

COMMERCIAL CRABBING IN VIRGINIA TIDAL WATERS

Licensing Information

Any person desiring to commercially crab in Virginia tidal waters must first obtain a Virginia Commercial Registration License (fee is \$190 and \$90 for age 70 and older). Crab gear licenses can then be purchased from any Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) licensing agents, except that crab trap/pound licenses can only be obtained from the district marine patrol officer. All licenses are valid for a calendar year and expire December 31 in the year issued. Any person holding a Commercial Registration License must fully report their catches. License tags for vessels using crab pots, trotlines, and crab scrapes shall be fastened at a conspicuous place on the starboard side of the boat or on the boat's mast, during the crab season [Code 28.2-226, 28.2-234, 28.2-241, 28.2-300, Regulation 4 VAC 20-30-10 ET SEQ., 4 VAC 20-610-10 ET SEQ.].

A moratorium on the sale of new commercial crab gear licenses shall continue through 2010 [4 VAC 20-1040-20].

Annual License Fees

For each person taking crabs by dip nets \$13.00
For ordinary trotlines \$13.00
For patent trotlines \$51.00
For up to 85.. crab pots \$48.00
For 86 to 255.. crab pots \$79.00
For 256 to 425 crab pots \$127.00

For each crab trap or crab pound \$8.00
For each single-rigged crab-scrape boat \$26.00
For each double-rigged crab-scrape boat \$53.00
For up to 20 shedding tanks & floats \$9.00
For more than 20 shedding tanks & floats \$19.00
For up to 210 peeler pots \$36.00
[4 VAC 20-1090-30].

Season / Time Restrictions

- No commercial crabbing is permitted on Sunday, except for the working of peeler crab traps or peeler pots, or the working of floats, pens or onshore facilities for soft crab shedding operations. Any person licensed to harvest peeler crabs by peeler pot may harvest one bushel of male crabs from his peeler pots, on Sunday, strictly for the purpose of baiting his peeler pots, and such crabs may not be sold [4 VAC 20-270-20].
- It is unlawful for any person licensed to catch & sell crabs taken by crab pot or peeler pot, to take & harvest crabs from any crab pot or peeler pot, or to retrieve, bait or set any crab pot or peeler pot, except during the time periods described here. The commercial harvesting of crabs by crab pot or peeler pot shall be from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. during April, September, October & November and from 5:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. during May, June, July & August. Crab pots or peeler pots already on board a boat at the end of the lawful 8-hour time period may be set during the one hour immediately following the lawful 8-hour time period. [4 VAC 20-270-30].
- It is unlawful to knowingly place, set, fish, or leave any hard crab pot or peeler crab pot in any Virginia tidal waters from December 1 through March 16 [4 VAC 20-270-40].
- The lawful season to harvest female crabs shall be from March 17 through November 20.

Size / Catch Restrictions

- Minimum size limits: 5 inches for male hard crabs (jimmies) and immature female hard crabs: 3 ¼” inches for peeler crabs for the dates of March 17 through July 15 and 3 ½” from July 16 through November 15 caught in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries; a 3 ¼” size limit for peeler crabs caught on the seaside of the Eastern Shore; and 3 ½ inches for softshell crabs, measured from tip to tip of the longest spikes. No size limit exists for adult female hard crabs (sooks). Tolerance (possession) limits for undersized hard crabs of 10 crabs per U.S. standard bushel or 35 crabs per barrel and for undersized peeler crabs of 10 peelers per U.S. standard bushel are allowed [Code 28.2-708, 4 VAC 20-270-55].
- Dark sponge (brown through black coloration) crabs must be returned to the water alive and not altered or destroyed in any manner during the period of March 17 thru July 14, however, a tolerance of 10 dark sponge crabs per U.S. standard bushel or 35 per barrel is allowed [4 VAC 20-370-20].
- All crabs taken from Virginia tidal waters shall be culled to the legal size and possession limits by the catcher at the location of the harvest [4 VAC 20-370-20].
- March 17 through May 31, a 51 bushel or 17 barrel daily catch limit per vessel is in effect for the crab pot fishery [4 VAC 20-300-20].
- It is unlawful for any crab potter to possess more than five bushels of channeled whelk [4 VAC20-890-50].

