

# Marine Fisheries Administration Monthly Report

*March 2021*

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## **\*\*MARINE FISHERIES\*\***

### **ASMFC/MAFMC/COOP/NOAA**

- As part of an ASMFC subgroup on shad mixed stock fisheries staff have been compiling data on NJ commercial fisheries, tagging surveys, and DNA sampling in preparation for submittal to the TC for review.

### **MEETING SUMMARIES**

- **Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission-ASMFC (TC, SAS, Boards)**
  - The Red Drum Stock Assessment Subcommittee (SAS) and Technical Committee (TC) met via webinar March 1-4 for a simulation assessment workshop to review and finalize projection scenarios and finalize the framework for assessment models to determine accuracy. The Southern and Northern Stock Simulation Model and Scenarios were reviewed and discussed as were the Catch-At-Age Model, Traffic Light Approach and Stock Synthesis Model. For the Southern Model configuration; the time series, life history parameters, fishing fleets and surveys were addressed. An 1859-1900 burn-in period is being used to establish unfished equilibrium age structure, a historical fishery time period of 1901-2019 was established and the projection period will be 2020-2061. Growth, Natural Mortality, Maturity, Length-Weight Relationship, Stock-Recruit Relationship were all gone over in depth. The fishing fleet setup consisted of South Carolina recreational, Georgia recreational, and Florida recreational with a length-based selectivity and derived age-based selectivity assuming a hook and release mortality rate of 8%. Due to a bug in the simulation tool, some of the surveys had to be dropped in order to get the model to run, the developer is addressing the issue and when they are added back in, they will not change the population dynamics. The Population Dynamic scenarios are high fishing mortality, increasing adult selectivity, decreasing fishing mortality, natural mortality scaled to Hoenig (1983) Estimator, and depressed recruitment. Two Data Prioritization scenarios were included: a longline survey time series necessary to estimate spawning stock biomass and implement recreational discard length composition sampling. The Northern Model configuration also addressed the time series, life history parameters, fishing fleets and surveys. An 1838-1900 burn-in period is being used to establish unfished equilibrium age structure, a historical fishery time period of 1901-2019 was established and the projection period will be 2020-2082. Growth, Natural Mortality, Maturity, Length-Weight Relationship, Stock-Recruit Relationship were also gone over in depth. The fishing fleet setup consisted of commercial gill nets and beach seine, commercial other gears, and recreational with a length-based selectivity and derived age-based selectivity. The survey set consisted of 4 surveys and there were no issues running it in the simulation tool due to the low number of surveys being input. The Population Dynamics scenarios were the same as for the southern stock with the same two data prioritization scenarios also being included.
  - Staff attended an American lobster TC meeting on March 11<sup>th</sup>. The premise of the meeting was to discuss Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) options, as recommended by the board. The TC determined that budget options should include socioeconomic funds, and to reassess at a later date funds for wind energy and marine mammal interactions.
  - Staff attended an Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team meeting on March 11<sup>th</sup>. The intent of the meeting was to discuss the science and processes used to determine population and mortality rates of the endangered North Atlantic Right Whale. Current methodology estimates about 368 individuals in the population; a significant decrease to 409 individuals estimated in 2017.
  - Staff attended an Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team meeting on March 18<sup>th</sup>. The intent of the meeting was to discuss the procedures and updates to the Decision Support Tool from the NEFSC's DST Development Team. The support tool was used in determining how to achieve a 60% reduction in North Atlantic Right Whale entanglements during the Team's April 2019 meeting.

