

Drop halts N.J. horseshoe crab harvest

State calls two-week moratorium due to shortage of migratory red knots

By JEFF MONTGOMERY / The News Journal

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Just two days after the horseshoe crab harvest began, it abruptly stopped in New Jersey.

Officials from the Garden State announced Thursday a two week emergency moratorium of the horseshoe crab harvest. The harvest had to stop, they said, because of an "alarming" decline in sightings of the red knot, a migratory shorebird whose future is intertwined with the horseshoe crab's because it depends on the arthropod's eggs for nutrition.

Bradley M. Campbell, the commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, said the harvest could resume June 23 and continue through Aug. 15. Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control Secretary John A. Hughes endorsed New Jersey's efforts, but said he was unable to do the same.

Both states began the harvest season Tuesday.

"The stunning decline in red knot numbers combined with the late arrival of these shorebirds this year makes clear that temporary emergency action is needed to protect these threatened natural resources," Campbell said.

One recent study in South America turned up only 17,600 of the birds, down 40 percent from last year. Delaware Bay sightings have dropped from 95,000 in 1989 to around 15,000 recently. Surveys spotted 3,000 red knots in the Delaware Bay this week, an arrival which came weeks later than expected.

The Delaware Bay boasts the largest population of horseshoe crabs in the world, and the migrating red knots stop by the bay in spring to rebuild their weight between trips to nesting grounds in South America and the Arctic.

Cold, stormy weather may have contributed to the problem this year by discouraging crab spawning along shorelines. New Jersey recently reported that surveys had found only 1,500 eggs per square meter of beach, down from an expected 4,000 eggs.

The effort to save the creatures, however, also competes with the fishermen's struggle to make a living. New Jersey, so far, has no plans to compensate fishermen for the two-week moratorium. But Campbell said officials are considering the possibility of financial assistance for those affected if harvest limits continue.

Charles Auman, who operates a fish-packing house at Slaughter Beach in Sussex County, called New Jersey's move unjustified. He said the moratorium would cripple or destroy some fishing operations.

"I feel bad for those guys over in New Jersey," Auman said, adding that Delaware crab permit holders were prepared to sue if the state attempted a similar moratorium. "Those birds are here and gone, and obviously their state wants to annihilate their fishermen. They're not going to have any bait for their eel or conch fishery. You don't pick a crab after July. They're giving them a quota, but no possible way to get them."

In Delaware, officials will step up patrols and enforcement of the state's harvest restrictions, said DNREC's Hughes, which could allow an additional 94,000 crabs to be taken this season.

"We attempted an emergency restriction and actually lost," two years ago, Hughes said. "We have every reason to believe that we run a very high risk of losing this case."

Horseshoe crabs provide bait for lucrative eel and conch fisheries in the Delaware Bay, where fishermen sell them for about \$1.

Delaware and New Jersey together issued 67 permits this year for horseshoe crab collections, with the total take limited to 150,000 on each side of the river, including crabs taken by dredging.

In Delaware, Hughes added, "our goal is zero" for horseshoe crab harvesting in the future. He said: "We're making no secret. We've moved to a full priority on enforcement" for harvest restrictions.