

# Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission Draft Business Meeting Minutes

November 18, 2025

1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough, MA

## Attendees

**Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission:** Shelley Edmundson, Clerk; Chris McGuire; Eric Nelson, Ray Jarvis; and Sooky Sawyer. Absent: Raymond Kane, Chair; Bill Amaru; Bill Doyle, Vice-Chair.

**Division of Marine Fisheries Staff:** Dan McKiernan, Director; Story Reed, Deputy Director; Jared Silva; Nichola Meserve; Anna Webb; Kelly Whitmore; Derek Perry; Micah Dean; Ben Gahagan; Bradlie Morgan.

**Department of Fish and Game Staff:** Commissioner Tom O'Shea; Sefatia Romeo-Theken, Deputy Commissioner

**Massachusetts Environmental Police:** Lieutenant Matt Bass

**Members of the Public:** David Meserve; Brett Hoffmeiser; Jamie Bassett; and Theodore Glenn.

## Call to Order and Routine Business

Chairman Ray Kane and Vice-Chair Bill Doyle were absent during the meeting. Shelley Edmundson assumed the duties of the Chair. Edmundson called the meeting to order.

## Review of November 2025 Business Meeting Agenda

Edmundson asked for amendments to the November 2025 MFAC business meeting agenda. Director Dan McKiernan requested that the discussion on the lobster stock assessment and the review of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) Lobster Board meeting be postponed to the December meeting. There were no objections. **Edmundson called for a motion to approve the amended November 2025 business meeting agenda. Sooky Sawyer made the motion. Ray Jarvis seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.**

## Review and Approval of October 2025 Draft Business Meeting Minutes

Edmundson asked for amendments to the draft October 2025 Business Meeting Minutes. There were no amendments. **Edmundson called for a motion. Chris McGuire made a motion to approve the October 2025 business meeting minutes as drafted. Ray Jarvis seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.**

## Agency Updates

### Office of Law Enforcement: Personnel, Recent Operations & Marine Fishery Incidents

Lieutenant Matt Bass provided comments for the Massachusetts Environmental Police (MEP). On personnel, MEP anticipated that despite state-wide funding and hiring limitations, MEP should be able to backfill seven existing vacancies. Regarding marine fisheries enforcement, MEP was monitoring reported shore-based shark fishing activity along the Outer Cape and was addressing gear conflicts near Stellwagen Bank. Lastly, a deceased sperm whale recently washed up on a Nantucket beach — the cause of death was under investigation but was not thought to be entanglement related.

Sooky Sawyer asked for additional information on a recent lobster gear compliance issue in Ipswich Bay where a dual state-federal permit holder was found fishing untagged gear. Bass noted that this was a cooperative effort among DMF, MEP, and NOAA Office of Law Enforcement. Untagged traps were found and DMF subsequently required the permit holder haul-out their gear for MEP inspection. The case has been handed over to NOAA Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement.

### Department of Fish and Game: Recent Meetings and Events and Department-wide Activities and Projects

Commissioner Tom O'Shea provided an update on recent events relevant to the Department of Fish and Game (DFG). Seafood Day was held at the State House and Governor Healey was presented with an award from the Massachusetts Fishermen's Partnership. This past weekend, the Commissioner presented a TEDx Talk as part of a group speaking on extinction prevention and biodiversity. He also described other talks relevant to marine fisheries — including a presentation from the Executive Director of the Billion Oyster Project in New York Harbor and a presentation on toxicity in the food environment. Lastly, an event was held to celebrate the dedication of a boat ramp in Fall River to former State Representative Manuel Raposa.

The Commissioner then shared that DFG's Assistant Commissioner Jen Ryan, Mass Wildlife's Dave Puter, and DFG's Julia Hopkins received the Manuel Carballo

Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service for their work executing on the Governor's executive order on biodiversity through the development of DFG's Biodiversity Report and Strategic Plan. He applauded their hard work and appreciated the administration's recognition of this initiative.

Tom anticipated state-wide budget issues as a result of revenues falling short of projections and reduced federal funding. This has led to a hiring freeze across the executive branch, including DFG and its agencies. However, the development of DMF's Marine Restoration Center at its Cat Cove Marine Laboratory in Salem continues through funding from the capital budget. Commissioner O'Shea advocated for a presentation on this effort at a future MFAC meeting.

Sooky Sawyer noted that while many expected lower than normal lobster prices this year due to limitations on international trade, the industry was experiencing prices that were even lower than expected. He was interested in what DMF and DFG may be able to do to address this. Director McKiernan responded that DMF would investigate these concerns.

