

Fishermen blast crabbing moratorium

Environmentalists hope to protect red knots

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Since former governor Christine Todd Whitman ordered a moratorium on taking horseshoe crabs in spring 1997, commercial fishermen say they've been giving up access to an increasingly expensive bait supply — without much apparent benefit to the migrating shorebirds that feed on crab eggs.

Last year, New Jersey watermen landed 48,000 horseshoe crabs — less than a third of the 150,000 crabs they are allowed to take for use as bait in eel and whelk traps. With acting Gov. Codey's order last week extending a closed season on the crab harvest, watermen predict the 2005 season will be a bust.

"In two weeks, with the heat, the crabs will be gone," back to deeper, cooler waters after their shoreside mating season, said Fred Layton, a fisherman from Middle Township in Cape May County.

For their part, environmental activists say the two-week extension of the previous May 1 to June 7 closed season is only better than nothing — probably enough for 3,000 red knot shorebirds still on the bay to finish eating crab eggs, and put on fat they need for their summer breeding season on arctic nesting grounds.

The shorebird saga has erupted anew every spring in recent years, with a team of international shorebird experts warning of population declines on the red knot's wintering grounds at Tierra Del Fuego, the southernmost tip of South America.

Now the trend since February 2004 is sufficiently alarming for wildlife officials in Delaware and New Jersey to recommend that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service add red knots to the federal endangered list.

New Jersey environmental commissioner Bradley M. Campbell says he doesn't expect the Department of Interior to permit a red knot listing anytime soon. But that move would put pressure on the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission to "take emergency action on a coordinated basis" in states affected by the complicated relationship between shorebirds, horseshoe crabs and fishermen.

"The horseshoe crabs are the only thing that really work for eels," said bayman Elliott Giles of Barnegat, who used to catch his own crabs for bait. "I was in the business for 10 or 15 years. I had to give it up when the bans started."

Fishermen say female crabs in particular attract eels. At retail prices, crabs cost around \$1.50 to \$2, and even more in times of demand, fishermen say. That may sound cheap, but eels and whelks are fished with lines of multiple traps that are bait with split, frozen crabs, and it's a considerable savings to watermen who can stock backyard freezers themselves.

Delaware is funding research to develop an artificial bait to mimic the underwater scent of dead crabs, said John Hughes, Delaware's environmental secretary. The effort at the University of Delaware's College of Marine Sciences includes a study of horseshoe crab DNA, he said.

Meanwhile, Delaware fishermen can gather up to 150,000 crabs under the joint New Jersey-Delaware management plan. Hughes said he'd like to suspend the harvest for two weeks, but he's not allowed to under his state's regulatory system.

Conservationists and Campbell say they'd like to revive the idea of a buy-out or other financial aid to ease fishermen out of the crab business. Jeff Tittel argues it's cheap, compared to the contribution that birdwatchers and eco-tourism bring to the Cape May region's economy. He gauges the annual value of the harvest at perhaps \$150,000.

"Are you kidding me, that the state can't come up with \$150,000?" he said in a Statehouse meeting room. "This place leaks that every day."

Layton says he'd peg a buyout package at closer to \$500,000 to pay for license value and future lost income.

"There ought to be some kind of compromise, instead of putting people out of business," Giles said.

Some watermen have come to insist that is the real goal of their adversaries.

"They're trying to stall us off so there's no harvest at all," Layton said. "As long as we're still around, we're a threat."

At public meetings, Layton speaks of "high-profile environmental bullies." It's a talking point with Layton. He says it means that environmental activists have the political clout and media access to force state government to take action against the watermen without what they consider conclusive scientific proof.

There are between 34 and 37 fishermen left in New Jersey who are licensed to gather crabs, according to state officials and industry sources. Crabbers are limited to picking crabs up on Tuesday and Thursday nights in the marshes at least 1,000 feet away from bay beaches, to minimize any disturbance of birds.

"There are a lot of things that happen along the way" on bird migrations, said Scot C. Mackey, a Trenton lobbyist for the Garden State Seafood Association. "We have a hard time making the correlation between the birds and eggs."

But fishermen don't give up challenging the scientists. Layton says they prowl the Internet for the latest reports of red knot sightings elsewhere. When naturalists in Virginia reported an aerial survey of 9,000 red knots in late May, Layton picked up on it. "So how can there be a decline in the population?" he said.