

CRAB ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT

February 19, 2015

PRFC Office, Colonial Beach, VA

Members Present

Robert A. Boarman – Chairman, (MD)
John B. Morris, Jr. – (MD)
James B. Berthe – (MD)
George W. Smith – (VA)
Kyle Schick – Proxy for Arthur L. Loving (VA)
Larry W. Thrift – (VA)
Dean E. Bowie – (MD)
Mark G. Hunter – (VA)

PRFC Commissioners

None

Support Staff Present

Ofc. Tommy Wilkins – VMRC Law Enf.
Martin Gary – PRFC Executive Secretary
Ellen Cosby – PRFC Asst. Executive Secretary
Becky Butler – PRFC Staff
Cathy Friend – PRFC Staff

Members Absent

Bruno Vasta – (MD)
Elgin H. Nininger – Vice Chair, (VA)

Press

None

Others Present:

John Dean representing the St. Mary's County Watermen's Association, Dan McDougal and Sam Dorrough.

Chairman Boarman called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and thanked everyone for attending.

Blue Crab Research and Management Update

Mr. Gary advised this particular item was geared towards comments that this committee and others have asked for many times: what's going on in terms of research; what is being done in terms of funding to better understand the crab resource, and the issues that may be impacting it; and what are we doing to better manage the crab resource. He presented a document entitled "Draft Management Strategy for Blue Crabs". He explained that Maryland, Virginia and the PRFC collaboratively work together with blue crab management under the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Program. In particular, the one group that gets all of the scientists together is called the Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team (SFGIT). This document is a product of that team, and they are at a 60 percent level of completion of working towards the objective of better understanding blue crab dynamics. They are looking at different factors influencing the blue crab resource and gaps in research needs. He advised that the three jurisdictions have agreed to a management strategy: "Maintain a sustainable blue crab population based on the current 2012 target of 215 million adult females. Refine population targets through 2025 based on best available science. Manage for a stable and productive crab fishery including working with the industry, recreational crabbers and other stakeholders to improve commercial and recreational harvest accountability. By 2018, the SFGIT will evaluate the establishment of a Bay-wide, allocation-based management framework with annual levels set by the jurisdictions for the purpose of accounting for and adjusting harvest by each jurisdiction".

Mr. Gary advised that what they are striving for is to get us to a point where each of the jurisdictions has its own independent quota. It isn't a guarantee that we are going down that road or going to get locked into quotas without a lot of public input. He wanted to make the committee aware of this early on. This will not happen without the input from this committee, Maryland and Virginia.

The Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee (CBSAC) stock assessment Timeline was presented. This timeline outlines the target dates for implementation of the 2014-2015 management cycle. Mr. Gary noted that the target date for release of the winter crab dredge survey is May 1, 2015. In March of this year, the CBSAC is going to complete stock assessment terms of reference (TOR's) which will look at a range of activities leading up to the assessment. These are activities that are funded with available money, and they are going through those exercises right now.

Mr. Gary is interested in getting feedback from this committee tonight and he would like to keep everyone updated on the progress of this.

Female Harvest Reduction

Chairman Boarman stated 8.1 percent of the required female reduction was reached last fall, and it was left open to complete the remaining 1.9 percent. He asked Mr. Gary to present the options to the committee.

Mr. Gary advised the he understood this committee more or less had enough of the rolling closures and wanted to focus on what Maryland and Virginia were doing in terms of bushel limits. He doesn't have any other options other than the bushel limits to present this evening. He noted that Maryland and Virginia do things a little differently because of sex ratios. Virginia has applied their harvest reductions to males and females combined, whereas Maryland applied theirs to females only. Maryland will also have a vessel cap limit this spring, in addition to individual bushel limits, with a target reduction of 12 percent. Maryland is also proposing to raise the minimum size limit for peelers from 3" to 3 1/2". Both jurisdictions are carrying their restrictions through June 30th.

Mr. Gary spoke with Joe Grist (VMRC) and Brenda Davis (MD DNR) and they both had different strategies on achieving bushel limits. Mr. Gary worked with Joe Grist. He felt the process was simpler and more straight-forward. He presented a chart developed by Ray Draper and Cathy Friend that shows data points for every individual crabber from April 1st through June 30th. The idea is to reduce from 2013 levels, and figure out what 1.9 percent equates to in bushels. He was pleasantly surprised to learn that this equated to a savings of only 225 bushels. In 2013, a total of 44,269 bushels were harvested and of that about 12,000 were females, which is a little more than 25 percent. A program was created to establish a cap to quantify what we need to do to achieve the goal of saving 225 bushels. Chairman Boarman asked for an option through May because he didn't think anyone would want to have a bushel limit for males like Virginia does. The following two options were presented for the committee to consider:

Option A – 7 bushel limit from April 1 through May 31 = 214 bushels saved.

