Arundel Rivers FEDERATION

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Committee: Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs
Legislation: SB 257
Position: FAVORABLE
Date: January 29, 2020

Dear Chairman Pinsky and Members of the Committee:

The Arundel Rivers Federation requests a favorable report for SB257, a common sense, yet overdue, measure to prevent the needless killing of marine life in our State's waterways.

Introduction

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that there are as many as 145,000 derelict crab pots littering the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay, with about 58,000 of these in Maryland waters.[1] The study authors estimate that these "ghost" crab pots are responsible for the needless death of approximately 3.3 million crabs each year, or about 4.5% of the total annual fishery product.[2]

Recognizing the magnitude of the problem, Maryland and Virginia have each instituted programs for removal of ghost crab pots. NOAA's study estimates that Maryland's removal program has given back approximately 8 million lbs of crabs to the State, at a value of $10.9 million over the study period (2008-2014). Put another way, each ghost pot taken out of the water adds another 868 lbs to the Bay-wide harvest. [3]

Senate bill 257 would alleviate this problem by requiring that the Department of Natural Resources implement regulations requiring the use of biodegradable panels on crab traps that would dissolve after a certain amount of time in the water, thereby preventing the unintentional trapping and killing of marine life, and putting value back into the fishery.

Harm to Marine Life

In addition to the waste of 3.3 million crabs each year, bycatch from ghost crab pots kills thousands of other aquatic organisms, from diamondback terrapins to diving birds to marine mammals, and several species of finfish, including oyster toadfish, Atlantic croaker, black sea bass, American eel, white perch and catfish.[4] Scientists from the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences estimate that of ghost traps recovered through efforts of Virginia watermen, 83% of croaker, 63% of black sea bass are killed by such bycatch. For diamondback terrapin, 98% of terrapins recovered from ghost pots had died.

[1] Available at: https://marinedebris.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/publications-files/DFG_Effects_Chesapeake_Bay_Final_Report_2016.pdf
[2] *Id.*
[3] *Id.*
[4] *See* Bilkovic, D.M., et al., Derelict fishing gear in Chesapeake Bay, Virginia: Spatial patterns and implications for marine fauna. Mar. Pollut. Bull. (2014). Available at: http://ccrm.vims.edu/marine_debris_removal/publications/MPB_Bilkovic_etal2014.pdf

Economic Factors

In 2017, the value of Maryland's crab fishery was $53.7 million.[5] Considering that derelict crab pots are killing off 4.5% of the blue crabs that could otherwise be caught, that means they are costing the fishery approximately $2,416,500 each year. Divide that figure by the number of outstanding commercial crabbing licenses, and the return should easily outweigh the cost of retrofitting existing crab pots with ghost panels, which cost an estimated $1/each.[6]

Conclusion

Senate bill 257 is an important step toward managing our blue crab fishery in a more intelligent way, delivering higher catch rates to watermen, while at the same time limiting the needless killing of marine life. Accordingly, Arundel Rivers Federation urges a favorable report.

Respectfully submitted,

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[5] https://www.delmarvanow.com/story/news/local/maryland/2018/08/09/consumers-paying-more-maryland-crab-heres-why/848371002/
[6] https://www.mdsg.umd.edu/news/biodegradable-materials-may-take-scare-out-ghost-fishing