MEETING OF THE MARINE RECREATIONAL FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT PANEL
June 6, 2024
Westborough, Massachusetts

Attendance

Panel Members: Kevin Blinkoff (Chair), Kalil Boghdan, Mike Moss, Patrick Paquette, Mike Pierdinock

Division of Marine Fisheries: Dan McKiernan, Mike Armstrong, Ben Gahagan, Kevin Creighton, Nichola Meserve, Matt Ayer, Elise Koob, Kim Fine, Neil McCoy, Mark Rousseau, Greg Skomal, Ross Kessler, John Boardman, Brad Chase, and Dave Martins

Department of Fish & Game: Tom O'Shea

Office of Fishing and Boating Access: Doug Cameron

Other: Sheila Moss, Dean Moss

Call to Order, Approval of Agenda and Minutes

Chairman Kevin Blinkoff called the meeting to order at 9:37am. The draft agenda for the meeting was approved by consent without modification. The draft minutes from the Panel's December 18, 2023 meeting were approved, without modification, by consent.

At the request of the chair, Ben Gahagan reviewed the legislation that established the Marine Recreational Fisheries Development Panel (Panel) and the Marine Recreational Fisheries Development Fund (Fund). DMF Director Dan McKiernan noted how the inclusion of the dedicated Fund was instrumental in passing the recreational permit requirement in Massachusetts, and how it provided a model to other states. Ben commented on how much the Fund had improved DMF's capabilities to support recreational fishing. Patrick Paquette remarked on the broad level of community support for the Fund.

Fund Accounting

Kevin Creighton first acknowledged the contributions of Mike Armstrong and Stephanie Cunningham, both retiring this year, to the development of the recreational fishing program and the administration of grant monies supporting its operation. He then reviewed the Fund's accounting. Revenue from its three sources is averaging about $1.79-million per year: $1.29M from permit sales, around $475K per year for the MRIP reimbursement, and around $25K per year from donations. Permit sales peaked during Covid and have since moderated to pre-pandemic levels; sales for FY24 dropped a little but permit purchases in June still needed to be added. Individuals aging into the free permit category is affecting permit revenue. The MRIP reimbursement had recently increased via request and had been covering all expenses but was expected to fall short this year due to contractor salary increases needed to stay competitive. Fund donations had notably fallen from over $40K to less than $20K, which may be related to the change in the online permitting vendor and webpage design (less visibility of the donation button); a recent revision to the webpage had generated an increase in donations.

Moving onto expenditure, Kevin C. reported that FY24 estimated expenditures totaled $2.01M, compared to $1.32M in FY23, due to increased public access spending (i.e., from 25% to 50% of

expenditures) on the Salem Willows pier construction. This represents a slight overspending that was mitigated by bringing in some funds from elsewhere. On average, the 1/3 requirement for public access pending is being achieved. Regarding FY25 expectations, Kevin anticipated that expenses would outpace fixed revenue. Costs are increasing from salary adjustments, an elevated fringe assessment percentage, and general inflation for the costs of construction, whereas the permit fee remains flat at $10.

Kevin C. reminded the Panel about the previously-discussed expectations to be able to do a large pier project about every seven years, letting the Fund build up in between. He noted that the timeline from the Deer Island pier to the Salem Willows pier was less than that only because a $1.4M Sportfish Restoration grant has contributed to the available funding. The Panel discussed how the seven-year timeline will also likely need to widen to build up more reserves in the Fund, unless other sources of funding can be procured; several possibilities were discussed.

Free Saltwater Fishing Days

Ben reminded the Panel that for 2024, the Free Saltwater Fishing Days had been changed from Father's Day Weekend (both Saturday and Sunday) to the Sundays of Mothers Day (May 12) and Father's Day (June 16). Neil McCoy summarized the advertising of the days that was occurring, including via social media and MassDOT billboards. The Panel agreed they preferred to keep the same two days for 2025.

