

North Carolina Department of Marine Fisheries Crab Pot Clean-up Info

Department of Marine Fisheries (DMF) contact: Nancy Fish (1-800-682-2632 or 252-328-9842).

Clean-up occurs Jan 24-Feb 7. During this time, fishermen know that their crab pots must be removed (DMF rule: 15A NCAC 03J.0301) and that marine patrol officers will be out collecting abandoned pots. If the officers can identify the owners, the fishermen are contacted and potentially fined (but they can then get the pot back). If not, the pots are destroyed.

Sea Grant started the crab-pot round-up over 10yrs ago. Lundi Spence was in charge of it then (now she is with SC Sea Grant). At that time it had more public involvement. The rules surrounding private property make the DMF hesitant to involve the public in pot removal now.

No one has kept track of what is found inside the abandoned pots. However, recording may be initiated.

DMF views the program as a success, but it is labor intensive and time consuming.

The email update from DMR patrol Officer Lynch dated 11 Feb 2003 reads:

“Many abandoned pots were located (4121) and most were removed from the water. We are still working on removal and disposal of the remainder (598).

“A number of ghost pots were also located (953) and most are still in the water (825). For the purposes of this report a ghost pot is defined as a pot that cannot be identified **and** has no buoy or float attached.

“I think the results of this effort show that there is, in fact, a problem with abandoned (and to some extent ghost) pots. This has been a labor intensive, time consuming job and much retrieval and ultimate disposal still remains to be done. But at least we know where the remaining pots are located. I will be checking with David and Craig to see if they have any staff and/or equipment available to help with the remainder of the retrieval and disposal.”

The email from Lynch dated 19 Feb 2004 reads:

“I have listed below the final figures on abandoned crab pot retrieval efforts by the Marine Patrol this year:

“A total of 8,343 abandoned pots were removed from the waters. Most (7,703) were removed by Marine Patrol officers. The balance (640) were removed by the pot owners at

the direction of marine patrol officers. Nearly all of the retrieved pots were destroyed, and 45 criminal charges were filed in connection with the illegal pots.

“Marine Patrol expended considerable effort during the closed pot season this year to get abandoned pots out of the water and disposed of, and to track down the owners of pots that bore identification. In addition to patrol boats, hard labor, and long hours on the part of the staff, a barge, heavy equipment, and numerous rolloffs were also pressed into service. Craig Hardy assisted with equipment (barge & heavy equipment) and staff for this project.

“Hopefully the efforts put forth will decrease the number of crabs and other species lost to abandoned pots, and will encourage fishermen to act responsibly by removing their gear from the waters if it is not being fished. But picking up abandoned pots is costly, labor intensive, and only a partial solution. Last year we located over 5,000 abandoned crab pots and this year over 8,300. The expectation of being reimbursed by the government is an incentive to leave pots in the water and report them “lost”. I don’t see the problem of abandoning pots going away until the incentive to do so is removed.”

Information from Officer Joe Lynch:

Lt. Don Twine (1-800-405-7774) runs the details of the clean-up out of the Columbia office.

3 or 4 boats are out collecting pots simultaneously during the round-up. This year, they have equipped 3 boats with crab pot pullers due to the strain on the backs of the officers pulling the pots in previous years.

Most of the crabbing occurs in D1 (DMF districts are not the same as WRC districts) which includes Dare, Hyde, Washington, and Terrell counties North, and the Pamlico and Albermarle sounds (I looked online for a map to better describe D1 but haven’t found one yet). Clean-up is coast-wide, but the majority of the pots are collected from D1.

In 2003, he reports that they decided to really put major effort into cleaning up all the pots during the round-up. That year they used all the D1 staff and officers. In 2004, they increased the effort by also including officers from other districts and by using a barge as a staging area to off-load collected pots from the collection boats. In 2003 they collected over 5000 pots; in 2004 they collected over 8100 pots. They had thought that the effort exerted in 2003 might make the collection numbers decrease in 2004, but Isabel had come through and he believes that hurricane impacted the abandoned pot numbers. This year, they plan to use the increased staff again, and they do hope to see a decrease from last year’s collection. But again, weather and particularly hurricanes will impact the numbers collected.

What he would change: The closure is only 15 days which is too short for the Marine Patrol to complete the round-up. Round-up activities are at the mercy of the winter weather. Some days it is very windy or icy and pots can not be collected. He suggests that 4 weeks is a minimum of time they need to complete the round-up. Ideally, the pot

closure should be for 6 weeks, with the option for officers to re-open the fishery early if the officers certify the waters as clean.

He also says that we should eliminate reimbursements for lost pots. In the past, when there has been a big storm, the legislature has appropriated a couple of million dollars to aid fishermen by reimbursing them for lost gear. This makes sense for pound nets which are very difficult to set and pull. But crab pots are not difficult to pull, and with weather forecasting as accurate as it is, fishermen can see a hurricane coming for a week or more and have plenty of time to go remove their pots to protect their gear. In the last two years, the legislature has not made these sorts of appropriations, so he is hopeful that fishermen will no longer have this incentive to “accidentally” lose pots in storms.

He feels that the timing of the closure is good. Winter is a difficult time for the officers to do the round-up, but it is the appropriate time from the crabber’s perspective to shut down crabbing, so he feels that the timing is as it should be...it just needs to last longer.

He emphasizes that a round-up is VERY labor intensive. Marine Patrol uses aircraft to spot pots and concentrations of pots prior to the boat patrols. For the week prior and the two weeks of the removal, officers work pretty much exclusively on the round-up.

He says that they do not always make a case when they find pots with names. If it is obviously not an accident (they find 100 pots belonging to one individual) then they do prosecute.

In the past, they have destroyed abandoned pots whose owners they could not identify. This year (2005) they are experimenting with an auction. They plan to auction off the pots in good condition and see if it is worth the trouble.

They have noted that pots in the rivers wash up into the mangroves and roots grow through the pots, making removal VERY difficult. Also, areas that appear to be pot free will suddenly have lots of pots when the tide runs a different direction and the buoy is no longer pulled under.

I asked about going out with his officers to see what is in the pots, and suggested that perhaps this year we could try it out just to see what is going on by putting someone on a couple of boats. We could then determine the best way to go about inventorying the contents in the future, and figure out how the effort should be distributed, and if the effort would in fact be warranted. He agreed and suggested I contact Lt Don Twine (see above) to coordinate this and get more detailed info on what we should expect.