

Narragansett Bay Special Area Management Plan
Aquaculture Element
Working Group meeting - Sakonnet
October 6, 2021, 4:30 – 6:00pm
Summary Notes

Welcome, Overall Purpose of the Meeting/Overall Purpose of the Bay SAMP: The first part of the meeting served as an opportunity for the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), the state agency with regulatory oversight of the Narragansett Bay Special Area Management Plan (BaySAMP), to provide feedback on the SAMP process to the 30-plus meeting attendees participating virtually. This meeting was to focus on the over Bay SAMP effort, with special attention to information and questions related to the Sakonnet River portion of the Bay. Jennifer McCann, moderator, of the URI Coastal Resources Center and Rhode Island Sea Grant, asked CRMC Executive Director Jeff Willis, Deputy Director Jim Boyd, and Aquaculture Coordinator Ben Goetsch to share this information so the working group can have a fuller sense of how the agency is considering community input.

To this end, Willis indicated that he is pleased with the high degree of community stakeholder participation in the process – “We need you to help us figure this out;” he said that the participation makes it very clear that people care how the Aquaculture Element of the SAMP is shaped and expected outcomes, and that the CRMC is working hard to ensure that existing aquaculture regulations are enhanced as effectively as possible to reflect balanced use of bay resources and stakeholder needs. Boyd shared that he and other CRMC staff have benefited from site visits to coastal communities, like Tiverton, that have enabled them to further engage with stakeholders about interests and concerns regarding aquaculture permitting, especially as it pertains to the Sakonnet River. Goetsch reviewed the three expected products of the process – a map that will illustrate areas of the bay to be excluded from aquaculture farming, guidance for marking farms so boaters and bay users can navigate around lease areas, and a process for notifying stakeholders and property owners (and others) of aquaculture lease applications. All of this information can be found online at: https://web.uri.edu/crc/files/THE-FINAL-Aquaculture-Element-FACT-SHEET_091421.pdf.

Another purpose of the meeting was to ask the working group to alert the CRMC, preferably in detailed writing, about where and how activities are taking place in the bay, and especially the Sakonnet River – the information could be useful in helping the CRMC determine how best to plan for aquaculture and the many other uses and resources that exist – from public access, to recreational fishing, to kayaking, and to boating, among other uses. Three separate regional meetings have been held for the East Passage, the West Passage, and now the Sakonnet River, as well as meetings with varied bay use stakeholder groups. These meetings, combined with the working group sessions, are providing a wealth of information for shaping the SAMP and obtaining desired outcomes.

Q & A: Much of the meeting enabled the working group members to ask as many questions as they wanted of the CRMC staff. Questions varied; one question, for instance, by Donna Cook, a Tiverton town council member, focused on whether the CRMC had received and would consider the information of a memo developed by the town’s administrator – the administrator had been unable to attend a CRMC site visit to the town; the CRMC indicated that the memo was received and noted, and is being posted

on the SAMP website. Many questions and subsequent discussion focused on advising the CRMC on specific areas of the Sakonnet River that are locations for boating and boat traffic, recreational fishing, kayaking, swimming, and multiple uses of public access areas – these discussions generally shared the perspective that the Sakonnet is a busy area for bay uses, and these uses need to be respected as much as aquaculture is. CRMC staff members indicated several times that this feedback is very important for ensuring the aquaculture element is as vital and useful as possible to a wide array of stakeholders, reflecting as many of their needs as possible, and that the CRMC charge is to ensure balanced usage of the Bay resource in its entirety. Along these lines, other questions concerned whether there will be a specific set of criteria for evaluating uses in the bay.

Information Needs: Chris Damon, of the URI Environmental Data Center, provided, as he has at several other Bay SAMP meetings, a “tour” of the public mapping tool that anyone can use to see how the bay is being used, and where certain activities and uses tend to be clustered. The map reflects “authoritative” data from trusted sources – like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – and current data from these sources servers. He explained that the darker areas of the map indicate existing uses, so in general, darker areas may be places where, sometimes, aquaculture activity won’t be able to go – hard constraints. For instance, he showed areas of the bay with darker yellow coloring; once clicked, those areas showed use for military activity, or environmental conservation, or as a shipping channel – these places have high likelihood of appearing as “exclusion” areas on an aquaculture siting map. Damon provided tips and information for the working group so members can explore the mapping tool and he said that people should alert the CRMC or him to uses that they think should be there. McCann also asked Boyd to define the meaning of “hard constraints,” and he said it’s an area legally defined through federal or state regulations as being “off limits to aquaculture.” A comprehensive definition can be found on the Bay SAMP web site under Frequently Asked Questions.

