

3,100 crab pots so far, and one baby stroller

Looking for abandoned crab pots, marine trash. (Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot)



Pete Freeman hangs on to a hooked line and drags it across the river bottom near Craney Island, trying to snag a crab pot he'd seen on side sonar. (Photo by Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot)

By [Scott Harper](#)
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Pete Freeman turned 80 Friday. As usual, he was on the water, working. But not harvesting crabs, as he has done each winter since he was 14.

Instead, Freeman was working for the government, making \$300 per day, plus expenses, scouring the bottom of the lower Chesapeake Bay for abandoned crab pots, junk tires, scrap metal and rope, and other marine trash.

"You got to do something," Freeman said with a shrug Wednesday morning as he steered his weathered old boat, the Hot Goose, toward the open waters of the James River for another day of "catching pots."

Freeman, of Hampton, is one of 58 Virginia watermen participating in a work program this winter stemming from a federal declaration that the Bay's once-mighty crab fishery is a national disaster.

In the wake of that historic declaration, Congress approved \$10 million to aid struggling watermen, such as Freeman, who found themselves without a job after state regulators shut down the winter crabbing season for the first time in 105 years, in the name of conservation.

For the record, Freeman said he thinks there is no shortage of crabs in the Bay, and that state and federal officials overreacted to scientific estimates about fragile crab stocks. But he is not complaining.

He supports the debris-cleanup program, costing \$1.5 million this year and slated to continue in 2010 and 2011 at more than \$1 million a year. Freeman said he is not sure what he would have done without it.

"I hadn't had a paycheck since October," he said. "We had heard the state was considering something like this, but we weren't sure. I just wanted to work. I couldn't afford to stay at home and twiddle my thumbs."

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission launched the cleanup program just before Christmas, utilizing state funds in anticipation of federal disaster aid.

Watermen received two days of training through the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, mostly in how to use side-imaging sonars that the state purchased and then installed on their boats. The high-tech cameras allow the crabbers to locate abandoned crab traps, or pots, that have sunk to the bottom.

"OK, see? There's a pot," said Freeman, pointing to a white square that appears on a fuzzy screen aboard his boat.

He pushed a button on a screen that marks the spot, storing the information inside a tiny computer. That way, he could come back and retrieve the pot later. Or he could go grab it right then.

So far, participants have removed more than 3,100 pots from the Bay, as well as 290 derelict peeler pots, 34 eel pots, 16 fishing nets, a baby stroller, an air conditioning unit, chunks of scrap metal and several shopping carts, according to Kirk Havens, an ecologist and project leader at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science.

Previous studies have shown that each "ghost pot" can trap up to 50 crabs, Havens said, posing serious risks to the overall crab population.

Other marine life also gets stuck and often dies in the traps. Victims include black sea bass, catfish, yellow perch, muskrats and turtles, Havens said.

"We're cleaning up the Bay, one piece at a time," Freeman said. "God knows, someone has to do it."

On Wednesday, Freeman was heading to the confluence of the James and Elizabeth rivers, just off Craney Island in Portsmouth, where he had marked a cluster of ghost pots a few days earlier.

Once there, he deployed a self-made "dead-man's drag," a 150-foot-long rope and chain, interspersed with hooks. After sinking the device to the bottom, he maneuvered his boat in a wide circle until he snagged his target.

When he hit the pot, the impact nearly knocked him over. But he held fast and started reeling in the rope, one hand at a time.

Soon, a slime-covered chicken-wire box surfaced, loaded with fish, baby crabs, mud, plants, shell fragments and other earthy life.

There was good news too: This abandoned pot held a veined Rapa whelk, a rare and invasive sea snail that the state is collecting and trying to get rid of.

Freeman flipped the whelk into a bucket of river water and said he can get \$5 by turning in the species to state scientists who offer bounties to water men.

Freeman said he has hauled up more than 100 pots from the lower Bay this winter. He throws away the rusted remains once back on land and must record the numbers.

On this day, he snared two pots, though he spotted a dozen others and pledged to come back for them. Since the program allows watermen to work just 48 days through mid-March, he must ration his schedule.

As Freeman pattered back to his Newport News dock, two other participants, who were working up the James River, crackled over his radio. They commented on the nice weather, complained about state regulations and then talked wistfully about the promise of the upcoming crabbing season, which opens March 17.

"Never wanted to do anything else," Freeman said of his 60-year career as a waterman. "You work your own hours, go where you want, when you want, and then go home."

He then smiled, looked ahead into a bright sun, and steered for shore.

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