



## Clawing Back

By Tamara Dietrich April 13, 2016

The Chesapeake blue crab stock has rebounded for the second straight year, and fishery managers say it likely means a better commercial harvest ahead.

Results of the annual bay-wide winter dredge survey released Tuesday show the crab population has improved in every area, with a 35 percent hike in overall numbers to 553 million.

That compares to 411 million last year, which was itself a vast improvement over 297 million in 2014.

“We now have back-to-back years of solid growth in this important fishery,” John Bull, head of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, said in a statement announcing the results. VMRC regulates nearly every fishery in the state.

“The crab stock has been on a roller coaster for most of the last decade,” Bull said. “We’ve seen a few great years of reproduction followed by awful years of (low) abundance. Two years does not make a trend, and this news inspires both wary optimism and cautious management.”

Such caution reflects wide fluctuations in blue crab numbers that have occurred since the survey began in 1990. Over the years, the stock has bounced around from a high of 852 million in 1993 to a crash of 251 million in 2007 that caused the fishery to be declared a federal disaster. It also spurred a ban on the winter crab dredge fishery that has continued every year since.

Crab numbers fluctuate naturally every year for a variety of reasons, including storms, winds, tides, cannibalism, habitat changes and wide swings in the populations of species that prey on them.

In the summer of 2012, for instance, there was a massive explosion in the number of red drum migrating into the bay to feast on juvenile crabs. And the unusually long, cold winter of 2014-15 caused one of the worst crab die-offs in the history of the survey.

Even so, crab numbers improved last year, and that improvement continues:

- The number of all-important spawning-age females nearly doubled from last year, from 101 million to 194 million.

This is good news in general, VMRC says, but is still short of the 215 million target recommended by fishery scientists. Still, it’s well above the 70 million considered dangerously low for a healthy female stock.

- The number of adult males more than doubled, from 44 million to 91 million.

- And the juvenile stock rose, but less dramatically: inching up from 269 million to 271 million — only slightly above the recorded average.

The annual dredge survey is conducted by Virginia and Maryland as a science-based tool to help manage what’s considered the most valuable fishery in the bay.

Last year, the bay-wide crab harvest jumped by 42 percent — from 35 million pounds to 50 million pounds. VMRC says this year's improved numbers mean crabbers could see an even better harvest.

It could also lead to a "slight loosening" in harvest limits, the agency says. In 2014, a bay-wide 10 percent harvest reduction was imposed to help the depleted spawning female stock rebound.

Still, said Bull, the improved numbers don't justify "opening the floodgates to significantly increase targets."

"We've had two years of back-to-back growth in the fishery," Bull said. "That's gratifying. But we've been in this rodeo before. After good years of crab abundance, we need to be very wary. We need to be very cautious."

Continued prudent management is needed to improve the stock's resilience to forces outside anyone's control, he said.

Such management has been successful there so far, said Rom Lipcius of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science in Gloucester Point. VIMS is affiliated with the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg and conducts Virginia's portion of the survey.

"The management measures put in place in 2008 triggered the recovery of the population since 2009," Lipcius said, "and provided resilience in the population to recover from natural disturbances."

The survey results pleased the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, which advocates for the estuary. Still, said Chris Moore, the group's senior scientist, female blue crab numbers remain below the recommended target.

"Continued conservation management of the fishery and improving water quality by implementing the Chesapeake clean water blueprint are the keys to building and sustaining a healthy crab population," Moore said.

The blueprint is the so-called federal pollution diet imposed on Virginia and other bay states to help restore the impaired watershed and the species it supports.

The crab survey is conducted using dredges to take samples at 1,500 sites throughout the bay from December through March, when crabs are buried in the bay's muddy bottom.