



For Immediate Release

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Virginia Marine Resources Commission Sees Increase in Chesapeake Bay Blue Crabs as Encouraging

Improving Juvenile Recruitment Remains a Priority

HAMPTON, VA. – The Chesapeake Bay blue crab population is showing encouraging signs of a rebound from recent record lows, according to results from the 2023 Bay-wide Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey. Although the spawning stock has returned to healthy levels, fisheries managers remain cautious about the continued trend of low juvenile abundance.

All categories of blue crab, by sex and by age, have shown increase since the 2022 survey, including the abundance estimate for all crabs in Chesapeake Bay which increased from 227 to 323 million. Adult crabs drove this increase, with adult males nearly doubling and adult females returning to above average levels. According to current biological reference points, female blue crabs in Chesapeake Bay are not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, due to successful management of the bay-wide blue crab fisheries.

Scientists and managers agree that a robust abundance of adult female crabs is integral to success of the crab population, as each female can spawn on average up to nine million eggs per year. The 2023 adult female abundance of 152 million crabs is promising, though it remains below the target abundance of 196 million crabs. “We’re pleased to see over a 50% increase in the adult female numbers in 2023,” said Jamie Green, Commissioner of VMRC. “These results are encouraging, and we’ll continue working diligently with our partners in the Chesapeake Bay to increase blue crab stock numbers.”

However, the abundance of juvenile crabs tempered population growth by remaining low at 116 million crabs. The juvenile populations from 2021 through 2023 rank amongst the six lowest in the 34 years of the Winter Dredge Survey.

Managers from the three Chesapeake Bay jurisdictions—Virginia, Maryland, and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission—and the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee (CBSAC), an advisory group under the Chesapeake Bay Program’s Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team, are tentative about what appears to be a trend of low recruitment in recent years.

The low abundances seen in 2022 spurred interest in a new benchmark stock assessment for blue crabs, allowing researchers to incorporate new data and test new models since the last assessment was conducted in 2011. This process began in September 2022 with a blue crab science workshop

that sought to characterize impacts on the blue crab population from a variety of influences, including water quality, predator abundance, and availability of habitat.

The benchmark stock assessment is scheduled to be completed and peer reviewed in 2025. Managers look forward to this new assessment to evaluate current stock status and guide future sustainability efforts.

The Winter Dredge Survey is conducted annually by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Since 1990, the survey has utilized traditional crab dredges to sample blue crabs at 1,500 sites throughout the Chesapeake Bay from December through March.

By sampling during winter when blue crabs are sedentary and buried in the mud, scientists can develop more precise estimates of the number of crabs in the Bay. Adult females observed in each Winter Dredge Survey are likely to spawn during the following early- to mid-summer period, contributing to next year's juvenile population.

The VMRC's Crab Management Advisory Committee will hold a public meeting on May 24th at 4 PM at the VMRC Main Office to discuss the Winter Dredge Survey results and any potential management responses for the ongoing crabbing season. Visit [MRC.Virginia.Gov](https://www.mrc.virginia.gov) for more information about these public meetings.

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