

# Maryland Proposes Restrictions on Blue Crab Catch

Chesapeake Bay

By David A. Fahrenthold  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, April 10, 2008

Maryland proposed significant cutbacks yesterday in the number of blue crabs that could be caught in the Chesapeake Bay, joining Virginia in a historic effort to stop the iconic species' collapse.

State regulators suggested barring watermen from catching female crabs during certain months and prohibiting recreational crabbers from catching females at all. They also suggested setting a limit on the bushels of female crabs that professional watermen could land during one day.

Overall, officials said their aim was to reduce by 20 to 40 percent the harvest of females, which account for about half of the total Maryland catch. That could put a major pinch on some watermen, who rely heavily on crabs now that the bay's traditional oyster fishery has almost collapsed.

Regulators said the crab population had fallen so far that gentler measures would not work.

"We are very concerned about the future of the blue crab fishery, which is so important to the bay, ecologically and economically," said Frank Dawson, an assistant secretary of natural resources. He said that any new regulations would probably not be in place until summer. A legislative committee will consider them, and Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) will make the final decision.

Yesterday, Larry Simns, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association, said the limits on watermen could be devastating for the "picking houses," where steamed crabs -- now mostly females due to a decline in the size of males -- are processed for their meat. He said it could also put a strain on watermen in parts of the bay where, because of crab migration patterns, females are more common.

"The crabbers in the middle and lower bay, it's going to destroy them," Simns said. "That's the only thing they've got to catch most of the year."

Similarly drastic proposals are on the table in Virginia. There, state officials have proposed cutting the number of crab traps each waterman is allowed to set out and banning dredging, in which an underwater scoop snatches crabs from their winter burrows.

These ideas will be voted on by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission on April 22 in Newport News.

"The sea change in how we regulate crabs in Virginia is going to be in two weeks," said John Bull, a spokesman for the commission.

The two states have been holding discussions about how to cooperate in reducing the bay crab harvest. The governors of Virginia and Maryland have scheduled a joint news conference on the subject Tuesday in Colonial Beach, Va.

# Maryland Proposes Restrictions on Blue Crab Catch

Chesapeake Bay

These actions follow months of warnings from scientists, who said the population of crabs -- thought of as the bay's best survivors because they had thrived while oysters and rockfish died off - has now fallen near an all-time low. Their bay-wide population is estimated to be about one-third what it was in 1993. In Maryland, last year's crab harvest of about 21.8 million pounds was the second-lowest on record.

The reasons for this collapse include a constellation of the Chesapeake's troubles. Algae blooms, feeding on pollution from farms and cities, rob the water of oxygen. A warmer climate threatens the grasses that shelter baby crabs. And for years watermen have been catching an unhealthy amount of the crab stock.

The proposals unveiled yesterday in Maryland would aim to protect female crabs, which are prized by diners as the meat in crab soup and crab cakes, but also release the eggs that keep the population going. Maryland suggested limiting watermen to six bushels of female crabs a day for most of the season, or setting a maximum size that would protect the largest and most fertile females.

It also suggested banning recreational crabbers from keeping females except for the molting crabs that wind up as "soft-shell" crabs.

"They're the spawners," said Bill Goldsborough, a scientist with the nonprofit Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "And the immediate need is to make sure that the population replaces itself through reproduction."