FY24 Funded Activities Review

Striped Bass Research: Ben reviewed the striped bass research on post-release mortality being supported by the Fund. A manuscript on the first phase of the research, the circle hook/J hook comparison, had been accepted for publication in *Marine and Coastal Fisheries* the week prior. The second year of the second phase of research, the Striped Bass Citizen Scientist project, was well underway in 2024, with a focus on getting participants from a wider range of the coast. Ben expected that from this work, DMF would be in a position to make recommendations to anglers about fight time, hook selection, etc. to reduce release mortality. Planning was underway for the third phase of the research, a survey of anglers about their frequency of use of various gear and tackle, to be conducted by a contracted specialist. Ben thought this may include a mix of survey techniques (e.g., online questionnaire, in-person workshops).

In reviewing some of the Citizen Science data, Patrick noted how the use of the lures varies based on fishing location (shore vs vessel). Ben commented that the data could be drilled down into further. He noted that for all the lure and tackle categories, the expected release mortality rate was coming in below the 9% used in stock assessment, based on data to date (limited in geographic scope). Other state agencies were helping to get the word out about participating. Partick asked if other states might also contribute to funding this project; Ben replied this wasn't likely given the project timeline (concluding all phases in 2025 to hopefully inform management in 2026). Dan noted that individuals could choose to contribute to striped bass research through a permit donation or having a striped bass license plate. The Panel members remarked on the great importance of this work.

MRIP: Dave Martins reviewed the 2023 operations of MRIP in Massachusetts. The survey is conducted with 15 contracted interviewers; five supervised each by Matt Ayer, John Boardman, and himself by area to cover the whole coast. Dave summarized the survey assignments by month, including how many were required by NOAA and how many were DMF add-ons. Total shore and headboat assignments in 2023 numbered 1,414. He noted that only one other state does as many

(NC). Patrick asked how many other states do add-ons; Mike A. responded it was less than half likely but he'd need to research an exact count. The total resulting number of interviews in 2023 was 4,037 (down from 4,850 interview in 2022 on account of frequent poor weekend weather affecting overall fishing effort). Dave summarized the number of interviews by mode as well; mostly private vessel, followed by shore, then charter.

Information & Education: Kim Fine reviewed the saltwater angler education component of I&E. DMF hosted/co-hosted/participated in 14 fishing events in 2023, some of which were multi-day or ongoing throughout the summer. The Take Me Saltwater Fishing program continued, through which DMF trains and lends gear to other groups to conduct their own events.

Looking ahead to 2024, Kim has 15 fishing events planned, including some new partnerships as well as a first-ever surfcasting event. She is working on developing a survey approach to find out how effective the clinics are in recruiting new anglers. Kim had also successfully applied for a grant from the new MA Office of Outdoor Recreation to supply take-home tackle kits in 2024 to promote additional fishing effort after clinic participation. Ben noted that effort was also going into translating I&E materials into more languages to reach a wider constituency (contributing towards a statewide initiative in the area), which the Panel was very supportive of and flagged the need to stay current with the changing demographics.

Kalil Boghdan encouraged partnering with schools to reach a wider audience; this was discussed as a possible off-season activity and one that would require additional resources. Neil noted that requests are received (and fulfilled) from schools to get copies of the activity books and other written materials. Kim indicated interest in developing a hook-to-plate type seminar. Dan indicated plans to combine DMF seafood marketing events with angler education events, where appropriate. He also noted that the Department's pending Strategic Plan will include a focus on increasing DMF communications staff and program.

Neil reviewed the social media, website, publications and design, and digital outreach components of I&E, all of which furthers the mission of storytelling (about what we do, why it's important). Social media includes facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram, for which the analytics on engagement are reviewed each month. Each platform has seen an increase in followers, although Neil and the Panel discussed that Twitter/X may not be a great option for providing the pictures and videos that tend to generate more engagement. New equipment was purchased (e.g., Go-Pro cameras) to produce more of this type of content. Website activities included improvements to the current site's design and a focus on creating more content. For publications and design, Neil is working on bringing a cohesive, clean, modern look. Several new graphics/posters centered on striped bass science and management. The Panel applauded the noticeable increase in the quality and quantity of DMF's social media presence in the past year.

Diadromous Fish: Brad Chase began with an outlook for the diadromous fish run counts this year. While not yet complete, it seemed that the counts were down a little, but Brad was encouraged by this because he had expected it might be worse based on the drought conditions that occurred in 2020. The cooperative project for shad stocking in the Taunton River was continuing into 2024. Brad reported that last year's large-scale projects has numbered six, with five planned for 2024. Three of the larger projects tackled by the fishway crew last year included: the installation of a new fishway at Stump Brook Reservoir Dam, in East Bridgewater, providing the first passage in over 100 years in this tributary to the Taunton River; replacement of the fishway at Gorham Mill Pond and Herring Brook, in Pembroke, and channel repair work at the Stillwater Pond fishway in Chatham.