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- Staff attended an American lobster TC meeting on March 25<sup>th</sup>. The purpose of the call was for the TC to discuss options for a trigger mechanism and management measures for Draft Addendum XXVII on the GOM/GBK resiliency, as tasked by the Board.
- Staff attended an Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team meeting on March 25<sup>th</sup>. The intent of the meeting was to discuss an update to the North Atlantic Right Whale calving season. High productivity during the calving season is essential for the future of this critically endangered species.
- Staff participated in a conference call with the NEFSC on March 31<sup>st</sup> to discuss potential data gaps in their Right Whale Entanglement Model. The focus of the discussion was a small overlap of state stat area 171, which stretches into the western region of the model's area. After discussions, it was determined that the only potential fishery in state waters that may benefit the model's analysis is NJ's commercial conch fisheries. Additional discussion will be scheduled to input NJ's conch harvest within stat area 171.
- Staff participated in a Striped Bass Technical Committee (TC) conference call to review the results of the Albemarle Sound-Roanoke River stock assessment. The A-R stock is managed by the State of North Carolina based on stock assessments that must be reviewed by the TC and approved for management use by the Board. The peer-reviewed assessment determined that the A-R stock is overfished and experiencing overfishing.
- The ASMFC Tautog Stock Assessment Subcommittee (SAS) met via webinar on March 3, 2021 to review progress in integrating data through 2019 into the Age Structured Assessment Program (ASAP) model for the current update stock assessment. Model runs for every region except DelMarVa were able to converge with the full data sets, while DelMarVa did successfully complete the continuity model run through 2015. Work will continue to resolve potential issues brought to light by diagnostics of each model run, and the results will be reviewed in April.
- Staff participated via webinar in a conference call of the Sturgeon TC to discuss the current state of sturgeon ageing on the coast and to gauge the interest in a possible ageing workshop in the next year or so. Staff from each state detailed to the TC any current or past age sampling efforts/programs from their state. Major topics of discussion included preferred ageing structures and harvesting methods and a review of ageing in the 2017 benchmark stock assessment. The TC was generally amenable to conducting an ageing workshop. Due to a general lack of experienced agers on the TC it was agreed that states could nominate experienced agers from other agencies or academia within their state. TC have been asked to nominate themselves or an appropriate experienced ager from their state and respond to ASMFC accordingly. Bureau staff will serve as the NJ representative for this workshop
- Participated via webinar on the quarterly meeting of the Atlantic Coast River Herring Collaborative Forum, which consists of river herring specialists from the ASMFC TC and Board, academia, and NGOs. A variety of presentations in regards to river herring research projects were presented with eDNA being a major topic as well as diet studies and river herring responses to climate change.
- The Menhaden Technical Committee and Ecological Reference Point working group met via conference call to discuss a Menhaden Board task related to development and data needs for spatially explicit models. Much of the discussion focused on the TC/ERP's need to understand management questions of interest from the Management Board. The TC/ERP will draft a memo to the Board outlining generic data needs for spatial models and request additional guidance on goals and objectives. The groups also discussed timelines for model updates, with a single species model update in 2022, and benchmark assessment for all models in 2025.
- **Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council-MAFMC**
  - The Butterfish Research Track Working Group met on March 23<sup>rd</sup> via webinar to discuss the delay of the peer review as well as to review state surveys and decide how to combine the data. Russ

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Brown, Branch Chief of the Population Dynamics Branch, brought up delaying the peer review of Butterfish and Illex from November 2020 to January 2021 due to delayed data access, the diversity of working group member and their varying view points and the time frame being too short. For the state surveys it was decided that spring surveys will not be used because the Butterfish are offshore so the surveys must occur between September and November. A young of the year (YoY) model, starting at age 0 will use a NEAMAP age/length key and a combined survey indices beginning in 2007.

- The Illex Research Track Working Group met on March 31<sup>st</sup> via webinar to discuss delaying the peer review process as well as provide updates and discuss landings, recruitment in the NEFSC spring and fall surveys, landings body size, cohorts, observer data lengths, Illex pulses, economic factors, and environmental factors. Mike Simpkins, Branch Chief of the Resource Evaluation & Assessment Division, brought up delaying the peer review process due to data access issues and that the working group was formed giving them a reduced time frame. Economic Factors (TOR 2) is proving to be difficult as the Falklands Data is difficult to get even though their fleet determines the initial pricing of the US fleet. Environment factors (TOR 4) explored frontal drivers, Study fleet data, Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE), Habitat Model and fishermen discussions which entails semi-structured discussions with Illex fishermen to identify factors impacting catch and effort for integration into standardized CPUE.

- **Marine Fisheries Council/Advisory Committees**

- The NJ Marine Fisheries Council's Recreational Summer Flounder Advisory Committee was contacted twice during March to adjust commercial summer flounder trip limits. After increasing the weekly trip limits early in march, after two weeks of harvest, Staff recognized that effort increase three fold due to the trip limit increase which drove landings up to a point where the season would close prematurely if left at that high level. As such, staff recommended to advisors that the trip limit be reduced to allow harvest to occur over the full season avoiding an early closure.

- **Public Hearings**

- Staff participated in an ASMFC Public Hearing to gather public input on the Atlantic Striped Bass Draft Amendment 7 Public Information Document (PID). As the first step in the amendment process, the PID seeks input from those interested in striped bass about changes observed in the fishery/resource and potential management measures. The hearing was well attended. A significant amount of commentors would like to see the fishery managed for abundance noting the BRP's should not be changed, conservation equivalency should be eliminated, triggers should be stronger, and the stock needs to be rebuilt quickly. Some commentors suggested a 10-year harvest moratorium to rebuild the stock. A minority of commentors noted the idea of a moratorium is extreme and not necessary at this time.