Option B – 8 bushel limit from April 1 through June 30 = 207 bushels saved.

Mr. Gary noted the concern with going with a bushel limit ending May 31st is that you don't know how many females you will harvest in June (recoupment issue). He also didn't think the other jurisdictions would go along with that since they are going through the end of June. Knowing that, there is nothing prohibiting this committee from going with either option or with a different one.

Kyle Schick asked if the graph showed how many crabbers went over the 8 bushel limit during that time. He noted that it looks to be around 15 or so. He was concerned about how many crabbers would be affected by the bushel limits. Mr. Gary stated that if you look at the graph you also need to take into consideration the ones who are not catching over 8 bushels, but have the "potential" to increase their catch up to that limit. Mr. Schick stated it seemed like to him that you are talking about impacting a fewer number of crabbers to achieve your reduction by capping the top. Also usually when you catch 25 bushels of females, how many of those actually make it to the market.

Mr. Schick asked if anyone thought about the consequences of a cold spring and how that may impact June's catch. Mr. Gary stated that there's no way to predict it. We are working with 2013 data and we can't project the future. We have to make our best educated guess and work with the numbers we have. Everyone is committed to going forward with what they put in place. Maryland and Virginia had already established what they wanted to do back in the fall and they are continuing their management responsibilities through June 30, 2015. We had not completed ours, and what they are saying is no one knows what the spring is going to bring. Mr. Schick felt without having years of data to back up the reductions, there's really no way to know who will be impacted with a closure ending in May and how that would affect the reduction efforts.

James Berthe asked about reductions using the decreased effort that was seen last season. Mr. Gary explained that question went to the Commission and they directed staff to work with Maryland and Virginia to look into what options could be developed in terms of reductions using effort numbers. Again, the term that he received back from both states was "recoupment". Dan McDougal stated that recoupment is the theory that of those crabs that are put back in the water, 20 percent of them are going to get caught by someone else. Mr. Gary advised the definition is the practice of claiming in advance. Basically you are getting credit for something you've accomplished before. The response he got from the two jurisdictions is their concern in not knowing how we are going to behave in the spring. The idea is to keep the management response in place all the way through the management cycle, which is June 30th, because you don't know what will be harvested. Therefore, you run the risk of either over attaining or under attaining. The jurisdictions felt it wasn't in the spirit of the agreement to consider effort reductions.

Mr. Gary advised that he needs to forewarn the committee that if they go with bushel limits, there may be a second layer of analysis applied to this in the future. He's not suggesting that it changes the end product from tonight's meeting. When developing the reductions for bushel limits, 300, 400 and 500 pot limits were not taken into consideration and that probably needs to happen in the future.

Chairman Boarman thanked Cathy Friend for the work she did to provide the harvest graph.

Sam Dorough felt there is no way to prove what will be saved because there is no data to support it. No one is taking into account what the catfish are doing to the crabs. The closures taken last fall, no matter what the number is, will not save them because the other jurisdictions will catch them if we don't. Mr. Gary advised this is not a prognostication tool and it's not anything that will predict what

will be caught. What it's doing is taking data that we have and trying to give the best estimate as to what will be saved in terms of achieving the reduction required.

Mr. McDougal questioned if this has been turned over to the computer guys now. Based on his assumptions, staff is going to give you a list of options to choose from. He asked Mr. Gary have we turned it over to you to dictate what we catch. Mr. Gary advised that the committee can make whatever recommendation they want. He stated he was asked to develop options that can allow the crabbers to achieve the remaining 1.9 percent female reduction as best we can. Mr. McDougal stated the reason he asked that question is because when the BBCAC people presented their recommendations and said do this for three years and the crabs will come back; it didn't work so well. He looks at trend analysis and as we were trending down in effort reduction to where it is now, it turned around and started coming back up and we saw it again this year. He doesn't know what to say here and if we are going to turn it over to the computer guys, there's no point in even coming to these meetings.

John Dean stated we are in a tight spot here with this. At one of our county meetings, this was brought up. When you have a complete closure, you have nothing. We discussed going to bushel limits and he hoped the number was going to be higher, because it's going to be tough to make it on that. He doesn't see what other options we have we have right now. Chairman Boarman asked if Mr. Dean thought just the May closure would be sufficient enough from what was presented here tonight or is June a better month to catch females down river. Mr. Dean deferred that question to John Morris and James Berthe.

