

MARINE RECREATIONAL FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT PANEL

Draft Business Meeting Minutes

June 3, 2025

Sandwich Center for Active Living

Marine Recreational Fisheries Development Panel: Kevin Blinkoff, Kalil Boghdan, Tammy King, Patrick Paquette

Division of Marine Fisheries: Jared Silva, Matt Ayer, Story Reed, Sarah Ferrara, Neil McCoy, Ross Kessler, Ben Gahagan, Dan McKiernan, Tara Dolan, Bradlie Morgan, Kimberly Fine, Kevin Creighton

Department of Fish and Game: Commissioner Tom O'Shea

Office of Fishing and Boating Access: Terry Smith

Call to Order, Approval of Agenda and Minutes

Chairman Kevin Blinkoff called the meeting to order and welcomed any comments.

Department of Fish and Game (DFG) Commissioner Tom O'Shea also welcomed the group and introduced the newest member of the Marine Recreational Fisheries Development Panel (Panel), Tammy King, a fishing guide in Nantucket. He also noted that all members have been reappointed. He described DFG's Strategic Plan, which included a focus on marine habitat conservation and public access through the Office of Fishing and Boating Access (OFBA). The Commissioner noted complications created by the hiring freeze. Regarding the proposed permit fee increase, he added that this will require a thoughtful approach. The Commissioner highlighted the new Commissioner's Cup to rebrand the Saltwater Derby.

Kalil Boghdan noted that with his upcoming retirement from the Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission (MFAC), his seat on the Panel will be vacant. Tom responded that the new MFAC members will be able to attend the next Panel meeting in December.

Director Dan McKiernan remarked on the uniqueness of the Panel and the importance of their role. The Panel and guests then introduced themselves.

Kevin Blinkoff asked for any proposed modifications to the agenda. Ben Gahagan requested moving the Permit Fee Increase Discussion from the end of the meeting to after Fund Accounting Discussion. He also proposed not discussing reappointments since the Commissioner noted this. Kevin asked for a motion to approve the amended agenda. Tammy King made the motion and Kalil Boghdan seconded. Kalil then asked to

clarify a point made in the February 11, 2025 meeting minutes where Dan Koch described \$10 million in sales from permits. Tom clarified that this value accounts for all MassFishHunt permits in Massachusetts. Tammy made a motion to approve the draft minutes as written, and Patrick Paquette seconded.

Ben Gahagan outlined free fishing days for 2025. These would include one day each for Mother's and Father's Day. Tammy asked how this information is shared online. Neil McCoy explained that posts on social media will be shared in the days leading up to the holidays, as well as through Massachusetts Department of Transportation signs. Kevin Blinkoff asked if anyone wanted to change these dates, and no one did.

Fund Accounting

Kevin Creighton reviewed the Marine Recreational Fisheries Development Fund's (Fund) accounting. Revenue from Fund donations decreased about 80% last year due to a change in the vendor's webpage making it more difficult to give donations. After some adjustments to the webpage, donations have increased by 42% and with a new vendor coming onboard, Kevin C. anticipates further increases in donations. Permit revenue had peaked during Covid and has gradually decreased since. However, last year there was a small increase in permit revenue. In FY24, 47% of permit revenue was spent on public access. This is a corrected value from 54% that Kevin presented last year. He explained that this was due to an error in fund allocation requiring funds to be moved, decreasing the total percentage towards public access. MRIP is fully covered. He noted the benefits of reallocating payroll when possible. Patrick asked how FY2024 Fund Accounting compares to the proposed 2023 budget. Kevin C. and Ben noted that they haven't examined this difference and are interested. Patrick noted the importance of knowing the value of the Net Draw from the Fund over the year. Kevin C. explained some of the process. He said that the most significant portion of the Fund, payroll, is initially removed, before addressing allocations, allowing the total spending to closely follow the proposed budget. The Commissioner reiterated that most appropriations remain fixed, including salary, public access, and MRIP, which is reimbursable. He added that the earlier mentioned projects surrounding DFG's Strategic Plan do not require alterations to the Fund. Ben and Kevin C. discussed how the amount of funds appropriated into the account are higher than the amounts budgeted for and spent. This is done to accommodate years when a large Public Access project occurs and spending can be much larger than the typical annual budget, so in most years the appropriated funds are higher than the anticipated annual costs. Director McKiernan clarified that Kevin C. had anticipated the Fund would begin losing money in FY25 but due to redistributing funds this issue has been delayed.

