

**RI CRMC Narragansett Bay SAMP
Aquaculture Element Working Group Meeting/West Passage Meeting
August 2, 2021 from 4:00 – 6:00pm
Summary Notes**

Welcome - Jeff Willis/Jim Boyd, RI CRMC; Jennifer McCann, URI Coastal Resources Center

Jennifer McCann, of the University of Rhode Island Coastal Resources Center (URI CRC), served as facilitator and opened the meeting by welcoming virtual attendees. She indicated that the purposes of the meeting were to communicate the overall Bay SAMP aquaculture element purpose, process, and expectations; and identify Working Group (WG) information needs to assist with the development of an informed process and product. She also explained how the series of virtual meetings were being organized to provide as much of an in-person sense as possible.

McCann then introduced Jim Boyd, deputy director of the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), who reminded the group that the CRMC, as the state's coastal administrator, is committed to ensuring a productive, science-informed, and transparent process to develop, review, and adopt the NBay SAMP. A goal for all SAMP chapters, he said, is apply "ecosystem-based management" approaches, to leverage economic opportunity and "minimize environmental impacts," within the context of a stakeholder-driven process. He also indicated that a slate of community meetings is providing multiple opportunities for public and stakeholder involvement. Boyd also said that a great deal of science data is available about Narragansett Bay which can inform the aquaculture element – a chapter and complementary siting map or tool – so the aim is to have a comprehensive draft chapter and a detailed map prepared for public review by the end of the year.

The Role of the Working Group - Jim Boyd

Boyd indicated that the role of the working group is strictly advisory, with no legal or regulatory authority. He said that CRMC is relying on the combined expertise of the working group to assist the agency with putting forth recommendations for consideration in the development of an aquaculture zoning map. Also, he said that a formal process will be applied to review proposed regulatory changes, that this process could begin, at the earliest, in spring 2022, and that the working group will advise CRMC throughout the process.

McCann said that the working group functions as a "sounding board" for community questions and concerns, and that each Rhode Island coastal community has been given the opportunity to assign three members to the group. Three community virtual meetings – East Bay, West Bay, Sakonnet River—are providing for wide stakeholder participation. McCann provided this general timetable for the SAMP aquaculture element: Jul-Oct 2021/Issue Identification; Sept-Dec 2021/Issue Solution development; Jan-Apr 2022/Finalize Revisions; and May-Dec 2022/Initiate Rulemaking, as a formal process.

Following this, several questions were taken; Larry Taft, of the Rhode Island Chapter of the Audubon Society, asked the CRMC to ensure that the Rhode Island Saltwater Anglers Association (RISAA) is aware of this process, and CRMC indicated it has apprised the group.

Aquaculture Element - Presentation and Dialogue - Chris Damon, URI

Hard Constraints Map

Chris Damon, a URI data and mapping specialist, provided a presentation, “Preliminary Screening Criteria for Siting Aquaculture Lease Locations in RI Waters.” He shared aspects of an in-process Hard Constraints Map. The map reflects authoritative data sources, like Rhode Island GIS and NOAA, and will illustrate areas largely off-limits to aquaculture in state waters, per existing CRMC regulations. Damon indicated that mapping will be used also to illustrate areas that have potential, or are possible candidates for aquaculture siting in state waters. Questions here focused on how state agencies (CRMC, and possibly RIDEM) can ensure that the map reflects the most up-to-date approved/existing leases (Lisa Bryer, of the Jamestown Planning Department), and whether Damon can consider other kinds of data layers to obtain map information (Charles/Chip Lawrence, Tiverton resident); the concern here was that the use of the Sakonnet River as a commercial vessel corridor is not reflected by the map. In answer to these, Damon indicated that data lags are due to computer system update schedules. He also said he will try to find other authoritative data sources illustrating commercial use of the Sakonnet.

At this point, discussion moved to a larger issue of how stakeholders of bay resources can be more effectively and efficiently made aware of CRMC permitting processes (see Other Revised Notification Process two sections down).

Enhanced Navigational and Aesthetic Guidelines or Standards

The group talked about refining or enhancing the method via which aquaculture leases are marked so other bay users, including boaters, know to steer away from farms and their equipment – CRMC Aquaculture Coordinator Ben Goetsch indicated that the last time such markings, like buoy systems, were explored or examined was 2009. The working group will consider options for marking systems, with effort being made to consider effectiveness of markers, in terms of safety, and their aesthetic appeal. Lighted buoys are one option, for example, as are reflectors. Also, the U.S. Coast Guard will be consulted to see if markers can be officially recognized, and thus plotted on appropriate mapping systems – this would allow the markers to appear as a data layer on the aquaculture siting map. Working group members made several comments; for example, Robby Hudson, shellfish hatchery manager and adjunct professor, Roger Williams University, said that marking must be undertaken carefully, as it can cause interference issues, and working group member Bob Rheault, of East Coast Shellfish Growers Association, advised that it would serve prospective farmers well to talk with a potential host municipality about marking system functioning and aesthetics.

Other Revised Notification Process

Significant discussion took place on the issue of how CRMC can best move forward on its chosen effort to enhance how people, especially bay resource users, can be made aware of lease reviews more quickly and easily. On the problem side, working group members, including Dick Pastore (North Kingstown stakeholder and private sector engineer) say that it's difficult for users – whether fishers/gatherers, for example, or recreational anglers – to know, even with the current permit notification process, which is predicated on municipal noticing, when they should be aware of a lease review. Boyd indicated a new and underway list serve open to the public may go a long way to helping, as anyone can sign up for it, but working group members continued to ask for further measures to be taken. Another option discussed focused on whether other state agencies, like RI DEM, could possibly help with the effort via their existing communication vehicles, and this will be looked into further. On the other hand, more notification could make the permitting process more difficult for permit applicants, said working group member and aquaculture farmer Jeff Gardner, so he urged the CRMC to be careful about this. Another group member, Deb Hagan, of Tiverton, asked whether it would be possible to post flyers about permit reviews at public access points, and Boyd indicated this could be onerous or undoable, due to weather and physical logistics. There was also discussion about whether and how municipalities could effectively assist with the notification process; the problem, said Boyd, is that bay resources are open to all, so technically, we are all abutters, in some sense. The discussion will be ongoing.

After this, the discussion returned to the second item in the agenda (see Enhanced Navigational and Aesthetic Guidelines or Standards, above).

Next Steps – Jen McCann and Jim Boyd

McCann told the group that the third community meeting, on the Sakonnet, had been scheduled, but would be rescheduled and announced soon. She also said that for the next meeting, one key topic of consideration will be the development of web site specifically for the Narragansett Bay SAMP Aquaculture Element, which will feature tools and resources for the state and stakeholders to collaboratively apply in order to create the recommendations for the CRMC review and adoption process, and to be of use to the public after. She and Boyd, as well as CRMC Executive Director Jeff Willis, thanked the working group for their continuing hard efforts, and said that discussion, especially on the notification system enhancement, is very useful. McCann then adjourned the meeting.