

## **Watermen resist horseshoe crab limits**

State plans to shorten season, cut harvests by half

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DOVER -- Delaware and New Jersey watermen vowed Friday to fight a proposal by regulators in both states to further restrict their horseshoe crab harvests.

Regulators said Thursday they plan to ban beach harvesting from May 1 to June 7 and to cap each state's harvest at roughly half of last year's landings.

Commercial fishermen say such a move will have a serious economic impact, not just for crab harvesters, but for the eel and conch fishermen who use the crabs for bait.

"There's a lot of people who aren't going to be able to fish this spring," said Slaughter Beach fisherman Charles Auman.

Fred Layton, a commercial fisherman from Goshen, N.J., said the harvest restrictions also will affect the flounder and striper fisheries. Watermen use horseshoe crabs as bait for minnows that are then used as flounder bait, and for eels used as striper bait, he said.

"It's going to have an adverse affect on the bait and tackle shops," warned Layton, who plans to express his objections to the New Jersey Marine Fisheries Council when it meets on Thursday.

"What are they going to do to compensate the New Jersey watermen and the Delaware watermen?" he asked.

The two states agreed to the harvest restrictions because of concerns about population declines in both the horseshoe crab and shorebirds - particularly the red knot - that feed upon its eggs. The bay is a primary spawning ground for the crabs and an important stopover for the red knot and other migratory shorebirds.

New Jersey and Delaware officials said they will implement the new restrictions through emergency regulations that will last through the spring harvest. They also plan to begin administrative proceedings to make the restrictions more permanent.

"I don't know what impact that will have on the fishery," said Alan Davis, chairman of Delaware's Shellfish Advisory Council. "I imagine it's going to be pretty dramatic."

Auman said he and Davis plan to meet with a representative of Gov. Ruth Ann Minner on Tuesday to express their concerns.

"They picked the best weeks and just threw us a little bone, gave us the end of the season and half the quota," Auman said. "... There's not hardly any crabs left on the beach after June seventh."

Minner spokesman Greg Patterson said the proposal is a compromise between those who favor no restrictions and those who want to ban the crab harvest altogether. Some environmental groups have called for a complete moratorium.

"It is clearly a middle ground," Patterson said.

Officials with the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control plan to hold a public meeting in a couple of weeks to present information about the harvest restrictions and accept public comment.

"It was not done lightly," said state fisheries administrator Roy Miller. "We're pretty sure that this is going to have pretty dramatic economic consequences for the harvesters of that resource. ... None of us are terribly happy about having to restrain our fishery to this extent."

While implementing their own restrictions, New Jersey and Delaware also have asked officials with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission to consider capping the 2003 crab harvest quota at 2001 levels coastwide.

At a meeting this week, members of the ASMFC's Horseshoe Crab Management Board said the proposal for coastwide quota reductions would have to go through an administrative process that includes a public hearing.

Miller said the board promised to put the proposal on the agenda for its June meeting.