

Division of Marine Fisheries' Overview of Amendment 2 to the Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan March 26, 2012



The blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) supports North Carolina's most valuable commercial fishery. They are harvested commercially and recreationally year-round throughout North Carolina's estuarine and nearshore coastal waters, with peak harvests occurring in the spring through fall.

This amendment updates and makes significant changes to the management strategies in the N.C. Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan. The initial fishery management plan was adopted in 1998 and Amendment 1 was completed in 2004.

The goal of this amendment to the fishery management plan is to manage the fishery in a manner that promotes its ecological and economic value and the long-term viability of the resource through sustainable harvest. The following objectives will be used to achieve this goal:

1. Utilize a management strategy that provides resource protection and sustainable harvest, promotes blue crab ecological and economic value, provides opportunity for resource utilization, and considers the needs of all users;
2. Promote harvesting practices that minimize waste of the resource and environmental damage;
3. Promote the protection, restoration, and enhancement of habitats and environmental quality necessary for the perpetuation of the blue crab resource;
4. Maintain a clear distinction between conservation goals and allocation issues;
5. Minimize conflicts among and within user groups, including non-crabbing user groups;
6. Identify and promote research to improve the understanding and management of the blue crab resource; and
7. Promote education and public information to help users understand the causes and nature of problems of blue crabs in North Carolina, their habitats and fisheries, and the rationale for efforts to address resource management.

Results of the current stock assessment show the blue crab stock in North Carolina is not overfished and is producing a sustainable harvest; however, it is unknown if overfishing is occurring. There are concerns with the blue crab's stock status because of a decline in landings, and reduced abundance of adult and young crabs in the population.

Management Issues and Proposed Actions

Areas addressed in the management of the North Carolina's blue crab fishery are:

- Environmental factors;
- Stock protection;
- User conflicts;
- Clarification of rules; and
- Harvest practices.

In addition to the fishery management actions recommended in this plan, the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan has specific recommendations that will benefit habitats used by blue crabs including the water column, wetlands, submerged aquatic vegetation, soft bottom and shell bottom.

Key management issues were identified and management options were developed by the Division of Marine Fisheries, in conjunction with the Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan Advisory Committee, with review and comment from the N. C. Marine Fisheries Commission, the commission's Crustacean and regional advisory committees, and the public, as well as the scientific community. Detailed issue papers and public comment for each of the key issues can be found in Section 11 and Appendix 14.5 and 14.6 of the plan.

The Marine Fisheries Commission selected the preferred management strategies listed below for each of the key issues and tentatively approved the draft Amendment 2 to the Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan on February 23, 2012.

The draft amendment proposes adoption of adaptive stock management measures. Under these measures, stricter regulations would be implemented in the blue crab fishery if certain biological triggers are met for three consecutive years. These adaptive management measures use several biological surveys and sampling programs to determine the relative abundance of adult crabs in the population and various production indicators for the stock each year.

Other preferred management alternatives in the draft amendment include:

- Opening eight non-pot areas (long haul areas) in the Pungo River to the use of pots, but keeping the Long Point non-pot area in Pamlico River closed to the use of pots;
- Using the type of bait instead of pot mesh size to define escape ring requirements in a crab pot;
- Adopting the no-trawl line along the Outer Banks in Pamlico Sound as the new boundary line where closure of escape rings to take small mature females is allowed;
- Clarifying existing crab dredging rules so they are easier for the public to understand and to match harvest and enforcement practices;
- Correcting an error in the peeler trawl exception rule;
- Incorporating the long-standing Pamlico Sound crab trawling proclamation into rule and retaining proclamation authority to restrict crab trawl mesh size;
- Codifying an existing proclamation that closes the lower Broad Creek area (Neuse River) to crab pots June 1 through Nov. 30;
- Establishing proclamation authority for requiring terrapin excluder devices in crab pots that will not be used until criteria for the excluder devices is developed and approved by the commission;
- Modifying the blue crab size limit and culling tolerance rule to clearly state the intent of the exceptions, culling tolerance, and separation requirements for the various categories of crabs; and
- Developing and providing information to encourage the use of methods to reduce pot loss and minimize ghost pot fishing bycatch.

For management strategies that require rule changes, notice of text will be published and a hearing will be held during the upcoming summer and fall, followed by final approval of rules in November 2012, with an anticipated effective date of April 1, 2013.