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Working to divvy up the pot

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Financially strapped Virginia watermen are a step closer to getting the \$10 million in federal funds appropriated for crab fisheries disaster relief. In action taken last fall another \$10 million was approved for Maryland watermen.

In Feb. a formal plan for doling out the funds was sent to the Department of Commerce by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, according to VMRC spokesman John Bull. If the plan is approved, \$10 million will be dispersed in Virginia over the next three years to the crabbers.

Bull said that one component of the plan is a debris removal program that employs crab dredgers to salvage "ghost pots". They will pull up these crab pots that have been lost or abandoned and other marine debris from the bottoms of rivers and the Bay.

Crab dredgers are among the watermen who have been hardest hit financially over the past decade as the industry and the Bay changes. The winter dredging season, which runs from December to March was closed by VMRC last spring as part of their effort to rebuild the decimated blue crab population. Bull said that VMRC officials voted to start the debris removal program in December, before federal relief money could become available.

"It just could not wait," he said. "We started the debris removal program with our own funds to help the most severely impacted watermen, in the good faith that the federal government would reimburse us. But there is no guarantee of that."

Currently the program pays 58 dredgers \$300 per day for a minimum of six hours of work. Each crabber can work a maximum of 50 days from December to March.

The program also pays for their fuel and the cost of the side-scan sonar needed to locate the traps. Each crabber can earn a maximum of \$15,000 for the season in addition to the cost of the fuel and sonar equipment.

Bull described the effort as a "bridge program" to help crab dredgers get through a few years until they can find another way to make a living in the winter months.

"We don't expect to reinstate the dredging season," said Bull.

The director of the Coastal Watershed Program for the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, Kirk Havens, is managing the debris removal operation for VMRC. He produced a study of ghost pots in the York River in 2006 that found 700 pots in the lower river and extrapolated the number of abandoned pots for the entire Bay.

That report estimated that 100,000 traps might be lost annually. Scientists

believe these lost traps and other debris become death traps to crabs and marine life until they deteriorate from corrosion. That can take several years, depending on the salinity of the water.

"We believe the debris removal program will have a significant impact on the crab population," said Bull. "It should rebuild the population much more quickly."

Havens and his assistants are responsible for training and trouble shooting with watermen in the use of the sonar. The VIMS staff also collects data from the dredgers about where and how many pots are found. He said that over 3,000 pots have been removed from Virginia waters since the program started in mid-December.

A VIMS team makes a circuit every two weeks of the five broad regions covered by the program to monitor the program. Those regions are the Northern Neck, the Middle Peninsula, Tidewater, Eastern Shore and Tangier Island.

Dredgers Mark Haynie and Allen Parks of Tangier Island joined their colleagues Roy and Spencer Headley of Reedville at Fairport Marina on Feb. 6 to meet with marine scientist Kory Angstadt and graduate student Jeanna Kidwell from VIMS for one of the bi-monthly data collection journeys.

Haynie's work boat was covered with ice from the trip over to the mainland. Haynie handed the 14 sonar units used by the island men to Parks, who set them on a dolly to take into Headley's restaurant at Fairport Marina.

Once inside the warm building, Kidwell and Angstadt brought out their laptops to connect the sonar and small digital cameras used by the watermen. The sonar information and photos of every item salvaged are put into a database at VIMS to track the progress of the program.

"It's a good deal," said Parks. "I would still like to dredge. My ideal would be to crab dredge in December and do this from January to March."

"I call it ghost busting," joked Roy Headley, one of Reedville's most prolific watermen. "It's getting us through the winter and helps clean up the bottom. It was getting serious. People were getting ready to lose their homes and boats."

Headley said that he located the wreck of a 300 foot long ship called the City of Annapolis near Smith Point using the sonar. His son Spencer Headley located two small recreational boats on the bottom of the Great Wicomico River during his salvage operations.

Other dredgers from the Northern Neck participating in the program are Jim and Jeff Dameron, Ronnie Jett, Harry Marshall and Keith Wilmer.

This program accounts for nearly half of the \$10 in relief funds, according to Bull, who said the plan spans over three years.

Another component of the relief plan is a crabbing license buyback program that uses an additional \$3 million over three years to purchase primarily dormant licenses in Bull's words. These are permits held by 700 crabbers in the state that have not been used or used sparingly in the last few years.

Active crabbers that want to leave the industry can participate also. The price of each waterman's buyback will be negotiated with VMRC officials depending on activity level and number of pots.

After crabbers sell their license back to VMRC, the permit will be retired

permanently. This makes the remaining licenses more valuable and reduces the total number of crabbers, both potential and actual, fishing for a scarce resource.

Another key component of the relief plan is a \$1.5 million appropriation over three years for training watermen in oyster aquaculture methods. This is designed to encourage them to leave crabbing and enter into the more stable and increasingly successful oyster farming industry.

The remaining money will be divided among several programs that employ watermen to study cull rings, turtle exclusionary devices, other experimental gear and update crab stock assessments.

Administrative costs for VIMS staff and program expenses total almost \$768,000 for the three years. VMRC requested less than \$20,000 of the relief money to defray incidental expenses, according to a copy of the submitted plan.

Bull said that he expects an answer about the relief plan from federal officials within a couple of weeks.