



15<sup>th</sup> November 2016

## Certification Determination

For The

### Louisiana Blue Crab Commercial Fishery

Following a meeting of a Global Trust Certification Committee on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2016, a positive determination for the Certification of the Louisiana Blue Crab Commercial Fishery to the Audubon Nature Institute Gulf United for Lasting Fisheries (G.U.L.F.) Responsible Fisheries Management (RFM) Certification Scheme has been reached. The Louisiana Blue Crab Fishery was found to meet the requirements of the G.U.L.F. Certification Scheme for the following unit of certification:

- **Louisiana blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) commercial fishery employing baited pot/trap gears in Louisiana state waters under the management of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries (LDWF) and the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission (LWFC).**

The requirements of the G.U.L.F. Certification Scheme are laid out in the G.U.L.F. RFM Standard (Issue 1.1) available on the Audubon [website](#). These requirements are based on the substantive criteria contained within the UN FAO's Guidelines for the Ecolabeling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries (originally published in 2005 and revised in 2009) and clauses from the relevant Articles of the 1995 UN FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.

The G.U.L.F. Certification Scheme is a voluntary program for U.S. Gulf of Mexico fisheries whose purpose is to provide these fisheries with a "Certification of Responsible Fisheries Management" to an internationally recognized standard. Certification to requirements under the scheme demonstrates that fisheries are managed in accordance with internationally established practices provided by the UN FAO. A full description of standard-setting arrangements, normative references and processes may be obtained from Audubon Nature Institute, owners of the G.U.L.F. Certification Scheme.

Certification was awarded on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2016 and will be continually monitored and verified through annual surveillance assessments. The full re-assessment of the Louisiana blue crab fishery will be due on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2021.

A summary of the Assessment Outcomes are presented below.

## Introduction

The Louisiana blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) commercial fishery employing pot/trap gears within Louisiana State Territorial Waters under the management of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries (LDWF) and Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission (LWFC) was assessed against the requirements of the Audubon Nature Institute Gulf United for Lasting Fisheries (G.U.L.F.) Responsible Fisheries Management (RFM) Certification Scheme. The request for assessment was made by LDWF on behalf of the Louisiana commercial blue crab fisheries and participants, and was conducted by Global Trust Certification Ltd.

The Assessment was conducted by a team of assessors made up of both Global Trust internal staff and external fishery consultants while the Peer Review Team was made up exclusively of external fisheries consultants. The assessment consisted of assessment planning, onsite audits, assignment of non-conformances, clarifications and corrective actions, certification reporting, peer review and internal technical and certification committee reviews. In the course of this assessment 2 on-site visits were conducted. Throughout the assessment, pertinent information has been posted on the Audubon G.U.L.F. website: <http://audubongulf.org/>.

A vast amount of information was considered in the course of the assessment and the assessment findings have been summarized in a Full Assessment and Certification Report. The assessment report documents the assessment of commercially exploited Louisiana blue crab against the G.U.L.F. RFM Standard (Issue 1.1). The assessment was based on five major components of responsible management derived from the FAO Criteria:

- A. The Fisheries Management System
- B. Data Collection, Stock Assessment and Scientific Advice
- C. Management Objectives for the Stock
- D. The Precautionary Approach
- E. Serious Impacts of the Fishery on the Ecosystem

These major components are supported by fundamental clauses and underlying sub-clauses. Each sub-clause represents a scoring element. Collectively, these scoring elements form the G.U.L.F. Conformance Criteria against which the blue crab fishery was assessed.

The blue crab fishery scored highly against G.U.L.F. Certification Scheme Conformance Criteria. There were initially four nonconforming areas recorded by the Assessment Team. Two of these were addressed through the submission of further evidence. Corrective actions were implemented by managers to address the remaining two non-conforming areas. The ongoing effectiveness of these corrective actions will be reviewed annually at surveillance audits.

Full details of all non-conforming areas and corrective actions are presented in the assessment report.