Jeff Gardner asked Damon to further describe “Natural Areas” designation on the map, and Damon explained that the terms reflects his own grouping of items like eelgrass plantings and research reserve areas. Several attendees, like Donna Cook, stated clearly several times that their perceptions of their communities are that people are very unsure about how aquaculture leases could be made to work in positive fashion with a Sakonnet River area already highly active with boating, fishing, kayaking, swimming, commerce, passive recreation, and other uses. Others gave detailed information about boating traffic and fishing sites in the Sakonnet. Larry Taft, of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, urged the CRMC to consider the value of conservation areas, and others agreed to create a written description of important recreational fishing areas, both from land and boat. CRMC staff members said that they hear the concerns, and that the agency is intent on making sure that the SAMP aquaculture element is as productive and respectful as possible to the fullest array of balanced bay resources – and that the stakeholder feedback is very important for informing the process, so it is welcomed. Several questions focused on mooring fields. While Town of Portsmouth Town Planner Gary Crosby asked whether mooring field information contained in the town’s harbor management plan (HMP) would be considered by the CRMC – Boyd answered that current CRMC approved mooring fields would be included for this SAMP process and would consider new HMPs or amendments in the future – additional discussion took place exploring whether mooring field arrangements would logically preclude future aquaculture placements. Bob Rheault, of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association,

commented to the group that should fields be considered for their use as, in effect, lease barriers, these fields would likely need to be of larger size, and would likely need to be put forth through full CRMC review processes. Also, Rheault suggested that the group consider the possibilities of kelp farming – it’s a winter crop, can be placed further toward the open ocean, and wouldn’t interfere with warm weather recreational activities.

Also, several inquiries were made by the group concerning which information they should provide to the CRMC so it can consider adding the data to the map. For example, one participant indicated that he will provide a written piece to the CRMC so recreational fishing areas, from land and boat, can be considered by the CRMC. In addition, Deb Hagen, of the Tiverton council, along the lines of criteria setting, asked if and how recreational elements could be evaluated so they can inform the SAMP. Willis answered that it would be most useful for town entities to document or catalogue the coastal recreational assets and uses they value, and that detailed information will be considered by the CRMC as it weighs amendments to the existing CRMC aquaculture regulations for the state.

Other items were shared as well; McCann encouraged the group, if the haven’t already, to listen to Goetsch’s presentation of the CRMC processes for aquaculture lease applications; it can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9nX9NHCLks>. Also, Goetsch shared, in response to an inquiry, that the CRMC reviews all lease applications, regardless of the size of the proposed lease – work takes place within the review process with the applicant and stakeholders to assess all aspects of the proposal, including the lease size.

Next Steps: After taking everyone’s questions (for ALL questions, it is useful to see the video of the meeting; too many questions were asked to list them all separately here in brief summary notes), McCann told the group of several events and opportunities; for instance, on October 26, from 4 – 6 p.m. University of Rhode Island Professor Emeritus Dennis Nixon would provide a webinar on the legal contexts for aquaculture farms within public ocean spaces. To attend, see: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/conflicts-between-public-and-private-rights-along-rhode-islands-shore-tickets-173800882117>. She also said that all working group meetings and the place-specific meetings (East Passage, West Passage, Sakonnet River) are available publicly on video, and can be seen on the NBay SAMP web page at: <https://web.uri.edu/crc/narragansett-bay-samp/>. She urged working group members to consider inviting the CRMC to local events appropriate for sharing information about the SAMP effort, and she reiterated, as she has in other meetings, that the CRMC has gone “above and beyond” the state requirements in terms of creating the extensive and intensive public process to engage stakeholders in creating the aquaculture element, and that everyone is welcome to participate in this very transparent, open, and full process, with many learning opportunities available as well.

Boyd and Willis thanked the attendees several times; Willis said that this process is extremely important and is being taken very seriously, and that the CRMC deeply appreciates the time, work, energy and effort that people, including the working group, have dedicated thus far.

The meeting was then adjourned.