Mr. Gary wanted to respond to Mr. McDougal's comments and stated one thing that weighed heavily on his mind is despite all of the computer analysis that is done and the data we have, we had pretty good information from 2011 going into 2012 from the winter dredge survey. At that point in time the survey predicted a good crab harvest and we had a season where the crabs disappeared and no one knows what happened to them. He stated Mr. McDougal is correct, we have all the computer information and we still can't predict what will happen. We have to better understand what is going on around us.

A motion was made by Larry Thrift to recommend Option A – 7 bushel limit from April 1 through May 31, 2105. Mark Hunter asked to add an amendment to the motion if Option A doesn't pass to back it up with Option B. Mr. Thrift declined the amendment and wanted to stick with the 7 bushels. Chairman Boarman called for a second to the motion three times. There was no second to the motion, therefore the motion fails.

A motion was made by Kyle Schick, seconded by Mark Hunter to recommend Option B – 8 bushel limit from April 1 through June 30, 2015. The motion passed with 4 in favor and 3 against.

Mr. Schick stated the only reason he made that motion was because that was better than shortening the season. Chairman Boarman agreed and said we've taken enough blows already.

Chairman Boarman tabled item #5 and moved down to new business to hear what Mr. Dorrough would like to have the committee address before he addresses crab size limits.

New Business – Sam Dorough

Mr. Dorough stated when 2 ½” cull rings were introduced, it produced a big crab. When the 5 ½” size limit comes into effect July 10th those crabs are being eaten by catfish and rockfish. Those crabs are not making the reports. The catfish are tearing the pots up. We need to figure out what to do with these catfish. The numbers are outstanding and they need to be killed. He would like to see a 5 ¼” size limit all year long. This is easier for law enforcement and everyone involved. He doesn't catch a lot of big crabs in the fall and it takes longer for them to shed and they end up dying. It's obvious the crabs are not coming up the river like they use to because of sewer treatment plants. The crab reports are going to continue to go down until we figure out what to do with these catfish.

Regulation VII, Section 2(a) – Size Limits

Mr. McDougal stated that Virginia is the only jurisdiction that is still at 5”. When we have to kick over from the 5 ¼” to 5 ½” it's hard when those 5 ¼” crabs are swimming into the Virginia creeks and being caught. Increasing to 5 ½” never did make much sense to him.

Mr. Dean stated the 5 ¼” size limit would be good in his area especially for law enforcement across the jurisdiction lines. Most everyone crabs in both jurisdictions and this would make it much simpler.

A motion was made by Larry Thrift, seconded by Dean Bowie to recommend the crab size limit be changed to 5 ¼” all season long. The motion passed with 5 in favor and 2 against.

Mr. Dorough asked that the crabbers be sent a survey to see what they are doing with the catfish that are being caught while crabbing. We need to get an idea on what's happening out there and how many they are catching and what are they doing with them. Chairman Boarman stated he agreed with Mr. Dorough, but felt strongly that we as an advisory committee or a Commission cannot enforce or encourage someone to kill catfish. He thinks that would be sending the wrong message to the public. We can see about doing the survey part of it. Mrs. Cosby stated the Finfish Advisory Committee has addressed catfish and they are encouraging more effort for fishing for catfish. Markets are being developed and it is expanding. Mr. Gary stated we can take a look at what we can do to address that.

Electronic Reporting Discussion

Mr. Gary advised that he has been asked many times if there is an easier way for licensees to report. Maryland has a pilot program for crabbers and they are going to try one for striped bass this year. He has asked Lynn Fegley (Deputy Director under Tom O'Connell) to come to the Commission meeting on March 6th to give a presentation on the in's and out's of their program. She is most fluent with the electronic reporting in Maryland. It is not something he is pushing, but wants to make everyone aware of the options that might be available to make everyone's lives a little easier. The most important thing is we're only as good as our data, and the PRFC is known for its data and we don't want to change that. If electronic reporting can help that, then it's probably worth listening to. Chairman Boarman stated he reports on-line with Maryland on a monthly basis. For him, he likes the idea of e-mailing instead of mailing. Mr. Gary stated it would be great if everyone could attend and ask her questions and voice their concerns or wishes to the Commission.

Advisory Committee Vacancies

There were four members' whose terms are due to expire on March 31, 2015. James Berthe and John Morris, Jr. both agreed to serve another term. Larry Thrift declined to serve another term and Arthur Loving was not present to accept or decline. Staff will contact him before the Commission meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 7:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert A. Boarman, Chairman