- **Miscellaneous**

- Staff attended the annual ACCSP Information Systems Committee Meeting. The commercial fisheries electronic trip reporting system (eTRIPS) redesign went live to the public on January 1st. The new reporting system has an updated look and can accommodate changes in fisheries reporting requirements. The dealer system (eDR) is scheduled to be redesigned in 2023.
- Staff attended the annual ACCSP Commercial Technical Committee Meeting. Major talking points of the meeting included gill net requirements in relation to whale entanglements, updates on spatial data, and reviewing projects such as conversion factors and aquaculture reporting.
- As part of a core team, staff attended two Town Hall meetings hosted by the SAFMC to bring together stakeholders from across our fisheries community to help identify the most useful and interesting insights that could be collected through a Citizen Science mobile application.

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## **INDEPENDENT FISHERIES**

- **Delaware Bay Tagging**
  - During seven trips in March 2021, 123 striped bass, 3 American shad, and 1 Atlantic sturgeon were tagged and released. Scale samples were taken from all striped bass and genetic samples were taken from the American shad and Atlantic sturgeon. Otoliths and biological samples were collected from 6 additional striped bass. The highest catch this year took place on March 12 when 43 striped bass were caught.
- **Eel Surveys**
  - Staff completed the glass and yellow eel survey presentations, as well as the yellow eel survey SOP. All were placed in associated shared folder.
  - Staff submitted a proposal for the yellow eel pot survey. The proposal includes a breakdown of job duties based on COVID-19 safety protocols and information on how this survey could be completed safely and effectively.
- **Ocean Trawl**
  - The Ocean Trawl Survey remains postponed until the project can resume under safer COVID conditions. The June 2021 survey is officially cancelled, but August 2021 remains open in case conditions improve.
- **Sturgeon Receivers**
  - All 19 acoustic receivers were successfully deployed on March 17<sup>th</sup> in order to track the movements of sturgeon and other acoustically tagged fish in the lower Delaware Bay. 2021 marks the tenth year that the receivers have been deployed and staff followed all COVID safe protocols for the project. The first data retrieval for 2021 is scheduled for Monday April 12<sup>th</sup>. A press release was prepared and posted to the Division's website to alert boaters to watch out for the buoys while on the bay.
  - Staff received 9 incidental take reports for sturgeon in March.

## **DEPENDENT FISHERIES**

- **Access Point Angler Intercept Survey-AP AIS**
  - Sampling for the 2021 AP AIS began March 1, headboat sampling is still suspended at this time. The March draw consisted of 59 site assignments yielding a total of 34 intercepts (29 SH, 0 CH, 5 PR).
  - Staff continue to make updates to the Vessel Directory and Site Register in preparation for Wave 3.
  - Staff are on track to complete the first round of mandatory quality checks by late April.
  - March mileage is being validated and submitted for reimbursement.
  - Fishdump data from March were reviewed.
- **Artificial Reef**
  - Artificial Reef Staff inspected the current island ferry loading/offloading barge used at Liberty State Park. The superintendent of the Park contacted staff regarding the 330-foot long by 40-foot wide barge as a potential reef candidate. After inspection and several meetings, it was determined that the barge meets the requirements of the program and can be sunk on one of NJ's artificial reefs.
  - Artificial Reef staff set and lifted all 54 traps on three reefs this month. The first of four trap hauls were made and will continue to be monitored throughout April on the Little Egg, Manasquan, and Sea Girt reefs. The first lift made March 31, on the reefs produced little in the way of catch or biomass with ocean surface waters around 42 degrees at all three locations. We expect to see these numbers increase dramatically over the next several weeks.
- **Biological**
  - Staff have completed mounting commercial Atlantic menhaden scales for the 2020 sampling year. Coordination is in process with the NMFS Beaufort Lab on shipment and aging of the mounted scales.

