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Report: Number of Blue Crabs in Bay Remains Below Long-Term Average

The Chesapeake Bay's blue crab population remained below the long-term average in 2007, according to a report approved by the NOAA-chaired Fisheries Steering Committee.

The population of spawning-age blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay in 2007-08 was 120 million, down from 143 million in 2006-07. The interim target population for spawning-age crabs is 200 million.

"The science provided by the Blue Crab Advisory Report is critical as state resource managers make decisions regarding the blue crab fishery," said Peyton Robertson, director of the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office. "This consistent and continued cooperative assessment by the bay jurisdictions, supported by a multiagency team of expert analysts, establishes a sound basis for making decisions that will determine the future of the crab population."

The 2008 Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab Advisory Report, developed by the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee, is based primarily on data collected by the 2007-08 bay-wide winter dredge survey, the most comprehensive and statistically robust annual blue crab survey conducted in the bay. The data also show:

- The abundance of crabs over five inches remained lower than historical levels.
- The number of juvenile blue crabs entering the population increased slightly from the previous year, but remained well below the average.
- The abundance of mature females, or spawning potential, was also found to be below average.

The 2007 bay-wide harvest of 43.5 million pounds was the lowest recorded since 1945. Based on the historical relationship between crab population and the following year's harvest, the 2008 harvest was expected to remove approximately 67 percent of the bay's adult crab population. These harvest levels are higher than a healthy crab population can sustain. New regulations were implemented by Maryland, Virginia, and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission in 2008 that are primarily designed to reduce fishing pressure on female crabs. These changes are expected to reduce the amount of crabs taken to near the target level.

The Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee includes fisheries scientists from universities, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service and the states of Maryland and Virginia. The Fisheries Steering Committee works with the various Bay management jurisdictions and is a forum where fisheries management agencies communicate and coordinate decisions across management boundaries.

The NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office focuses NOAA's capabilities in science, service, and stewardship to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay.

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On the Web:

Blue Crab Advisory Report: <http://chesapeakebay.noaa.gov>