VWA President Serves as Master of Ceremonies for ‘Blessing of the Fleet’ in Cape Charles, Virginia
Ken Smith, VWA President

On April 13th, I had the honor of being the master of ceremonies for the 5th annual “Blessing of the Fleet” in Cape Charles. When I say honored it goes much deeper than that. Sure anyone would be honored to be asked but when I see what the town of Cape Charles has done to honor watermen I feel a special pride.

This event brings the entire community together to recognize, honor, and give thanks to its maritime heritage. The blessing of the fleet is a time honored tradition of paying homage to lost watermen, and offering prayers and gratitude for those still working the waters.

It is obvious by all the workboats around Cape Charles, that this community welcomes working watermen. While working waterfront areas are fast disappearing from other communities, Cape Charles embraces theirs. Virginia’s watermen are disappearing in other areas as well. As they disappear so does your access to fresh, local seafood.

In the early 1980’s there were over 8,000 watermen in the state. It was around this time that the General Assembly conducted a Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission study on the “Economic Potential and Management of Virginia’s Seafood Industry”. The reason for this study was that both industry and legislative had concerns that the Commonwealth was not achieving the full economic potential of its marine resources.

The study attempted to develop a thorough understanding of the biological and economic factors that affect the harvest, market price, and the public management of each fishery. The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission’s report recommended that “The General Assembly may wish to consider amending the Code of Virginia to transfer the details of gear, seasonal restrictions, enforcement methods, and licensure fees, to administrative regulation”.

As a result fishery management shifted from the legislation to the Marine Resource Commission and the Code of Virginia requires the Commission to prepare plans where conservation and management measures shall be based upon the best scientific, economic, biological and sociological information available.

Today there are about 3,000 watermen in the state down 60% from when fishery management shifted from a legislative authority to a regulated authority. We cannot just blame the decline on the change in authority to the Marine Resources Commission.

I think it is much more complicated than that and I do think that we have gotten away from the intent of the study which was full economic potential. I think today’s plans rely on the scientific/biological and ignore the economic/sociological factor. If science says there is x amount of the resource that can be taken to sustain the resource then shouldn’t the waterman be allowed to develop the plan which allows him the greatest return in harvesting that resource.

I can’t remember when a fisheries management plan even considered the sociological factor. So again Cape Charles, I thank you. Without any regulations or mandates you have shown the society of the waterman as the hard working, God fearing man that he is. It is the waterman that brings Virginia seafood to the consumer’s table and this is evident when you see the refrigerated trucks at the town harbor.

I ask that you support the Virginia Waterman’s Association as it tries to unite waterman in developing fishery management plans that not only achieve sustainable fisheries but also sustainable watermen. In the tradition of the Blessing of the Fleet, if you see a waterman in your community remember to thank him or her for all that they do to protect this tradition and the Chesapeake Bay.
### NEWS FROM VMRC:

**April 4, 2012:** The Virginia Saltwater Fishing Tournament today certified a 24-pound, 3-ounce tautog caught by a Seaford dentist as a new state record. The 32-inch-long fish was caught on March 25 by Ken Neill, III and broke the previous record of a 24 pound tautog set 25 years ago. Mr. Neill made the record-setting catch at the Morgan wreck, which is one of the vessels contained within the footprint of the popular Triangle Reef site and located slightly over 30 nautical miles off Cape Henry.

**March 27, 2012:** The Virginia Marine Resources Commission has given a green light for construction of what will likely be the country’s first offshore wind turbine generator, a prototype that will stand 479-feet-tall and produce five megawatts of clean energy. It will be located in state waters in the Chesapeake Bay three miles from Cape Charles on the Eastern Shore. The facility is slated for completion at the end of 2013.

**March 7, 2012:** Virginia Marine Resources Commissioner Steven G. Bowman has announced his retirement from state service, effective March 26, after six years in charge of the state agency that manages the Commonwealth’s tidal fisheries and the state-owned bottom. Bowman, 52, has accepted a position as Chief of Police for the Town of Smithfield, his hometown. He spent most of his career in law enforcement and has lived in Smithfield for decades.

