

Horseshoe crab limit set at 100,000

By MOLLY MURRAY, The News Journal

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Delaware environment officials will stick with their planned harvest of 100,000 male-only horseshoe crabs this year, despite a decision by New Jersey to extend its existing two-year harvest ban.

The decisions in both states come amid a flurry of new data, including horseshoe crab egg-density studies that point to a shortage of eggs and draft trawling survey results that point to an increase in the Delaware Bay horseshoe crab population.

Meanwhile, conservation groups are increasingly alarmed that red knots, migrating shorebirds that feed on horseshoe crab eggs as they pass through Delaware Bay, continue to be in peril.

There is no specific regulation to protect the red knots, and efforts to list them as an endangered species have not been successful.

Conservation groups have pushed for rigid restrictions on horseshoe crab harvests as a way of protecting the food supply for migratory shorebirds that spend about two weeks fattening up along Delaware Bay before flying north to Arctic breeding grounds in northern Canada.

Horseshoe crabs, more closely related to spiders than blue crabs, have been victims of overfishing. They are used as bait in the conch and eel fisheries and in the past were ground up and used as fertilizer. The creatures are long-lived and take years to reach sexual maturity, so recovery efforts are expected to take time.

Delaware and New Jersey officials were among the first to dramatically cut harvests. And in 2006, the regional Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission mandated the 100,000 male-only catch for the two states. New Jersey went further with its harvest moratorium, and Delaware officials unsuccessfully tried to take similar action.

It is concern over the red knot population that prompted New Jersey officials to recommend extension of their crab harvest moratorium.

David Chanda, director of the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, said in a letter to the New Jersey Marine Fisheries Council that his staff had reviewed the impact of current harvest regulations on the red knot and concluded that they are not sufficient to prevent further declines in the bird population and "do not promote the recovery of red knots."

Chanda wrote that two other migratory shorebird species that also feed on horseshoe crab eggs -- the semipalmated sandpiper and the ruddy turnstone -- are showing a similar inability to gain weight as they pass through Delaware Bay.

New Jersey fish and wildlife officials imposed a two-year harvest ban in 2005. It expired Dec. 31.

Delaware environmental officials attempted to impose a similar two-year moratorium, but the effort was overturned by a Superior Court judge.

"There's absolutely no reason to close the fishery," said Rick Robins, owner of Virginia-based Chesapeake Bay Packing LLC, a company that buys horseshoe crabs for bait used in the area's large conch fishery.

Robins said New Jersey officials have tried over and over to frame the issue as an emergency.

"Yet the overwintering population of red knots has been essentially stable from 2006 to 2007 and has been relatively stable for the past few years," he said.

The South American overwintering population of red knots numbered an estimated 17,360 birds in 2007, compared with 17,653 birds in the winter of 2006.

Robins believes the horseshoe crab population is showing signs of improvement and points to a draft trawling survey released last week at a horseshoe crab technical advisory meeting. That survey, conducted just off the coast, points to increases both in male and female juvenile crabs in Delaware Bay.

"It's very encouraging," Robins said.

Meanwhile, conservation groups point to other research that raises concerns about the crabs and the shorebirds.

Nicholas DiPasquale, conservation chair for Delaware Audubon, said new information on the availability of horseshoe crab eggs and the further decline in red knot populations both are cause for concern.

Still, John Hughes, secretary of the state Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, said he plans to stick with the 100,000 male-only harvest adopted last year after the Superior Court ruling negated Delaware's harvest ban.

"We've been beaten twice" in court, Hughes said. A harvest ban "is just not going to happen. ... Frankly, the 100,000 male-only take is an acceptable compromise. It's all we can do."

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