seem to have had an elevated mortality event on the record juvenile class of last year,” Fegley said.

Robert T. Brown, president of the Maryland Watermen’s Association, said the survey results were disappointing. “Anytime you take a cut in your catch, you’ve got a cut in pay,” Brown said, noting that a 10 percent reduction in the female catch would probably mean a net loss to watermen of about 5 percent. William Baker, president of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, said the drop in crabs was likely the result of weather, pollution, habitat loss and increased predation. Bay grasses that provide protection for crabs have been significantly reduced in recent years.

“While progress has been made, the Chesapeake Bay remains a system dangerously out of balance,” Baker said in a statement. “Implementing the states’ Clean Water Blueprints will finish the job.” DNR and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science have conducted the primary assessment of the bay’s blue crab population annually since 1990. The survey is conducted from December through March when blue crabs are usually buried in the mud and stationary, enabling scientists to develop estimates.

"Chesapeake Bay blue crab numbers show steep decline." *The Frederick News-Post*. N.p., 20 Apr. 2013. Web. 5 Nov. 2013.
<http://www.fredericknewspost.com/news/environment/article_df854204-f9a4-57f8-b4db-d404056d88f1.html>.

Blue crab shortage creates debate

November 13, 2000 | By Joel McCord | Joel McCord, SUN STAFF

MECHANICSVILLE - Nearly everyone in the social hall of this St. Mary's County firehouse agreed that the Chesapeake Bay blue crab population is in trouble. The question was, what to do about it. And there wasn't much agreement on that. Crack down on recreational crabbers and enforce existing laws, some watermen said. Set commercial catch limits, said recreational crabbers, and ban taking female crabs. The Bi-State Blue Crab Advisory Committee has taken its show on the road, holding public meetings in schools, council chambers and fire halls to seek feedback on proposals to ease the pressure on the bay's most economically important fishery.

Faced with steadily declining crab stocks, scientists have said the harvest must be cut by 15 percent to stave off a crash. Among the options are reducing the number of days or hours watermen can work, placing restrictions on the amount of gear they can use or quotas on their catch. The blue crab panel, created by Maryland and Virginia, is halfway through a series of meetings in both states to hear what watermen, recreational crabbers, conservationists and others have to say. And while they have said a lot, they have agreed on little: licensing recreational crabbers, improving the health of the bay and easing limits on catching rockfish.

Rockfish, once on the verge of extinction in the bay, have made a stunning comeback and are preying on juvenile crabs, said the watermen, who argued that restrictions on rockfish catches should be eased. Forty-seven percent of the rockfish caught in one study had an average of 21 small crabs in their stomachs, said Terry Conway, a seafood packer from Crisfield. But the author of the study, Jacque Van Monfrantz of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, said that doesn't mean the comeback of the rockfish, also known as striped bass, has led to the decline of blue crabs. His study focused on grass beds near the mouths of four Virginia rivers, nursery areas for juvenile crabs to congregate, he said. Rockfish "feed on whatever is most available," and in the grass beds, that's juvenile crabs. "It's readily apparent that as striped bass increase, they eat more crabs. But peeler pots have doubled and effort has gone up in all the [crab] fisheries," he said. "It's natural to try to place blame elsewhere, but in reality I don't think that by reducing the striped bass population, you'll increase the blue crab population."

The grass beds, which scientists believe once covered 600,000 acres of bay bottom, are among the keys to restoring the crab population because they provide shelter, help clean the water by absorbing nutrients and suppress erosion. They are so important that federal and state officials have promised to increase the acreage from 68,000 to 114,000 acres by 2005. But restoration efforts have been spotty because high levels of nutrients create algae blooms that block vital sunlight to the grasses, and wave action and erosion often wash away tentative efforts at new plantings. In 1998, grasses declined by 8 percent overall, then increased by 8 percent last year. Without the grasses, limits on commercial crabbing won't make much difference, watermen say. "We could stop crabbing today, and 10 years from now it won't be any better unless the government does something about the water quality," said Larry Simns, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association. "We're willing to sacrifice some if we see that more is being done to take care of some of these other problems."

