

2 Va. Fishing Ports Among U.S.'s Best

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A snug waterfront village and a sprawling metropolis earn Virginia two prominent places in a new federal listing of the nation's top seafood harbors.

Reedville, beside the Chesapeake Bay at the tip of the rural Northern Neck, and Hampton Roads rank among America's leading fishing ports.

A new National Marine Fisheries Services report lists Reedville as the second-largest port in terms of landings in 2004. The same report identified the Hampton Roads area as the third-richest U.S. port by value of the catch in 2004.

The information is contained in the service's report on commercial and recreational fishing in 2004. The report shows both localities climbed in the rankings and underscore the importance of commercial fishing to Virginia's economy even as the state becomes increasingly urban.

Reedville, which has a population of only about 200 people, easily nudged out the combined ports of Empire and Venice, La., to advance from its traditional third-place rank to the No. 2 spot on the service's ranking of harbors by weight of landings.

Only Dutch Harbor, Alaska, which handled 886.4 million pounds of seafood, exceeded Reedville's total. The federal figures show fishermen landed 400.5 million pounds of fish in Reedville. That reflected a 25.2 million-pound increase from the year before and represents more than 75 percent of the entire reported 531 million-pound Virginia harvest in 2004.

Hampton Road's landings were worth \$100.6 million last year, the report showed. The only two ports that did better, according to federal figures, were New Bedford, Mass., and Dutch Harbor. Seafood landings there were valued at \$206.5 million and \$155 million, respectively.

By contrast to Hampton Roads and the other two top money ports, Reedville's landings were worth just \$26.1 million, placing it 27th in terms of value. The difference in rankings between Reedville and Hampton Roads on the money scale reflects the huge price gap between Reedville's inedible specialty and a sought-after shellfish that is making Hampton Roads a seafood boom town.

Reedville is known for menhaden, an oily foot-long fish which Omega Protein Co. nets by the millions and renders into animal feed, oil and dietary supplements at a processing factory in town. Hampton Roads is riding a wave on the value of scallops, which have

increased in the Atlantic Ocean because of conservation measures and have also enjoyed rising demand. The service ranked scallops as the fourth-most valuable catch nationwide after lobsters, shrimp and crabs.

"Prices of scallops have skyrocketed," said Jack Travelstead, chief of fisheries management for the Virginia Marine Resources Commission. "I hear of prices as high as \$9 a pound compared to a couple of dollars a pound a few years ago."

Trawl boats based in the Hampton Roads area fish on extended cruises off the New England coastline up to 200 miles offshore and return their catch to local seafood processors and dealers. "Boats that used to sell for a couple hundred thousand dollars are now going for millions," Travelstead said.

The value of Hampton Roads catches in 2004 was \$78 million greater than the year before, federal data shows. The region ranked fourth in the country in value of landings in 2003 and 2002. In 2001, it was listed as only the seventh-richest seafood port.

Reedville's ranking continues to affirm its association with menhaden fishing. The town is named for Eliza Reed, who moved to the tip of the Northern Neck after the Civil War and developed a market for the oily fish.

"It's exciting to encounter so many third- and fourth-generation families who make their living from the waters of the Chesapeake Bay," said Reedville Fishermen's Museum executive director Chuck Backus. "In the 21st century, when so many of us are employed in careers that did not exist in the days of our parents and grandparents, it's reassuring to see this heritage passed from generation to generation."

Omega's fleet of 10 ocean-going ships fish in the Chesapeake Bay and the ocean for menhaden. A smaller fleet of small, individually owned boats called "snapper rigs" primarily fish in the bay and sell the menhaden they catch for crab pot bait and chum.

Statewide, 531 million pounds of seafood and fish were landed in Virginia in 2004, compared with 496 million pounds the year before, federal figures show. The value of the harvest increased from \$179.7 million in 2003 to \$209.4 million in 2004.

Reedville's huge harvests drew attention this year from regulators.

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, composed of representatives from the coastal states, recommended that Omega's landings be limited for the first time over concerns that the concentrated harvest might be robbing striped bass and other menhaden-eating game fish of their food supply. It called for a harvest cap equal to the average of the company's landings over the past five years. It will be up to the General Assembly to enact the recommendation, but the commission can ask the U.S. secretary of commerce to ban menhaden fishing in Virginia if the cap is not enacted.

Omega, which is based in Houston, opposes the restriction. In contrast to the rise in Reedville landings, the company's share of the menhaden harvest is declining, said Toby Gascon, Omega's director of governmental affairs.

"Our catch this year was down 6.9 percent from 2004 and down 9.3 percent compared to the five-year average," Gascon said.

In other categories, the service report showed Virginia was the eighth-ranked state in the nation in terms of angling trips per year in 2004. It showed 3.558 million sport fishing trips were taken in the bay and ocean.

The report also showed how clam aquaculture -- a big business on the Eastern Shore -- is growing nationwide.

The report did not breakdown clam harvests by state, but said U.S. clam growers harvested almost 10.8 million pounds of clams in 2003 worth \$53.9 million -- up more than a million pounds and \$24 million from 1998.