### Upcoming Events

- **Chincoteague Seafood Festival**  
  May 5  
  Tom’s Cove Park, Chincoteague, VA

- **VWA Meetings**  
  (always at 7 pm)  
  May 9  
  Northside Branch of the Bank of Lancaster in Kilmarnock  
  June 13  
  Pilot House in Topping  
  July 11  
  Northside Branch of the Bank of Lancaster in Kilmarnock  
  August 8  
  Ginny’s, Hayes Shopping Center in Gloucester

- **BrewJam**  
  May 12  
  6596 Main Street, Gloucester, VA  
  Local music, brews, and food  
  [www.MainStreetBluesandBrews.com](http://www.MainStreetBluesandBrews.com)

- **VMRC Public Meetings**  
  May 22, June 26  
  9:30 am, 2600 Washington Ave, Newport News, VA  
  Check [www.mrc.state.va.us](http://www.mrc.state.va.us) for agendas and other info

- **Cinema Under the Stars**  
  June 2, 16, 30  
  Towne Bank Fountain Park, Norfolk, VA  
  Free outdoor film screenings for families this summer

- **Norfolk Harbortfest Party**  
  June 8-11  
  Town Point Park/Norfolk Waterfront, Norfolk, VA

### 2012 Season Limits

**Striped Bass:**

1. In the Chesapeake area, the open commercial season shall be from February 1 through December 31, inclusive. The minimum size limit shall be 18 inches total length during the periods of February 1 through December 31. The maximum size limit shall be 28 inches from March 26 through June 15.
2. In the coastal area, the open commercial season shall be February 1 through December 31, inclusive, and the minimum size limit shall be 28 inches total length.

**Crabs:**

The lawful season for the harvest of male crabs shall be March 17 through November 30. The lawful season for the harvest of female crabs shall be March 17 through November 20.

It shall be unlawful for any person knowingly to place, set, fish or leave any fish pot in any tidal waters from March 12 through March 16, except as provided in 4VAC20-270-40.

The lawful crab pot license categories and crab pot limits are as follows:

1) up to 85 crab pots.
2) up to 127 crab pots.
3) up to 170 crab pots.
4) up to 255 crab pots.
5) up to 425 crab pots.

Additional season limits are available directly from the Virginia Marine Resources Commission ([www.mrc.state.va.us](http://www.mrc.state.va.us)).
“You are The Solution to Water Pollution”

“I been fooling with oysters ever since I can walk,” said long-time waterman Dudley Biddlecomb. Earlier this month, Ken Smith, President of the Virginia Waterman’s Association, talked with Mr. Biddlecomb about his work in educational outreach and his ongoing experiments growing oysters. “I’ve been hanging around for about sixty years. I been in the business and out the business and one thing and another,” said Mr. Biddlecomb about his life around the Chesapeake Bay. “When I was growing up the first thing I smelled in the morning was fish factory. And I can still smell it.”

Mr. Biddlecomb gives talks at museums and serves on the educational committee of the regional fishermen’s museum. “You’re never too old to learn,” Mr. Biddlecomb said, observing that his work has allowed him to talk to people from many different backgrounds. His favorite audience is young children—up to a point. “Once they get past fifth grade they get too wise, you know?” When he speaks with children, they sometimes ask him questions that he can tell come from misconceptions about watermen they may have heard from their parents or the media. He works to correct assumptions people may have about watermen and overfishing, especially among young people. “So I think we’re heading in the right direction. And yes...if you can go and tell that to young people, and just to the public in general, it puts a different perspective on what us watermen do.”

Now that he has retired, Mr. Biddlecomb also has more time to devote to his experiments growing oysters. He has been having success with growing hybrid oyster spat in cages full of dry oyster shells. He has also been monitoring water temperature and salinity, with some help from VIMS. “It doesn’t take much encouragement to overcome whatever problem there is with getting natural strike the natural way. The oysters are doing what they need to do and reproducing—but they need some help.” If there is one thing that Dudley could let people know, it would be this: “You are the solution to water pollution.”