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- Staff completed Biological sampling of Tautog for the 2020 sampling year. In total, 183 hard structures were collected.
- Staff met on March 19 to discuss biological sampling plans for American eel during the next round of the yellow eel pot survey. Currently, lengths and weights are collected from all eels, and otolith samples are collected from a subsample for ageing. Staff is working to create a more robust sampling project which will include sexing eels and examining swim bladders for parasites.
- **Commercial Fisheries/Quota Management**
  - Menhaden- The Directed Atlantic menhaden “other gears” fishery reopened on Sunday, March 28<sup>th</sup>. There is roughly 1.33 million pounds (49%) of unharvested quota remaining for the fishery.
  - Bluefish- The 2021 commercial fishing season began with a quota of 264,935 pounds. Harvest remains low at >1%.
  - Black Sea Bass- The commercial directed Season 2 fishery began on March 1<sup>st</sup>. To date, 141,491 pounds have been harvested of the 293,629-pound adjusted quota (48%).
  - Summer flounder- The commercial directed Season 2 fishery began on March 1<sup>st</sup>. On March 21<sup>st</sup>, trip limits were decreased to a 2,000 weekly limit, to prevent a premature directed closing. The action was a result to a potential increase in effort due to the lucrative initial weekly trip limit. To date, 230,974 pounds have been landed of the 331,376-pound quota (70%).
  - Scup- The federally managed commercial Winter I season began on January 1<sup>st</sup>. Current harvest is 3,012,973 pounds of the 9,247,904-pound quota. New Jersey accounts for 38% of the current harvest with 1,145,101 pounds.
  - Spiny dogfish- The 2020/2021 commercial fishery has currently harvested 1,663,618 pounds of the state’s 2,073,165 adjusted quota. This quota includes a transfer of 300,000 pounds from the New England states, which was approved on January 12<sup>th</sup>.
  - Staff submitted 2020 New Jersey commercial fisherman trip reports to the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP). Each report is entered into the Standard Atlantic Fisheries Information System and then is verified for accuracy. This data will then be used for fisheries management decisions.
  - Staff received numerous commercial fisheries data request including a request from ASMFC to validate commercial tautog landings from 1950 to present.
  - Staff contacted Harbor Lights Software and ACCSP to request additional information regarding the upcoming switch to electronic federal vessel trip reports. Currently New Jersey requires federal permitted vessels to submit a paper report for positive and did not fish trips.
  - Staff is creating an updated trip reporting form so that the new lobster reporting requirements can be successfully implemented.
  - Preliminary 2020 landings for American eel Miniature Fyke Net License holders are 23,340 pounds. There were 101 license holders, who made 170 trips.
- **For-Hire Telephone Survey-FHTS**
  - Sampling began for the 2021 year with an average of 24 vessels per week.
  - Staff contacted the first vessels drawn.
  - Fishing activity reported has been minimal, as expected. The weather earlier in March inhibited many of the boats who were operating to stay docked.
  - Feedback shows roughly ~80% of the NJ Charter and Headboat fleet is drydocked and/or winterized in the month of March.
- **NJ Saltwater Recreational Registry Program-NJSRRP/Volunteer Angler Survey-VAS**
  - As of March 31, 2021, there were 41,163 individuals and 352 for-hire vessels registered for 2021 with the New Jersey Saltwater Recreational Registry Program (NJSRRP). (Last month: February 26, 2021, there were 21,131 individuals and 229 for-hire vessels registered for 2021)

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- **Striped Bass Bonus Program-SBBP**

- Applications for the 2021 Striped Bass Bonus Program (SBBP) are now being accepted. The SBBP will reopen on May 15, 2021. Due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, staff developed an online application form to make it easier for applicants to apply and easier for staff to process applications. A listserv was sent out and the SBBP webpage has been updated. Staff continue to proof 2020 SBBP logs.

## **OUTREACH**

- The second draft of the 2021 Marine Digest was received on February 26. Staff reviewed the document and made comments and edits which were submitted to the editor on March 3.
- The third draft of the Digest was received on March 15. Staff reviewed the document and made comments and edits which were submitted to the editor on March 17.
- The final draft of the Digest was received on March 24. Staff reviewed the document and made comments and edits which were submitted to the editor on March 26. Staff worked with the editor to proof cover options. The production timeline remains on schedule, with an expected shelf date the first week of May.
- Staff presented a talk on horseshoe crabs for the Rutgers Marine Extension Program Seminar Series on March 29, 2021. In a webinar with over 250 attendees, topics covered included an overview of the horseshoe crab (taxonomy, fossil record, historic and current uses, life history), NJ's participation in the Delaware Bay Horseshoe Crab Spawning Survey, fishery management under ASMFC, and a review of the 2019 benchmark stock assessment and the ongoing Adaptive Resource Management update. With the high volume of questions from the audience, the webinar remained open for an extra half hour for staff to provide answers and comments.

