

TCC CRAB SUBCOMMITTEE MINUTES (DRAFT)

Gulf Shores, Alabama

Tuesday, October 15, 2024

Chairman Saucier called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. with the following in attendance:

Members

(Chair) Jason Saucier, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Peyton Cagle, LDWF, Lake Charles, LA
Jason Herrmann, ALDMR, Dauphin Island, AL
Harriet Perry, USM GCRL, Ocean Springs, MS
Zach Olsen, TPWD, Corpus Christi, TX

C. McIntyre
APPROVED BY:
COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

Others

Julie Lively, LA Sea Grant, Baton Rouge, LA
Nan Steedley, Alabama Dept. of Public Health, Montgomery, AL
Daniel Childs, Alabama Dept. of Public Health, Montgomery, AL
Tim Bower, Alabama Dept. of Public Health, Montgomery, AL
Robert Caballou, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Traci Floyd, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Eric Sparks, MS-AL Sea Grant, Ocean Springs, MS
Scott Bannon, ADCNR, Dauphin Island, AL
Douglass Boyd, Commissioner, TX

Staff

Dave Donaldson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Steve VanderKooy, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Keith Wilson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS

Adoption of Agenda

After introductions were made, Saucier asked the committee to review the agenda for adoption or any changes. *Cagle moved to adopt the meeting agenda as written, and Olsen seconded the motion. The agenda was unanimously adopted.*

Approval of Minutes

The subcommittee reviewed minutes from the October 2023 meeting in New Orleans. *Cagle moved to accept the minutes from October 2023 as presented. Herrmann seconded the motion, and the minutes were approved.*

Terrapin/Bycatch Issues

Saucier discussed a letter from the Center for Biological Diversity regarding a Public Records Act Request to MDMR for Blue Crab traps and Diamondback Terrapin. The request was first reported in 2022 by McIntyre (FWC), and now every state has received similar information requests and responded by providing whatever data and information was readily available. It is unclear what the intent of the requests are at this time but the Center for Biological Diversity had made some inroads into Florida with turtle excluders following the original request to FWC. Cagle mentioned that MSC is in

the process of discussed recertification of the Louisiana Blue Crab fishery which had some concerns over the Diamondback Terrapin status in Louisiana but he does not believe this letter is building a case against MSC certification.

State Recreational License Fee Structure and Regulations

Saucier asked for this to be added to the agenda prior to this meeting with a purpose of asking each state for more information. Mississippi is the only state that requires a recreational crab trap license and **Saucier** wondered how the other states were handling the wide variety of gear used to harvest Blue crabs. Each member provided some of their licensing info as they relate to recreational harvest.

Saucier also explained that Mississippi has unknown effort at the barrier islands during mid- to late Summer when female crabs migrate toward offshore. There are a number of people who are dip netting Blue Crabs with no limits and no license requirements. Each state explained which gears required a minimum of a saltwater fishing license. All noted that there is still limited sampling of catches from recreational participants targeting Blue Crabs and very little information on recreational effort other than from traps.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) Review

VanderKooy reviewed his updates to the Subcommittee's SOPs which were identified with red text. These are minor changes from the approved 2023 SOPs just to match to current GMSFC meeting schedule and election of officers. The draft was emailed to the Subcommittee with not much response from members. The changes were:

Section 6. Meetings:

- A. The Crab Subcommittee meetings may "be held twice a year: one in the spring (virtual or in-person if necessary) and one in coordination with the annual GSMFC meeting" ... This allows the subcommittee to meet if needed, and definitely meet at the annual meeting in October.
- C. "50 percent" defines what amount of voting members constitutes a quorum.
- D. At the last meeting of "an even numbered" year, elections shall be held, at which time a chairman and vice-chairman will be "elected for next two years".

Cagle moved to approve the changes for the Crab Subcommittee Standard Operating Procedure, and be presented to the TCC. Perry seconded the motion, and the SOP was unanimously adopted by the Subcommittee.

State Reports

A summary of written reports was provided by the state agency representatives serving on the Subcommittee. These state reports, which copies were distributed to members and other attendees, explained derelict trap clean-ups and updates to the respective states' fishery.