#### Division of Marine Fisheries: Personnel, Recent Meetings and Events, and Agency Activities and Projects

Director Dan McKiernan began by updating the MFAC on the status of various lawsuits involving state and interstate fishery management. The courts ruled against numerous charter boat organizations in a suit brought against the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC and Atlantic coastal states (including Massachusetts) regarding the implementation of Addendum II to the Interstate Striped Bass Fishery Management Plan. Additionally, there are two ongoing lawsuits against DMF and the ASMFC regarding addenda to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Lobster and v-notch possession standards for the Outer Cape Cod (OCC) Lobster Conservation Management Area (LCMA). One case is in federal court and the other in state court. Lastly, there are three ongoing court cases involving vessel tracking in the lobster fishery — a case in federal court against the ASMFC and Maine, a case in Massachusetts' state court against DMF, and a case in Rhode Island (RI) state court against RI Department of Environmental Management.

The Shellfish Advisory Panel (SAP) recently met. Dan noted that Bill Doyle sits on the SAP as a member of the MFAC. The SAP does not have regulatory authority but is instrumental in advising DMF on shellfish issues, including municipal and public health concerns.

On recent events, Director McKiernan noted that Massachusetts' first Aquaculture Month was announced at an event in Boston.

Lastly, DMF is scheduled to hold two virtual public hearings in December. On December 2, DMF will take public testimony on emergency regulations implementing permitting changes for the commercial striped bass fishery in 2026, including limiting entry. These emergency regulations are likely the first in a series of regulatory changes affecting the striped bass fishery to enable DMF to implement a commercial harvester tagging program by 2029, as required by Addendum III to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Striped Bass. Then on December 15, DMF will hold a virtual public hearing on a draft framework to permit and authorize the removal and disposal of fishing gear debris. DMF will likely present final regulatory action on both items to the MFAC at their December business meeting.

## Discussion Items

### Striped Bass

#### *Review of ASMFC Board Meeting and Final Addendum III, and Outlook on State Rule Making and Convening MFAC Focus Groups*

Nichola Meserve provided an overview of the October ASMFC Striped Bass Management Board (“Board”) meeting. The Board reviewed and approved Addendum III to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Striped Bass. The Board opted not to reduce fishery removals beginning in 2026 as part of the addendum. However, two coastwide measures were approved. First, a standard coastwide total length measurement definition was established for states to implement by January 1, 2027. Massachusetts is already compliant with the new total length definition and no regulatory change is required. Second, states are to adopt commercial harvester tagging by January 1, 2029. DMF will have to amend its tagging program to move it from dealer tagging to harvester tagging. This is a significant departure from current practices and will require substantial changes to how the fishery is permitted and the program is administered. The previously discussed emergency regulations are the first step in this exercise. However, additional action will be needed. Meserve anticipated the MFAC’s Striped Bass and Permitting Focus Groups will convene this winter to assist DMF in developing potential activity criteria to further reduce the number of permits issued for 2027. This will allow DMF to potentially implement the harvester tagging program by 2028, one year ahead of the ASMFC’s implementation deadline.

Meserve discussed why the Board did not approve proposed actions to reduce removals in the commercial or recreational fishery to support stock rebuilding. There were concerns that these actions would produce negative economic impacts and a hesitancy to pursue the actions due to uncertainty. Specifically, preliminary 2025 MRIP data seemingly indicate that harvest has continued to decline in contrast with the projections that suggested cuts were necessary; the 2027 benchmark stock assessment is on the horizon and management could benefit from its findings; and there was an

interest in doing additional outreach and investigations to ensure better management and science going into the benchmark assessment. To this last point, the Board established a working group to consider how to update the FMP's goals, enhance striped bass management moving forward, address reduced reproductive success in the Chesapeake Bay, and work with stock assessment scientists to address emerging data (e.g., MRIP recalibration, discard mortality assumptions).

Chris McGuire asked about the timing and content of the striped bass benchmark assessment. Meserve confirmed that the stock assessment is on track to be reviewed by the ASMFC Striped Bass Board in spring 2027 and released in 2028. Given this timeline, Meserve anticipated that it will not be used in management until 2029. Further, as the assessment will only include data through 2025, additional updates may be necessary to encourage management action. McGuire and Meserve discussed the inclusion of new data (e.g., discard mortality, MRIP recalibration, year-class strength and spawning stock productivity). Meserve noted that the stock assessment committee and Board's working group will discuss the stock assessment model and how to best incorporate these emerging elements.