Videos of this interview with Mr. Biddlecomb are available on YouTube: tinyurl.com/bnhatyv or tinyurl.com/c5u7x5v

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President Ken Smith called the regularly scheduled meeting to order shortly after 7 p.m. Treasurer Tammy Croxton gave the treasurer’s report, which was approved. For the past 3 years, Tammy has expertly managed the finances and much more for the Association, giving up time from her busy schedule as a waterman and waterman’s wife. With reluctance, but with much appreciation for the excellent job she has done, Ken and the association accepted Tammy’s resignation as treasurer. J. C. Hudgins has agreed to fill in as the acting treasurer.

Secretary Ida Hall gave the minutes from the March meeting, which was approved. Ida told the members that the VMRC approved Bill Davenport’s request to locate a pound net near Dividing Creek in Northumberland County.

Ken discussed the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) Master Plan for oyster restoration in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, which is currently being reviewed and available for public comment. Ken is concerned that the Corps wants to take over everything in Virginia’s waters and make sanctuaries perpetual. Ken reminded us that our State Constitution states that natural oyster bars are to be held “in trust for the people.” Ken questioned why private oyster ground holders can work their shore, yet, public oyster grounds, not in a sanctuary, can’t be worked.

Waterman and oyster expert, Dudley Biddlecomb believes the Corps wants “everybody to endorse the Plan.” “Overharvesting is always blamed” for the demise of oysters, but that should be “at the bottom of the list.” “In the 1960’s all the oysters went away because of diseases, not overharvesting”. Dudley and other knowledgeable fisheries experts like Roy Insley, “want working watermen to have a say” in managing oyster restoration.

The recent National Marine Fisheries Service’s (NMFS) designation of Atlantic sturgeon as an endangered species is a concern for all watermen, even if there are not any sturgeon in your local area. Ken expressed concern that this listing could lead to additional regulations of gillnet mesh size or even a moratorium in other fisheries, like striped bass, due to concerns of sturgeon bycatch. Anyone who gillnets is urged to speak out in opposition to this listing. Kelly Place is leading the fight against the NMFS listing and believes the NMFS has overstepped its bounds. He has years of evidence that verify the Atlantic sturgeon is not endangered.

Ida gave the latest update on the menhaden issue. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) is taking public comment until April 20th on menhaden regulation. “A website has been created to make it easier for individuals to send something supporting” this vital fishery. All those concerned about over regulation and economic impacts the ASMFC menhaden regulation would create are asked to go to http://letter.savingmenhaden.org/ as soon as possible and sign on to the letter.

Ken discussed the ongoing efforts to form a new Crab Panel, made up of working watermen, that would develop a long-term crab management plan to sustain the industry, in dealing with the numerous regulations, marketability of crabs, and increasing costs of crabbing. In order for the panel to be successful, Ken believes that the industry should make the decisions on who and how many members serve on the Panel. Ken has scheduled a meeting on April 15th, 2p.m. – 4p.m., at the Virginia Living Museum in Newport News, Va. Watermen from both sides of Virginia’s Bay, and Tangier Is. are expected to attend. All watermen concerned and interested in the future of their industry, are urged to attend. If watermen are told what percentage of crabs can be harvested, shouldn’t we decide how we catch this percentage? If VMRC adopts tagging of crab pot buoys, which the Potomac River Fisheries Commission has already adopted, wouldn’t it be better for industry to decide how this is done?

Ken also discussed the upcoming meeting he and Paula Jasinski, with Chesapeake Environmental Communications, have on 4/27/12, with Secretary of Natural Resources, Doug Domenech at the Waterman’s Museum in Yorktown. In the 2 hours that have been allotted to them, they hope to discuss management plans, marketing, and preserving the heritage of the waterman. The Secretary is in charge of seven agencies. One of those agencies is the Department of Historical Resources. Ken believes the watermen are a cultural resource and should be perceived as such. Hopefully the Secretary will agree and instead of seeing negative press clippings we might see press clippings about the importance of watermen bringing Virginia seafood to the consumer’s table.

After some interesting discussion on the breeding habits and spawning potential of sooks, and the impact imports of foreign crabmeat has on our local seafood markets, the meeting adjourned at 8:15p.m.