Area / Gear Restrictions

- From May 1 to September 15, it is unlawful to commercially crab in the Lower Bay Crab Sanctuary Area or in the Virginia Bay-wide Blue Crab Spawning Sanctuary [Code 28.2-709, 4 VAC 20-752-30].
- It is unlawful to set crab pots and/or take hard crabs by any gear in the Tangier Island Crab Scrape Sanctuary [4 VAC 20-240-20].

- No commercial crabbing is permitted in Pretty Lake, which was designated as a crab sanctuary by ordinance of the Norfolk City Council on July 11, 1995.
- It is unlawful to take or catch hard crabs or peeler crabs using any type of pot other than a licensed hard crab pot or peeler pot [4 VAC 20-880-30].

Crab Pot License Type	Maximum Gear Amount Permitted by License	
	Before May 1, 2008	2009 Season
Crab Pot 100 or Less	100	85
Crab Pot 150 or Less	150	127
Crab Pot 200 or Less	200	170
Crab Pot 300 or Less	300	255
Crab Pot 500 or Less	500	425
Peeler Pot 300 or Less	300	210

Crab Pots are devices made of wire or thread net with a mesh size of at least 1½ inches. All crab pot buoys must display the licensee's VMRC ID from their Commercial Registration License, preceded by a "C". Each pot must have at least two unobstructed cull rings that are at least 2 3/8" inside diameter, located one each in opposite exterior side panels of the upper chamber of the pot. Crab pots set on the seaside of Eastern Shore shall have two cull rings: one at least 2⁵/₁₆ inches inside diameter and the other at least 2³/₁₆ inches inside diameter, located one each in opposite exterior side panels of the upper chamber of the pot. Pots may not be placed in government marked navigable channels [Code 28.2-700, Code 28.2-705, Code 28.2-710, Code 28.2-712, 4 VAC 20-700-20].

A 255 hard crab pot limit is in effect for the Virginia tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay and the Virginia tributaries of the Potomac River, and a 425 hard crab pot limit is in effect for the Chesapeake Bay and coastal waters. No person may place, set or fish more than a combined total of 425 hard crab pots in Virginia tidal waters [4 VAC 20-880-30].

Peeler pots, with a mesh size less than 1½ inch are exempt from mesh size limitations. They are wire mesh pots baited with live adult male crabs; however, no food is allowed in the peeler pots for those crabs. All peeler pot buoys must display the licensee's last 4 numbers of his/her Commercial Registration License, preceded by a "P". No person may place, set or fish or attempt to place, set or fish more than 210 peeler crab pots. Laws and regulations pertaining to crab pots apply to peeler pots as well, except peeler pots with a mesh size less than 1½ inches are exempt from cull ring requirements [28.2-700, 28.2-705, 4 VAC 20-270-50, 4 VAC 20-700-20].

Crab Scrapes are hand hauled devices used to catch peeler crabs. The mouth may not be over four feet wide and the bar may not contain any teeth. No more than two scrapes per boat are permitted overboard at one time. No hard crabs may be possessed by any person having a scrape on board [Code 28.2-706].

Crab Traps/Pounds are maze-like devices used to direct crabs into a submerged trap. Each trap must have at least four unobstructed cull rings of at least 1½ inches inside diameter, located two each under water in the lower portion of two opposite side panels (perpendicular to the shoreline) of the retention box. Crab traps must be spaced at least 100 yards apart. Each trap or pound must be completely removed by December 31 of each year, except that two poles may be left for site relocation (Tangier Island vicinity - all poles may be left if used the following season). Crab trap retention box has one inch minimum mesh size restriction [Code 28.2-701, 4 VAC 20-30-20, 4 VAC 20-460-10 ET SEQ.].

Rakes: No boat shall be used to pull or push any rake to harvest crabs. It is unlawful to use rakes other than hand rakes, dredges or scrapes to take crabs from the public rocks or shoals on the seaside of Accomack and Northampton Counties [Code 28.2-519, Code 28.2-705].

Violations: Any person convicted of two blue crab conservation violations will be summoned for a license revocation hearing before the Commission. A conservation violation is such that it inhibits the the conservation intent of a regulation, such as blocking a required cull ring opening. The presence of a pot in a marked channel does not constitute a conservation violation. [4 VAC 20-270-58 ET SEQ.]

All information provided above is summarized from the Code of Virginia and VMRC Regulations. Please refer to the Code sections and Regulations cited for legal documentation. All regulations are subject to change. Call (757) 247-2200 for the most current regulations.

Revised March 12, 2009