Commissioner O'Shea asked how conflicting findings—such as lower harvest estimates and reduced release mortality rates—may impact modeling. Director McKiernan and Meserve remarked that there was substantial uncertainty on how these new elements will impact the assessment and it was difficult to project outcomes until the model is run.

Eric Nelson commented on the various challenges to rebuilding the striped bass population particularly given year-class strength and spawning stock productivity is largely influenced by environment. He expressed some disappointment in the decision not reduce removals and voiced concern for the stock. Meserve echoed Nelson's concerns and acknowledged that the prevailing challenge facing striped bass is continued low recruitment from Chesapeake Bay. Meserve was hopeful that this additional time would allow the ASMFC to respond to the various concerns and sources of uncertainty that came up in the public process for Addendum III.

Nelson and Meserve discussed the influence of different sectors in management decisions and the wider socioeconomic impacts on communities.

Edmundson asked to clarify the target number of striped bass commercial permits to implement harvester tagging. Jared Silva responded that DMF anticipated the target number of permits to be around 500 based on experience with harvester tagging in the tautog fishery. Director McKiernan emphasized the importance of working with the MFAC and stakeholders to determine renewal criteria to achieve this substantial reduction.

### *Presentation on Recreational Release Mortality*

Micah Dean presented on DMF research on striped bass release mortality. In 1996, a study led by DMF researchers showed that the release mortality of striped bass was ~9%. However, DMF wanted to revisit this study given changes in the fishery, improvements in scientific techniques, and the importance of better understanding the factors influencing release mortality as it was recently modeled to be the single largest source of fishing mortality. In response, DMF and its partners developed a three-phased study design: (1) use acoustic telemetry to monitor and estimate mortality of caught and released fish according to release condition of the fish, (2) pair release conditions with different environmental or fishing variables through citizen science, and (3) assemble fishery scale datasets to represent different predictors.

Phase one used acoustic telemetry to understand how mortality rate vary based on release condition and hook types. Telemetry tags were attached to released fish throughout Salem Sound to monitor swimming speed. This phase found a correlation between the condition of fish released and their mortality, but there was no significant difference in mortality across hook types.

Ben Gahagan noted that circle hooks may have conservation benefits in other fishing settings beyond what was examined in this phase of the study. Nelson echoed Gahagan's comment, noting that he has experienced greater survivorship using circle hooks. Nelson, Dean, and Gahagan discussed the study's protocol for gut-hooked fish and the use of anglers with a range of experience. Dean explained that the size of the gape in circle hooks has increased in the years since the preliminary research suggested lower mortality rates using circle hooks and these larger gape hooks may not provide the same conservation benefits. Dean opined that additional research into terminal tackle was warranted.

Lieutenant Matt Bass asked about the range of acoustic receivers used in the study. Dean explained that their range was about 1 km, and fish were either released in the range of the receivers or would likely be brought close to one in the surf.

Phase two incorporated citizen's science to understand which variables influence release condition and mortality (e.g., tackle, fight time, handling time). Across New England, 362 anglers participated and 8,349 fish were caught. Results showed that handling time was the most influential predictor of release mortality.

Phase three then used a coastwide angler survey on angling behavior and experience. DMF received nearly 5,000 responses.

The data from these three phases was then modeled and it was determined that the release mortality in the recreational striped bass fishery is about 4.2% — about half of what it was previously estimated. Dean noted that model found the rate varies across

region and is higher among larger fish (up to 6%) likely due to handling time. These findings have a variety of potential consequences. First, release mortality is likely contributing less to overall mortality than previously thought and removals likely remain the leading source of fishing mortality. Second, the higher release mortality rate among larger fish is of importance as recreational catch is likely concentrated on the 2015 and 2018 year classes due to year-class strength and poor recruitment from 2019 to present. These factors will likely impact the upcoming assessment, but the exact consequences are unclear.

Nelson and Jarvis applauded DMF and their partners for this work. Director McKiernan and Dean discussed how the research was funded.

McKiernan then asked about data sources for size distribution across years. Dean responded that this information comes from ASMFC compliance reports. Different states approach this in different ways, creating inherent assumptions.

McGuire asked whether charter boats record length of releases, and Nelson responded that they do not. Gahagan, Nelson, McGuire, Jarvis and Dean discussed potential efforts to increase reporting requirements to capture this information for charter vessels in Massachusetts and collect more comprehensive data. Director McKiernan and Jarvis discussed differences in Rhode Island's permitting and reporting process from Massachusetts.

