

Horseshoe Crab Management Board Votes to Reduce Coast Wide Commercial Bait Landings by 25%

Board Approves Addendum I to the Horseshoe Crab FMP

Alexandria, Virginia – The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s Horseshoe Crab Management Board today approved Addendum I to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Horseshoe Crab, which implements harvest reduction measures along the Atlantic coast for the commercial horseshoe crab bait fishery. Specifically, the Addendum establishes a state-by-state cap at 25 percent below 1995-1997 levels of 2,999,491 horseshoe crabs for all states. Individual state horseshoe crab fisheries would be closed once its cap is reached.

Furthermore, the Management Board recommended additional harvest control measures to provide further protection to the Delaware Bay horseshoe crab population, recognizing its importance to migratory shorebirds. Despite the lack of support for a 50 percent reduction in the Mid-Atlantic region, the Management Board is encouraging states that have already achieved harvest reductions in excess of 50 percent to maintain their current harvest restrictions. Additionally, the Management Board is recommending that the National Marine Fisheries Service, which has jurisdiction from 3-200 miles offshore, establish an offshore horseshoe crab sanctuary (no harvest allowed) within a 30 mile radius off the mouth of Delaware Bay.

The State of New Jersey, through the action of its Governor, Christine Todd Whitman, has further extended its commitment to the conservation of horseshoe crab by pledging to contribute \$50,000 toward data collection activities, which would provide the necessary data to accurately assess the status of horseshoe crab populations and potential impacts to migratory shorebirds. In pledging the State’s contribution, Governor Whitman challenged the States of Delaware and Maryland, and the Commonwealth of Virginia to donate similar funds, so that states’ combined funds of \$200,000 could be matched by the Department of the Interior.

Board Chair Bruce Freeman expressed the Board’s pleasure with New Jersey’s generous contribution by stating that, “By far the greatest challenge we face in the conservation and management of horseshoe crabs is the lack of sufficient data to accurately assess the status of the population.

These monies, combined with the contributions of the other three Mid-Atlantic states and the Department of Interior match, will bring us much closer to our

goal of generating a statistically sound stock assessment for this important species.”

The Management Board’s actions were taken after extensive public review and input through six public hearings and submission of written comments from across the country. Public comments were largely divided between the commercial fishing industry and the conservation community and biomedical industry. The commercial fishing industry urged the Management Board to establish minimal reductions of 0-25 percent until better data becomes available. The conservation community and biomedical industry encouraged the Management Board to establish significant reductions of 50 percent or higher because of the lack of uncertainty with the status of the population.

Bruce Freeman, Board Chair, continued by stating that “We are further challenged in the conservation and management of this species to meet the needs of all the various parties concerned about this resource – fishermen, the conservation and bird watching communities, and the biomedical industry – when the opinions of these user groups are so divergent. In light of these challenges, I believe the approved management program best meets the needs of all resource users.”

Horseshoe crabs are utilized as the primary bait source for commercial conch and eel fisheries along the Atlantic coast. It is also an important resource for the biomedical industry that produces a byproduct of the horseshoe crab’s blood to detect contaminants in injectable drugs and implantable medical devices. Since the early 1990s, there has been growing concern among fisheries managers, scientists, fisherman and the conservation community regarding the increase in horseshoe crab landings and the potential impact that this may have on both the horseshoe crab resource and hemispheric migratory shorebird populations. Horseshoe crab eggs are an important food source for migratory shorebirds, which use the Delaware Bay area as a primary staging ground during their spring migration from South America to Arctic breeding grounds.

The FMP, which was approved in October 1998, called for the development of a coastwide cap on landings for the commercial bait fishery to be implemented in the year 2000. Based on input from the Horseshoe Crab Advisory Panel, Technical Committee, Plan Review Team and the conservation community, the Management Board developed a suite of management strategies to cap commercial bait landings. These options were incorporated into a Public Information Document, which was available for public review in December 1999, and presented at state public hearings in January 2000.

The next step will be for the states to develop management proposals to meet the requirements of Addendum I. These proposals will be reviewed by the Management Board for approval in April and implementation by May 1, 2000.

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