



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

*Environmental Protection and Restoration
Environmental Education*

Senate Bill 257

Fishing Gear – Crab Pots – Ghost Panel Requirement

DATE: MARCH 17, 2020

POSITION: SUPPORT

POSITION

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation supports Senate Bill 257 and recommends a favorable report from the Environment and Transportation Committee. SB 257 would require the use of biodegradable panels or other mechanical devices to prevent ‘ghost fishing’ by lost or abandoned crab pots.

COMMENTS

The term ‘ghost fishing’ refers to the continual capture of crabs, fish, and other organisms in crab pots and other derelict fishing gear after it has been lost or abandoned. Often, the animals caught by lost or abandoned gear starve and die, resulting in a ‘self-baiting’ phenomenon where additional organisms, such as diamondback terrapins, are attracted to the gear by the scent of the captured fish and crabs, and perish.

A 2007 study conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimated that there are 84,567 lost or abandoned crab pots in Maryland waters of Chesapeake Bay. Each of these derelict pots was estimated to catch 20 crabs per year, resulting in a loss of more than 1.6 million crabs, a significant impact to the Maryland blue crab fishery.¹ Additionally, more than 40 other species, including white perch, oyster toadfish, and croaker were observed in these derelict pots.² Annually, watermen lose an average of 10-70% of their pots. Each of these pots can continue ghost fishing for several years, an issue exacerbated by the use of more durable materials for pot construction in recent decades.³

Ghost fishing may be prevented by the use of biodegradable panels or other mechanical means to disarm the pot after loss. These panels are designed to degrade in months as compared to the pots themselves that may take up to 15 years to degrade. Biodegradable panels do not affect catch rates of blue crabs and have already been employed in lobster, Dungeness crab, black sea bass, and stone crab fisheries. The mandatory use of these panels in blue crab pots in Maryland could significantly reduce wasteful losses to commercial and recreational fisheries through the prevention of ghost fishing.

CONCLUSION

For these reasons, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation recommends a favorable report on SB 257 from the Environment and Transportation Committee. Please contact Dr. Allison Colden, Fisheries Scientist (acolden@cbf.org) should you require any additional information.

¹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. <https://chesapeakebay.noaa.gov/monitoring-and-research/marine-debris>.

² Bilkovic, D.M, Havens, K., Stanhope, D. and Angstadt, K. 2014. Derelict fishing gear in Chesapeake Bay, Virginia: Spatial patterns and implications for marine fauna. Marine Pollution Bulletin. Available online: http://ccrm.vims.edu/marine_debris_removal/publications/MPB_Bilkovic_et al2014.pdf

³ Virginia Institute of Marine Science, Center for Coastal Resource Management. Fact Sheet: Polyhydroxyalkanoate (PHA) biodegradable escape panel (biopanel) for crab, lobster, and fish traps. Available at https://www.vims.edu/ccrm/docs/marine_debris/biodegradablepanel_factsheet.pdf

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