Jarvis suggested additional angler education to further share best practices to increase survivorship. Gahagan and Dean discussed current outreach plans, such as collaborations with On the Water Magazine, and future education. McGuire suggested quantifying impacts of best practices, such as reduced handling time, on the overall population as an angler education strategy. Dean, McGuire, Nelson, and Gahagan discussed how this could be implemented in the future.

Sefatia Theken-Romeo applauded the presentation and asked that DMF make the presentation widely available. Silva noted it is on the agency's YouTube channel.

#### ASMFC Menhaden Board Decision

Meserve presented the results of the 2025 single-species and ecosystem reference point stock assessment for menhaden and the ASMFC Menhaden Board's management decisions.

The assessment revealed a significant change in menhaden natural mortality estimates, impacting the time series of biomass and decreasing overall biomass estimates. Meserve shared the ASMFC's FAQ page that had been released following the Board Meeting.

In considering how to set the total allowable catch (TAC) for 2026 – 2028, the Board ultimately opted to set the TAC for 2026 only and revisit the catch limits for 2027 and 2028 in the fall of 2026. The TAC for 2026 will be 186,840 metric tons (mt), a 20% reduction from the 2023 – 2025 level of 233,550 mt. This 20% reduction provides a TAC that has 0% risk of exceeding the ecosystem reference point fishing mortality threshold but falls short of achieving the ecosystem reference point fishing mortality target. Achieving the ecosystem reference point fishing mortality target would have required a near 50% cut in the TAC. As a result, Massachusetts' 2026 quota will be reduced from 10.8 million lbs. to 8.73 million lbs. However, DMF retains the ability to access additional quota through state-by-state transfers and the Episodic Event Set Aside.

The Board will meet again in October 2026 to determine coastwide quota for 2027 – 2028 and discuss potential reallocation. During the interim, Meserve expected there will be robust stakeholder engagement along the coast.

Sawyer asked if there are size restrictions in the menhaden fishery. Micah Dean described the practical and management challenges related to size restrictions in a high volume pelagic fishery. Further, menhaden typically mature around two years old and the fishery (on a coastwide basis) generally only harvests adults and fishery in New England (at the northern extent of the species range) tends to target older and larger fish due to life history and migratory patterns. Sawyer and Dean discussed the presence of smaller fish near the Commonwealth this year. Dean noted that the exact reasoning for this is unknown, but that the stock assessment does not suggest issues with age structure within the population.

McGuire asked about size distribution of menhaden in Chesapeake Bay. Dean responded that size distribution follows latitudinal patterns, and the Bay fishery likely targets adult populations of fish similar to fisheries occurring at similar latitudes (e.g., ocean fishery elsewhere in the mid-Atlantic).

McGuire and Meserve discussed the process for and impact of potential actions to reallocate quota. Meserve explained that states are allocated quota by the ASMFC, not fishery sectors (e.g., bait, reduction). The states then may manage their quotas among various sectors. As for process, changes to quota allocations requires an addendum process that would take a least six months. McKiernan and Meserve expected reallocation discussions would be challenging and complicated.

#### Recent Inshore Dragger Meeting

Director McKiernan shared that DMF recently invited the inshore dragger fleet to a meeting in New Bedford to discuss recent fishery performance, the pending quota increases for 2026 and 2027 and resulting management proposals.

Jared Silva presented background information on fishery performance and management. Silva then looked ahead to 2026 and 2027 and the pending 75% increase to the state's quota resulting in an expected ~1 million lb. quota for these years. To encourage quota utilization, DMF was proposing to:

1. Establish quota-based triggers for Period 1 and Period 2 allocations whereby if the quota exceeds 750,000 lbs., the split will be 30/70, but if quota is 750,000 lbs. or less, the split will be 15/85.
2. Establish quota-based trip limits for the Period 1 fishery whereby if the quota exceeds 750,000 lbs. trip limits will be 5,000 lbs., otherwise it will be 2,000 lbs.
3. For the Period 2 summertime fishery, DMF was proposing to roll back last year's amendments and reinstate Saturdays as an open fishing day and increase trip limits to 600 for net fishers and 400 for hook fishers.

Industry expressed overall support for these initiatives. There was some interest in increasing the lower limit for Period 1 trip limit to increase profitability, reinstating the multi-state program, and reducing the fall trip limits. While Massachusetts previously participated in the multi-state program—which allowed permit holders from New York, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts to land fish during multi-day trips in multiple states—the program was halted in the Commonwealth last year because of concerns that Massachusetts vessels were not adequately benefiting from it due to permit restrictions in other states. Dan noted his interest in speaking with his counterparts in the other northeast states about his concerns that their permitting programs may be overtly discriminatory based on state of residency.

