

BLUE CRAB

Stock Status – Concern – Increased concern, for the health of the stock and fishery, is due to reduced landings of hard blue crabs during 2000-2002 and 2004-2007, following record-high landings observed during 1996–1999. The 2009 fishery yielded the fourth lowest landings during the 10-year period of 2000-2009. Harvests from the Pamlico/Core sounds and tributaries continue to remain significantly below historical contribution levels.

Average Commercial Landings and Value - 2000-2009 – 32,195,157 lbs./\$27,793,620
(Includes Hard, Soft, and Peeler Crab Landings and Value)

2009 Commercial Landings and Value – 29,380,887 lbs./\$27,195,701

North Carolina's (N.C.'s) most valuable commercial fishery and ranks first in pounds harvested. Landings for 2009 declined 3.5 million pounds from 2008 levels; however, harvests were still above the low levels observed in 2005-2007. Again, the Albemarle Sound area accounted for the majority of the landings (67%). The 2009 fishery yielded the fourth lowest landings during the 10-year period of 2000-2009. Overall value decreased \$350,000 from 2008 levels, yielding the fifth lowest value during the 10-year period. Although, harvest effort (crab pot trips) during 2009 increased significantly (15%) compared to 2008 (i.e., 47,215 vs. 54,440 trips), hard crab landings decreased (10.8%) from 32.3 million pounds in 2008 to 28.8 million pounds in 2009. Peeler/soft crab landings declined only 2% from 2008 levels, with 2009 yielding the lowest harvest in the 10-year period, 2000-2009. Cooler spring-time water temperature and higher salinities were probable factors in the peeler/soft crab reduction; causing crabs to move further inland and away from the traditional crabbing areas.

Status of Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) – The North Carolina FMP was adopted by the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission in December 1998. Amendment 1 to the FMP was completed in December 2004. Development of Amendment 2 of the Blue Crab FMP is in progress and scheduled for completion some time in 2011.

Research and Data Needs – Fishery-independent index of abundance, recreational landings estimates, fishery effort and economics, and the impact of environmental factors on behavior and abundance. Additional research and data needs are listed in the 2004 FMP.

Current Regulations – 5 inches from tip of spike to tip of spike, for male and immature female hard crabs. For crabs less than the minimum size, a tolerance of not more than 10% by number in any container shall be allowed. Mature females, soft and peeler crabs, and male crabs (March 1- October 31) to be used as peeler bait are exempt from the minimum size limit. Seasonal Maximum Size Limit - When the spawning stock is determined by fishery independent surveys to be abnormally low, the Director may prohibit the harvest of mature female blue crabs greater than 6¾ inches (5% tolerance) and female peeler crabs greater than 5¼ inches from September 1 through April 30. This maximum size limit was enacted for the first time in January 2006.

Harvest Season – Year round.

Size and Age at Maturity – 5-6 inches/12-18 months

Historical and Current Maximum Age – 5-8 years/2-4 years

Juvenile Abundance Index – 7.29 crabs (size = 0-60mm) per minute for the 1987-1998 juvenile trawl survey (unvalidated). Juvenile Index for 2008 and 2009 was 8.1 and 7.8. Despite variability in abundance from this annual survey, there is no general downward or upward trend in recruitment.

Habits and Habitats – Migration and movement among various habitats are seasonal, depending on life stage, sex, maturity, and associated salinity preferences. Many different habitats are used during migrations from high-salinity ocean waters to the lower-salinity and freshwaters of the coastal sounds, rivers, and creeks.

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