

CAPE COD COMMERCIAL
**FISHERMEN'S
ALLIANCE**

Small Boats. Big Ideas.

February 26, 2026

Director Dan McKiernan
MA Division of Marine Fisheries

Re: Proposed amendments to Division of Marine Fisheries regulations

Dear Director McKiernan,

On behalf of the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance, I write in opposition to the proposed reduction in the Horseshoe crab bait quota from 140,000 crabs to 100,000 crabs and the reallocation of these 40,000 crabs to the biomedical sector.

Our organization represents small-boat, community-based fishermen across Cape Cod who depend on responsibly managed local fisheries and access to sustainable bait sources. Our members are deeply committed to sustainable fishing practices, local stewardship, and science-based management of the Commonwealth's marine resources. The limited, highly regulated harvest of horseshoe crabs for bait in Massachusetts is a model for sustainable management that balances ecological protection with the economic realities of coastal communities.

The MA Division of Marine Fisheries already maintains comprehensive protections for horseshoe crabs that far exceed management measures in most neighboring states. Commercial harvesters must comply with:

- **Complete harvest closures during spawning periods** tied to the lunar cycle, ensuring crabs are protected during peak reproductive periods (April 15-June 7) in all Massachusetts waters;
- **Prohibition of harvest of horseshoe crabs** within the boundaries of the Cape Cod National Seashore and the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge
- **Prohibition within the waters of Pleasant Bay** for bait fishery, implemented in 2006 and adopted permanently in 2007.
- **Strict permitting, reporting, and trip limits** (300 horseshoe crabs per trip limit for participants in the limited access bait fishery), enforced by the Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) ensuring DMF has real-time monitoring of harvest activity

Starting in 2024, spawning horseshoe crabs received the added protection of a continuous 7 ½ week no-harvest closure from mid-April through June 7. This new rule replaced the state's 5-day "lunar closures" that surrounded each new and full moon in the spring which began in 2010. This new protection enhanced conservation by maximizing the spawning potential of the local populations. Based on data collected from MA Division of Marine Fisheries that described the timing of spawning activity, this closure time period will protect about 90% of spawning crabs, allowing them to deposit eggs on Massachusetts beaches undisturbed.

In Massachusetts, horseshoe crab populations appear to be increasing in recent years (MA DMF). The most recent stock assessments for Horseshoe crabs (2019 and 2024) showed abundance in Massachusetts has

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been increasing since horseshoe crab management started in 1998, citing data from MA DMF's semi-annual trawl surveys. The MA Division of Marine Fisheries recently shared via social media that 2025 was a great year for horseshoe crabs in Massachusetts. They state: "Last year, we saw record numbers of female crabs in the spring trawl survey south of Cape Cod, the seine survey had its 3rd best year (behind 1988 and 2023), and 90% of the spawning beach surveys are showing increasing trends over the last ten years. In fact, over the past 10 to 15 years, we have seen positive trends in abundance across all three surveys."

Despite the increase in horseshoe crab populations, MA DMF has continued to manage this species conservatively with precautionary management and rigorous oversight. The bait fishery is subject to an annual quota. The quota was first set by Addendum I to the ASMFC Fishery Management Plan (2000) at 339,337 horseshoe crabs annually. In 2008, the MA Division of Marine Fisheries with the approval of the Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission instituted new regulations for the harvest of bait crabs, including reduction in annual quota from 330,337 to 165,000, and a reduction in daily limit from 1,000 to 400 crabs. In 2023, the Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission (MFAC) voted unanimously in favor of adopting additional conservative measures by MA Division of Marine Fisheries that cut the states quota for the bait fishery from 165,000 to 140,000 making it far below the state's 330,377 crab allowance in the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's interstate management plan (ASMFC 2024). These science-based measures are conservative and ensure that the Commonwealth's horseshoe crab population remains healthy while allowing a small number of horseshoe crab harvesters to continue a traditional bait harvest critical to local conch fisheries.

Currently there are 32 active horseshoe crab bait endorsement holders across Massachusetts (13 using hand gear, and 19 using mobile gear (Data sources: MATL Reports, NMFS VTRs). From 2022 to 2024, the top ten Massachusetts fishing ports with horseshoe crab bait landings, in order, were Chatham, Hyannis, Orleans, Harwich Port, Eastham, Woods Hole, Barnstable, Mashpee, Wellfleet, and Plymouth (Sources: MA Commercial Catch Reports, NMFS VTRs). The revenues from horseshoe crab landings contribute substantially to the profitability of these commercial fishing businesses, and for some mobile gear fishermen, it represents the second most valuable species retained. In 2024, dealers reported the bait fishery took 139,970 horseshoe crabs, about 99% of the annual 140,000 crab quota. Bait fishermen are required to sell their catch to authorized dealers, and the bait dealers re-sell these horseshoe crabs to supply the state's conch pot fishermen. Additionally, some horseshoe crabs are exported to other states where there is a demand for this bait. With this proposal, to reallocate 40,000 crabs to the biomedical sector, there are equity concerns in terms of a reduction to the bait sector, but also in terms of bait quota not remaining in Massachusetts if exported to other states, therefore limiting the supply available to conch fishermen here locally.

The limited horseshoe crab bait fishery is an important part of Cape's small-boat commercial fleet, supporting local conch and whelk fishermen who rely on horseshoe crab bait to maintain their livelihoods. In 2024, there were 127 conch pot endorsement permits issued, and 45 actively fished (MA Commercial Catch Reports and NMFS VTRS). The whelk fishery supports active commercial harvesters, many based in Cape Cod's small ports. The highest ports with conch landings were Martha's Vineyard (35.8%), Harwich Port (12.0%), and Chatham (11.9%). Horseshoe crabs are the primary bait for the conch pot fishery. Reduction to the bait harvest quota, also impacts the state's conch pot fishery because they would see a reduction in access to their primary bait source. Losing access to local horseshoe crabs will decrease the profitability of this fishery and force fishermen to use less productive bait at a time when this fishery is already dealing with economic factors impacting domestic and international market demand.

Reallocation horseshoe crab quota to the biomedical field would unnecessarily penalize compliant harvesters who follow the rules and operate under strict state regulations to ensure the sustainability of the resource. It would also increase dependence on imported or synthetic bait, raising costs for local fishermen and shifting ecological pressure to other regions where management standards may not be as robust. Trials testing effectiveness of alternative baits to horseshoe crab for whelk fisheries have been previously conducted and harvesters reported poor results (2017 Horseshoe Crab Technical Committee Report).

We urge you to maintain the quotas, which already provides strong conservation measures and protection, rather than reducing this well-managed local bait fishery. A reallocation of horseshoe crab quota to the

biomedical sector would have significant economic consequences for these fishermen and their communities while doing little to improve conservation outcomes beyond what existing protections already achieved through MA Division of Marine Fisheries. The best available science, supported by state and federal horseshoe crab biologists, demonstrates that horseshoe crab populations in Massachusetts are increasing in abundance. This is a direct result of MA DMF and ASMFC managing the species conservatively and with rigorous oversight.

Thank you for your attention to this issue and for your ongoing support of policies that sustain both our marine resources and the fishing communities that depend on them.

Sincerely,

Aubrey Church

Aubrey Church
Fisheries Policy Director
Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance

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