

## RED KNOTS ON WAY

# Meeting set for Monday to focus on horseshoe crab moratorium

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GALLOWAY — With New Jersey moving quickly toward two years of full protection for both horseshoe crabs and migrating shorebirds, conservation groups and fishermen are meeting Monday at Richard Stockton College to discuss the possibility of a wider moratorium.

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and state wildlife officials will host a public hearing at 7 p.m. in the college's Townsend Residential Life Center here. The interstate commission is looking at a variety of options, from letting New Jersey go it alone with a two-year ban on taking crabs for fishing bait, to ordering a moratorium for all of Delaware Bay and new crabbing limits in New York and Maryland.

Some experts say Delaware Bay's horseshoe crab population may be growing somewhat, recovering from the peak years of a 1990s bait fishery that served booming commercial conch and eel trapping fleets. What's not recovering are the red knots — marathon migrant shorebirds that will arrive at the bay in a few weeks, looking for horseshoe crab eggs to eat.

The political debate over a New Jersey moratorium ended March 30 when the state Marine Fisheries Council deferred to state environmental Commissioner Lisa Jackson's personal appeal to impose the shutdown. With the western Atlantic red knot population estimated at 15,000 birds, the extremity of a crabbing ban is justified, she told the council.

Even council members who disliked the moratorium proposal were swayed by Jackson. Several said they also realized the danger that the Legislature might enact a long-term crabbing ban.

"It was a tactical choice. We were right up against a cliff there," said Robert Abel of Shrewsbury, an ocean engineering professor and chairman of the council's horseshoe crab committee.

"We've got to get alternative baits," Abel said. "And we've got to do aquaculture" to rear juvenile horseshoe crabs in captivity for release, he said.

State Department of Environmental Protection officials hoped their counterparts in Delaware would likewise impose a moratorium — just as the two states cooperated earlier with setting bay-wide crabbing limits. But it looks like Delaware will wait for the Atlantic states commission to decide.

"Even if we started our regulatory development approach right now, it wouldn't affect this season," John A. Hughes, secretary of Delaware's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, told the News-Journal newspaper of Delaware. "When we tried the emergency order route, we were beaten in court. We're not foolish enough to try that again."

On the fishing industry side, Rick Robins of Chesapeake Bay Packing, a major conch buying and packing company in Newport News, Va., has been promoting a partial moratorium — a two-year, male-crabs-only harvest option. Spawning female crabs are usually attended by two or more male crabs, so allowing a controlled hand picking of male crabs after spawning would have less impact on the egg supply for birds, Robins contends.

Last week, the males-only proposal got some qualified support from Glenn Gauvry of the Ecological Research and Development Group, a horseshoe crab conservation group based in Lewes, Del.

"If you look into all the science that's been done on spawning and spawning rates, you can see a point in at least a two-year moratorium" with crab pickers limited to males, Gauvry said. "For two years, with the enforcement we have, in that regard we would be able to monitor any detrimental

effect from a males-only harvest."

Gauvry cautions that his group doesn't make claim to knowledge about the shorebirds' predicament. But they are concerned with horseshoe crab populations, and are worried that a larger Mid-Atlantic closure of the bait fishery could shift pressure onto smaller crab populations in Maine and Florida, Gauvry said.

Other environmental groups dismiss the males-only proposal, saying there's not enough science to back it up.

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