## **ADMINISTRATION/MISCELLANEOUS**

- **Regulatory/Legislative**

- Notice of Administrative Changes (NOAC):
  - A NOAC to amend 2021 recreational cobia season, size limit and vessel limit was submitted to the Office of Legal Affairs on March 5, 2021. The Commissioner has not yet reviewed the draft NOAC as of April 5, 2021. The open season is changing from June 1- Sept 30 to Jan 1- Dec 31, so timing must be considered.
- Rule Proposals
  - The Menhaden Multi-Species Rule Proposal was published in the March 1, 2021, New Jersey Register, initiating a 60-day public comment period. MFA worked with the OLA, DOIT and DEP Press Office to achieve additional notice requirements, including: posting additional notice, the published rule proposal and electronic submission information on the DEP website and DFW website; issuance of additional notice to the Statehouse Rule Group, Press Rule Group, and Department-maintained and DFW Listservs. MFA rule team is working with the Office of Legal Affairs during the public comment phase and the adoption phase, which includes recording proofs of proposal publication and public comments, completing the Certificate of Proposal Adoption and Promulgation Form, and adoption summaries for the NJR.
  - MFA staff involved with administering the crab license lottery is working with the MFA rule team to ensure crab pot/trot line licensees, crab dredge licensees, and unsuccessful applicants are made aware of expected programmatic changes resulting from the adoption of the proposed crab management rules (included in the Menhaden Multispecies Proposal). A mailing will be sent out upon adoption of the new rules.

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- MFA rule team continues to develop a new multispecies rule proposal amending N.J.A.C. 7:25-18.5A Artificial reefs, along with other subchapters and sections pertaining to marine fisheries. Marine Fisheries-related rules will be reorganized under N.J.A.C. 7:25B.
- Rule-Fee Adjustments
  - Fees included in the Marine Fisheries rules will require amendments to allow fee changes through notice. MFA rule team is identifying where fees are included in the rules and/or statute. Subsequently, a rulemaking will be drafted with an amendment to configure an automatic fee adjustment based upon CPI. MFA rule team will work with the Office of Economic Analysis to develop specific language.
- Legislative Action
  - S3230, a bill that appropriates \$30.387 million from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues to DEP for State land acquisition purposed for recreation and conservation, was signed by the Governor on February 4, 2021, and became Public Law 2021, c.8
- Congressional Action
  - S. 907, (Sen. Reed, D-RI), a bill to amend the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to add Rhode Island to the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, and for other purposes. Introduced on March 23, 2021, and referred to the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee.
  - H.R. 1689, (Rep. Gonzalez-Colon, R-PR), A bill to amend the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act to apply to territories of the United States, to establish offshore wind lease sale requirements, to provide dedicated funding for coral reef conservation, and for other purposes. Introduced on March 9, 2021 and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.
  - H.R. 1726, (Rep. Young, R-Alaska) a bill to provide that an order or action by the President or the Secretary of the Interior imposing a moratorium on oil and gas leasing shall not take effect without the express approval of Congress. Introduced on March 9, 2021 and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.
  - S. 497, the “American Fisheries Advisory Committee Act”, (Sen. Sullivan, R-Alaska), a bill to establish the American Fisheries Advisory Committee to assist in the awarding of fisheries research and development grants, and for other purposes. Introduced on March 1, 2021 and referred to the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee.
- **Scientific Collection Permits**
  - Twenty scientific collecting permits have been issued in 2021. An additional five have been reviewed and are being processed.
- **HOT TOPICS/Miscellaneous**
  - License Sales
    - Nacote Creek license sales to date in 2021 are January \$35,479.00; February \$16,312.00; March \$12,130.00

### **\*\*SHELLFISHERIES\*\***

#### **Offshore Wind Development**

- Staff participated in biweekly permitting meetings with Atlantic Shores Offshore Wind (ASOW) and Ocean Wind.
- Staff met weekly with COS Rosenblatt and Megan Brunatti to discuss updates and policy development for offshore wind.