Kalil asked to clarify the meaning of fringe costs. Kevin C. noted that these encompass health benefits for state employees. Patrick asked if these fringe benefits only cover staff funded through the Fund, and Kevin C. said yes. A brief discussion followed on MRIP funds.

Kevin C. then introduced fund appropriation. Permit issuance has remained steady, but cost of construction projects, payroll, and related expenses have increased. He added that current models project the Fund lasting through 2031, which may require a permit cost increase to cover expenses.

Permit Fee Increase Discussion

Ben introduced the topic of a saltwater recreational permit fee increase. He noted the differences in Massachusetts' permit fee structure from those of similar states. Specifically, the no fee cap for anglers 60 years and older is unique to MA. However, Rhode Island and Florida have both established funds similar to the Panel's. He introduced the draft hard permit cards for the upcoming season. Kalil, Dan, and Ben then discussed the differences in cost between saltwater and freshwater recreational permits. Patrick noted that additional investments are made by DFG to warrant a higher freshwater recreational fishing cost, and even this still sparks frustration among anglers who may see it as an additional tax. Commissioner O'Shea appreciated Patrick's perspective and noted the importance of affordability with greater expenses facing residents. Tammy King asked about potential approaches to adjusting the age for a free permit. Ben said there are separate pathways required for a permit fee change and an increase, noting that the latter would require legislation. Patrick added that considering changes to the statute will likely open the Panel to additional proposals concerning out-of-state angler permits and the for-hire permit structure. Ben noted the relatively small percentage of the Fund contributed by for-hire permits, resident or out-of-state, making up about \$75,000. The Panel then discussed complications concerning estimating the effort and patrons of for-hire boats and how Massachusetts differs from other states. Ben highlighted the limited required reporting beyond MRIP.

Kalil and Kevin B. asked about Massachusetts' for-hire permit structure. Ben and Matt Ayer explained that anglers must provide what is federally required annually. Further, Massachusetts is not unique in not requiring for-hire patrons to hold relevant permits. Beyond Connecticut's requirement for patrons of saltwater guides (two or fewer patrons) to hold saltwater permits, no other states require patron permits. A discussion followed on states that may hold these requirements outside of New England.

Kalil asked about budget implications if the permit fee does not increase. Ben and Kevin C. reiterated that budget modifications allowed the Fund to continue without permit fee increases until 2031. Kalil advocated for a permit fee increase and noted the quality of the product for the cost. He made a motion to increase the permit fee to \$20. Patrick added his support for a fee increase up to \$20 but cited some concerns about it passing through legislation. He voiced strong support for addressing discrepancies in for-hire permit fees, with most fish recreationally landed through charter vessels with minimal required contribution to the Fund. He called for an increase in charter vessel permits, as well.

Director McKiernan suggested discussing this proposal further at a future meeting. He then noted that DMF has not researched how many for-hire patrons already have a saltwater fishing permit, and this may be worth investigating. Commissioner O'Shea agreed to discuss this issue at a later meeting. Ben asked about the administrative timeline if an additional meeting is scheduled to discuss a permit fee increase. O'Shea explained the importance of having clear intentions for the increased fee in order for it to be accepted by legislature. Patrick emphasized the need for the permit fee increase to maintain the Fund before including additional growth and projects. Tammy asked to

clarify what can be decided on today and what requires legislative. Ben and Jared Silva responded that the age and for-hire patron exemptions require legislature. Tom reiterated that the recreational and for-hire fees could be decided today. A discussion followed between Commissioner O'Shea, Ben, Tammy, Director McKiernan, and Patrick concerning potential suggestions and considerations, including how to equitably raise permit fees and improve education and outreach. Kevin B. summarized the thoughts shared thus far, noting that the Panel supports a fee increase with consideration to the needs of the Fund and plans to delay the effort to alter age and for-hire patron exemptions. Patrick and Tom then discussed challenges of the current ,early age exemption. Ben reiterated that a future meeting can be scheduled to discuss this further.