Mark your calendars and please join us at our upcoming meetings. Dates and locations are listed on page 2 of this newsletter.

Respectfully Submitted by: Ida Hall, secretary VWA

Virginia’s Watermen: Ambassadors for a cleaner bay PAGE 4

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Watermen Added to Endangered Maryland List

From The Bay Journal and Maryland Life:

Historic preservationists have added watermen to the 2012 Endangered Maryland list. The list is curated by Preservation Maryland, a group founded in 1931 that advocates for the protection of historic buildings, neighborhoods, landscapes, and archaeological sites throughout Maryland. The list usually includes properties with historic or architectural value that are at risk of destruction because of neglect or modern development. It is unusual for the list to include a group of people; the inclusion of watermen on the list will raise awareness and help prevent the loss of a traditional way of life.

“It’s hard to imagine a Chesapeake without watermen, but it could happen,” said Michael Schultz of the Maryland Conservancy. “Stocks of fish and shellfish have steadily declined due to environmental and market pressures, and the numbers of watermen and people that work in the fishing industry are also declining.”

Many watermen are now reaching retirement age, but there are fewer young people joining the profession to renew their ranks. Larry Simns, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association, said, "Watermen learn their trade, for the most part, from other watermen, mainly family members. It is handed down from one generation to another. It is not a trade that can be learned from books, so protecting the traditions, stories, and history of these men and women is critically important.”

VMRC Commissioner Steven Bowman Retires

From the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC):

After serving for six years, Virginia Marine Resources Commissioner Steven G. Bowman announced his retirement this March. Governor McDonnell has named Jack Travelstead as the Acting Commissioner effective immediately. Travelstead will serve until a new, permanent appointment is found.

"I have enjoyed my 19 years with the Marine Resources Commission but this is an opportunity to give back to my hometown," Bowman said. "It is a great state agency with hard-working, dedicated employees, and I will miss them tremendously. I also wish to thank the two Governors for whom I served as Commissioner. I am grateful for their faith in me and my leadership."

Governor McDonnell praised Bowman’s nineteen years of service to the Commonwealth. "Under his leadership at the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, the agency made great strides in the ongoing effort to restore the oyster and blue crab populations in the Bay and grow the striped bass and flounder stock in Virginia's tidal waters. I thank Steve for his service to this Administration and to Virginia, and wish him the very best as he starts this new chapter in life."

Bowman spent most of his career in law enforcement and has served with the Surry County Sheriff’s Office, the Smithfield Police Department, and the Virginia State Police. He will next serve as the Chief of Police in Smithfield, his hometown. He lives in Smithfield with his wife and children.

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-Ken Smith, President
Virginia Waterman’s Association

Recipe: Crab Triangles

Linda Jabs of Gloucester shares this simple, classic, and delicious use of Virginia blue crabs.

2 jars Old English Sharp Cheese 1 lb. crab
2 packs English muffins 1 stick butter, softened


Virginia State Waterman’s Association

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“Proud Virginia Watermen since 1878”

Virginia’s Watermen: Ambassadors for a cleaner bay
Seafood Industry Representatives Talk to Congress About Jobs in America

From Capital City Weekly:

Industry representatives recently briefed policy makers in Congress about seafood jobs and economic opportunities in America. The group presented a panel discussion to the Senate Oceans Caucus and an audience of about 80 people this past March. Representatives for twelve senators and the White House attended, as well as representatives from the environmental NGO community.

"Nobody else has really had this conversation," said Bruce Schactler of Kodiak, director of the National Seafood Marketing Coalition which represents 75 industry groups. "We need them to realize what a big deal it is. We're talking $115 billion in sales, 1.2 million jobs, and actual income to people involved in the industry of more than $30 billion. This is a big deal and we want them to understand that," Schactler said.

Panel members included Jack Brooks, CEO of J.M. Clayton Company of Maryland, a blue crab processor; Natalie Webster of the American Albacore Fishing Association in California; David Veal, Director of American Shrimp Processors Association of Mississippi; Dane Somers, Director of the Maine Lobster Council, and Phil Lansing, a seafood economist and Bristol Bay fisherman.

