

STATE OF GEORGIA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
ATLANTA 30334-0900

Roy E. Barnes
GOVERNOR

December 11, 2002

The Honorable Donald L. Evans
Secretary of Commerce
HCHB/Room 5516
U.S. Department of Commerce
14th and Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20239

OS EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAT
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Dear Mr. Secretary:

Based on a recommendation by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, I ask that you declare that a commercial fishery failure has occurred in Georgia's blue crab fishery. This request is made based on a fishery resource disaster pursuant to Section 312 (a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Management and Conservation Act.

The state of Georgia has experienced an unprecedented decline in the abundance of blue crabs within our coastal estuaries, a direct consequence of which has been a significant loss of income to commercial fishermen. Reported landings of hard blue crabs declined to record lows during the past two years. Commercial landings of hard blue crabs in 2001 were 69 percent below the historical average, and landings during 2002 are predicted to be even lower.

A recent survey of Georgia's licensed commercial crab fishermen revealed that a majority desire financial assistance to mitigate the effects of the approximate \$2 million of lost income due to the poor catches of the past four years.

It is believed that prolonged drought has led to the proliferation of *Hematodinium perezii*, a parasitic dinoflagellate, which causes a lethal disease in blue crabs. Researchers at the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography have found infection rates as high as 40 percent in some samples and that the disease is 100 percent lethal. Other drought-related factors leading to the decline in blue crab abundance may include loss of habitat, recruitment failure, and pollution. There is concern that localized overfishing may also have had a deleterious effect in less saline areas where crabs have sought refuge from *Hematodinium*. Further investigation is needed to define specifically the causes and effects of this decline.

Disaster relief funds authorized by the relevant statutes are needed to: (1) further assess the primary and secondary causes of the blue crab decline; (2) determine feasibility of actions to remediate or restore the affected resources; (3) begin actions to prevent and restore affected resources; and (4) provide economic assistance to fishing communities and small businesses, including crab fishermen, affected by the disaster.

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On behalf of Georgia's blue crab industry, I thank you for your prompt consideration of this urgent request.

Sincerely,

Roy E. Barnes

REB:lpt

cc: Lonice Barrett, Commissioner
Department of Natural Resources