

**FISHERIES GIT MEMBER UPDATES
VIRGINIA MARINE RESOURCES COMMISSION
UPDATES ON SELECT, CURRENT ACTIVITIES**

Blue Crab

Since the release of the 2013-2014 Winter Dredge Survey results, VMRC staff has been scrambling to devise conservation management strategies to address the depleted condition of the spawning-age female crabs. A tough challenge has been convincing the Commission's advisory panel that harvest reductions need to occur in 2014 and 2015, despite the low removal rates by the fisheries. To date, it does seem that most industry members recognize harvest reductions need to occur, and most advisors recognize that despite low removal rates, a 37-million pound bay-wide harvest signals a low point not seen since 2007. Staff has met with advisors twice since the release of the results in late April, and there will be one additional meeting with the Crab Management Advisory Committee, prior to the June 24 public hearing that determines management actions for 2014 and 2015. It is encouraging that some advisors who rail against the abundant blue crab regulations adopted by the Commission since 1994 want to devise new strategies, with VMRC staff assistance, to conserve different life stages of crabs, in advance of 2015.

Horseshoe Crab

Virginia jointly manages horseshoe crabs as part of the Delaware Bay Region, under the 2007 Adaptive Resource Management model, one of the first ecosystem based models used by ASMFC that evaluates both horseshoe crabs and red knots for long term sustainability. The ASMFC also sets annual commercial quotas for each state (set in numbers of crabs). The horseshoe crab industry and VMRC staff have worked closely in adjusting management measures to better conserve the resource and the harvesters that rely on the fishery. To date, this relatively small quota of 172,828 horseshoe crabs has been very difficult to monitor because of a five-quota system. In 2013, industry and the VMRC cooperatively established a new gear quota allocation specific licensing system to address overcapacity and latent effort in the fishery and prevent potential quota overages through improved monitoring capabilities. Also in 2013, the harvest of horseshoe crabs by dredge gear was prohibited in the Historical 1942 Blue Crab Sanctuary in order to reduce mortality of species within the sanctuary.

Atlantic Sturgeon

The VMRC staff has been preparing the state's application for the incidental take of endangered or threatened species under Section 10 of the Endangered Species Act for the incidental take of Atlantic sturgeon in state waters. The VMRC has submitted the methods and estimated number of Atlantic sturgeon interactions that will occur in the commercial gill net fishery to the National Marine Fisheries Service for review. The current endangered species status of the Chesapeake Bay Distinct Population Segment may have a direct impact on commercial gill net fishing activity because of the prevalence of this gear type in Virginia waters. Accurately estimating the potential number of interactions will aid in allowing harvesters to continue fishing activities, while providing protection for Atlantic sturgeon in Virginia.

Development of an Atlantic Menhaden abundance index in Virginia's pound net fishery

As required by Amendment 2 of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s Fishery Management Plan for Atlantic Menhaden, the Commonwealth of Virginia has developed an Atlantic menhaden abundance index.

Currently, the only fishery independent data available are for age-0 menhaden caught as bycatch in monitoring programs for other species. The only adult abundance index is a fisheries dependent data set that comes from the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC) harvest database for pound net landings.

The Virginia index is a dependent data derived abundance index, based on pound net harvest reported through the VMRC Mandatory Harvest Reporting Program. The dependent data focuses on statistical areas of menhaden harvest, and harvesters reporting menhaden (positive trips). The PRFC pound net index, currently the only adult abundance index in use for Atlantic menhaden, shows a strong relationship with the Virginia pound net index (Figure 1).

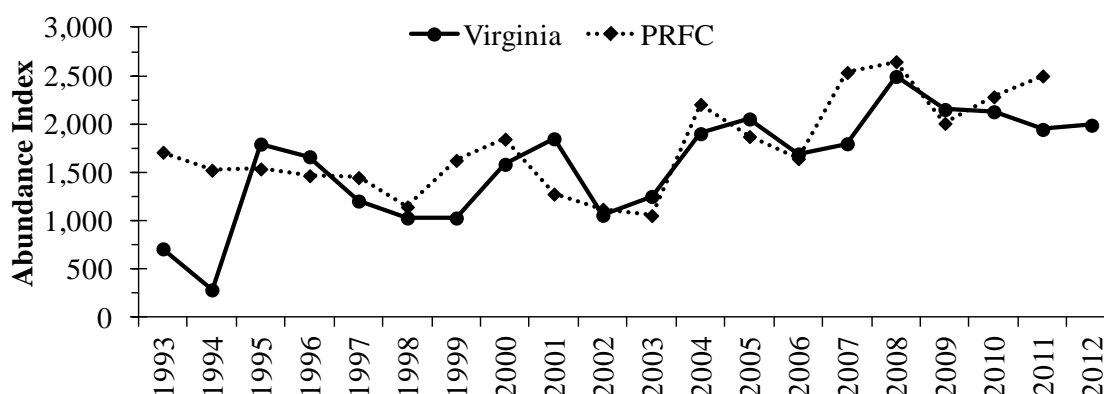


Figure 1. Standardized abundance index values for menhaden in Virginia and the Potomac River pound net fishery.

Recent data collections in Virginia suggest the possible existence of differences in size of menhaden collected between the main stem Chesapeake Bay and tributary locations in the lower Chesapeake Bay. These size differences may have implications on the relationship between the Virginia pound net index (mainstem) with the PRFC pound net index (tributary) for adults and juvenile abundance indices.

The identification of menhaden within the industrial bait category may also have an implication on the relationship between indices. VMRC staff is currently working with commercial pound net harvesters to identify menhaden within the ‘bait’ category, determine effort for each landing report (e.g. number of nets fished, identifications of specific nets, and the soak time of the gear), and identify the age composition of the pound net harvest. This refined CPUE and age composition information will contribute to the improvement of the Virginia menhaden index. Additionally, it will provide forage fish information for those species that are either captured in the industrial bait fishery, or those that may be part of both the industrial bait and food fish fishery, depending on their life stage.

Mandatory Reporting

One major component of Fisheries Management at the VMRC is the Mandatory Reporting Program. Mandatory Reporting staff has been reviewing monthly reports of daily harvest received from commercial fishermen and preparing the data for entry since 1993. This data is essential, as it is used by staff to evaluate and determine harvest and effort characteristics of Virginia's fisheries in order to assist the Commission in making well-informed management decisions. Mandatory Reporting staff also coordinates the Commission's compliance program. Notifications are sent to commercial fishermen who are not complying with the code of Virginia and regulations which require them to report their monthly seafood harvest. Commercial fishermen who fail to submit their monthly harvest reports are subject to disciplinary action from the Commission, which could include a temporary probation or suspension of their fishing privileges. With experience and increased efforts by staff, the agency has observed an increase in report submission timeliness. Staff continues to maintain the integrity of Virginia fisheries' harvest data, by identifying and resolving reporting errors.

Quota Monitoring

Quota monitoring has become an ever-increasing challenge for staff. In 1992, Virginia's only quota-managed species was striped bass. Over the years, many other species have been managed by landings quotas. Some of these quotas are set by NMFS and ASMFC, and include striped bass, Atlantic menhaden, summer flounder, black sea bass, and horseshoe crabs. There are also two Virginia-initiated quotas for black drum and speckled trout that involve monitoring.

Recreational

The agency is facing a significant challenge in the way that recreational catch data are collected and estimates are produced, as the NMFS transitions from the old Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistical Survey (MRFSS) design to the Marine Recreational Information Program design (MRIP). Confidence or lack thereof, by recreational anglers in the improved accuracy of the catch estimates produced by NMFS is moot, because these estimates are the currency of Fisheries Management.

At present, NMFS hires a private contractor to conduct the Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (AP AIS) for the Atlantic Coast states. The survey involves statistically predetermined locations and blocks of time that recreational anglers returning from saltwater fishing trips are asked a series of questions about their trip and their catch and harvest is recorded. Of the thirteen Atlantic Coastal states, six states subcontract from the private contractor and conduct the survey with fulltime state personnel or part time individuals hired by the state. It is the consensus among the states that those states that conduct the survey see both improved quality of the data provided by the angler and efficiency in the collection of the data plus receive an increased "buy-in" by the recreational fishing community. Virginia is one of the seven states that use the private contractor to do the field survey at present. However, the VMRC, along with the other six states that rely on the private contractor hired by NMFS, have begun the planning process to enable state personnel, and with the help of state hired part time personnel, to conduct the AP AIS. The first step is the creation of a draft budget proposal for NMFS funding that will be reviewed at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission meeting in August. All the states' budget requests will be combined and submitted as a package to NMFS for funding. Concurrently the VMRC will submit a request to the legislature (January 2015) to create new positions and enable the agency to hire additional staff for possible implementation in 2016. And then the real challenge begins!