## Assessment Outcome Summary

### A. The Fisheries Management System

There are effective legal and administrative frameworks, appropriate for management of the blue crab fishery, in place. The Louisiana blue crab fishery and its industry operate under the legal authorities established by the Constitutions of the State of Louisiana and the United States of America. Legal authority to manage the blue crab fishery is shared by the Legislature, the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission (LWFC), and Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF). The Crab Task Force (CTF) and Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) provide input and recommendations. The overall objectives of the management system are based on the best available scientific evidence and are defined in a Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) which integrates fishing, habitat, conservation, and socio-economic factors into a balanced strategy to maintain long-term sustainability of the fishery. The FMP proposes limit and target reference points for the blue crab stock as well as a harvest control rule. Management objectives and underlying estimates of stock size explicitly take account of uncertainty and imprecision. Data to support the management of the fishery are largely obtained through the LDWF's extensive fishery monitoring programs.

Louisiana management organizations participate within a legal and policy framework that include stakeholders from other states and mechanisms for cooperation and coordination among them. The blue crab fishery is an inter-jurisdictional fishery in the Gulf of Mexico and associated waters and is recognized by the GSMFC as such. The LDWF is an active participant in the GSMFC which provides an excellent mechanism for sharing regional management objectives within individual states to ensure responsible management of shared stocks. The fishery management decision-making processes is well understood and used by those involved to create, amend, or abolish laws and regulations. Mechanisms and procedures to avoid or reduce user group conflicts exist.

There are established mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement of blue crab fishing regulations and defined sanctions including fines, jail time, loss of fishing license, and forfeiture of property. Sanctions increase with both the severity of the offence and where the offender has a previous track record of offending. The use of dynamite, poisons, and other destructive fishing practices to harvest blue crabs is illegal and there is no evidence of their use. LDWF provides education and training programs to improve the skills of fishers and their understanding of fisheries regulations with public outreach efforts being made in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

### B. Data Collection, Stock Assessment and Scientific Advice

The LDWF has a strong and long-standing structure of professional scientists, researchers and statisticians in place to conduct the necessary research and stock assessment on blue crab for conservation and management purposes. Processes exist to ensure proper planning of research projects, as well as ongoing review of stock assessment and research activities. LDWF staff are involved in a number of collaborative projects with other researchers and institutions.

All fishery removals and mortality of blue crab are considered in the assessment and management of the stock. Reliable and accurate fishery-dependent and fishery-independent data are available to assess the status of blue crab fisheries and ecosystems and the state of the stock relative to the management elected reference points. These data including information on retained catch in commercial fisheries as well as estimates of bycatch, discards and wastage. Several data reporting systems are in place to ensure timely and accurate collection and reporting of catch data. Data review and analysis consider and take sufficient account of all fishery removals of the target stock including retained catch and discards in target and non-target fisheries as well as catches and discards of other commercial and non-commercial species associated with fishing activity to the extent that impacts on these species can be understood.

LDWF uses scientific data to provide the best stock assessment information and related advice for the objectives of fisheries management. The assessment includes an appraisal of the stock status and harvest rate relative to target and limit reference points. As of the latest stock assessment, the stock biomass was below its limit reference point meaning the blue crab stock is currently in an overfished condition. While fishing mortality is currently less than the associated limit reference point, it is very close to that limit. In order to reduce the risk of further declines and allow for restoration of the blue crab stock, fisheries managers put in place a set of corrective actions designed to decrease fishing mortality. These corrective actions, which include license fee increases, a ban on the landing of immature female crabs, a one month fishery closure and changes to the size, number and placement of escape rings in crab traps, were formulated taking into account life history characteristics of blue crab, including the structure and composition of the blue crab stock which contribute to its resilience. Having reviewed these corrective actions the Assessment Team was satisfied that the measures have a reasonable expectation of effectiveness. The effectiveness of these corrective actions will be continually monitored at annual surveillance audits.

