

HEADWATERS

News & Notes From the Virginia Office of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation

JUNE 2022

Blue Crab Survey Results Show Downturn

In May, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and Maryland Department of Natural Resources released the results of the 2022 Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey, an annual estimate of the population of blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

This year's survey estimated total crab abundance at 227 million, the lowest in the survey's 33-year history. The adult female and male population both decreased, with males also at record lows and the number of juvenile crabs continuing a troubling three-year below-average trend in recruitment.

This year's survey results continue a worrying trend for blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay. Though the population fluctuates annually, this is the third consecutive year of below-average numbers for juvenile crabs, and fewer female crabs reduces the possibility of reversing this trend. It is likely that the loss of underwater grasses is contributing to the blue crab's decline, along with water-quality challenges and predation by invasive blue catfish.

The reduced abundance of juveniles and males could make crabs scarce later this summer and into the fall—impacting not only people who like to eat crabs, but also the commercial fishery. In Virginia, the commercial harvest value for blue crabs has ranged from \$22 million to \$38 million annually.

Reducing pollution to improve water quality and restoring underwater grass beds are two things that are critical for helping the Bay's blue crabs.

Underwater grasses represent one of the most important habitats for young and female crabs, providing food and protection. The Bay's grass beds are vulnerable to pollution that decreases water clarity and



The results of this year's Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey show disappointing numbers for adult and juvenile crabs. Crabs need clean water and thriving grass beds to flourish.

blocks sunlight, as well as rising water temperatures and high flows of water from extreme storms linked to climate change. Unfortunately, the latest data show underwater grass acreage declined an additional seven percent in 2020.

Crabs are also affected by the Bay's "dead zones"—areas of little or no oxygen that rob blue crabs of both food sources and areas to hide from predators. Dead zones form when excess nitrogen and phosphorus pollution feed large algal blooms, which deplete the water of oxygen when they die and decompose. The algal blooms also block sunlight, which prevents underwater grasses from growing.

Fisheries regulators and scientists must work quickly to identify the key ecosystem challenges influencing the survival of young blue crabs so they can be addressed to ensure a healthy blue crab population in the future.

The continued low abundance of crabs, especially juvenile crabs, is a worrying trend in the Chesapeake Bay. Reducing pollution is key to improving crab habitat and—coupled with science-based management—ensuring a healthy population returns.

From the Desk of
Peggy Sanner
VIRGINIA EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR



We were excited last month when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that it plans to direct an additional \$22.5 million this year to helping farmers in the watershed adopt conservation practices that improve water quality in the Bay and its tributaries.

Practices that reduce nitrogen and sediment runoff, improve management of livestock waste, and conserve wetlands will be prioritized, and eligible practices include installing forested buffers on stream banks, rotating fields where livestock graze, and planting cover crops.

Agriculture is the largest source of pollution damaging the Bay and the local creeks, rivers, and streams that feed into it. More than 80 percent of the remaining pollution reductions the six watershed states committed to making in the Chesapeake Clean Water Blueprint must come from agriculture. The Blueprint gives them until 2025 to adopt the policies and practices needed to make those cuts.

Farmers across the watershed need additional funding and technical assistance from federal and state sources to get best management practices in the ground. Such investments strengthen the farm economy and deliver both water quality and climate resiliency benefits. We applaud USDA for providing this additional funding.

Peggy



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION
Saving a National Treasure

CBF Hosts Adult Education Classes

In May, CBF began our Volunteers as Chesapeake Stewards—or VoiCeS—adult education class in southside Richmond. The intensive educational training course includes classroom teaching, hands-on projects, and field experiences. Adult volunteers in VoiCeS classes learn about specific land-use and water-quality issues. Speakers are experts in their fields and include elected officials, non-profit leaders, local government officials, scientists, farmers, watermen, and educators. The southside Richmond course has a particular focus on our diverse urban environment.

Armed with their classroom knowledge, VoiCeS participants commit to completing a volunteer project on behalf of improving local water quality and the Chesapeake Bay.

Many thanks to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for providing funding for this



CBF Vice Chair, Otis Jones, welcomes participants to CBF's VoiCeS adult education class in southside Richmond this spring.

Richmond class so participants can attend for free!

Also in May, CBF was finally able to offer our on-the-water field trip for our most recent Northern Virginia VoiCeS graduates. The group got to explore the Potomac River and gets hands-on experiences to match with their classroom learning.

Panel Updates Striped Bass Management Plan

Over the past 10 years the striped bass (or rockfish) population in the Chesapeake Bay has plummeted well below healthy levels. In response, this May, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC)—the body that oversees fishery management decisions for the Atlantic coastal states—voted to adopt numerous changes to its striped bass fishery management plan.

In its vote, ASMFC maintained two key management triggers that require corrective action if population estimates show unsustainable fishing rates or low adult female numbers. The update also includes a ban on the use of gaffs, an often lethal method of removing fish from the water.

And a new stock assessment of the striped bass population is expected later this year—action taken in this recent update allows ASMFC to act quickly if additional harvest reductions are required based on the stock assessment results.

Unfortunately, the ASMFC did not adopt a measure that would require states to educate anglers about “careful catch” methods that reduce the number of fish that die after being released and the body did not include a measure that would ensure protection of spawning areas along the coast.

CBF is grateful for the thousands of our members who submitted comments in advance of ASMFC's decisions. CBF members were the largest percentage of folks who provided input!

Adult female striped bass numbers, widely used to gauge the overall health of the population, have fallen approximately 40 percent from 2013 to 2017. In addition, recruitment in the Bay has been below average for the past three years. We hope ASMFC's recent updates to its striped bass fishery management plan will quickly rebuild the striped bass population to healthy levels.

CBF in the Community

RESTORATION

Buffers for Birders

Saturday, June 11, 11:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.

The Highland Center

61 Highland Center Drive, Monterey

Learn about how streamside forests can protect local bird species such as the threatened golden-winged warbler. After presentations and lunch, there will be a site visit where participants can see real-life examples of landscapes working to protect local birds and other wildlife. Email Sarah Coffey at scoffey@cbf.org for more information or to register.

COMMUNITY

Annual Clean the Bay Day

Saturday, June 4, Various locations

DIY Week ends Friday, June 3

Help do your part for our watershed by signing up for 2022 Clean the Bay Day! Every year Virginians all over the state join together on the first Saturday in June to pick up litter. If you are unable to attend on June 4, you can participate in DIY week. Register to clean up anywhere you have permission and can take care of the disposal yourself. To learn more and register, visit cbf.org/clean.

Virginia Rod & Reef Slam

Fishing Tournament: Saturday, September

10 through Saturday, September 17

After Party: Saturday, September 17

3:00–7:30 p.m.

CBF's Brock Environmental Center

3663 Marlin Bay Drive, Virginia Beach

Save the date to join CBF for our annual fishing tournament! We're celebrating the variety of fish that oyster reef restoration provides to the ecosystem. You won't win by catching the biggest fish; prizes will be awarded for how many species you catch. Registration costs \$25 and includes the after-party on Saturday afternoon. If you are not interested in fishing, just join us for the celebration! Register now at cbf.org/SlamVA.



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FOUNDATION

Saving a National Treasure

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