FY25 Funded Activities Review

Striped Bass Research: Ben Gahagan explained that survey scoping and design has been completed for striped bass post-release mortality research. Survey outreach and distribution are still in progress awaiting information from New York and Maryland. He anticipated completing the project in 2025 and 2026. On the Water magazine has shared information on the survey. The survey will include six states, which account for more than 80% of the catch and 60% of effort: Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Virginia, and Maryland. It will consider all for-hire operators, citizen science participants, and a random 5% of private permit holders. As of this meeting, all surveys have been sent to states except Maryland and New York, putting the project about one and a half months behind schedule.

Fishing Access: Ross Kessler reviewed the status of public access improvement projects. The Salem Willows project has been completed and is open. The Small Grant announcement will be shared this week and will be a two-year contract to enhance access to saltwater fishing. In Somerset, the Slades Ferry fishing pier project is on hold due to complications with surrounding wetlands and permitting. DOT and the Town of Somerset will determine alternative potential locations for the pier to minimize cost and impact on wetlands. Kalil asked about issues with the Conservation Commission, and Ross responded that they haven't reached that point in the project yet. Ben noted that the new proposal reduces engineering and the cost burden, so it will not require additional funds. Tom O'Shea asked if Terry Smith of OFBA is involved, and Ross noted that he hasn't been included yet but will be when necessary. Finally, Ross introduced a new fishing access website that will be released in the next few months. Patrick and Ross discussed ease of accessibility on DMF's website. Terry asked about the composition of sites included, and Ross noted that all are coastal or saltwater sites. Commissioner O'Shea voiced support for this work and increased accessibility, and asked about the needs for ADA access at sites. Ross expressed interest in filtering ADA-accessible sites. Terry voiced a desire to understand accessibility needs without replicating work. Ross added that he has advocated for fishing pier access as part of the Cape Cod bridge renovations. Patrick asked if they could discuss the fishing access budget, and Ben noted that it should be discussed later in the meeting.

MRIP: Dave Martins reviewed the 2024 operations of Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) in Massachusetts. The survey is conducted with 15 interviewers; five

supervised each by Matt Ayer, John Boardman, and himself and covers the state's coast. Dave summarized survey assignments by month, with 924 assigned by NOAA annually and add-on surveys by MA DMF. Total shore and head boat assignments in 2024 numbered 1,413. The program record number of intercepts took place in September 2024, with 1,004 angler interviews. Massachusetts is sampling the third most anglers on the east coast and is likely the highest in add-on state-funded surveys, increasing the precision of data. The total resulting number of interviews in 2024 was 4,855 (up from 4,037 in 2023). Dave summarized the number of interviews by mode, with majority from private boat anglers, shore anglers, and charter. The state has also added surveys in head boat sampling to improve data. Patrick asked whether MA add-ons are reimbursed, how many seasonal contracted employees are add-ons, and how much effort is dedicated towards for-hire vessels vs. head boats. Ben responded that DMF will have these numbers at the next meeting. Patrick reiterated the importance of understanding the cost and benefit of each program, including MRIP. Director McKiernan asked whether the number of for-hire patrons with recreational permits would impact Patrick's decisions and wondered if this could be asked as part of MRIP surveys. Matt noted that this would only be applicable to head boats, not charter boats. A discussion followed regarding the potential findings of this question.

Patrick expressed a need to understand the impact of MRIP add-ons and for-hire permit holders. Matt noted the importance of head boats in understanding fish length and discard data. Commissioner O'Shea wondered if most charter patrons do not have recreational permits. Patrick noted that his preferred approach is to charge \$750 for charter boats, slightly higher for head boats, and \$20 for individual permits. He posed questions concerning how to effectively budget the Fund moving forward. A conversation followed between Kevin C. and Patrick regarding how the Fund contributes to MRIP, add-ons, and payroll.

