

NEWS FROM THE DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL

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DNREC Reduces 2003 Commercial Harvest of Horseshoe Crabs

Delaware's commercial horseshoe crab harvest was reduced effective 12:01 a.m. Friday, April 25 under an emergency Order signed by Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control Secretary John A. Hughes.

Emergency regulations instituted under the Order reduce the annual harvest limit of horseshoe crabs taken and/or landed in Delaware to 150,000. Horseshoe crabs cannot be taken from any lands or the tidal waters of Delaware during the period beginning 12:01 a.m., May 1 and continuing through midnight, June 30.

Horseshoe crabs may be taken lawfully during the period beginning 12:01 a.m., June 8 and continuing through midnight, June 30 by persons with valid horseshoe crab collecting permits and eel licensees and their alternates on weekdays, Monday through Friday, from state-owned lands to the east of state road 89 (Port Mahon Road).

Horseshoe crabs may also be taken lawfully from private lands with written permission of the landowner during a period beginning 12:01 a.m. June 8 and continuing through midnight June 30, for persons with valid horseshoe crab collecting permits and eel licenses and their alternates on weekdays and Saturdays. Horseshoe crabs cannot be taken from lands not owned by the state or federal government May 1 through midnight, June 7.

The statewide annual quota for harvesting horseshoe crabs was reduced to 150,000 for all methods of harvest combined. This reduction, combined with the May 1 to June 7 closure, was designed to help provide an adequate number of horseshoe crab eggs available to support a variety of resources in Delaware Bay and help restore the crab population itself to former levels of abundance.

In response to the concerns of commercial fishermen, the emergency regulations originally suggested have been modified and now eliminate the proposed requirement to use bait saving devices. Also, a whole male horseshoe crab will be permitted as bait, rather than the originally proposed half male crab.

According to Division of Fish and Wildlife Acting Director H. Lloyd Alexander, the emergency action was taken as a conservation measure toward ensuring the future

DNREC Reduces 2003 Horseshoe Crab Harvest viability of the commercial horseshoe

crab fishery and related fisheries and industries dependent upon horseshoe crabs and their eggs. The regulations were also designed to provide adequate food for the migratory shorebirds that feed on horseshoe crab eggs during their stopover in Delaware Bay during May and early June.

The best scientific information about the population status of the horseshoe crabs suggests that the number of crabs in the bay has declined significantly since the early 1990s. Although their numbers may now be stable at a low level, the numbers are insufficient for responsible management. The three surveys conducted by Delaware to measure the number of horseshoe crabs recorded their lowest levels in 2002. The number of one population of shorebird, the red knot, that is dependent on horseshoe crab eggs to gain sufficient weight for one of the world's longest migrations, is at alarmingly low levels. Studies in both Delaware and New Jersey in 2002 to measure the abundance of horseshoe crab eggs on beaches showed declines that increased concern for the resources of the bay.

"Management of the horseshoe crab fishery has become more and more complex and this was a very difficult decision," said Alexander, "but after assessing all the information on this essential resource, we felt that action to better manage this year's spawning season was needed. Instituting the emergency regulations at this time is meant to increase the availability of eggs and the number of crabs spawning on Delaware's beaches in the future."

A variety of conservation groups petitioned the states of Delaware and New Jersey to place a moratorium on the taking of horseshoe crabs. In recognition of the economic base the crabs provide to watermen of both states, the emergency regulations were designed to allow a limited harvest that poses minimal risk to all of the resources involved. The emergency regulations will be followed this summer with standard regulations that will reconsider all of the available information and lay out a responsible course of management for future years. The emergency regulations were discussed at three public meetings in Delaware before their adoption.

Delaware is working with the State of New Jersey to take similar action to protect this shared resource of the Delaware Bay. It is also working with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and other Atlantic coast states to adopt conservation measures to better manage the resource.