

Introduction

Blue crabs are harvested commercially and recreationally in South Carolina, primarily using crab traps, or pots. Blue crab is one of the primary commercial species statewide, accounting for approximately 10% of the total value of all commercial landings. This report provides an update on the 2004 status of blue crab in South Carolina. A previous status report up to 2003 is available at <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/marine/publications.html> under "State of Resources".

Commercial Fishery Harvest

Blue crab landings have historically been the most stable of all the state's commercial fisheries with landings averaging about 6 million lbs since 1979 (Figure 1). Commercial landings of blue crab in 2004 were 4.56 million pounds, well below the long term average but consistent with landings since 2002. There was also a decrease in the value of the blue crab harvest to \$3.48 million compared to the previous two years. The decline in total catch may be largely explained by reduced price per pound being paid during the fall (Figure 2) and reduced landings during that season which has historically been the period of highest landings.

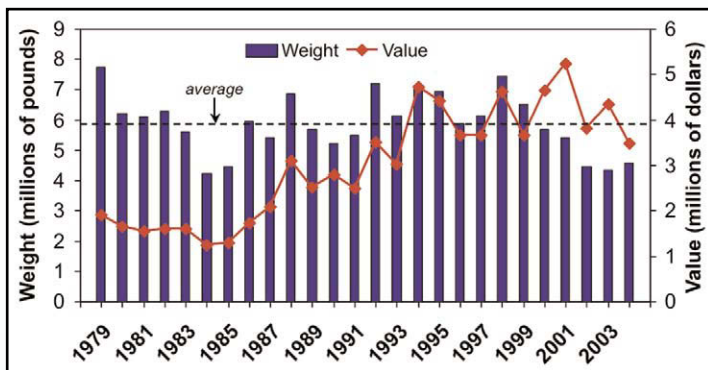


Figure 1. South Carolina commercial hard blue crab landings and values, all gears.

Hard crab licenses in South Carolina have fluctuated in accordance with prices and crab availability. However, the numbers of licenses sold over the past few years have remained fairly stable with a slight upward trend.

Since May 1997, crabbers have been required to license the number of pots they wish to fish. There has been a significant increase in the number of pots licensed over the last

couple of years, perhaps reflecting concerns fishermen have about potential regulations to limit fishing effort; however, a field count of pots and reported pot use from fishermen suggests that only about 1/3 of the pots licensed are fished. In the 2004-05 season, 33,877 crab pots were licensed in South Carolina. This represents a slight decrease from the previous years. Preliminary 2004 data show that the number of pots fished is highest from May to August and loosely reflects the price per pound (Figure 2).

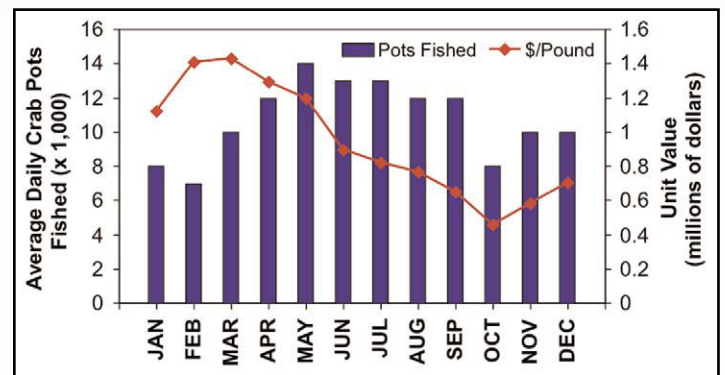


Figure 2. 2004 SC commercial hard crab pots fished per month vs. unit value.

Softshell Crab Fishery

Over 52,000 pounds of peeler crabs were landed in 2004, exceeding landings from the past two years. However, the increase in landings was small compared to the increase in value. Total value in 2004 was the second highest recorded since 1979 and the unit price value was the highest recorded in South Carolina.

Fishery Independent Sampling

Numbers of blue crab in SCDNR trawl samples began to increase in December of 2003, and continued through spring of 2004, indicating an apparent recovery from the low levels seen in 2001-2002 during the prolonged drought (Figure 3). Overall, numbers were still less than the decade-long average, although the fall crab potting survey yielded the highest number of mature female blue crab taken since its inception in 1988 (Figure 4). This bodes well for spawning stocks in 2005.

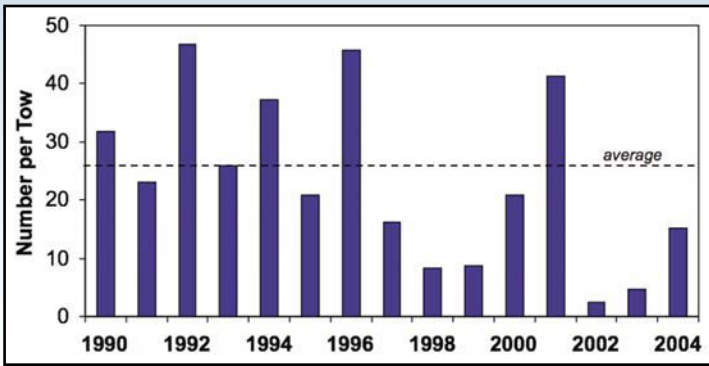


Figure 3. Number of blue crab per 20' trawl tow at stations from Charleston to the south. Dashed line indicates long-term average.

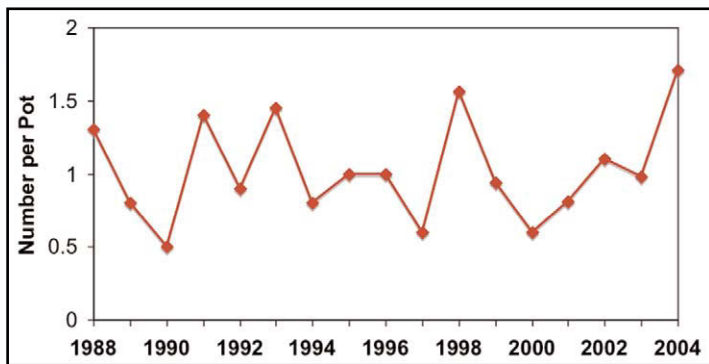
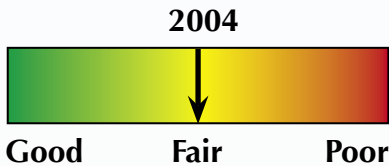


Figure 4. Number of legal-sized female blue crab per pot in fishery independent survey.

Overall Condition of the Stock

Blue crab stocks have recovered from the low levels observed during 2001-2003; however, landings and fishery independent sampling indicate that stocks in 2004 were still below the long-term average.



Legislative Updates

Legislation proposed to be introduced in 2006 represents the culmination of deliberations begun in 2002 in response to concerns over blue crab stocks during the severe drought. Proposed changes include: limits on number of commercial crabbers and pots, a one-bushel recreational limit, a separate “peeler” pot license, and an experimental trotline fishery in some designated areas during future droughts.

In 2003, the Marine Division’s Office of Fisheries Management identified eligible crabbers and disbursed Federal drought assistance funds. The federal 2003 Omnibus Appropriations Act authorized disaster relief funds to offset economic losses suffered by blue crab fishermen in the Atlantic States. To be eligible a licensed fisherman had to provide proof of lawful take and sale of at least 2000 pounds of blue crabs in South Carolina in a year. The Marine Division’s Office of Fisheries Management identified eligible recipients and disbursed the funds. An amount of \$250,152 was issued in individual and equal portions of \$2,084.60 to one hundred-twenty eligible blue crab fishermen as direct economic assistance.



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