Large contracted projects included: removal of the Armstrong Dam on the Monatiquot River in Braintree; removal of the High Street Dam on the Town River in Bridgewater; and installation of a new fishway at the Howlett Brook Dam within the Ipswich River watershed in Topsfield. Kalil and Ben discussed additional improvements taking shape for the Ipswich River, including permitting and design for a new nature-like bypass at the dam by Foote Brothers canoe/kayak rentals, selective stocking such as at Hoods Pond in Topsfield, and the Town of Ipswich's vote to remove the Ipswich Mills Dam.

Mike P. asked about eel passage through fishways. Brad responded that eels can successfully pass through some fishways, and where they can't, eel passes can be installed. DMF has installed 12 through 2023. Brad commented on an uptick in glass eel passage over time, but that we're not seeing a similar increase for older eels.

Artificial Reefs: Mark Rousseau reviewed several reef monitoring activities, including continued acoustic receiver deployments, a pilot program using eDNA begun in 2023, and a planned sidescan sonar survey of the Yarmouth reef in 2024. As for reef deployment, additional material was deployed in February 2024 at the Yarmouth site in cooperation with USCG. Kalil asked about the cost of this deployment, which Mark reported was none; boat costs identified in the Fund spending plan are for DMF vessel transit to conduct monitoring. No deployments were in the queue, and DMF had still not found a replacement material staging area. He remarked on the link between artificial reefs and the Governor's biodiversity Executive Order. The initiative to permit new reef sites in lower Cape Cod Bay continued, with current efforts focused on collaborating with towns on finishing the permitting aspects. Two preferred sites have been identified with a number of back-up sites. The Panel discussed issues of access to these future reefs (e.g., prohibiting buoy lines) and the value in telegraphing the likelihood of some restrictions when trying to build community support now, as well as collecting data on current area use. The Panel voiced strong support for continuing to grow the number of artificial reefs in MA waters, and the benefits provided.

Fishing Access: Ross Kessler reviewed the status of public access improvement projects. Two large projects are underway: at Salem Willows, construction of the replacement pier began this spring, with work expected to be completed by late summer; and in Somerset, the Slades Ferry fishing pier is in its early stages, with the engineering contract recently awarded to GZA for $245K and a kickoff meeting scheduled for mid-June. Ross recognized OFBA Director Doug Cameron (also nearing his retirement), for his contributions to the public access project and mentorship of Ross in his role.

Regarding the Small Grants program, two projects were awarded in the most recent round of funding: one in Beverly for $25K (a third award) to finish replacement decking on a popular downtown pier; and the other, also $25K, to The Trustees of Reservation to use dredge spoil at Chappaquiddick on the Vineyard to maintain on-sand-vehicle access to Tom's Neck. Ross reported on some pending changes to the administration of the grant process, specifically moving up the application timeline to facilitate municipalities being better able to complete projects within the fiscal year.

Kalil commented on the importance of preserving shoreline access and asked how the public is informed about shore-based public access sites. Ross replied that there is a webpage/GIS application but it is incomplete, and he is currently working with DFG GIS staff to create a new mapping application that is better and more complete. Patrick commended Ross for his continued defense of public access at Leland Beach.

Prelim FY25 Fund Appropriation & Division Spending Plan

Ben reviewed the spending plan for an anticipated $2.18M FY25 appropriation from the Fund, noting that it is largely status quo. There is a minor salary shifting for the public access coordinator due to contributing part of his time to another project. The biggest increase was under MRIP for the contractors' wage to stay competitive in the marketplace. Ben noted two staff transition that had occurred: Elise Koob to backfill Sam Truesdell in the role of Stock Assessment Specialist, and Joe Holbeche to backfill Ben's role in the Diadromous Fisheries Project. The Diadromous budget includes another year of shad stocking in the Taunton River. Ben noted that the engineering costs for the Somerset pier were about 250% greater than what had expected last year, which Doug reported was the outcome despite two rounds of bidding. The EJ Review process was flagged as driving up costs for permitting. Ben reiterated the need to bring in a specialist via contract to design and perform the angler survey phase of striped bass research.

