

No Longer Dredging, Crabbers Collect Pots

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POQUOSON -- The long-lost crab pot came up from the bottom laden with mud and slime and sea life. Dennis Dalheim shook it out and swung it up on deck. It was rusted and falling apart, but the "ghost pot" was the catch of the day.

"This is what I do now," said Dalheim, a Poquoson crabber who is spending this winter rounding up derelict crab pots from the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. The state of Virginia pays Dalheim and 57 other crabbers \$300 per day plus fuel costs to collect ghost pots, which probably number in the thousands.

The work program was created by the state as emergency help for crabbers whose traditional winter jobs ended this season as the state banned crab dredging. Virginia is trying to halt a plunge in the blue crab population; dredgers scoop up millions of female crabs, most of them pregnant, before the spawning season.

Dalheim, 40, has worked on dredge boats in January on the Back River in his native Poquoson since age 15. He operates a wooden, 45-foot Chesapeake Bay deadrise workboat fashioned by a Deltaville master builder in the 1970s. The switch from dredging to collecting pots "has a mournful feel," he said. "But it's still work, hard work, and a lot of people are glad for it."

Crabbers lose dozens of pots every season to storms and to passing boats that snag the lines -- a considerable expense, at \$40 per pot. Untended on the bottom, the pots pose deadly traps for crabs and fish for up to a year, when the metal of the cage dissolves in the salt water, said Kirk J. Havens, a researcher at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. So far this winter they have recaptured more than 3,000 pots.

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission put up the money to start the program in mid-December -- to replace the dredging season -- in hopes of being repaid out of \$10 million in emergency funds recently approved for the watermen by Congress.

John Bull, a VMRC spokesman, said the ghost-pot program could cost up to \$1 million if it continues for another winter or two. He said it is designed to give crab dredgers the time to find other work in the winter months, with the idea that dredging will never resume.

To help watermen locate the lost pots, the VMRC bought small side-scan sonar devices to lend to each vessel. VIMS researchers taught the crabbers how to run the sonar, which shows the images of objects on the bottom. Crab pots have a distinctly square shape.

Dalheim has learned to find them. He said he and a friend have retrieved about 100 over the past month while marking many others on a computer for later pickup. "Like everything, there's a game to it," he said.

One recent morning in the Back River off Poquoson, he pointed to a square on the sonar, turned the boat around and tossed out a big metal rake at the end of a 100-foot line. After a couple of passes, the line went taut, and Dalheim hauled in what remained of a pot. It was empty except for an oyster toad, which swam off. He said he rarely finds creatures in the old pots, although a friend reported finding 12 crabs in one.

Dalheim said he and other crabbers have gotten along well with the VIMS researchers running the program, though they disagree with scientists about the need to stop dredging.

But he said crabbers feel like "a guy at GM who's built cars for 30 years and they're getting ready to lay him off, but they give him a broom to sweep the floors. I guess it's a job, and I guess he's going to take that job to keep his family going."

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