

**Narragansett Bay Special Area Management Plan**  
**Aquaculture Element**  
**Working Group meeting Municipalities**  
**September 27, 2021, 4:00 – 6:00pm**  
**Summary Notes**

**Meeting Purpose:**

1. Learn about CRMC's aquaculture and permitting process.
2. Discuss the current role of the municipality in this process and identify mechanisms for improvement.

**Moderator:** Jen McCann, URI Coastal Resources Center and RI Sea Grant

**Welcome and Overall meeting purpose** – Jen McCann, URI and *Jeff Willis, CRMC*

Jennifer McCann, of the URI Coastal Resources Center, welcomed the municipal attendees and explained that the meeting was an opportunity for the group to both learn about the state effort, via the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), the existing aquaculture permitting regulations, and to participate in the revision and improvement process. She also noted that the CRMC is making a significant effort to go above and beyond ensuring that all stakeholders can take part in the process and help foster regulation enhancements that truly assist the state, the public, and the aquaculture sector with moving forward. She introduced CRMC Director Jeff Willis, who also thanked the group for the hard work they have already dedicated to the process, and said he is pleased with the “good discussion” which will likely yield important improvements for the aquaculture permitting process and regulations.

**CRMC's Aquaculture and Permitting Process: The Role of the Municipality** - *Ben Goetsch, CRMC*

Ben Goetsch, Aquaculture Coordinator for CRMC, provided the municipal group with an overview of the aquaculture permitting process; he started with a general review of the history of the regulations, noting that aquaculture started in the Salt Ponds in South County more than 30 years ago, and now the outlook is upon Narragansett Bay. He also shared a diagram outlining the entire process that the state undertakes in coordination with local government and a wide array of stakeholders to review aquaculture permits. Goetsch explained the process, moving from the preliminary or pre-application phase, and through the later stages of the review, whereby the public and private parties work together to modify an application, with stakeholder input. The process can take sometimes as long as nine months to a year before it reaches the final stage whereby the application is finally approved, approved with modifications, or denied, in the public arena. He and Willis both indicated that it is a key aspect of the aquaculture element to work with the municipalities and the array of stakeholders to consider opportunities to enhance the process so improve its efficiency and effectiveness as a tool for the state, the public, and the aquaculture industry. Goetsch also explained to the group how the current regulations reflect state and federal guidance and effort to be responsive to stakeholder needs.

**Discussion** – *All*

Both during and after the presentation of the permitting diagram, the municipal representatives engaged with the CRMC to ask questions and provide feedback. A majority of the discussion focused on how the permitting process can be augmented to ensure that any and all parties needing to be notified of a lease permit application are apprised appropriately. Another aspect that was brought up was

whether the existing process actually enables stakeholders adequate time to have the application looked at by any number of organizations or groups that may have advice to offer.

Some of the attendees provided input about how the prospect of aquaculture is being met within their municipalities by stakeholders. For example, Chris Cotta, a Tiverton administrator, explained that the rural community is largely unfamiliar with aquaculture, so the idea of it becoming present in the Sakonnet River has caused some difficulties with wary residents. Also, Cotta shared that the municipality is concerned that too much of the onus of making people aware of potential aquaculture leases could be put upon it, so towns and the state will need to work together to come up with solutions.

Willis and CRMC Deputy Director Jim Boyd indicated to Cotta and others, who have similar concerns in other towns, that CRMC agrees that the onus of notification should be upon the applicant, but that it does seem useful and productive for the state and town to work together on some aspects of notification. For example, they indicated, some places, like Charlestown, have found that it works well to package CRMC application permitting processes via the Harbor Commission – anyone in the town wishing to know about any upcoming aquaculture permitting processes under review can always find them through the Harbor Commission agendas.

Deb Hagen, of Tiverton, asked questions of CRMC pertaining to whether towns truly have enough time, per the official CRMC review process, to secure reasonable advice or information from any number of boards or organizations. During this discussion, CRMC representatives, including Willis and Goetsch indicated that the timetable or schedule has been largely sufficient through the Preliminary Determination and formal application reviews, but that again, the opportunity is now for efforts to be made to enhance the process further.

Jaime Hainsworth, Jamestown administrator, said that he appreciated the effort that CRMC is undertaking with the municipalities to further improve aquaculture permitting, and added that in his estimation, part of the problem is that communities feel unsure of trusting that aquaculture businesses will stay at the manageable sizes they are permitted at. “The unknown scares them,” he said. In response, Willis and Boyd thanked Hainsworth for his observation, and said they intend this SAMP process to help answer and allay these fears. Boyd said that he hopes and expects that an exclusionary map will be a product of the process and that this regulatory tool will help make clear where new aquaculture projects will be allowed in the future in the Bay.

In other comments and questions, Dan Geagan, a Warwick planner, pointed out that additional difficulties could arise from the land-side aspect of planning – for example, which government agency would be responsible for enforcement, should issues arise at aquaculture businesses? CRMC indicated that while its jurisdiction would be kept to the four corners of the lease itself, it is a question, and no information currently exists in the regulations to provide guidance on this.

Also, Lisa Bryer, a Jamestown planner, shared that in her perspective, on the issue of notification, planners are largely conditioned to expect, per zoning/planning regulations, that the applicant will take care of this need. She also said she understands that from the CRMC side, it’s a different arena, when it comes to understanding how water areas are considered in terms of notification needs. That being said, she also shared with the group that she and other Jamestown staff found it helpful to use a mapping tool to create buffers that guided how the town notified stakeholders for a recent aquaculture lease application.

Willis indicated that all of this information is welcomed, valued, and appreciated, and that it is helping CRMC to better understand community concerns and aid in updating the CRMC aquaculture application notification process.

**Next Steps** – *Jim Boyd and Jen McCann*

At the end of the meeting, the CRMC and McCann thanked the attendees for their time, input, and sharing. McCann also apprised the group of upcoming events, including on October 26, 2021, which will feature retired Rhode Island Sea Grant Director Dennis Nixon, a law professor of the University of Rhode Island, who will present information on public and private rights as related to aquaculture in Jamestown. McCann then adjourned the meeting.