Dan asked if other states would need to do a similar survey to have results representing the entire coast for ASMFC use. Ben reported that the preliminary plan was to use the license databases from MA plus NY, NJ, MD and VA to conduct the survey, which is representative of about 80% of the coastwide fishing effort.

Given no other questions or comments, Patrick made and Mike P. seconded a motion to approve the spending plan as presented. The motion passed without objection.

Review Potential Fee Increase and Funding Strategies

Kevin C. reminded the Panel about its prior discussions about increasing Fund revenue to keep up with expenses. The discussed approaches include: raising the permit fee (such as to $15), raising the age of the free permit (such as from 60 to 65 years old), and requesting general fund reimbursement for the cost of issued free permits (these are not mutually exclusive). Kevin reviewed projected revenue from various combinations of these approaches. Prior efforts to gain support in the administration or legislature had not been fruitful. The plan was to update the revenue projections after the end of the fiscal year, and try again.

DFG Commissioner Tom O'Shea asked the Panel for any thoughts on the general sentiment among anglers for a fee increase. Patrick worried that recent inflation has likely reduced appetite, but expected a diversity of opinion, with more support from those that understand what the fee is used for. Kevin C. noted that other states' permits were generally higher, and when queried over a decade ago, averaged about $17. Dan noted that by inflation alone, the $10 permit would now cost $14. Ben made a pitch for a $20 permit to invest more in improvement to recreational fishing, noting that the donations to the Fund demonstrated a willingness to pay more, and reviewed some possible areas of focus. Patrick cautioned against creating more permanent positions under the Fund, and requested that changing for-hire permit fees also be considered.

Tom discussed, and the Panel supported, the need for a marketing strategy to support a change to the fee structure, that focuses on the work of the Fund, noting that getting recreational fishing groups to lend their support would be instrumental. Both Patrick and Mike M. reflected that increasing the age of the free permit and getting reimbursement for free permits issued would increase parity with freshwater permitting and should be an easier lift. Mike P. remarked on the EJ component of fishing access to be part of the sales pitch.

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Other Updates

Tom O'Shea reported that the Department's new Strategic Plan is nearing completion, possibly by end of month. Improving public access to our natural resources is among the plan's pillars, which will hopefully lead to higher general funding of the Department. He planned to share a copy with the Panel members once done, for more detailed discussion at the next meeting. He also noted the public listening session planned for July for the Governor's Biodiversity Executive Order, and how the Department planned to submit its recommendations to the administration late this year.

Ben informed the Panel about planning underway to increase the visibility and prominence of the Saltwater Derby.

Matt Ayer presented on the status of several mobile applications being used in the recreational fishery as a tool for anglers to keep a logbook and/or submit data for research. There are many factors to consider in selecting an application, whether you are an angler or a researcher, such as data storage and access, dependability, ease of use, field settings, quality control, benefits to anglers and managers, and costs for development and maintenance. Currently, GotOne! is the one and only app for participating the Division's Striped Bass Citizen Science project. SciFish is another application developed in cooperation with ACCSP, through which a template can be customized. Angler Catch is another app developed for RI DEM as a logbook for anglers and used in some other pilot projects. Panel members remarked on some of the confusion or frustration surrounding the various apps (which to use for what, having to use different apps for different fish), and encouraged a role for I&E here. Mike P. reported on having heard some concern that ACCSP is not the repository for data collected through the GotOne! app.

Ben reviewed the pending changes made to the striped bass filleting rules going from the emergency to final version (specifically on shoreside filleting) based on public comment received. It may be until late July before the final rules are official.

Other Business

On behalf of the Panel, Patrick recognized the many contributions of Mike Armstrong to the recreational fisheries of Massachusetts.

Seeing as there was no further business, the meeting adjourned at 1:55pm.

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Meeting Documents

- June 6, 2024 Draft Agenda
- December 18, 2023 Draft Meeting Minutes
- FY25 Recreational Permit Revenue Spending Plan

Meeting Presentations

- MRFDP June 6, 2024 Meeting Presentation