Information and Education: Neil McCoy reviewed the social media, website, publications and design, and digital outreach components of I&E. This year's program goals include growing social media audience, more collaborations, building campaigns, and increased transparency. The saltwater fishing derby will be reenergized this year, rebranded as the Commissioner's Cup. Increased video content will improve engagement. Additionally, hard permit cards will be released this year. Further, updated FishMA stickers have allowed DMF to connect to local anglers by highlighting different species. Website activities include updates to the recreational fishing webpage and easing accessibility and navigability of resources.

Neil explained that Instagram and Facebook followers have increased, while Twitter/X has decreased, highlighting the reduced activity and engagement on that platform. He hoped to exceed 10,000 followers on Instagram within the next year. Ben emphasized the importance of spreading awareness and education through collaborations and social media, highlighting the efforts done by himself and Neil since last year's meeting. For publications and design, Neil is working to update the Recreational Fishing Guide with an emphasis on increased transparency and education. Ben added that the striped bass FAQ page will be especially valuable for anglers. The Panel applauded the strides made by DMF to improve their social media.

Kim Fine then reviewed the saltwater angler education component of I&E. DMF participated in 15 angler education clinics in 2024. A small grant awarded to DMF provided I&E with rods and starter tackle kits to distribute during angler education clinics in EJ communities. Educational materials were translated into Spanish and distributed during clinics. Leftover gear from 2024 will supplement this year's Rod and Reel Loan program. Kim described her experience at the R3 summit (reactivation, recruitment, retention) to learn how to increase participation in recreational fishing. Post-event surveys allowed Kim to receive feedback on the clinics and implement changes to encourage anglers to learn more effectively, such as creating and distributing a Basic Skills card. There are 18 clinics scheduled in 2025. With \$10,000 from the striped bass license plates, the program will distribute additional rods, reels, and tackle. Patrick asked about the striped bass license plate profits, and Dan noted that these funds are used for research, angler education, and diadromous programs. A discussion followed on the use of striped bass license plate funds.

Diadromous Fish: Brad Chase provided a review of the diadromous fish run season thus far. He described how runs are displaying a wide range of success. Herring Brook in Pembroke, Stony Brook in Brewster, and Monument River at Cape Cod Canal have been performing better than average. Conversely, Herring Brook in Harwich, Tom Brook in Plymouth, and Nemasket River in Middleborough have shown lower numbers than previous years. Mystic and Charles Rivers continue to have fish running, but they're performing fairly well. DMF monitors nine sites through electronic and video counting, and 30 sites are monitored through other counting strategies like volunteer counting. Monitoring for smelt, American eel, and shad takes place as well. Brad described four large-scale cooperative restoration projects being completed in 2025, including Stony Brook restoration in Brewster; culvert remediation at Sesuit Creek in Dennis; dam removal in South River in Marshfield; and dam removal and ladder construction in the Fore River in Braintree, allowing herring to access areas of the river closed for the past 200 years. The DMF fishway crew works to improve and restore small fishways, as well. DMF is helping to fund a project with USFWS to stock the Taunton River with shad, which includes genetic sampling of the population. Patrick asked about the presence of shad in the Indian Head River. Brad noted that shad are present in the Indian Head River, and stocking could be possible in the Neponset and Charles Rivers. Commissioner O'Shea called out the importance of these types of research and restoration projects. A discussion followed on potential future restoration projects.

Artificial Reefs: Ben Gahagan provided the update on artificial reefs in Mark Rousseau's absence. He described five artificial reefs across the state, with two additional reefs upcoming in Cape Cod Bay and Nantucket Sound in the permitting process. Funding from the Panel contributes to monitoring through baited remote underwater video (BRUV) and underwater visual consensus (UVC) surveys, MRIP, and deployments in Yarmouth and Harwich last year. One of the greatest obstacles facing this project is determining staging areas before deploying. A discussion followed on potential future projects.

