



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Division of Marine Fisheries

(617) 626-1520 | www.mass.gov/marinefisheries



MAURA T. HEALEY
Governor

KIMBERLEY DRISCOLL
Lt. Governor

REBECCA L. TEPPER
Secretary

THOMAS K. O'SHEA
Commissioner

DANIEL J. MCKIERNAN
Director

April 12, 2024

Marine Fisheries Advisory

NEW REGULATIONS AFFECTING THE HARVEST OF HORSESHOE CRABS

The Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) has promulgated new regulations affecting the harvest of horseshoe crabs. These new rules for the 2024 fishing season go into effect on April 26th.

- **Spawning Closure.** To enhance the protection of spawning horseshoe crabs, DMF has adopted an April 15 – June 7 closure when the harvest of horseshoe crabs is prohibited in all Massachusetts waters. This extended spawning closure replaces the previous lunar closures, which prohibited harvest for the five-days around each new and full moon from April 16 through June 30. Because this new regulation does not take effect until April 26th, the current lunar closure rules apply until that date. Consequently, with this year's April full moon occurring on April 23rd, harvest this month will be prohibited during the period April 21-25 under the current rules, and will remain closed from April 26th through June 7th due to the recently adopted regulations. Starting in 2025, the spawning closure will begin on April 15th and run through June 7th.
- **Bait Fishery Trip Limits.** DMF has amended the trip limits by adopting a uniform 300 horseshoe crab trip limit for participants in the limited access bait fishery. This trip limit applies per trip or calendar day, whichever period is longer. This maintains the existing limit for mobile gear fishers and replaces the prior limit that afforded hand harvesters a 400 horseshoe crab limit per 24-hour period. The trip limit will automatically increase to 400 horseshoe crabs on August 1 should more than 50% of the quota remain available and will automatically decrease to 200 horseshoe crabs if more than 80% of the quota is taken before September 15. These automatic adjustments are designed to optimize the utilization of the quota to meet demand and prevent an early season quota closure that could result in regulatory discarding in mobile gear fisheries. Horseshoe crabs will also be included in the annual Consecutive Daily Trip Limit Program, which allows vessels fishing in the summertime mixed-species trawl fishery south and west of Cape Cod to retain and land two days' trip limits that were lawfully caught and retained over consecutive open fishing days.
- **Matching Federal Harvest Prohibitions.** DMF has also prohibited the harvest of horseshoe crabs within the boundaries of the Cape Cod National Seashore and the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge. This matches existing federal prohibitions for these areas, and in doing so, allows the Massachusetts Environmental Police to enforce the ban.

Horseshoe crabs are harvested for bait in whelk and eel pot fisheries and for biomedical processing to produce *Limulus Amoebocyte Lysate*, which is used to detect bacterial contamination in the medical field. The bait and biomedical fisheries are discretely managed and subject to fishery specific annual quotas of 140,000 and 200,000 horseshoe crabs, respectively. Horseshoe crabs harvested against the biomedical quota are to be handled in a manner that increases their probability of survival and are required to be returned to the area from which they were harvested. Biomedical firms may also obtain horseshoe crabs from bait dealers for biomedical processing prior to sale as bait.

For more information, please visit our website: www.mass.gov/marinefisheries. DMF's horseshoe crab regulations may be found at 322 CMR 6.34.