

# Maryland denounces Virginia decision on winter crab fishery: 'A bad day if you care about blue crabs'

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Maryland officials and environmentalists are railing against a Virginia decision that could reopen a long-closed segment of that state's blue crab fishery.

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission voted 5-4 to repeal a prohibition on a [winter](#) dredge fishery for blue crabs, a ban that's been in place for about 15 years. As a result, staff members at the commission will explore reestablishing a winter fishery for the species.

Historically, the winter [season](#) allowed watermen at the mouth of the Chesapeake to dredge the bay bottom, scooping up semi-dormant crabs buried beneath the mud for warmth during the coldest months of the year. The practice was halted in the 2000s as the crab population faltered.

In a statement, Maryland Department of Natural Resources Secretary Josh Kurtz said Virginia's decision was ill-advised and poorly timed.

"A decision of this magnitude should have only been made with the support of scientists, in close consultation with Maryland officials, and in response to a significant increase in the blue [crab population](#)," Kurtz wrote.

"It's a bad day if you care about blue crabs."

The latest blue crab survey from this winter found blue crab abundance held fairly steady in the Chesapeake Bay relative to 2023, but the number was still below average. Continued low numbers of juvenile crabs have prompted concern, and the number of female crabs in the bay this winter (estimated at 133 million) was below a target of 196 million crabs.

Staff members of the Virginia commission recommended against reopening the winter season. In a presentation, they highlighted that during the 1998–1999 winter dredge harvest in Virginia, harvesters removed about 32% of the total female crabs estimated to be in the Bay when the season began. About 96% of the crabs caught during that

winter season were female.

Maintaining the stock of female crabs is considered critical to the species' longevity, and much of the fishing regulations focus on protecting them. The first-ever bushel limits for male crabs came in 2022, after worrisome survey results for the species. The 2022 survey estimated the lowest number of blue crabs in the Chesapeake in any one year since the effort began in 1990.

Environmental groups opposed to the winter season, including the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, argue that although the crab numbers have rebounded since then, the population remains too shaky to give more leeway to harvesters.

Zach Widgeon, a spokesman for the commission, called its decision "very preliminary," since it does not actually establish the winter fishery, adding that it isn't time to sound any alarms.

The vote allows commission staff to explore the viability of a winter fishery that could begin as soon as this winter, if approved. At the commission's next meeting in September, the staff members will present their findings, Widgeon said.

It's very likely that, if a winter fishery is reestablished, it will differ from the winter seasons 15 years ago, Widgeon said. Historically, the dredge season ran from Dec. 1 to March 31, but it could be shorter this time around. Some stakeholders have suggested a January-February season, Widgeon said, to help sustain crab-picking houses during the winter.

"This is not the winter dredge that it was in 2008," Widgeon said.

It's also likely that a dredge season will include fewer participants, meaning it would not remove as many crabs as the 1998 season,

Widgeon said.

"While this historical data is useful in evaluating the full scale of effort during the historical winter dredge fishery, current viability will be determined using current data and harvest targets in line with bay-wide management goals," Widgeon wrote in an email.

Even so, the prospect of reopening the winter dredge harvest for blue crabs has attracted concern. Of the 186 individuals and groups that shared comments with the commission about the idea, all 186 were against it.

In 2008, when the Chesapeake Bay blue crab came under a federal fishery disaster declaration due to dire population numbers, Virginia's winter dredge fishery was seen as "one of the biggest culprits" to remove to help the species recover, said Allison Colden, Maryland executive director of the bay foundation, which also released a statement condemning Virginia's decision.

Reinstating the season now, with the blue crab stock unsteady again, seems like a poor decision, Colden said.

"Based on all the information we had going into today's meeting, it was entirely expected and logical that this would not move forward, considering all of the recommendations and sentiments against it," Colden said.

The decision is also poorly timed, argued Kurtz in his statement, because officials are beginning a comprehensive stock assessment for the blue crab. It will explore the reasons for lower-than-hoped juvenile and female numbers, and evaluate new environmental stressors such as warming waters and ravenous invasive blue catfish.

"The success of the species' recovery after a steep decline in the 2000s can be directly traced to Maryland and Virginia cooperatively managing [blue crabs](#), especially females, based on science," Kurtz wrote.

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