

# Chesapeake Bay's crab population up 60 percent

April 15 2010, By Timothy B. Wheeler

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The Chesapeake Bay's iconic blue crab population soared by 60 percent since last year, Maryland officials announced Wednesday.

Based on the annual winter dredge survey of [crabs](#) as they slumber on the bottom of the bay, Maryland and Virginia scientists estimate there to be 658 million crabs, the highest since 1997.

At the same time, officials reported last year's commercial crab harvest increased to 53.7 million pounds, which is below the safety threshold.

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley announced the results on the crab deck of an Eastern Shore restaurant, the Fisherman's Inn.

"This is a great day," O'Malley said. "Once decimated, this population is not only rebounding, but at its highest level in 10 years."

O'Malley said the crabs' recovery resulted from a coordinated set of catch restrictions that had been imposed by both Maryland and Virginia to reduce the harvest of female crabs over the last two years so that more of them could reproduce and rebuild the stock. The governor said the survey results validated officials' decision to curtail the catch in 2008.

Noting the uptick in harvest last year, O'Malley said the rebound was "a win not only for the environment, it's a win for the watermen" because they were able to catch more even under the restrictions.

The news was welcomed by Jack Brooks, co-owner of J.M. Clayton crab processing plant in Cambridge, Md. It came after lean years for the seafood industry. Brooks said he hoped the crabs' rebound would enable the state to begin easing the catch restrictions imposed in 2008.

But Maryland Natural Resources Secretary John Griffin said the state was unlikely to make any major changes soon. "Two years does not necessarily make a trend," Griffin said, adding that officials wanted to avoid a boom and bust in the crabbing industry that occurred in the 1990s.

The crab survey results and harvest estimates need to be reviewed by an independent panel of scientific experts, Griffin said, after which the state may make some minor modifications.

The catch restrictions had caused hardship and bitterness among the bay's watermen, who questioned the scientific basis for the cutbacks. The crabbing season was shortened in both states, and in Virginia, the traditional practice of dredging slumbering crabs from the bottom during winter was ended. Watermen in that state went to court in a vain attempt to overturn the ban, while some Maryland watermen inflated their catch reports, apparently attempting to stave off further catch curbs.

The restrictions were prompted by increasingly urgent warnings from scientists that the bay's [crab population](#) was dangerously close to collapse. They estimated that the number had declined by more than 70 percent in the previous 15 years.

The restrictions were aimed at reducing the catch of female crabs by a third, and ensuring that fewer than half of all the bay's crabs would be caught each year.

The federal government sought to soften the blow by declaring the crab

fishery a disaster and doling out \$30 million in financial aid to Maryland and Virginia. The states used the funds to hire watermen to rehabilitate oyster reefs and retrieve abandoned crabbing gear, and to buy back crab licenses in an effort to prevent future overfishing.

Wednesday's announcement is the second year of good news from the annual winter survey of crab abundance conducted by Maryland and Virginia scientists.

Last year, based on the number of slumbering crabs found when dredging at 1,500 spots around the bay, scientists estimated that the overall population had rebounded from a low of 280 million to slightly more than 400 million. The bulk of the increase came from a doubling in the number of female crabs, scientists said.

Scientists estimated the number of adult crabs last year reached 243 million, surpassing the 200 million target they had set for restoring the population. But they urged that catch restrictions be kept in place for another year or possibly two, noting that the abundance of young crabs still was below the long-term average.

The two states, meanwhile, have taken steps to reduce the potential for future overfishing by buying back unused crabbing licenses and curbing a future surge into the fishery. Maryland purchased more than 500 licenses for \$2,260 each, and put restrictions on remaining license holders who hadn't reported any catch in the past four years. Virginia bought a smaller number, but paid more to retire some active crab licenses.

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