

'Ghost Pot' removal program has successful year

By John Bull

(April 22, 2011) Out-of-work commercial watermen succeeded in hauling up more than 10,000 derelict so-called "ghost pots," lost fishing nets, and assorted metal junk from Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries during the third year of Virginia's one-of-a-kind Marine Debris Removal Program.

The results of this year's program were announced during a press briefing hosted jointly by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission. Attending the briefing, one of Governor Bob McDonnell official "Earth Day" events, were Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources Doug Domenech, U.S. Congressman Rob Wittman, NOAA Assistant Administrator David Kennedy, Virginia state delegate Harvey Morgan, VMRC Commissioner Steve Bowman, Mr. Charles Stanton (representing the Office of Senator Jim Webb), and local watermen including E.C. Hogge.

"This program has now retrieved more than 28,000 ghost pots from the Bay," said Dr. John Wells, VIMS Dean and Director. "Removal of this marine debris is a fabulous way to apply the stewardship ethic that we celebrate today on Earth Day."

The program, funded by NOAA through the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and administered by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, paid the watermen to use side-imaging sonar units to detect and retrieve lost or abandoned crab pots and other marine debris that litter the Bay floor. This targeted retrieval method minimizes disturbance to the bottom and, as a result, is environmentally friendly.

The 70 watermen participants were paid \$300 a day, and were compensated for their fuel costs.

VIMS scientists, who set up the program and supervised the participating watermen during the winter, have analyzed the program's accomplishments in its third year and discovered:

- A total of 9,970 derelict crab pots were recovered, along with 52 lost nets and 532 other pieces of junk, including a jon boat, a portable generator frame, and a large metal crate used to transport hunting dogs.
- Many of the recovered pots had been derelict for several years, and continue to inadvertently trap and kill crabs and a variety of fish and wildlife.



Waterman E.C. Hogge (R) talks with U.S. Congressman Rob Wittman (L) about his use of side-scan sonar to locate derelict crab pots.

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Virginia Institute of Marine Science
School of Marine Science
College of William and Mary
Gloucester Point, VA 23062
(804) 684-7000

- The recovered crab pots were found to have captured over the winter more than 11,000 animals, including thousands of crabs, as well as turtles, fish, eels, and whelks. Scientists have determined that each functional lost crab pot can capture about 50 crabs a year.

Ongoing research at VIMS funded through NOAA's Marine Debris Program suggests 20 percent of all the crab pots set in a year are lost, primarily due to storms or boat propellers that accidentally cut the pots free from their buoys.

"Marine debris, if unchecked, has economic impacts beyond the waters in which it exists," said David Kennedy of NOAA's National Ocean Service, which oversees the NOAA Marine Debris Division. "NOAA is proud to be involved in this on-going effort to protect our Chesapeake Bay resources."

This was the first, and is the largest, marine debris removal program of its kind in the country. It combines 21st century technology with the ingenuity and work ethic of Virginia's commercial watermen.

"This is a wonderful partnership that shows what watermen, fishery managers and the academic community can accomplish when working together," said Doug Domenech, Virginia's Secretary of Natural Resources. "I'm proud of what has been accomplished here."

The program costs roughly \$1 million a year. It is funded by NOAA through blue crab disaster funds made available to the Virginia Marine Resources Commission. VIMS handled the daily operation of the program and supervision of the participating watermen. The program ran from December through March 15.

All the recovered marine debris was GPS-located and photographed, and participant boat tracks were also recorded. All marine debris was disposed of in a safe and environmentally conscious manner or recycled.

Since the Marine Debris Removal Program began in December 2008, more than 28,000 lost or abandoned crab pots have been removed from the water, as well as 150 lost fishing nets and 1,300 pieces of assorted metal junk. More than 27,000 animals, many already dead, were found in crab pots retrieved since 2008.

This year's haul of marine debris was more than in either of the last two years.

For more information on the program results, call Dr. Kirk Havens at (804) 684-7386 or visit http://ccrm.vims.edu/marine_debris_removal/index.html.



Kory Angstadt (C) of the ghost-pot removal program at VIMS talks with local watermen Billy and Jackie Bonnaville during the press briefing to announce the results of the 2010-11 program.