

DELAWARE’S GOVERNOR RUTH ANN MINNER SAYS: “ERDG SHOULD BE COMMENDED . . .”

ERDG has sought and obtained funding for an initiative to greatly reduce the number of horseshoe crabs used as conch and eel bait. One of, if not the most, critical reasons for the decline in the horseshoe crab population are over harvesting by fishermen. Fishermen have historically used a whole horseshoe crab for bait in each of their conch and eel pots. ERDG initiated a program that allows fishermen to use fewer horseshoe crabs, complying with government restriction guidelines, without reducing their catch. This project involves using a bait bag within the conch and eel pots, whereby a portion of the crab can be used, rather than the entire crab, allowing conch and eel fishermen to extend use of the horseshoe crabs as bait. Who developed this and how does it work? More importantly: will it work?

Glenn Gauvry, President of ERDG, produced the bag after talking with a local fisherman at a bait workshop hosted by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. Specifically, Gauvry met Frank Eicherly, IV, a Milford conch fisherman, at the workshop. Mr. Eicherly told the group about a bait bag he developed and uses to stretch his supply of crabs. Mr. Eicherly stated that he had cut his supply of bait by 75 percent using the built-in bait “pocket” in his conch pot, that he developed. Gauvry was intrigued. He met with Mr. Eicherly and then went to work.

With the help of volunteers such as Gerry Butkus, Debra Rose, and many others, Gauvry manufactured 500 bags in 2000 and made them freely available to local fishermen. Gauvry spoke with Robert Fisher, also in attendance at the bait workshop, and a researcher at the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences Sea Grant Program, agreed

to use the bags in research tests for alternative bait they were conducting. Mr. Fisher found that fishermen could catch the same amount of conch using 50 percent less bait.

Gauvry freely distributed those first 500 bags in Virginia and Delaware and started a larger initiative this year. Today, Virginia requires the use of the bait bags for its conch fishermen. The intent is to provide bags to fishermen in Delaware, Maryland and New Jersey. This effort will produce lasting results. What's next?

We now know how the bait bag was developed and we know it will work. The next question is: Who will pick up the production of the bags? Through some diligent efforts, Gauvry successfully secured funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and the divisions of fisheries for Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey, to have the bags made at Kent/Sussex Industries. KSI is a nonprofit organization in Milford that employs people with disabilities. It is a sheltered workshop that allows individuals, who may not otherwise be able to work, to go out every day and be a productive member of the work force. Currently, workers at KSI are making 300 bags each day. A total of 7,000 are planned for this year alone.

Governor Ruth Ann Minner stated, "Kent Sussex Industries does an outstanding job and I am pleased that they are going to have the additional benefit of helping to conserve horseshoe crabs. ERDG is to be commended for working on solutions to this issue." Indeed, ERDG, Glenn Gauvry and volunteers should all be commended for this particular creative solution to an important conservation issues.