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Marine Fisheries

DMF Adopts New Regulatory Framework to Manage and Authorize the Clean Up of Fishing Gear Debris

Effective January 30, 2026, there will be new state regulations that increase the Commonwealth's capacity to remove fishing gear debris from our coasts and waters to better protect the environment and public safety. This follows a recent amendment to state law that distinguishes fishing gear from fishing gear debris and instructs the Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) to create a regulatory framework accommodating the clean-up of fishing gear debris.

Fishing gear is distinguished from fishing gear debris based on several criteria, including whether the gear is whole, undamaged, and functions as intended. Further, specific to pot and trap gear, the gear must be set during and open season and conform to three out of following four existing regulatory standards: (1) compliant surface buoy; (2) compliant buoy line; (3) current year's trap tag, or in the case of recreational gear, a compliant identification tag in or on the trap; and (4) compliant ghost panels and escape vents. If the trap/pot gear that does not adequately meet these criteria it is considered to be fishing gear debris.

To enable efficient and effective coastal clean-up efforts, fishing gear debris found on our coastline and intertidal zone may be removed and disposed of without any authorization. Parties who are interested in removing fishing gear debris from our coastal waters must apply to DMF by [e-mail](#) for a special project permit. Applications should minimally include a description of when, where, and how the project will be conducted; the relevant expertise of the applicant (or its contractor); how gear will be disposed of; and how gear and user group conflicts will be avoided. Additionally, DMF and the Massachusetts Environmental Police are given broad authority to remove and dispose of fishing gear debris throughout the Commonwealth and commercial mobile gear fishers who encounter fishing gear debris during the routine course of lawful commercial fishing may dispose of it.

DMF strongly encourages individuals involved in clean-up efforts to properly dispose of fishing gear debris. It is important to coordinate with your municipality to determine how best to do this. DMF is committed to continued partnership with local leaders to expand these efforts. This includes working with municipalities and partners to expand capacity for safe disposal of fishing gear debris at ports and grow a network of partners to recycle, salvage, or upcycle fishing gear debris. If, during the

routine course of clean-up efforts, individuals encounter fishing gear debris that may be salvageable, they are encouraged to reach out to DMF to determine its original owner so as to potentially return the gear. Further, there are no restrictions on salvaging and repurposing fishing gear debris.

Historically, state law restricted the clean-up of fishing gear debris because it afforded it private property rights regardless of condition. This law was developed over 80 years ago when there was far less fishing gear in the water and the fishing gear present was generally biodegradable and salvageable. Today, fishing gear is almost entirely made from environmentally persistent materials, such as polyvinyl coated steel and synthetic buoy lines and nets. Accordingly, fishing gear debris can now pose more severe harm to the environment through entanglement, pollution, and ghost fishing risks, as well as public safety hazards. In 2022, DMF convened the Massachusetts Derelict Gear Task Force with industry partners and stakeholders to investigate problems and develop solutions involving derelict fishing gear and clean-up efforts. The Task Force released a [white paper](#) in 2024 to outline the issue and recommend specific regulatory changes, which was later presented by DMF to the Legislature's Coastal Caucus. Governor Healey signed these amendments into law in early 2025. Throughout the course of 2025, DMF developed this regulatory framework with public input and approval by the Department of Fish and Game and the Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission.

Read about the new regulations in the Department of Fish and Game's [press release](#).