Other watermen are less collegial. "We don't need a 15 percent reduction," said Bob Evans, president of the Anne Arundel County Watermen's Association. "If we had enforcement of the laws we have now, we wouldn't be here." The argument is one Lt. Col. Tammy Broll, chief of field operations for the Department of Natural Resources Police, hears "at every single meeting I go to when we're talking about new regulations." But the department doesn't have "the manpower to focus solely on crabbing 24 hours a day, seven days a week," she said. While watermen call for enforcement, they complain repeatedly they are being "regulated to death."

In Maryland's portion of the Chesapeake, commercial crabbers can fish up to 900 pots from April 1 to Nov. 30, depending on their licenses. They are forbidden to put the pots in the main part of the bay and required to take Sunday or Monday off. While no limit has been set on their catch or how many hours a day they can fish, they are faced with a dizzying array of requirements for the size and configuration of their pots, as well as trot lines, crab scrapes and impoundment areas in the creeks and rivers.

The watermen's complaints did not impress Ken Hastings, a board member of the Coastal Conservation Association in Maryland." I object to the biased, self-serving interests I've heard here tonight and I disagree that commercial users have been shouldering the burden," he said at the Mechanicsville meeting. "We've all done it. We've all created the problem. We all have to fix it."

The committee has scheduled another hearing on Thursday evening at the Harford County Council chambers in Bel Air.

McCord, Joel. "Blue crab shortage creates debate." *The Baltimore Sun* 13 Nov. 2000. Web. 6 Nov. 2013.

<<http://articles.baltimoresun.com>>.

Chesapeake Bay Watermen Question Limits on Crab Harvests

Kurt Stoppkotte for [National Geographic Today](#) May 10, 2001

With the crabbing industry in the Chesapeake Bay on the verge of collapse, officials in Maryland and Virginia have imposed regulations aimed at what they say is the major cause: overfishing.

The new regulations on commercial and recreational crabbers are designed to reduce the crab harvest by 15 percent over the next three years, in an effort to preserve the U.S. \$150 million-a-year industry.

But many watermen disagree that their harvests are to blame, and say the problem is much more complex. Poor water quality, for one thing, has killed off underwater sea grasses that serve as a natural hideaway for small crabs, making them increasingly vulnerable to predatory fish. Waterman Eddie Evans argues that the real solution to reviving the crab population lies with reducing the number of predatory fish, which could be done if the state granted more fishing licenses. "We've got millions and millions of fish in the bay," Evans said. "If we could catch more fish it could help the crab population."

Rapid Population Decline

The blue crab has long been a mainstay for the watermen who make their livelihood from the Chesapeake Bay. But officials warn that the bay's crab population is declining so fast that if something isn't done to reverse the situation, no one will benefit. Female crab populations have deteriorated by 80 percent over the past 12 years.

Maryland's governor imposed new regulations that limit the watermen's workday to eight hours. They also end the crab season at the beginning of November, a month earlier than in the past. Government officials and conservation groups argue that protective measures such as these are critically needed if the crab industry is to survive. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Chesapeake Bay Program confirmed that the fishery has been overexploited and that a reduction of harvests is justified. Bill Goldsborough, a fishery scientist at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, supports the curb on crab harvests. "I would say most sincerely that what is being attempted here is a comprehensive effort, a bay-wide effort, that for over two years has utilized the best scientific information in an attempt to improve the fishery," he said.

Livelihood Concerns

Amid the concern for preserving the bay's blue crab, many watermen feel their own welfare is being overlooked in favor of environmental concerns. "The crabbers are going to be hurt and a lot of them will fall by the wayside," said Larry Simns, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association. "In the middle section of the bay it's going to be disastrous, and they're going to lose the crab pickers that work in the crab houses."

On Smith Island, a small fishing community that is fully dependent on blue crab harvests, waterman Roland Bradshaw says that local incomes could fall by 25 percent as a result of the new regulations.

"This is our livelihood, this is my living. You probably might lose your boat or your home—either one," Bradshaw said. "They're persecuting us. For the watermen, this is it."

Stoppkotte, Kurt . "Chesapeake Bay Watermen Question Limits on Crab Harvests." *National Geographic*. National Geographic Society, 10 May 2001. Web. 5 Nov. 2013.
<<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news>