### **C. Management Objectives for the Stock**

Conservation and management measures in place ensure the long-term sustainability of the blue crab resource. LDWF outlines specific management objectives in its 2014 FMP for blue crab which integrates fishing, habitat, conservation, and socio-economic factors into a balanced strategy to maintain the long-term sustainability of the fishery. LDWF makes recommendations for proposed regulations to LWFC and/or the state legislature for fisheries under its management. The provisions of the blue crab FMP ensure that short term considerations do not compromise the long-term management objectives for the blue crab resource. The mechanism for controlling harvest is identified, formally established and implemented in accordance with the best available scientific information. The Assessment Team was satisfied that managements' response to the overfished status of blue crab demonstrated that measures, harvest control mechanisms and associated actions are sufficiently formalized so that management can effectively respond and take action to situations of impaired recruitment, overfishing or other negative outcomes. As the current mechanism for controlling harvest was only adopted in 2014, it is still not clear what its effectiveness will be in the long-term. Therefore, the long-term effectiveness of the harvest control mechanism will be continually monitored at annual surveillance audits.

LDWF's stock assessments provide the necessary guidelines to protect the blue crab resource. As existing Louisiana blue crab data does not allow for reliable estimates of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), management measures are instead consistent with maintaining the stock above a recruitment overfishing threshold based upon the history of the stock and fishery. In normal circumstances the blue crab stock assessment will be updated every three years with indices of abundance and fishing effort being summarized annually. However, as the stock is currently in an overfished condition LDWF have stated that an off-schedule stock assessment will be conducted in early 2018 with the aim of assessing the efficacy of corrective management measures enacted in 2015 and 2016.

### **D. The Precautionary Approach**

Target reference points for biomass and fishing mortality have been developed based on sound scientific analyses. The LDWF 2011 stock assessment proposed maximum fishing mortality rates and minimum biomass levels to serve as proxies for maximum sustainable yield (MSY); these reference points are consistent with the precautionary approach and are widely accepted. Scientific information and stock assessments available are at a consistently high level, and clearly provide the necessary basis for conservation and management decisions. Potential uncertainty is adequately addressed through the current LDWF stock assessments as well as the planned three-year stock assessment and annual summaries of blue crab abundance indices and fishing effort as measured by the number of fishing trips by blue crab trap fishermen.

### **E. Serious Impacts of the Fishery on the Ecosystem**

LDWF conduct assessments and research related to fishery impacts on ecosystems and habitats and how environmental factors affect the fishery. The blue crab FMP has identified the most probable adverse impacts of the fishery on the ecosystem. Non-target stocks are sufficiently monitored to determine the impact exerted by the fishery. The blue crab fishery does not threaten these non-target stocks with recruitment overfishing or other impacts that are likely to be irreversible or very slowly reversible. The monitoring procedures and activities are robust enough to allow for objective and scientific verification of the risks and outcomes. Impacts of Louisiana's blue crab fishery on habitat are low, because fishermen set crab traps over oyster reefs and sand/mud bottoms, which are less affected by traps than sensitive bottom habitats such as corals or grass beds. Commercial crabbing is prohibited in coastal State and National Wildlife Refuges.

There is formal recognition of populations of species identified as endangered, threatened and/or protected (ETP) in the geographic location of the fishery by national and state authorities within the context of the likely risk posed by the fishery under consideration. The role of the blue crab stock in the food web has been considered. The blue crab serves as prey for numerous, diverse predators, but it is not a preferred prey item for any single predator species, such that it is highly unlikely that reductions in blue crab abundance would lead directly to reductions of any specific predator species. Finally, evaluation of the most probable environmental factors that influence the abundance of the blue crab stock has been included in the overall evaluation of stock status and determination of exploitation rates.

### **Certification Committee Determination**

**Following the recommendation of the assessment team and having considered comments from reviewers, the Certification Committee of Global Trust Certification Ltd. determined on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016, that the management system of the applicant fishery, the Louisiana Blue Crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) commercial fishery employing baited pot/trap gears in Louisiana state waters under the management of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries (LDWF) and the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission (LWFC), be awarded certification to the FAO-Based Audubon Nature Institute Gulf United for Lasting Fisheries (G.U.L.F.) Responsible Fisheries Management Certification Scheme.**

## Further Information

Information relating to the G.U.L.F. Certification Scheme and the assessment of Louisiana blue crab is available on the Audubon G.U.L.F. website: <http://audubongulf.org/>. The Full Assessment and Certification Report will also be made available shortly on the Audubon G.U.L.F. website.

For further information related to the G.U.L.F. Certification Scheme and the assessment of Louisiana blue crab please contact:

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Image source: Louisiana blue crab FMP