Dan added that there was some interest in reducing the standard of fishing activity to transfer limited entry permits such as the Coastal Access Permit for mobile gear (e.g., fishing two of the past five years rather than four of the last five). He noted he is interested in this approach, as it would benefit permit holders of this fishery who participate in multiple fisheries and allow for greater opportunities for participants. Silva added that a similar approach was taken in rod and reel fisheries to increase ease of permit transferability.

Sawyer asked about the number of fluke permit holders that are inactive. DMF did not have this information on hand.

#### Update on Horseshoe Crab Fishery Management

Silva then provided an update on horseshoe crab fishery management. He outlined the House Bill 898 – An Act to End the Taking of Horseshoe Crabs for Bait – and DMF's analysis that found: (1) the claims in support of the action are not supported by the best available science; (2) the fishery is strictly managed at the state and interstate level; (3)

populations are generally increasing in Massachusetts; and (4) banning bait harvest will have direct and cumulative indirect impacts on the state's working waterfront.

Silva then reminded the MFAC that representatives from the biomedical fishery have requested DMF consider reallocating quota from the bait fishery to the biomedical fishery. DMF was in the process of analyzing this request and would likely provide the MFAC with a memorandum for the December 2025 business meeting.

Jarvis expressed support for the current management practices in reflection of the good standing of the fishery's stock. Director McKiernan and Jarvis discussed the importance of interstate and state management efforts.

Sawyer asked about migration patterns of horseshoe crabs. Dan explained that there is some known migration, but he hopes to better understand this through tagging studies.

Nelson thanked DMF for providing background information to the MFAC on this issue.

Silva and Edmundson discussed research into alternative bait options for the whelk fishery. Edmundson explained that alternative baits like clams and green crabs showed some success but were less preferred than horseshoe crabs. Propeller clams showed promise as a potential alternative; however, these are native to Canada and present potential cost and supply issues.

Edmundson asked about the quantity of horseshoe crabs being exported to other states. DMF does not collect this data.

A discussion followed between Silva, Edmundson, and Sawyer on the mismatch in demand between the biomedical and bait quotas.

McGuire and Director McKiernan discussed bills similar to this.

## Other Business and Public Comment

Sawyer asked about addressing gear conflict between buoyed and on-demand gear when whale closures reopen. Dan said that DMF will look into the issue and perhaps discuss it with the industry at the Massachusetts Lobstermen Association's Annual Weekend in January.

With no further business from MFAC members, Edmundson invited public comment.

David Meservey cautioned against reallocating bait quota to the biomedical quota in order to protect the future of the conch fishery. Instead, he preferred DMF taking an adaptive approach to reallocating available quota between the bait and biomedical fisheries on an annual as needed basis towards the end of the season.

Director McKiernan commented on the significant decline of conch pots landed in Massachusetts since the fishery's peak in 2012. He did not anticipate the fishery would

soon return to peak levels due to declining abundance and macroeconomic issues impacting markets.

Brett Hoffmeister, from the Associates of Cape Cod, Inc., voiced support for an adaptive management approach and increased dealer control in determining whether horseshoe crabs are used for bait or biomedical quota for each vessel trip. He was concerned about increased fishing pressure over a shorter season and suggested reopening the fishery in April – June. Director McKiernan voiced concern that allowing dealers this control could risk using the biomedical quota early in the season, leaving bait fishermen with less stability later in the season.

Jamie Bassett echoed the points raised by Mesurvey and Hoffmeister and the desire to see DMF consider an adaptive management approach to quota allocation.

**Edmundson sought a motion to adjourn the meeting. Sooky Sawyer made the motion to adjourn the November business meeting. Ray Jarvis seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.**

### Meeting Documents

- November 18, 2025 MFAC Business Meeting Agenda
- October 21, 2025 MFAC Draft Business Meeting Minutes
- ASMFC 2025 Annual Meeting Summary
- Memorandum on Next Steps for Striped Bass Management after the Approval of Addendum III
- DMF Presentation on Revisiting Recreational Release Mortality of Striped Bass
- Memorandum on 2026 Commercial Menhaden Fishery
- Memorandum on Analysis of House Bill 898 — An Act to End the Taking of Horseshoe Crabs for Bait
- DMF Presentation on 2025 Nantucket Sound Inshore Dragger Fleet Meeting

### Next Meeting Date

December 18, 2025

Via Zoom