

Horseshoe Crab Recovery Coalition

Statement on H.898

An Act to End the Taking of Horseshoe Crabs for Bait

Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources: October 21, 2025

The Crisis on Our Coast: Why Massachusetts Must Act for the Horseshoe Crab

Dear Chairs, The Honorable Christine Barber and The Honorable Rebecca Rausch, Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources,

On behalf of the Horseshoe Crab Recovery Coalition, a partnership of 55 national and local conservation and healthcare organizations, we thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill H.898, an act to end the taking of horseshoe crabs for bait.

Massachusetts has a critical opportunity to lead in coastal wildlife conservation – a chance to stabilize a struggling ecosystem and safeguard a magnificent, ancient creature.

Bill H.898, currently before the Joint Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, would ban the harvest of horseshoe crabs for bait. This legislation builds on action taken a year ago in Massachusetts to prohibit the taking of horseshoe crabs during its critical spawning season of April 15 – June 7. Though well-intended, this prohibition does not decrease the harvest of horseshoe crabs. It merely delays it.

American horseshoe crabs are known as a keystone species, meaning that they are responsible for helping to keep an entire ecosystem abundant and thriving. Their eggs are jet fuel for the 9,000-mile migratory journeys of shorebirds like the federally threatened Red Knot, whose plummeting numbers parallel the steep decline in horseshoe crab populations since the 1990s. The relationship between the Red Knot and the horseshoe crab is an elegant one: when horseshoe crabs thrive, birds thrive as well.

But when horseshoe crab eggs are not plentiful, birds suffer, as do the marine species that also depend on the eggs.

Decades of overfishing, habitat loss, and other pressures have caused a sharp decline in horseshoe crab populations in Massachusetts and throughout the Atlantic Coast.

The problem compounds when we look at why horseshoe crabs are being used by commercial fisheries at all. One reason is that it's easy: you wait for them to come ashore, and you take them. Horseshoe crabs have long been used as bait for eel and whelk, both of which are exported in large numbers to satisfy foreign markets, particularly in Asia. What we know about these two species is alarming:

- The American eel stock is described by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) as depleted, with its population at or near historically low levels. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has placed the American eel on its red list of endangered species.

- Similarly, whelk populations have suffered in recent years and are extremely vulnerable to overfishing. Commercial fisheries are harvesting immature females because there are no minimum size limits in place that adequately protect them. This long-term harvest of immature females can drastically decrease the population's spawning potential and risk the stock's ability to sustain itself.

It is ecologically unsustainable to use one declining species – the horseshoe crab – as bait for other declining species like eel and whelk. At what point do we say enough is enough?

Passage of H.898 would also end the mercenary practice known uniquely in Massachusetts as rent-a-crab, whereby a harvester takes a horseshoe crab, provides it to a biomedical bleeder, who drains and then returns it to the original harvester who kills the crab and uses it for bait. This cruel practice has helped to fuel the surging demand for horseshoe crab blood, used by the biomedical industry for safety testing – despite the availability of internationally recognized synthetic equivalents that forward-looking companies like Eli Lilly are already using.

Other states have recognized the simmering crisis facing the horseshoe crab, and they have acted. Neighboring Connecticut banned the hand-harvest of horseshoe crabs in 2023, joining New Jersey, which initiated a long-standing ban on the commercial bait harvest back in 2008. Legal and regulatory actions are also protecting horseshoe crabs in South Carolina, where the bait harvest is banned and the blood harvest prohibited on the beaches of over 30 islands across the coast as well as the vast Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge.

When Massachusetts joins these and other states that are considering moratoriums, it will mean concerted coastline protections for an ancient mariner on which so much depends. This is more than a local ban; it is a shared commitment to our shorelines. We urge you to advance H.898 and help pave the way toward a more resilient coastal ecosystem where marine species, birds and the people that enjoy them can thrive together.

Sincerely,

Dr. Lawrence Niles and Dr. David Mizrahi
Co-Founders
Horseshoe Crab Recovery Coalition