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**Chesapeake's blue crab population supports healthy fishery**  
*New report recommends continued work to sustain crab population*

Chesapeake Bay blue crabs are continuing to show signs of rebounding even though this year's numbers dropped compared to last year's, and currently support a healthy commercial and recreational fishery, according to the 2011 Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab Advisory Report released today. The report recommends continued work to sustain robust crab populations over the long term, with a particular focus on protecting female crabs.

The report was developed by the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee, which is composed of NOAA fisheries scientists and representatives from academia and state governments. It is based on data collected in the 2010-11 bay-wide winter dredge survey and the 2011 Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab Stock Assessment. The data show:

- Bay-wide, numbers of juvenile crabs entering the population dropped from an estimated 345 million juvenile crabs in 2010 to 207 million in 2011. While this seems like a large drop, this number varies widely from year to year; in 2009, the number was 179 million. Much of the loss during the winter of 2011 was due to severely colder winter water temperatures, which hit before crabs were able to burrow into the mud for protection, resulting in the death of many crabs.
- Harvestable blue crabs—those over the age of one year—were down 19 percent from the 2010 estimate of 315 million to 254 million. However, this is well above the 1990-2010 average annual blue crab population of 192 million.
- Because the blue crab season extends into December, final numbers on what percent of the bay's blue crab population was harvested by commercial and recreational fishermen in 2011 are not yet available. (In 2010, 91.6 million pounds of crabs were harvested from the bay and its tributaries—the largest harvest since 1994, and 22 percent higher than the long-term average of 75 million pounds. Even with the higher harvest, fishing in 2010 remained well below the allowable level for the third consecutive year.)

While observing that blue crabs are making a healthy comeback in the Chesapeake, the advisory report recommends that conservation measures continue. The report suggests the management agencies work to increase the number of blue crabs in the bay to 215 million female crabs, and roughly 200 million male crabs. Building the crab population to the suggested new target population levels would ensure that blue crabs are sufficiently abundant so as to not suffer too great a loss from challenges like a dramatic cold snap.

This echoes the recommendation in the recent Chesapeake Bay Blue Crab Stock Assessment, a major, internationally peer-reviewed scientific report funded by NOAA that was released in August. The jurisdictions that manage blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay will use science from these reports to help guide their decisions as they draft regulations for 2012.

"The recent history of blue crabs in the bay is a success story about resource managers using the best science available to rebuild blue crab stocks," said Peyton Robertson, director of the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office. "NOAA is delighted to provide important science that is helping managers ensure that the future looks bright for this iconic species."

“We are going to be paying careful attention to the performance of the 2011 fishery relative to the new female-specific reference points. This is one of the things we’ll need to evaluate as we plan measures for the 2012 fishery,” said Lynn Fegley of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, current chair of the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee.

“The Virginia Marine Resources Commission is committed to doing what it takes to rebuild the bay’s blue crab population with our partners in Maryland and NOAA,” said VMRC Commissioner Steven G. Bowman. “We are pleased with the progress that has been made so far, but the science dictates there is much more work to be done to achieve a robust stock that can weather reproductive setbacks and provide large, sustainable harvests for generations to come.”

The advisory report, posted at [www.chesapeakebay.noaa.gov](http://www.chesapeakebay.noaa.gov), is set to be formally approved by the Chesapeake Bay Program’s Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team at a meeting December 19-20 in Alexandria, Va. The Goal Implementation Team, chaired by Peyton Robertson, director of the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office, provides a forum to discuss fishery management issues that cross state and other jurisdictional boundaries and better connect sound science to management decision making.

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