

November 24, 2008: Congressman Wittman Statement on Waterman Relief

(WASHINGTON, DC) - I was pleased to learn this week that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced that they will make available up to \$20 million in response to the commercial Blue Crab fishery disaster in the Chesapeake Bay. This funding will help watermen deal with tough harvest restrictions and the current difficult economic situation. While this is great news, it is not the final step in the process for improving stocks of Blue Crab and helping the commercial crab industry make a successful return to their harvesting levels.

This past April the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) imposed a 34% reduction in Blue Crab harvests, which has had a substantial impact on the industry. This is in response to a problem that has been years in the making where Blue Crab populations have declined 70% since 1990. Declining crab populations are linked to worsening environmental conditions, like loss of habitat and a degradation of the water quality. In 2007 we hit near record lows for our Blue Crab harvest with a haul of 19 million pounds.

As a result of these developments I wrote to Gov. Tim Kaine to request that he petition Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez urging the declaration of a fishery disaster. Both the Governor and I along with Sens. Webb and Warner, and Reps. Drake and Scott wrote to the Secretary urging action. Additionally, in May I met with Jim Balsiger, the Director of NOAA Fisheries Service, to highlight the importance of the disaster declaration. In the meantime we continued to work for Congressional funding of this effort and press for a timely decision so that waterman might receive help as soon as possible.

Through our efforts the Secretary issued the requested disaster declaration, Congress appropriated the funds, and NOAA has now made available these funds we desperately need to help the Bay and our crabbing industry. Ten million has been specifically set aside for Virginia and now the Governor must submit a plan to NOAA's National Marine Fishery Service for how these dollars will be allocated. There is no deadline set for the Governor's plan submission, but it is my hope he will take swift action to begin the relief efforts.

The commercial crab industry has long been a way of life in our region and valued at \$125 million, it is economically important for many Bay communities and is a critical part of our culture and our way of life. In the coming weeks the picture will become clearer as to how we will begin to specifically aid our watermen and restore our commercial crabbing efforts to pre-disaster levels. I will continue to work with all levels of government to find a solution that provides the greatest benefit to all parties involved.

If my office can be assistance or if you have questions please feel free to contact us at <http://www.wittman.house.gov/> or 202-225-4261.