Olsen reported that the Texas cleanup this past year was from February 16-25. During that time, 1,198 traps were removed by 241 volunteers with 65 boats. With regard to the landings, they were relatively unchanged from 2023. Based on TPWD fishery independent catch rates, coastwide relative abundance of Blue Crabs has shown significant declines since the 1980s. This trend is generally consistent in all Texas bays. While these trends have largely stabilized since the early 2010's, juvenile abundances continue to remain low despite increasing adults in some of their independent sampling. **Olson** noted that even though landings have been declining, values have been increasing slightly since 2015. Texas landings in 2023 were slightly lower than 2022 at 2,223,069 lbs and worth \$3,859,412 US dollars. In 2024, TPWD had 130 Blue Crab license holders with 172 licenses (a person may not hold or control more than three licenses). TPWD received two bids for Blue Crab license buybacks this year but did not purchase any of those licenses. **Olson** noted two upcoming university research projects; one looking potential management actions to address crab population declines (Dr. Hui Liu, Texas A&M University-Galveston), and another looking at imaging of plankton and stable isotopes to identify crab megalops moving into the estuaries (Dr. Sharon Herzka, University of Texas Marine Science Institute).

Cagle indicated that in 2023, Louisiana faced severe drought and saltwater intrusion into the Mississippi River. In addition, Louisiana experienced maximum daily temperatures exceeding 32.2°C for 99 consecutive days between June and September of that year. As a result, commercial blue crab landings were negatively impacted with the increased water temperatures and salinities across coastal Louisiana. Preliminary indications are that landings have fallen to below 40M lb from July 2023 to June 2024 and dockside value declined as well. However, the price per pound for Louisiana Blue Crab was above the previous 5-year average. Landings during the FY24 totaled 36.1M lb with a dockside value of approximately \$69.3M.

Louisiana held their 2024 trap cleanup and closure in Barataria Basin, Terrebonne Basin, Mermantau Basin, Vermilion-Teche Basin, and two in the Pontchartrain Basin from February 1-14. The Ponchartrain Basin closed again February 26 - March 6. A total 2,142 traps were removed from the closure areas. MSC presented their final report for recertification of the Louisiana Blue Crab fishery in March 2024 and recommended continued certification with two new conditions being issued related to Diamondback Terrapin status and management. An update assessment for Blue Crabs is scheduled to take place in spring 2025.

Saucier reported that in 2023-2024, there were 148 resident and 21 non-resident commercial crab trap licenses in Mississippi. Additionally, there were 70 resident and 1 non-resident commercial crab trawl licenses. A total of 866,266 lb of Blue Crabs were landed in 2023 with a dockside value of approximately \$1.67M. In 2024, a total of 877,630 lb have been landed through the end of August with a dockside value of approximately \$1.9M. He noted that 2024 is on target to be the highest year for landings and value. MDMR has distributed 80,772 escape rings (TEDs) through September 2024 at no cost to licensed resident crab fishermen while current supplies last. In the recreational fishery, a total of 576 resident and 118 non-resident licenses were sold this year. A public derelict trap cleanup was held in February and 398 traps were removed from Mississippi waters. The MDMR staff removed an additional 126 traps as well in 2024. **Saucier** also discussed the various fishery-independent sampling protocols that the MDMR has tested, modified and adopted over the last few years targeting Blue Crabs. Some of these were funded through the Commission's SuRF program. They include a transect

survey using commercial crab traps, a variety of trawls smaller than the traditional 16' FAM trawls, and new locations for additional bag seine stations all of which are focused in Biloxi Bay. **Perry** asked if MDMR would be doing a sampling in the western Mississippi sound. **Saucier** responded that this will be kept in one location, and they are limited in resources both staff and funding.

Herrmann summarized his report indicating that AMRD hosted a volunteer derelict crab pot cleanup with the aid of the Coastal Conservation Association May 3-4 this past spring. Volunteer kayakers marked derelict crab traps on the shallow flats of the Mobile Tensaw Delta and other volunteers recovered a total of 31 derelict crab traps. A new cleanup is being proposed for the 2025. **Herrmann** reported that the AMRD does not track bycatch in the volunteer cleanups any longer and terrapins were only available from 2002, 2004, and 2006. **Saucier** said Mississippi doesn't have a way to report terrapin interactions either.