The Marketing Coalition is working to obtain funding from duties and tariffs collected on seafood imported into the United States. This money would then be distributed to five locally run regional boards and used on efforts to increase consumer demand for US seafood. Schactler said that he is surprised by the lack of knowledge in Congress about the seafood industry.

"I had no idea it was as invisible as it actually is. They had no idea of the dependence of coastal America on local seafood," he said. "They've never looked at a boat as a small business. The more aware they are and the more people who get involved, they will understand a little help goes a long way, and the return on investment will be unbelievable."

Booth Generates Trade Leads for Virginia Watermen at Boston Seafood Show

From Mike Hutt, Executive Director of the Virginia Marine Products Board

This March, the Virginia Marine Products Board (VMPB) promoted the Virginia seafood industry at the international Boston Seafood Show. The Boston Seafood Show is largest of its kind in the United States. How does this benefit Virginia watermen? "We represent the Virginia waterman and the processors of Virginia seafood," said Mike Hutt, Executive Director of the Virginia Marine Products Board. Their efforts generated 185 trade leads for seafood businesses in Virginia.

Five Virginia seafood companies joined the VMPB in the Virginia pavilion, showcasing a full line of seafood products, including blue crab, oyster, and many species of fin fish. Three other Virginia companies exhibited elsewhere in the show. The booth included Chef John Maxwell, who prepared and served samples of soft-shell crabs, Chesapeake Bay ray, and scallops. Booth visitors also sampled oysters shucked by four-time oyster shucking champion Deborah Pratt.

The booth also benefited from the presence of David Wong, the Hong Kong representative of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. “David’s experienced in knowledge of the Virginia seafood industry and products added a great value to the number of trade leads we generated at the show,” said Hutt. Out of the 185 trade leads they obtained, 70 were from international businesses.

Hutt remains optimistic about the future of the seafood industry, saying it was the busiest show he has seen in 13 years. “I think we’re on an upward trend. There’s more interest and demand in this show for Virginia products than we’ve seen in a long time. People are realizing that Virginia is a big player.”

The VMPB trade leads are available for all Virginia watermen. Anyone who would like a copy of the leads, or to receive copies of future lead lists, should contact the Virginia Marine Products Board at info@vaseafood.org or Virginia Marine Products Board / 554 Denbigh Boulevard / Newport.
2012 Blue Crab Season: The Good and The Bad

This year’s blue crab season is off to a busy start. The annual winter blue crab population survey results indicate that blue crab population levels are at a 20-year high. This year’s survey estimates that there are 764 million blue crabs in the bay, about 66% more than last year and the highest estimate since 1993. While the survey estimated that mature female populations are down from 190 million last year to just 97 million this year, there is some speculation that warmer temperatures meant females overwintered in areas outside of the survey bounds. Juvenile crabs are at the highest level ever, at 587 million. This is good news for consumers across the region who want to enjoy crabs this year.

The warmer than average temperatures this spring started the season off with a boom. The glut of crabs entering the market in March overwhelmed processing plants that were short on workers. Johnny Graham of Hampton’s Graham & Rollins Seafood said, “This is unprecedented. We’ve never seen it this early”.

Some crabs are sold immediately to restaurants or consumers, but typically most are sent to picking houses. These processing houses struggle to find enough trained workers willing to work for low wages. This year’s early start to the season made this situation even worse. Packing houses usually rely on migrant workers under the federal H2-B visa program that links workers to all types of seasonal jobs in the U.S. Most local processing houses didn’t have enough workers on board to handle the early influx of crabs this year. Graham said he would have to be “turning away watermen because I don’t have the workers”.

This large influx of product has also sent the price per bushel well down from what our watermen have gotten in the past. VWA is working with VMRC to develop long-term solutions for blue crab management that protect the blue crab population as well as watermen economics. There are ways to accomplish both goals and those are issues to be explored by the developing Blue Crab Advisory Panel that VMRC voted to establish in 2011. VWA believes that while the resources are coming back, our watermen are going extinct and that must be addressed by our state resource managers. The definition of a sustainable fishery is one that protects the resource as well as working watermen. Join VWA and help support our watermen.