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HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 609
AMENDMENT IN THE NATURE OF A SUBSTITUTE

(Proposed by the House Committee on Rules
on February 2, 1995)

(Patron Prior to Substitute—Delegate Behm)

Requesting that the Virginia delegation to the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission jointly study the possible effects of changing minimum size limits of blue crabs allowed to be taken, of requiring cull rings in peeler pots and of preventing the taking of peeler crabs too early in the molting stage.

WHEREAS, the blue crab fishery is the most important commercial and recreational fishery in the Chesapeake Bay; and

WHEREAS, the blue crab population is now critically low; and

WHEREAS, factors such as the increased harvest pressure on the blue crab due in part to the decline of other Chesapeake Bay fisheries, particularly the oyster and rockfish fisheries, may prevent the blue crab population from recovering from its present low levels; and

WHEREAS, the blue crab population is also threatened by habitat loss due to the disappearance of submerged aquatic vegetation, which is particularly important for juveniles, and low oxygen levels in deep waters; and

WHEREAS, increased survival of juvenile crabs so that they may reproduce or be harvested at a larger size may contribute to the stability of the crab population; and

WHEREAS, a preliminary Virginia Institute of Marine Science investigation has concluded that the effect of the peeler crab harvest on the blue crab population is uncertain and requires study; and

WHEREAS, because large female crabs produce more eggs than smaller female crabs, and because there appears to be at least a partial genetic basis for blue crab size at maturity, the importance of increased survival of large female crabs to the stability of the crab population should be investigated; and

WHEREAS, the practice of capturing peeler crabs too early during the molting cycle may cause the crabs to die before they can be harvested as soft-shelled crabs; and

WHEREAS, the use of cull rings in peeler pots may have a positive impact on the crab population by preventing harvest of juvenile crabs; and

WHEREAS, it has been proposed that the minimum size of crabs allowed to be taken be changed from five inches in the transverse direction, which applies only to male crabs, to two and five sixteenths inches in the longitudinal direction for male crabs in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries and two and three sixteenths inches in the longitudinal direction for male crabs in other waters and for all female crabs; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the Virginia delegation to the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission be requested to undertake a joint study of the proposed change in crab size limits, other possible changes in crab size limits, the likely effect of requiring that peeler crab pots include one or two cull rings, and ways to prevent the capture of peeler crabs that are in an early stage of molting, and the effect of such measures. The Commissions shall consider and prepare a blue crab fishery management plan, consistent with the standards for fishery conservation and management so as to reverse the overfishing and stress on the crab stock in Virginia waters. The Commissions shall also include in their deliberations the need for regulations and restrictions on (i) winter dredging, (ii) commercial licensing, (iii) the protection of spawning stock, (iv) the establishment of nursing sanctuaries in areas with submerged aquatic vegetation; (v) limitations on the taking of peeler and soft shell crabs, (vi) size limits, (vii) the use of cull rings and crab pots, and (viii) time of day restrictions and closed seasons. The Commissions shall recommend such legislative changes on the commercial and recreational taking of crabs, as may be necessary.

One representative of the seafood industry shall be appointed by the Speaker of the House to serve with the Virginia delegation to the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission for the course of this study.

All agencies of the Commonwealth shall provide assistance to the Virginia delegation to the Chesapeake Bay Commission and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission for this study, upon request.

The Virginia delegation to the Chesapeake Bay Commission and Virginia Marine Resources Commission shall complete its work in time to submit its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the 1996 Session of the General Assembly as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents.