

# Meeting of the Marine Recreational Development Panel

*February 11, 2025 Via Microsoft TEAMS*

## **Attendance**

Panel Members: Kalil Boghdan, Kevin Blinkoff (chair), Tammy King, and Patrick Paquette.

Division of Marine Fisheries: Daniel McKiernan, Story Reed, Ben Gahagan, Ross Kessler, and Neil McCoy.

Department of Fish and Game: Thomas O'Shea, Commissioner and Daniel Koch, IT coordinator.

## **Call to Order, Approval of Agenda and Minutes**

Chairman Kevin Blinkoff called the meeting to order and welcomed any comments. No comments were made. Kevin Blinkoff asked if there were any additions to the draft agenda. The draft minutes for the Panel's June 6, 2024 meeting was approved unanimously without revision (motion by Kalil Boghdan, second by Patrick Paquette).

New Panel member Tammy King was introduced to the group and introductions were made around the (virtual) room.

## **Recreational Fisheries Program Updates**

Ben Gahagan gave an update to the panel about the FY25 funded striped bass post-release mortality survey. He shared that DMF had contracted Pelagic Strategies, LLC to conduct the survey and that they had made good progress in creating surveys for private and for-hire anglers and getting registry information for both groups in five states: Massachusetts; Connecticut; New York, New Jersey, Maryland; and Virginia. In each state, all for-hire and Citizen Science participants will receive the survey. A total of 5% of registered private anglers across the states will also receive the survey.

Ben also conveyed that the team at DMF had wrapped up the Citizen Science portion of the PRM project, which yielded nearly 350 active participants and data from more than 2,200 trips and 8,000 fish caught. These data will be more thoroughly analyzed in the summer of 2025 to yield a clear picture of the leading causes of post-release mortality that can be paired with the results of the survey work to create a more accurate estimate of coast-wide PRM for use in assessments and management.

Patrick Paquette asked if de-barbing hooks was considered or being advised as a result of the study as it has commonly been found to reduce post-release mortality in several fish species. Ben responded that DMF had not tested barbed vs. de-barbed hooks but that it would likely reduce handling time, which did appear to be an important factor in mortality of caught fish in initial analyses.

## **Public Access Updates**

Ross Kessler first updated the panel on the completion of the Salem Willows Park Fishing Pier project in November. Ross highlighted the historical importance of the pier in Salem and the success of the project and the quality of the new facility. Commissioner Tom O'Shea spoke about the success of the grand opening event for the Salem Pier. He called it a landmark, signature project. It was a great success for all the partners involved.

Ross shared that the next big project is a pier at Slade's Ferry in Somerset, a popular fishing location. The first phase was identifying a specific location for the project. The next phase, which is currently under way, is working with an engineering company to develop the design and logistics. Ross shared that we are working with GZA, the same company that we worked with for the Salem Pier.

Ross shared that two small public access grants were awarded in the summer of 2024. The Town of Edgartown received money to add lighting and washdown areas to shore fishing sites. Chatham was also awarded a grant to install life rings at twelve locations (\$12,000 grant) to increase angler safety at ramps and piers.

Kalil Boghdan commended our public access efforts (led by Ross) and how important it is to anglers. Kalil highlighted Ross's efforts and leadership and dedication over the years. He also recommended that the next grand opening be in spring or summer (not winter like Salem!).

Ben Gahagan noted that we're getting fewer and fewer small grant applications and that our process presented timeline issues for towns to apply. This year we will try to get the RFP out earlier (May) and for a 2-year time period (increased from 1 year). Hopefully that will improve access and applications for projects.

## **Upcoming Recreational Fishing Events**

Ben Gahagan highlighted the great opportunities that public-facing events bring and what we're planning to do for this upcoming show season. Our current show schedule tries to get into spots up and down the entire coast. Ben presented a list of all the events we're planning to participate in. Dan McKiernan brought up StriperFest (missing from list) that happens later in the year. Patrick Paquette stated that he wishes we could find more outdoor events where we can interface with other communities that we haven't reached well (outside of traditional venues). Ben Gahagan brought up the Topsfield Fair as one example of a good opportunity to

meet with a nontraditional audience. Ross Kessler spoke about urban and EJ community-focused angler ed clinics with Kim Fine that have been done.

## **MassFishHunt Updates**

Story Reed provided a background on the MassFishHunt system and handed off the discussion to Dan Koch, the IT coordinator for DFG. Dan explained his role as the primary point of contact with our new vendor (Brandt). Dan expressed his excitement to work with the new vendor. The transition will happen in early May. We expect Brandt to be a great reliable partner. They own the largest market share and have tons of experience. It was important to pinpoint exactly what we need with our procurement document, and he feels good about the process and the feedback. This is a department-wide solution with procurement and management from the Commissioner's office. The base product is a fully-formed solution already, without much customization. Our target to transition is early May. Our goal is to build it right, be really clear about what we need, and have great communication. The change will be complicated, which will bring challenges. It'll also look and feel different, so we'll need to help our users adjust and adapt, and alert them that these changes are coming. DFG will work to have tutorials and help resources, and great communication internally. Dan's overall message is that we should be excited, there's a lot to do, have good internal communication, and the Division priorities will be pushed by the procurement team. As opposed to the previous vendor and contract, this time the contract is more in line with the fees being paid by other states. We have multiple opportunities to renew the contract (out to 12 years). The fees will increase, but they are in line with fees paid in other states. The other states using this vendor all communicate with us.

Kalil Boghdan asked what percent of permits are purchased online vs in-person. Dan reported that we do about 12 million in sales each year. Internet sales are about 10 million of those sales. So online sales need to be optimized.

Ben Gahagan noted that Brandt is the vendor for Florida and North Carolina, and that both have great systems and user experiences.

Dan McKiernan mentioned issues with the previous vendor and complemented the team for the redo.

Kevin Blinkoff asked what the fee increase will be. Dan Koch said there are actually two fees. An administrative handling fee of \$1.45 will increase to \$2.75 (per product). A convenience fee (the cost of that transaction) is the other fee included, and that will be 4.9% (up from 2%).

Patrick Paquette asked about the length of the contract. Dan Koch said we have a 4-year initial period (up from 3 years). And then we have additional renewal periods. Patrick also asked about whether info from the old system will be imported into the new. Dan Koch said yes, that all gets ported over.

Patrick Paquette commented about the convenience fee. He said it would be better if it was just one fee, from his perspective, in this economy and political environment. Dan Koch clarified that the convenience fee only occurs for online purchases. For example, if you buy it in Walmart, you just have the handling fee. That's why they're two separate lines. Dan K. really appreciated the feedback and agreed it's challenging for the changes and messaging. Also noted that we want to continue improving the customer experience and product, and we welcome the feedback.

Ben Gahagan talked about how permit hard cards will be available through our new vendor, and highlighted a striped bass card example. He talked about all the opportunities that come with having hard cards. Dan Koch added that hard card sales create funds for marketing.

Kevin Blinkoff brought up raising the overall cost of the Saltwater permit. Ben Gahagan said Kevin Creighton will talk more in depth in June, but that we need an increased revenue stream to continue doing the work that we do. Ben stated that we also need to address equity, and that the for-hire permit fees are low. Dan McKiernan noted how inflation alone requires increasing to a \$15 permit. He also noted that an age change would require legislation. Patrick Paquette agreed that we will need an increase and commented that large projects also have to slow down.

## **Saltwater Derby Updates**

Ben Gahagan talked about the new Commissioners Cup and introduced our new branding. Ben outlined the new changes coming to the derby this year, including making it easier to do weigh-ins with scales. He said we want to be partnering more with Bait & Tackle shops, increasing awareness, generating more excitement, and will be unveiling a new derby trophy. He showed the drawing of the trophy in progress. He stated that our goal is to make the Derby cooler and more exciting and fun. The Derby will help highlight all the Division does.

Patrick Paquette commented about the change from the Governor's Cup to the Commissioner's Cup. He commented that there's a lot of history tied to the Governor's Cup, and that there'll be a lot of people that would not appreciate the change. Dan McKiernan asked about the name change and if we could still call it Governor's Cup without permission to still connect with the legacy. Ben clarified that the governor used to hand out those awards, and we don't have that connection anymore. Patrick discussed in more detail why that legacy is important and to be prepared for some pushback. Ben said we'll make an effort to reconnect to the Governor's Cup and make that connection clear, to remain connected to the legacy.

## **Other Business**

Dan McKiernan outlined the history of the Striped Bass license plate and our relationship to MET. Ben Gahagan highlighted funds that will provide rods and gear at angler ed events in EJ

and other communities. It'll also fund year two of the post-release mortality survey and education and materials for catch and release best practices.

Ben Gahagan discussed the upcoming striped bass videos that are aimed at three methods of pursuing striped bass; from shore, kayak, and boat with emphasis on good post-release survival practices. The videos were produced by On the Water and the videos will be curated for YouTube and social media.

Patrick Paquette brought up the work of both Ross and Ben for public access at the location in Martha's Vineyard. He wanted to recognize their efforts to preserve public access and how important it's been.

Ben Gahagan highlighted some of our visual outreach and the work of Neil McCoy to promote our programs and work (examples of angler ed stickers, a permit fee poster, etc). Ben also spoke about our new collaboration with artist Jay Talbot to create a series of FishMA stickers (showed Tuna example).

## **Adjourn**

Adjourn Kevin Blinkoff asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Kalil Boghdan made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Patrick Paquette, there was no opposition.