



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Division of Marine Fisheries

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Marine Fisheries Advisory

NEW HORSESHOE CRAB RULES AND IN-SEASON ADJUSTMENT TO DECREASE COMMERCIAL HORSESHOE CRAB TRIP LIMIT FOR MOBILE GEAR FISHERS

The Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) has filed new regulations for 2023 to cap total commercial harvest and mortality in the horseshoe crab fishery. This includes implementing a first-ever biomedical harvest quota. The biomedical quota is set at 200,000 horseshoe crabs annually and will be divided evenly among active biomedical processors. This biomedical quota is set slightly above 2022 harvest levels (~175,000 horseshoe crabs) and reflects the importance of limulus amebocyte lysate production for human health and safety. This is being offset through a reduction in the bait crab quota, which is being reduced by 25,000 horseshoe crabs from 165,000 horseshoe crabs annually to 140,000.

Capping total horseshoe crab harvest and mortality is likely the single most important conservation measure the state can take this year. This eliminates the potential for uncontrolled growth in the biomedical fishery which could negatively impact the resource moving forward. Capping harvest and mortality at near recent levels is appropriate, as Massachusetts survey indices have demonstrated improved abundance since 2010 and similar removals have occurred during this time series.

DMF has also enacted several measures to enhance the transparency of the biomedical horseshoe crab fishery management program. This includes formally establishing the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Best Management Practices (BMPs) for the biomedical horseshoe crab fishery as regulations. These BMPs were previously adopted through an annual set of conditions issued to permit holders. Additionally, for 2024, DMF is adopting a new set of permit categories specific to biomedical harvesters, dealers, and processors.

Lastly, at their July 10, the Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission voted unanimously in support of DMF's in-season adjustment recommendation to reduce the daily horseshoe crab bait fishery trip limit for mobile gear fishers for the remainder of 2023. Therefore, effective July 11, 2023 the limited access horseshoe crab trip limit for mobile gear fishers will be reduced from 300 horseshoe crabs to 200 horseshoe crabs and the open access trip limit will be reduced from 75 horseshoe crabs to 50 horseshoe crabs (see [Declaration Notice](#)). This should slow the consumption of the remaining bait quota to avoid an early season closure that may result in regulatory discarding in mixed species mobile gear fisheries. At present, the horseshoe crab fishery has taken more than 80% of its 2023 bait quota of 140,000 horseshoe crabs. This elevated harvest was driven by unanticipatedly high levels of winter landings, increased hand harvest effort responding to DMF proposals this spring, and the frontloading of the bait quota to make crabs available to the biomedical industry through the rent-a-crab program.

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