

# Study shows blue crabs on the rise in Bay

By **BOBBY MCMAHON**  
Staff Writer

**GRASONVILLE** — The Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab has rebounded to its highest level since 1997, according to a Bay-wide study conducted over the winter. The results of the study were announced by Gov. Martin O'Malley and others at a press conference at Fisherman's Inn on Wednesday, April 14.

"We are here to announce that despite the cynicism, despite the hopelessness, despite the thought that our best days were behind us in terms of the health and the abundance of the Chesapeake Bay, that we can actually have crabs and have them more abundantly right here in Maryland," O'Malley said.

The winter dredge survey, conducted by the state's Department of Natural Resources and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, estimated the crab population had risen about 60 percent from last year to a population of 658 million. The survey, which is considered by state officials to be an accurate estimate as well an excellent predictor of the upcoming harvest, also found that reproduction has increased.

The results of the survey were trumpeted by a bevy of elected officials and advocacy organizations.

"This shows us with some good news that we greatly need that the Bay can be saved," said Will Baker, president of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

"This is very good news for watermen and for those who are committed to restoring the health of the Bay," said U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin, D-Md., in a statement. "It shows that strong, positive action can bring about significant improvement to

the Bay's ecosystem."

State officials pointed to several reforms to explain the increase, including a cap in the percentage of crabs that can be harvested each year as well as more collaboration with Virginia to reduce the harvesting of female crabs.

"We have a history between the Marylanders and the Virginians, sometimes, of fighting over these waters — let's be honest," O'Malley said. "But this is one of those days that we can celebrate the fact that we've actually rolled up our sleeves and actually improved the health of these waters."

Bunky Chance, president of the Talbot Watermen's Association, said that efforts to stop Virginia from allowing harvest of female crabs were crucial.

"We've been after Virginia for I don't know how long," Chance said. "As a shared resource, Maryland and Virginia have done a good job of holding back."

But more generally, Chance said that the state regulations should strike a balance between the ecological benefits of having more crabs and the economic needs of watermen.

"The watermen have paid a steep, steep price," Chance said.

Jack Brooks, president of the Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association, said at the press conference that he hoped this good news would mean that the state may ease up on some of the restrictions on crab harvesting to help watermen and the seafood industry. But Secretary John Griffin of the Department of Natural Resources said that they may only make "minor modifications" to the regulations.



PHOTO BY BOBBY MCMAHON

Governor Martin O'Malley announces the Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab population is at its highest level since 1997. Behind him, from left, are Jack Brooks, president of the Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association, Department of Natural Resources Secretary John Griffin, Lynn Fegley of the Department of Natural Resources and Chesapeake Bay Foundation President Will Baker.

"Two years does not necessarily make a trend, Griffin said. "We want to avoid some of the boom and the bust of the past."

State officials also pointed to the fact that the crab harvest across the Bay had risen in the last two years to 53.7 million pounds in 2009 as evidence that the restrictions were helpful for crabs as well as watermen.

During his remarks at the press conference, O'Malley also touched on his administration's plan to rebuild the oyster population as a continuation of their efforts to clean up the Bay. But Del. Richard Sossi, R-36-Queen Anne's, said the lessons learned from the crab rebound may not apply to oysters, arguing against calls for a moratorium on oyster harvesting.

In echoing the comments of nearly everyone gathered, though, Sossi saw the survey results as a positive sign for the crab population and said that the state should stick with the plan to see what develops. As for this crab season (which started April 1), Chance has high hopes.

"A lot of people place a lot of stock in this upcoming crab season, myself included," Chance said.

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