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Saving the Crab -- and the Watermen

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Concerns over low crab populations have led the governors of Maryland and Virginia to announce a coordinated approach to reducing the harvest of female blue crabs [Metro, April 16]. In response, watermen have warned that their limited incomes and iconic way of life would be further jeopardized by these regulations.

There have been better times for the crab and the watermen. Between 1980 and 2000, more than 80 million pounds of crabs were harvested annually from the Chesapeake Bay, almost twice the meager 2007 harvest. We believe it is possible to return to a higher, sustainable harvest level while increasing watermen's income by \$30 million to \$40 million annually.

Currently, regulations restrict when, where and how crabbers work to meet a nonbinding harvest target. The hope is that these restrictions will keep harvests from exceeding the target. The emergency regulations are evidence that this approach has repeatedly failed. An alternative is needed:

- First, both states must continue the winter crab survey that provides accurate estimates of the crab population at the beginning of each season. The survey would be used to set a baywide harvest quota: a harvest cap. Once a quota program was adopted and enforced, we believe that the bay's crab population would increase. And, because the quota would change each year, allowable harvests would increase as the crab population recovered.

- Second, we propose that the total annual quota be divided among licensed watermen, giving each a guaranteed share of the harvest. The watermen would report their catch, and the agencies would ensure that each waterman caught only his allotted share. There would be no gold rush mentality under which every waterman aggressively seeks to catch crabs before others do. Because their shares of the harvest would be guaranteed, watermen could fish when and how they chose. Also, the quota shares could be bought and sold. The most efficient harvesters could pay others for their share of the quota, and in the end the total quota of crabs would be caught using fewer pots and less fuel and bait than is used today.

Such quota-share programs are sometimes viewed with skepticism. There are legitimate concerns about the initial allocation of quotas and the takeover of the fisheries by a small number of large operators. But these issues have been addressed in other fisheries.

Agencies are concerned about increased needs for harvest monitoring and enforcement. Jurisdictions don't have enough resources to enforce the current regulatory regime, so investment in enforcement must be addressed regardless. New techniques for tracking crab pots and boats and the use of computerized harvest reporting might ease these concerns.

Some might be reluctant to focus management efforts on enhancing watermen's income. But this is a commercial fishery; we cannot separate how management affects the welfare of crabbers from the health of the crab population. Moreover, our desire to preserve the crabbing tradition of the region requires that management strategies promote a viable industry.

What next?

A few years ago, Virginia and Maryland created a bi-state advisory body for crab management. One significant result was the coordinated winter surveys for assessing the crab population. It's time for another bi-state forum in which watermen, managers, scientists and other stakeholders can design a plan for a sustainable crab harvest. A collaborative process could create an equitable, enforceable annual quota as well as an approach to allocating that quota to ensure that the watermen can make a living.

We call on the governors, now that they have acted in response to the immediate crisis, to convene this forum and instruct it to fully design such a long-term management program.

-- Doug Lipton

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-- Tom Miller

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-- Len Shabman

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