Preliminary FY26 Fund Appropriation and Division Spending Plans

New Research: Black Sea Bass, River Herring, Winter Flounder: Ben reviewed the spending plan for FY26, noting that it is mostly status quo. New areas of research have been included in the fund. Ben described Black Sea Bass research, including a 2025 pilot project with 66 deployed tags and dedicated array to gather information on spawning aggregations, movement, and northern expansion. Future research projects include: a WHOI Sea Grant proposal to perform a telemetry and genomics study to understand northward movement. Patrick asked about the potential consequences of Sea Grant's closure, and Ben noted that in that case, research would be focused on either how recreational fishing may impact spawning aggregations or how wind areas may impact aggregations through the Vineyard Wind Innovation Fund in the spring of 2026.

River herring research would utilize a post-doc to work part-time to consolidate previous DMF research and help understand how to best inform management decisions.

Tara Dolan then presented on winter flounder research, highlighting a persistent bias of female catch and observation in the state and across the coast. Tara noted that understanding sex distribution is important to develop accurate stock assessments. The goal of this research is to develop a non-lethal genetic test using fin clips through a collaboration with UMass Amherst, and next steps are to validate the method and hopefully scale up in the future. Patrick asked what percentage of total catch is recreational, and Tara later noted that just under 50% is recreational.

Patrick asked about the potential findings and consequences of the black sea bass study. Ben noted that it could allow DMF to adjust its black sea bass season to minimize impact on the fishery. Patrick emphasized the importance of understanding project relevance to the Fund and determining if the Fund can afford it. He then noted concerns about the relevance of some of the proposed research, such as the winter flounder study, expressing fear of contributing funds to research that will potentially help the commercial fishing industry. Ben emphasized the importance of the recreational winter flounder fishery and added that this research is mostly funded by outside sources and does not require substantial input from the Fund. A discussion followed on Panel members' concerns about funding restrictions given Kevin C.'s earlier presentation.

Patrick expressed frustration with shifts in funding allocation, such as removing a teller's salary from the Fund. Commissioner O'Shea noted he understood Patrick's point and explained how the increase in state allocation was due to raises in union salaries. Ben projected that expenses will fall short of the allocation, so more money is not being spent than previous years, just reallocated to cover desired projects. The Panel then discussed how funds should be used to minimize stress on the Fund in the future. Patrick voiced concerns about creating new research projects and wondered if other groups would be better suited to fund this research. Kevin C. explained the challenges of budgeting and restrictions on certain buckets to designated purposes in the Fund. Patrick reiterated his fear of blurring lines between DMF's budget and the Fund. A discussion followed on what research should be included by the Fund, what role a permit fee increase could play, and the rationale behind the proposed budget. Commissioner O'Shea noted that without a clear understanding of the impact of the

permit fee increase on the Fund's allocation and activities, this issue should be addressed at a future meeting after further planning and preparation. Kevin B. asked if anyone would like to make a motion to approve the budget as written. Tammy made a motion and Kalil seconded. The budget passed unanimously.

Commissioner's Cup

Ben then introduced this year's changes to the Saltwater Derby, now renamed the Commissioner's Cup. A new trophy, built by Steve Swain, will permanently reside in Foxborough's Bass Pro Shops and 'anglers of the year' will have their name added to the structure. He described the two divisions—catch and release, and weigh-in—with around 30 catchable species in each. New submission improvements include online submission infrastructure and an option to use approved weighing scales for purchase or designated weigh stations. He explained that there are plans to expand social media outreach and the award ceremony. Dan suggested offering awards for anglers of the years built by Steve Swain to encourage attendance. Ben welcomed any additional feedback or suggestions. The Panel expressed excitement for the Commissioner's Cup.

Other Business

Director McKiernan and Commissioner O'Shea proposed scheduling a virtual meeting in July. Tammy requested materials in advance of the meeting. Ross invited anyone who is interested to visit Craven's Landing nearby after the meeting. Kevin B. thanked the Panel, DMF, and Kalil for his time and dedication to the Panel. Kalil made a motion to adjourn the meeting and Tammy seconded.