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U. S. Secretary of Commerce announces plans to establish Delaware Bay horseshoe crab preserve

-- Carper applauds federal response to protect 350-million-year-old species --

LEWES – As a result of his earlier efforts to protect horseshoe crabs, Governor Thomas R. Carper today received word from the United States Department of Commerce that a horseshoe crab moratorium will be in place by late October.

At an event along Delaware Bay in Cape Henlopen State Park, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Norman Y. Mineta reported that efforts are underway to establish a horseshoe crab preserve by October 30. The planned federal preserve, part of a state/federal program, will provide additional protection for local horseshoe crabs by prohibiting their harvest in a prime spawning area.

The proposed horseshoe crab preserve will be located in federal waters off the mouth of Delaware Bay, closing an area approximately 60 nautical miles long and 30 nautical miles wide. The closed area adjoins state waters south of Pecks Beach, New Jersey, to just north of Ocean City, Maryland. The area was proposed because horseshoe crabs are most abundant from Virginia to New Jersey with their center of abundance being around the Delaware Bay area. The closed area would prohibit fishing or trawling for horseshoe crabs within a 30 nautical mile radius of the mouth of Delaware Bay.

In May, Gov. Carper urged the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), which falls under the responsibility of the Commerce Department, to institute the horseshoe crab moratorium. He indicated that the action was necessary to complement the restrictions established by surrounding states to ensure the preservation of horseshoe crabs along the Atlantic coast. Researchers estimate that the horseshoe crab population continues to decline along Delaware Bay.

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“Horseshoe crabs are part of the Atlantic coast ecosystem, providing food for migrating seabirds, and are essential for both fishing and medical purposes. Creating this preserve will help protect a valuable natural resource,” Secretary Mineta said. “It is imperative that we do everything we can to protect the horseshoe crab, especially here in Delaware Bay, which is home to the largest population of American horseshoe crabs.”

Carper said, “Establishing a moratorium as soon as possible is essential for the preservation of the horseshoe crab. I’m relieved to hear that we’re on track to establish this preserve in the coming weeks. The fate of the horseshoe crab is in jeopardy and Delaware Bay contains one of the world’s greatest concentrations of this species. We must take necessary steps to employ sound, scientific-based conservation measures for horseshoe crabs. We’re also quite pleased that the Secretary is taking aggressive action to bring Virginia into compliance.”

Under guidelines established by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), all Atlantic coastal states must reduce their horseshoe crab bait catch by 25 percent. While 14 Atlantic states including Delaware, Maryland and New Jersey have taken action to implement the horseshoe crab conservation measures, Virginia has refused to abide by the ASMFC edict, effectively wiping out the conservation efforts of neighboring states. The action taken today by the Department of Commerce will ensure that Virginia complies with the ASMFC measures.

"Governor Carper's strong leadership was crucial to the establishment of the horseshoe crab preserve," said Daniel P. Beard, senior vice president at the National Audubon Society. "This preserve is critical to our efforts for horseshoe crabs and migratory shorebirds. Everyone who cares about horseshoe crabs and migratory shorebirds has a reason to thank Governor Carper."

The Delaware Audubon Society, the Delaware Nature Conservancy, the Delaware Nature Society and the **Ecological Research & Development Group** were all represented at the event to support the moratorium and to urge the overall preservation of horseshoe crabs in Delaware Bay.

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