VanderKooy helped review the Florida report which **McIntyre** had provided prior to the meeting. Florida's landings through 2023 suggest a continuation of landings volume below its historic average, beginning in 2001. It was noted that the 2021-2023 landings were the lowest since 2009 and appear to follow the historical cycle of 5-10-year intervals of landings "lows" and "highs". The damage sustained by Hurricane Helene in September 2024 will likely impact effort and landings in NW Florida counties through the end of the year. The catch-per-unit-effort (pounds per trip) of Florida Gulf Coast landings has remained relatively stable since 2012 but peaked in 2018 and 2019. The catch-per-unit-effort of the softshell fishery has decreased since peak landings in 2009. Florida does not collect recreational blue crab landings. Fishery-independent and -dependent monitoring began in January of 2024 in the Crystal River and Steinhatchee areas of Florida but Hurricane Helene has temporarily suspended these efforts and may require adjustments to sampling locations. Florida did not hold a trap cleanup along the Gulf coast in 2024 since they alternate between coasts on even and odd years. They will plan one in 2025. They did collect stone crab traps from the South Florida and the Keys however in 2024, just not Blue Crab traps.

Saucier discussed GOMA funding. **VanderKooy** explained and updated the Total Derelict Crab Trap Removal spreadsheet and will continue to update as more information is provided by the State agencies. **Saucier** says in Mississippi (Jackson County) they are looking at areas (30 meters wide) and look for gear that might have washed up. Only 12 retrieved traps were counted in these areas. DMR will begin to move west on this program and public cleanups. **Olsen** explained that in Texas they used GOMA funding to cover Christmas Bay with drone imagery to identify crab traps. Sonar mapping will be used for this effort going forward.

The following is the total number of Blue Crabs removed from each state through 2024. Total Derelict Crab Trap Removals - Bold indicates the first year with volunteers (NP = no program in place)

	FLORIDA	ALABAMA	MISSISSIPPI	LOUISIANA	TEXAS	Total
1999			352*			352
2000			1097*			1,097
2001			393*			393
2002	NP	438	605*	NP	8,070	9,113
2003	NP	1,084	1,818	NP	3,858	6,760
2004	138	418	856	6,894	3,571	11,877
2005	288	na	-	4,623	2,509	7,420
2006	879	346	-	2,935	1,922	6,082
2007	NP	154	11,150	1,495	2,816	15,615
2008	NP	356	1,259	1,234	1,301	4,150
2009	4,189	-	438*	788	1,927	7,342
2010	2	287	431	477	1,588	2,785
2011	1,479	na	108*	1,100	1,491	4,178
2012	139	-	122*	2,798	499	3,558
2013	176	-	281	969	877	2,303
2014	-	-	14*	1,051	788	1,853
2015	1,037	-	78*	422	556	2,093
2016	30		2,542	2,580	912	6,064
2017	94	84	145 * ^a	5,674	1,115	7,112
2018		64	42*	4,061	1,661	5,828
2019		114	1,556 ^b	4,041	1,089	6,800
2020		-	1,037 * ^b	4,188	2,023	7,248
2021	719		917 ^b	5,163	1,561	8,360
2022			334 * ^b	815	1,258	2,407
2023	453		431 * ^b	3,974	1,308	6,149
2024		31	524	2,142	1,198	3,895
total	9,623	3,376	26,530	57,424	43,898	140,834

* indicates no public program but state driven

** no state run program but NGO's held small cleanups

** no cleanup on Florida Gulf coast but NGO's held small cleanups

a ????

^b includes MSU extension cleanups (shrimpers)

Election

Saucier opened the floor to nominations for Chair of the Subcommittee with term beginning 2025 and ending 2027. **Cagle** nominated **McIntyre** for Chair, which was seconded by **Saucier**. No other nominations were made by the subcommittee, and **McIntyre** was approved by acclamation despite being absent from the meeting. **Saucier** then opened the floor to nominations for Vice Chair of the Subcommittee with term beginning 2025 and ending 2027. **Perry** nominated **Olsen** to Vice Chair, and **Saucier** seconded the nomination. **Olsen** accepted the nomination of Vice Chair, and with no other nominations, **Olsen** was elected Vice Chair by acclamation.

Other Business

Julie Lively with Louisiana Sea Grant requested help from the Subcommittee to provide whatever historical information they could for a Sea Grant book on the history of the Blue Crab fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. Lively reported that her colleagues have been writing the history for some time and because information is sparse and includes all five of the states, it has been difficult to target reliable sources. **VanderKooy** suggested contacting the Biloxi Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum, and the state reps would reach out with their own suggestions following the meeting. There may also be some video interviews with commercial fishermen that could overlap with the old crabbers.

Saucier asked about the status of the outreach videos being produced by GOMA as part of their derelict trap funding. **VanderKooy** said he would check for information from GOMA and add that to one of the Subcommittee's 2025 meetings. Other possible presentations were discussed.

Adjournment

*A motion to adjourn was made by **Cagle** and seconded by **Olsen**. The subcommittee meeting adjourned at 11:29 a.m.*