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Sides differ on using horseshoe crabs as bait

Regulators to meet in Feb.

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With New Jersey poised to extend its ban on taking horseshoe crabs for fishing bait, commercial fishing advocates are arguing that a limited harvest of only male crabs — similar to a crabbing season upheld last year by a Delaware state court — can be allowed without further endangering red knots, migratory shorebirds that feed on crab eggs along Delaware Bay.

It's a debate that could play out when the state Marine Fisheries Council meets Feb. 11, at the conclusion of a 60-day legal comment period on the Department of Environmental Protection's plan to extend the moratorium.

Biologists concerned about shorebird population

DEP biologists say the western Atlantic subspecies of red knot remains deeply depressed — at about 17,000 birds in the Eastern Americas, down from an estimated 100,000 or more — and say that other shorebird species have shown signs of decline in recent years.

"The red knot population is now in worse condition than two years ago," state Division of Fish and Wildlife Director David Chanda wrote in a Dec. 27 letter asking the state's Marine Fisheries Council to allow a moratorium extension. "The number of birds is lower, their ability to gain weight has decreased, and the density of crab eggs has shown no improvement."

Observers of the Delaware Bay horseshoe crab population say those long-lived animals — closer in evolutionary lineage to spiders than modern-day swimming crustaceans like the blue crab — seem to be slowly growing in numbers.

Horseshoe population is stable, growing

"From the horseshoe crab point of view, the population is stable and shows signs of increasing," said Glenn Gauvry of the Ecological Research and Development Group, a nonprofit horseshoe crab conservation group in Lewes, Del.

Gauvry, whose group participates in summer crab counts along the bayshore, said he expects the trend of crab population growth could be confirmed when data from 2007 are finalized in coming weeks. That also makes it unlikely that Delaware lawmakers will take a crack at reviving the harvest moratorium that was struck down in court last year, he said.

"There wouldn't be any solid science put into Delaware state legislators' hands to pass a moratorium that would stand up to a court challenge," Gauvry said.

Both states finally imposed a moratorium on the commercial harvest, but last June Delaware watermen won a state court order that allowed them to capture up to 100,000 male crabs.

Fisherman want a wildlife management plan

Such male-only crabbing seasons are sanctioned under a management plan by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and New Jersey fishermen want one of their own.

While one group of watermen is pressing its case in a state Appellate Division court next month, others are lobbying the Marine Fisheries Council to reject the state Department of Environmental Protection's extended moratorium.

"The department has again tried to frame this issue as an emergency, and yet the overwintering population of red knots (in South America) has been essentially stable from 2006 to 2007 . . . while the Delaware Bay horseshoe crab population has increased," Rick Robins of Chesapeake Bay Packing, a Virginia whelk dealer, told the council in a Dec. 30 letter.

That company and the associated Bernie's Conchs in 2006 sold \$4 million worth of conch, as watermen call the channeled whelk, a marine snail that's largely exported to Hong Kong, Robins related in his letter.

Government and industry sources estimate the industry generates \$11 million to \$15 million a year and employs up to 370 fishermen and dockworkers from Massachusetts to Virginia, he said.

Citing a 2006 scientific report that estimated the bay's population of male crabs at 13.7 million, Robins argued that a 100,000-crab harvest would use less than 1 percent of the population.

Setting harvest limits?

DEP biologist Amanda Dey, who heads the state's red knot monitoring program, said she worries that removing any part of the crab population could reduce its genetic diversity.

One horseshoe crab authority, Virginia scientist Carl N. Shuster Jr., wrote a memo in support of males-only season, saying it "will not demonstrably impact the gene pool of the Delaware Bay area crabs because this population is genetically homogeneous."

Shorebird advocates have been adamant that every crab egg possible should be on the beaches for the birds, and they contend even a limited crab harvest is too risky.

"Clearly there's science to be done . . . but you can't set a harvest limit that threatens extinction of the red knot," Tim Dillingham of the American Littoral Society told the state fisheries council at its Jan. 3 meeting.

"The fundamentals have not changed," said Eric Stiles of the New Jersey Audubon Society, speaking of red knot counts and a recommendation by experts for Canada to declare the birds endangered.