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- Staff attended training for MS Teams on March 2 and subsequently formed an MS Team for the Wind Energy Team to facilitate communication and document sharing.
- On March 4, the MFA Wind Energy Team met with Orsted and NOAA Fisheries staff to discuss their plans for fisheries monitoring. Ocean Wind is addressing this topic by issuing a request for proposals from select academic institutions to design, implement, and report on potential impacts from offshore wind. Since that solicitation went out, the MFA has been contacted by Rutgers and Monmouth to propose collaboration.
- An MFA Wind Energy Team meeting was held on March 16 to identify our current understanding of research priorities for offshore wind and fisheries. Later that week, staff met with Joe Bilinski from the Division of Science and Research to communicate that information to the DSR for inclusion in the Research and Monitoring Initiative Plan.
- Staff participated in an offshore wind Internal Coordination meeting on March 16.
- Staff participated in a meeting between the Department and the BPU on March 17 to discuss a Memorandum of Understanding for the Offshore Wind Research and Monitoring Initiative.
- Staff participated in the monthly Interstate Wind/Fisheries call, which is a collaboration between north- and mid-Atlantic states.
- A draft Research and Monitoring Plan was reviewed and comments were provided to the lead, Director Gary Buchanan. Staff communicated to the DSR that the Plan did not adequately address knowledge gaps in potential impacts to fisheries.
- On March 30, staff met with Morgan Brunbauer, the Fisheries lead for the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority to discuss upcoming scientific meetings on offshore wind and fisheries and research needs

### **MFA Outreach, Education, and Communications**

- **MFA Website Committee**
  - The MFA Website Committee members continue to work on updating and creating content for various MFA webpages.
- **MFA Communications Committee**
  - The MFA Communications Committee met and discussed various tasks to complete. The first priorities are to create a photo library and a list of ideas for social media content. The MFA outreach coordinator has been collaborating with I.E. staff on these topics.
- **Support NJ Seafood Story Map**
  - The NJ DEP, Division of Fish and Wildlife staff in collaboration with the NJ Department of Agriculture, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, and NJ Sea Grant Consortium representatives continue to work on expanding the story map to include more retail markets and add on wholesale distributors, delivery/pick-up businesses and restaurants who sell seafood that has been landed, grown or harvested in New Jersey.

### **Meetings, Conferences, and Seminars**

- **National Shellfish Association 2021 Annual Meeting**
  - Staff attended the annual NSA meeting. Staff attended sessions that focused on shellfish restoration/enhancement efforts, living shorelines, and nature-based solutions. These talks will help to inform the Bureau's efforts in these areas. Staff reached out to some of the presenters from the meeting to get more information on their presentations.

### **Nantuxent Creek Dredging Project**

- **Updates:**

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- The Division of Land Use Regulation permit application was approved and distributed to the Bureau on 4/1/21. The permit came with some archaeological conditions set by the Historic Preservation Office that NJDOT and their contractors will abide by while dredging. The Army Corps of Engineers permit comment period ended 3/26/21 with no comments submitted.
- Staff is awaiting the access agreement that The Nature Conservancy drafted for the Bureau and DOT to obtain permission to use their properties for this project. TNC supports the project but was advised to make an agreement before providing a permission letter. The agreement is currently under legal review by NJDOT.
- **Next Steps:**
  - When the USACE permit is approved, NJDOT can use both permits to obtain bids from contractors for the dredging work, preferably to be completed before June 30, 2021.
  - The dredge spoils are planned to potentially be used for a beach replenishment on Nantuxent Beach under a separate Blue Acres Program project.
  - Dredging will most likely occur during the fall after September 15th via hydraulic dredging by DOT, with mechanical dredging in the Creek.
  - The channel path will be dredged to remove about 30,000 cubic yards of sediment to make the channel 9 feet below mean low water to allow the oyster dredge boats to navigate.
- This is an important project since the multimillion-dollar oyster industry uses that channel for its main port. The industry's vessels have difficulty using this shallow channel with many shoals. This limits when boats can use that channel based on tides, as well as safety concerns with getting shellfish to the dock in a timely manner to provide a safe product to consumers.

### **Aquaculture and Leasing**

- **Shellfish Aquaculture Working Group – Commercial Shellfish Aquaculture Website Committee**
  - Bureau of Shellfisheries staff and representatives from various agencies involved in commercial shellfish aquaculture permitting, regulations, and outreach continue to work on and review the NJ Commercial Shellfish Aquaculture website design and content
- **Delaware Bay Leasing Committee**
  - On the 23rd of March, staff hosted a Delaware Bay Leasing Committee meeting. Staff updated the Committee on the status of the Lease Agreement document and regulations revision framework that is currently being drafted. The primary focus of the meeting was developing a leasing policy document for Delaware Bay. The next Committee meeting will be held sometime in May (date and time TBD), which will continue the development of the leasing policy.
- **Atlantic Coast Leasing Committee**
  - On March 18th, 2021, staff hosted an Atlantic Coast Leasing Policy Committee meeting. Committee members each spoke about their thoughts on why lease utilization is important and how criteria might be determined as a general discussion. The purpose of this meeting was to first establish some shared or common principles before participating in a more specific discussion about lease utilization issues. Committee members agreed that this topic was worth discussing in more detail. The next Leasing Committee meeting is to be determined

