



# TOWN OF WELLFLEET

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To: Dan McKiernan – Director  
Cc: Brad Chase - Diadromous Fisheries Project Leader  
Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries  
51 Causeway Street, Suite 400  
Boston, MA 02114

March 20, 2023

From: The Wellfleet Selectboard  
300 Main Street  
Wellfleet, MA 02667

Dear Director McKiernan -

The Wellfleet Selectboard and Wellfleet Natural Resources Advisory Board (NRAB) supports the undertaking of a long overdue survey of the life and health of Wellfleet Harbor. The last comprehensive harbor study was performed over 50 years ago by the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (MA DMF) [A Study of the Marine Resources of Wellfleet Harbor](#)

The selectboard supports this project, and requests that MA DMF, having the technical expertise and qualifications to fund, design and perform such a survey, consider allocating in your budget funding for a new Wellfleet Harbor survey to begin as early as summer 2023.

Our Natural Resources Advisory Board (NRAB) has prepared three harbor management plans in [1995](#), [2006](#), and [2021](#). These have been useful informational documents but don't quantify how our harbor is doing today compared to 50 years ago. With dredging and the Herring River work beginning, this is an opportune time to develop a comprehensive baseline for both the life in the harbor and chemistry of the harbor itself.

There are numerous studies and reports regarding our harbor that have been prepared over the years, all of which are useful for the town. However, what has been missing is a report that compiles and compares all the available data, analyzes what's been done, and details how those actions have affected the harbor and the fauna occupying the harbor.

As a healthy marine ecosystem begins from the bottom up, special emphasis should be placed on identifying the smallest phytoplankton by species, all the way up to the striped bass and bluefish at the top of the food chain. NRAB has prepared a detailed description of many technical details they believe are important and for your consideration in designing and finalizing a new survey. Additionally, Wellfleet is rich with citizen scientists with on-the-water expertise who would be available to assist MA DMF with designing a new survey, and could provide valuable assistance to help with performing the survey itself.

As work has already begun on restoring tidal flow to the Herring River, and dredging has been underway, time is of the essence to perform a new harbor survey. We would greatly appreciate your assistance in funding and documenting the current state of our harbor to properly gauge the consequences of those major initiatives now underway and set a detailed baseline for evaluating changes in the future.

Sincerely,

The Wellfleet Selectboard  
300 Main Street  
Wellfleet, MA 02667

## **Why the MA Division of Marine Fisheries should prioritize Wellfleet Harbor**



The health of Wellfleet Harbor is critical to the life and economy of Wellfleet, for both recreational use and for commercial fishing & shellfishing. While we have invested time and money to improve the quality of water and life in Wellfleet Harbor, we have failed to do one crucial step. We have not studied the actual health of the harbor - its water quality, finfish and shellfish populations, and plant life in over 50 years.

When the last such survey was published in 1972, based on 1969 data, the total value of the annual commercial oyster harvest was \$18,000, and the influx of summer visitors was a fraction of the current size. In 2019, the value of harvested shellfish from Aquaculture and the wild fishery alone was \$7.7m, with Wellfleet ranking #1 statewide for blood clams, #1 for oysters, and #2 for quahogs. 300 Wellfleet residents, or roughly 10% of the town's population earned their living in the industry. There is a total of 250 moorings, 200 slips, and a busy daily launch ramp. With 93 aquaculture farms and highly productive wild fishery, everything possible should be done to properly account for and manage the resource. We must take stock of the changes that have occurred in the past 50 years. Some questions that need answering are:

- How successful have our management actions been?
- What trends over the past 50 years should we logically expect to continue?
- What are the current populations of finfish and shellfish ... and their prey?
- What flora are growing in the Harbor?
- What is the chemistry and temperature of the water?

In short, what is the base reality of Wellfleet Harbor today and what do the changes in the past 50 years tell us about the future?

With climate change and global warming a scientific certainty, we need to become proactive to protect the health of the Harbor. We also should take into account the benefits from the Herring River restoration and the Town's waste-water project. Fact-based decisions will provide one chance to do this; our future depends on us getting it right. The time has come to have a comprehensive survey of harbor life, and to set a benchmark for future work.

Project work could begin in summer 2023, with a final report due by January 1, 2025. The work will identify those resources critical to harbor health including:

- A survey of finfish and shellfish populations in the harbor using seining, dragging and camera technologies. The basic plan follows the protocols of the MA Division of Marine Fisheries.
- Understanding the harbor food chain is important: big fish eat small fish, shellfish eat phytoplankton.
- A report will be prepared, with references to other on-going studies summarizing work done with proposals for either future surveys, or actions needed to ensure long term harbor health.
- The report will be presented to the Selectboard, other appropriate Town Committees and the general public.

We believe that this survey is critical to account for and protect our biggest asset. We must know what we have now and begin adapting to upcoming changes that will affect all aspects of life in Wellfleet, including the continued sustainability of those industries we all depend on.