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Contact: Anson Franklin

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Commerce Secretary Determines Blue Crab Disaster in Chesapeake Bay

U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez today determined that a decline in the harvest of soft shell and peeler blue crabs in Chesapeake Bay is a commercial fishery failure. The declaration is an important step in making watermen and their communities eligible for economic assistance.

The harvest value of soft shell and peeler blue crabs in Maryland and Virginia – both sold as soft shell crabs – has declined by 41 percent from the late 1990s.

“Watermen and their families in Maryland and Virginia who harvest blue crabs are being hit hard by this significant decline,” Gutierrez said. “This determination recognizes the importance of the blue crab harvest to the Chesapeake Bay community and the impact this decline is having on the regional economy.”

“This is great news for Maryland's watermen,” said Senator Barbara Mikulski, chairwoman of the Commerce, Justice and Science appropriations subcommittee that funds the Department of Commerce. “The disaster declaration means that Maryland is eligible for federal assistance to help the state as officials, industry and communities work to restore our crab population. I am proud to have worked with Secretary Gutierrez to reach this declaration.”

Blue crabs are harvested at three stages in their life cycle—as hard shell crabs, peeler crabs (just prior to molting), and soft shell crabs (immediately after the molt).

The governors of Maryland and Virginia requested that the Secretary of Commerce determine a disaster in the blue crab fishery. NOAA's Fisheries Service, which is part of the Department of Commerce, analyzed economic and biological information provided by the two states and by NOAA scientists and economists. The Secretary made this determination for a commercial fishery failure under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

“NOAA's Fisheries Service will continue to work closely with the states of Maryland and Virginia to assess the needs of crab fishermen and their communities,” said Jim Balsiger, NOAA acting assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. “Our scientists will also continue to cooperate with the states and local universities to provide the scientific information needed to manage the crab resources wisely.”

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