### **Surveys/Laboratory**

- Bureau staff launched the R/V James W. Joseph on 3/15 for the 2021 field season, which started on 3/16 with the Sturgeon Receiver Project.
- Bureau staff took inventory of all equipment and supplies for the sturgeon acoustic receiver project anticipated to be started in March 2021 if field work is allowed to resume.
- **Preparation for Estuarine Inventory – Sandy Hook Bay**

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- Staff are preparing for the estuarine inventory (hard clam stock assessment) of Sandy Hook Bay. The R/V Zephyrus is being evaluated and repaired for problems with the water pump. Once complete, the boat will be moved to Leonardo State Marina to operate for the duration of the survey, which should last 2-3 weeks.

### **Waterfront Development, Permit, and Environmental Reviews**

- MFA staff have reviewed and commented on the following waterfront development permit applications:
  - Maintenance Dredging of New York and New Jersey Channels – Arthur Kill Reaches Federal Navigation Project
  - Proposed dredging in Avalon, NJ
  - Proposed bulkhead reconstruction and dredging in Egg Harbor Township, NJ
  - NJTA Harbor Road bulkhead replacement near the Great Egg Harbor Bridge
- **Waterfront Development Guidance Manual**
  - Staff have completed the updated guidance manual for processing DLRP waterfront development permits that may affect marine resources and habitats. The last version of this guidance was published in 2008 as part of a document that included guidance from other Division bureaus. The MFA guidance manual does not address non-marine resources. The manual is designed to help both DLRP and MFA staff in determining applicability of relevant CZM rules based upon the resource and project type. The plan is to review and update the manual annually as necessary, or as required by a change to the rule text. Staff has already provided introductory training to DLRP supervisory staff, and is preparing to provide more in-depth, rule-specific training to all DLRP staff.
- **GIS Mapping Projects to Support Waterfront Development Review**
  - Staff and GIS experts continue to develop GIS resources for improving waterfront development review. This includes digitizing all older (pre-2000) shellfish and SAV resource maps, developing GIS data from shellfish and SAV surveys 2000-present, and developing finfish timing restriction guidance. The intent is for most of the data to be available in online viewing platforms, and eventually some of the data will be available for direct download. DLRP and MFA staff will be trained on how to access and interpret the GIS data once it becomes available.
- **Living Shoreline Environmental Reviews**
  - Staff provided comments to the Division of Land Resource Protection on a proposed living shoreline project at Mystic Beach in Little Egg Harbor Township. The project intends to restore the beach with sand fill as well as implement breakwaters and a stone jetty to reduce wave energy. The project is located within close proximity to commercial shellfish aquaculture leases and natural oyster grounds. The project was presented to the Atlantic Coast section of the NJ Shellfisheries Council on March 15th.
  - Staff reviewed and provided comments on a proposed beach restoration project taking place at Reeds Beach, Kimbles Beach, and Pierces Point along the Delaware Bay. The project intends to place sand fill at each location to restore beach habitat.
  - Staff reviewed and provided comments on a proposed living shoreline project for the Rutgers Aquaculture Innovation Center. The project intends to dampen wave energy through the placement of oyster castles and shell bags along the existing eroding shoreline along with the planting of natural vegetation.

