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MEDIA RELEASE

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Horseshoe Crab Hearing Holds Imperiled Shorebird's Fate in the Balance

Panel to Weigh Harvest Rules for Red Knot's Essential Food Source

(Washington, D.C., 09/24/07) To help save the red knot from imminent extinction, conservation groups are urging Delaware to go back to the drawing board and re-approve a moratorium on horseshoe crab harvests. The red knot relies on the horseshoe crab for its continued survival. Its fate may rest on a public hearing today in Dover, where the state of Delaware will consider adopting measures to protect horseshoe crab populations threatened by years of overharvesting. The proposal on the table is to allow the harvest of 100,000 male horseshoe crabs. In May 2006, the state of New Jersey implemented a full two-year moratorium on the annual take of horseshoe crabs.

A letter to the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control from the groups states in part:

"This moratorium is needed to protect the future of the migratory shorebirds, including the imperiled Red Knot, and will support the full recovery of the horseshoe crab population to levels required to resume its critical role in the Delaware Bay ecosystem. While the current regulatory proposal is necessary to bring the State into minimal compliance with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Addendum IV to the Horseshoe Crab Management Plan, it is insufficient to meet the State's obligation to protect its natural resources, exercise appropriate caution in allowing the commercial harvest of horseshoe crabs in the absence of adequate understanding of the consequences of the proposed harvest, and is insufficiently risk averse as regards to restoring the horseshoe crab population to a point where it can support the energetic needs of the shorebirds of Delaware Bay."

Delaware Bay is a vital migratory stopover each spring for the *rufa* subspecies of the red knot and a number of other shorebirds. Its beaches provide the largest spawning grounds for horseshoe crabs in the world. The bird relies solely on horseshoe crab eggs during its brief stopover at Delaware Bay during its arduous migration from as far south as the tip of South America to breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic. But since the 1990s, over-harvesting of horseshoe crabs has caused the density of horseshoe crab eggs to plummet, which has affected the red knot's ability to find and consume enough eggs during its brief stopover. This subspecies of red knots has declined from a high of more than 100,000 birds in the 1980s to fewer than 15,000 today. Scientists warn that unless this trend is reversed, the birds could

go extinct as early as 2010.

"The theory behind harvesting only male horseshoe crabs has never been proven to benefit either the horseshoe crab population or the red knot," said Maya van Rossum of Delaware Riverkeeper Network. "It is irresponsible to approve this level of harvest and the take of male crabs only without any evidence that this will achieve the necessary goal of increasing the supply of eggs to shorebirds. Furthermore, the harvesting technique of dredging for male horseshoe crabs is not sustainable and does not protect the female crabs and juvenile crabs that are protected by law. The issue of under-reporting crab harvest numbers is also a large problem that is exacerbated when a male-only harvest is allowed. That is why we are requesting Delaware to approve a complete moratorium on the horseshoe crab harvest to give the crabs, and the shorebirds that rely on them, a chance to recover."

The Department of Natural Resources & Environmental Control (DNREC) will be taking testimony on a plan to limit the number of horseshoe crabs fishers can take in Delaware Bay to 100,000 males a year. In 2006, DNREC approved a two-year moratorium on the harvesting of horseshoe crabs, but in June 2007, the moratorium was successfully challenged in a lawsuit brought by fishers and a Virginia seafood processing company.

"Scientists confirm that Red Knots could become extinct as soon as 2010 if conditions on the Delaware Bay don't improve," said Tim Dillingham, Executive Director of the American Littoral Society. "The key is to increase the density of horseshoe crab eggs, which can best be achieved by a moratorium."

The state sought to implement the moratorium after the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission failed to approve a moratorium earlier in 2006 for either New Jersey or Delaware. As a result of the lawsuit, DNREC adopted temporary emergency regulations that reduced Delaware's annual harvest quota from 150,000 horseshoe crabs of either sex to 100,000 male-only horseshoe crabs. Now the agency is considering a proposal to adopt the 100,000 male-only take permanently. This proposal was introduced to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission by the owner of the same Virginia company that originally challenged the moratorium, and that stands to profit the most from continued harvest of horseshoe crabs. The company sells the horseshoe crabs to be used as bait for conch and eel fishing.

"The lack of horseshoe crab eggs for the red knot has been attributed to an elevated harvest of adult crabs for bait in the channeled whelk ("conch") and eel fishing industries," said Nicholas DiPasquale of Delaware Audubon. "Studies have shown that red knot individuals with lower body weight at departure from Delaware Bay have lower survival rates than heavier birds."

A recently published U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) 2007 Red Knot Status Assessment concluded the red knot's dramatic population decline resulted from the low availability of horseshoe crab eggs in Delaware Bay. A copy of the status assessment can be found on the FWS website:
<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/endangered/Red%20Knot%20Assessment%20May%202007.standard.pdf>.

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[American Bird Conservancy](#) (ABC) works to conserve native wild birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. ABC is a membership organization that is consistently awarded a top, four-star rating by the independent group, Charity Navigator.

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Now in its second century, [Audubon](#) is dedicated to protecting birds and other wildlife and the habitat that supports them. Our national network of community-based nature centers and chapters, scientific and educational programs, and advocacy on behalf of areas sustaining important bird populations, engage millions of people of all ages and backgrounds in conservation.

The Delaware Riverkeeper and the Delaware Riverkeeper Network stand as vigilant protectors and defenders of the Delaware River, its tributaries and its watershed, including the Delaware Bay, and have been committed to restoring the natural balance where it has been lost and ensuring its preservation where it still exists since 1988. For more information, visit www.delawareriverkeeper.org.

The American Littoral Society promotes the study and conservation of marine life and habitat, defends the coast from harm and empowers others to do the same. For more information, visit www.littoralsociety.org

[Delaware Audubon Society](#) is a statewide chapter of the National Audubon Society. Delaware Audubon is dedicated to developing a better appreciation of our natural environment and working for species and habitat conservation.