

Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan Amendment 3

April 2020



The N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC) adopted Amendment 3 of the Blue Crab FMP to rebuild the blue crab stock and also implemented additional stock and habitat protection measures. The stock assessment determined the Blue Crab stock is overfished and overfishing is occurring. State law requires management actions be taken to end overfishing within 2 years and recover the stock from an overfished condition within 10 years. To meet these legal requirements the Division determined that reductions in commercial harvest were necessary. The resulting management measures were approved by the MFC on February 20, 2020, and are described here. For full details please refer to the Division's website (<http://portal.ncdenr.org/web/mf/home>).

Blue Crab Management Changes Adopted in Amendment 3

- Season closures (pot closure periods) will be:
 - Jan. 1-31 north of the Highway 58 bridge to Emerald Isle
 - March 1-15 south of the Highway 58 bridge
- Possession of blue crabs prohibited during season closure period
- A 5-inch minimum size limit for mature female crabs statewide
- The adaptive management framework was revised
- Remove all cull ring exempted areas
- New crab spawning sanctuaries established in Beaufort, Bogue, Bear, Browns, New River, Topsail, Rich, Mason, Masonboro, Carolina Beach, Cape Fear River, Shallotte, Lockwoods Folly, and Tubbs inlets with a March 1-Oct. 31 closure.
- Crab trawls prohibited in areas where shrimp trawls are already prohibited in the Pamlico, Pungo, and Neuse rivers.
- Crab bycatch allowance in oyster dredges reduced to 10% of the total weight of the combined oyster and crab catch or 100 pounds, whichever is less.
- Criteria were approved for designating Diamondback Terrapin Management Areas where use of approved terrapin excluders will be required.

Water quality issues affecting blue crabs will be addressed by working with other commissions and state agencies

Diamondback Terrapin Management Areas

The MFC approved criteria for designating Diamondback Terrapin Management Areas (DMTAs) where use of approved terrapin excluder device will be required. To establish DMTAs, the division shall produce an information paper, present to the appropriate regional advisory committees for input, issue a press release to the public, and hold a 30-day public comment period. Proposed areas will then be presented to the MFC for final approval. The division will issue a proclamation and mark boundaries of DMTAs at least one month prior to the effective date.

Habitat & Water Quality

The MFC recognizes that habitat and water quality are important factors for blue crabs. Steps they would like to take to address both include:

- Highlighting problem areas and advising other regulatory agencies on preferred options and potential solutions
- Create a joint interagency working group for monitoring and restoring water quality
- Support the Clean Water Act
- Task the CHPP steering committee to prioritize blue crab habitat and water quality impacts.
- Send letters to other agencies regarding concerns and invite them to future NCMFC meetings to present on water quality efforts
- Increase public outreach

Importance of Crab Spawning Sanctuaries

Mature female blue crabs require high-salinity waters to spawn, making inlets an important habitat. Blue crab mating peaks in April-June and August-September. Females then migrate to inlets, often overwintering in the soft bottom. Seasonal gear restrictions reduce negative impacts on migrating and spawning females. Sanctuaries are closed to

the use of trawls, pots, mechanical methods for oysters and clams, and to the taking of crabs with any commercial fishing equipment.

Five sanctuaries were established north of Cape Lookout in 1965. These sanctuaries are closed to mechanical methods and crab harvest March 1 - August 31. Amendment 3, moved the boundary of Drum Inlet to encompass Ophelia Inlet and expanded Barden Inlet sanctuary. Additionally, 14 new sanctuaries were established from Beaufort through Tubbs inlets. New sanctuaries will be closed to mechanical methods and crab harvest March 1 - October 31.



Current Blue Crab Restrictions

COMMERCIAL

- 5-inch minimum size limit on male and mature female crabs
- No size limit on peeler crabs
- No possession of immature crabs
- No possession dark sponge crabs April 1– 30
- 5% cull tolerance
- Hard crab pots must have 3 cull rings, one placed in one mesh of the corner of the upper chamber
 - No cull ring exemptions
- Prohibit taking of crabs with crab dredge
- Oyster dredge bycatch limited to 10% total weight of combined oysters and crabs or 100 pounds, whichever less
- Crab trawl prohibited north of the shrimp trawl lines in Pamlico, Pungo, and Neuse rivers
- Season closures (pot closure periods)
 - Jan. 1-31 north of the Highway 58 bridge to Emerald Isle
 - March 1-15 south of the Highway 58 bridge
- Possession of blue crabs prohibited during season closures

RECREATIONAL

- Equivalent to commercial regulations
- Bag limit 50 crabs/day not to exceed 100 crabs/vessel/day

For complete crab regulations visit:

<https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/marine-fisheries/rules-proclamations-and-size-and-bag-limits>

Want to Know More about Blue Crab Management?



Blue Crab Fishery Management Plan Amendment 3:

<https://www.deq.nc.gov/marine-fisheries/fisheries-management/blue-crab/2020-blue-crab-fmp-amendment-3/open>

For any other questions related to blue crab, contact Charles Bangley at 252-948-3874 or Charles.Bangley@deq.nc.gov or Scott Scripter at 252-381-6000 or Scott.Scripter@deq.nc.gov.