### **Restoration, Enhancement, and Mitigation**

- **Shell Recycling Program**

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- Staff continues to coordinate with Shell Recycling Program participants for weekly shell pickups. Some participants are still not operating at normal levels due to COVID-19 and are not in need of pickup at this time. Staff is in communication with all participants and will continue to adjust pickup schedules dependent on restaurant operations and need for pickup
- Staff finalized the Shell Recycling Program Annual Report for 2020. The report outlines the operations involved in the Shell Recycling Program, the economic and potential ecological benefits, logistical tasks, partners, and challenges faced. The report was sent to the Atlantic Coast Section of the New Jersey Shellfisheries Council as well as posted on the Bureau's webpage.
- Staff provided final edits and photos for the Shell Recycling Program article that will be featured in this year's New Jersey Marine Digest. The article will be the first release of information about the program to the public. Staff is planning for additional materials to be released, including coordinating with I&E staff on social media posts and photo/ video coverage when shell plantings occur in June/ July.
- Staff reviewed quotes for the rental of a deck barge for the planting of shell on the Mullica River oyster reefs this upcoming June/July. Staff is working with MFA Program Specialists to finalize the purchasing process
- **BioSonics MX Habitat Echosounder**
  - Staff coordinated with other MFA staff to discuss plans for the newly purchased BioSonics MX Habitat Echosounder. This equipment will help to identify and map existing submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) throughout the State. Staff discussed survey plans for the equipment for this Spring and is working with BioSonics staff to establish training opportunities to learn how to properly use the equipment and accurately post process collected data.
- **NFWF 2021 National Coastal Resiliency Fund**
  - Staff drafted a pre-proposal for this NFWF grant for \$911,400 across 4 years which was submitted 4/7/21. The project would plant shell across existing oyster reefs within Delaware Bay, NJ waters and within the Atlantic Coast Mullica River-Great Bay (MRGB) Estuary to provide more habitat for spat settlement and enhance the oyster beds. The State will surpass the 1:1 match requirement with approximately \$943,000 over 4 years.
- **NFWF 2021 Delaware River Program: Delaware Watershed Conservation Fund**
  - The MFA reapplied for this grant on 3/30/21 for a shell planting project to occur on and adjacent to oyster tonging areas with a dermo disease monitoring component. Staff are used NFWF comments from the 2020 application to update this year's application and better the chances of being awarded the grant.
  - Staff is requesting \$101,250 from NFWF to purchase shell, and the Bureau will have more than a 1:1 match including donated services from Rutgers University who would be a partner on the project. The budgeted match is just under \$213,000 for the project for a total project cost of \$313,887.

### **Commercial Fisheries/Quota Management**

- **Atlantic Coast Section of the NJ Shellfish Council Meeting**
  - On March 15th, 2021 the Atlantic Coast section of the Shellfisheries Council met to discuss items which included an update on the Leasing Committee, hard clam management plan, shell recycling program, and the Aquaculture Development Plan (ADP). In addition, Council was presented information regarding a proposed Mystic Island Beach restoration project which is currently under permit review with the Division of Land Resource Protection. The next Council meeting will be held on April 19th, 2021.
- **Delaware Bay Section of the NJ Shellfish Council Meeting**

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- Rutgers staff reviewed the science advice from February's Stock Assessment Workshop for the oyster population in Delaware Bay, and presented the quota recommendations to the Council.
- The Council used these recommendations to set their quota and approved the following: to open all market regions at the beginning of the season; to accept the SARC recommendations for the initial quota of 89,816 bushels; to accept the SARC recommendations for the potential quota increase to 114,669 bushels, with the condition that the Shell Rock and the High Mortality regions are closed when their quotas from the increased exploitation rate was reached at 39,805 and 36,375 bushels respectively; and once the MMM regional quota of 27,500 bushels was harvested, to reopen the Shell Rock and High Mortality regions to harvest the potential extra quota from the transplants which was estimated to be 10,989 bushels split among the two regions.
- The Council voted to have the Intermediate Transplant Program and move the recommended 23,833 bushels of oysters from the Medium and Low Mortality Transplant regions to the market beds. The Council also voted to move the recommended 1,480 bushels recommended from the Very Low Mortality region to go to the Medium Mortality Transplant region to ensure some resource survives in case another large mortality event from persistent rainfall and fresh water influx occurs as it did in recent years.
- The Council was also updated on the Nantuxent Dredging Project, Red Knot Stakeholder Committee, tonging industry, Delaware Bay Leasing Committee, Consolidation Committee, the Menhaden Multispecies Rule Proposal, and shell availability for the 2021 shell planting program.
- **Delaware Bay Oyster TONGING Industry**
  - The Delaware Bay Office sold approximately 300 tongers bushel tags during the 2020-2021 season. About 6 tongers have been harvesting so far this season. Most of the 107-bushel harvest was in 2020 and came from the Nantuxent tonging area.

### **Buildings, Grounds, Vessels, and Vehicles**

- **Boat Maintenance**
  - Bureau staff continue to maintain and improve the R/V James W. Joseph and the R/V Zephyrus by performing regular maintenance, repairs, and equipment upgrades as necessary.
- Bureau staff continued working in March on finalizing the proposal and vessel details for the \$250,000 landing craft.

### **Administrative/Miscellaneous**

- **License Sales**
  - Bureau staff has been selling licenses and assisting the public with questions or concerns over the phone and through email since staff started working from home from mid-March 2020 through present. License sales for the Delaware Bay Office were \$39,266.00 in March 2021. Oyster dredge boat bushel tag sales made up 89% of sales in preparation for the season starting April 5<sup>th</sup>.