

## 2020 WELLFLEET SHELLFISH DEPARTMENT ANNUAL REPORT

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It was a challenging year on the flats due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Markets abruptly shut down in mid-March, causing the department to roll up its sleeves and devise alternative ways to help the shellfishing community. Yet, our propagation and enforcement responsibilities continued, and our recreational fishery numbers exploded, which made for an extremely busy year overall.

The commercial industry seemed to be able to salvage summer markets with at least local restaurants opening, but once fall arrived and different areas in the country were going through shut-downs, markets quickly dried up again. Travel restrictions took a toll on vacation destinations such as cruise ships, New York City, Las Vegas, etc. which are big markets for shellfish. Quahogs did not suffer the same fate as oysters, probably because they are more versatile and get cooked and demand seemed to be constant throughout the year.

Recreational shellfishing increased exponentially as it became a way for residents and visitors to get outside and exercise, be able to social distance and bring food home for their tables without having to go into a store. This activity stretched the department's resources, both in trying to make sure ample shellfish was available for harvest and staffing to conduct propagation and enforcement with this growing number of users.

To help counter the COVID-19-related ripple effects, the department focused its 2020 work on implementing many initiatives to help commercial harvesters, oyster farmers and the recreational shellfishing public.

- The department petitioned the Mass. Division of Marine Fisheries (MADMF) to extend the bay scallop season for one month, which was approved.
- We purchased 141 bushels of quahogs harvested from the inner channel by draggers before dredging to augment our propagation efforts in Chipman's Cove and the Indian Neck Recreational Area. This put more than \$4,000 in shellfishermen's pockets.
- We worked with the state on CARES ACT assistance and Wellfleet SPAT on its Wellfleet Shellfish Harvester Relief Program to ensure that as many local shellfishermen as possible were eligible for different allocations of relief funds and efforts.
- The department was awarded a \$10,000 grant as part of the Sea Grant COVID-19 Related Rapid Response Municipal Propagation program, implemented by Woods Hole Sea Grant /Barnstable County Cape Cod Cooperative Extension. We matched the grant with \$10,000 from the Revolving Fund for Shellfish Propagation as approved at Annual Town Meeting. We organized an oyster buyback of 1,111 oysters from about 40 farmers, and each farmer received \$500.00 just in time for the holidays. Some farmers also elected to donate oysters to this propagation program. More than 45,000 oysters were relayed to the Indian Neck Recreational Area, which has seen increased fishing pressure all year.
- The department worked with state agencies (MADMF and Mass. Dept. of Public Health) to create an operations plan to function within state shellfish regulations but with the feel of consumers being able to buy oysters and quahog clams directly from shellfishermen. The Shellfishermen's Farmers Market launched on the on Saturday, December 12, and

will continue until May 1, 2021. The public orders shellfish online and drives through a pick up site on the Town Pier. Instrumental in making this happen are wholesale dealer Holbrook Oyster, the Wellfleet Shellfishermen's Association and President Ginny Parker and Ryan Curley. We would also like to thank the Selectboard for its direction and support and the state DMF and DPH staff who expertly guided us through this process, as well as Wellfleet SPAT who helped us get the word out and supplied us with recipes to distribute to attendees.

#### Big picture grant activities:

- We enforced new overwintering regulations, conducting more than 90 grant inspections in January and February. 29 written warnings were issued. A total of 2,151 racks, an 850 reduction from the winter of 2019, were left out. Thankfully, we had a mild winter with no ice, and there were no serious issues. Grant holders continue to clean up their grants.
- We conducted a few aquaculture gear clean up days with the Center for Coastal Studies and AmeriCorps. On one day alone, 1,240 pounds of old gear was removed and 590 zip ties were collected. We are making progress to tidy up our harbor for all users.
- We conducted a grant lottery for a grant where the only lease holder passed away.
- We worked with the Shellfish Advisory Board to simplify overwintering regulations.
- It took six months, but we completed grant inspections of all 154 grants in Wellfleet.

#### Wild fishery highlights:

- We initiated first-time commercial permit holder orientations to ensure success and compliance and weekly welcome emails with guidelines to recreational permit holders.
- The Selectboard added veteran and employee recreational shellfishing permits at resident rates but opted not to issue seasonal recreational shellfishing permits. Even with just annual permits being sold, we were challenged in the recreational fishery oversight.
- In 2020, we sold a total of 181 commercial shellfishing permits (the same as 2019) and 780 recreational permits (100 less than 2019). Total revenue was \$87,405, about \$500 more than 2019, probably because some usual seasonal permit buyers bought the more expensive annual permits.
- There was a 36% increase in recreational shellfishing permit usage from 2019 to 2020. 271 bushels of oysters, more than 85,000, were harvested (up 11%) and 143 bushels of quahogs, more than 42,000, were harvested (up 85%).
- We encountered many problems with people taking seed, fishing in closed areas and shellfishing without permits in the recreational shellfishery. We created an educational handout which we began to distribute in December with all 2021 permits and communicated our enforcement regulations to permit holders via our email "Crier."
- More than 950 bushels of oysters, close to 1,900 bushels of quahogs, 611 bushels of bay scallops and 945 bushels of blood clams were landed by wild commercial shellfishermen as tracked on commercial patrol. The bad news is that oyster harvest was down about 45% and bay scallop harvest was down by 50%, but on the bright side quahog harvest was up 70% and blood clam harvest was up 37%. We are grateful that our harbor offers a diversity of species from which residents can make a living.
- The fall bay scallop fishery was a bust. This might be attributed to natural cycles, codium seaweed, decline in market demand and other pandemic-related ripple effects.

#### Propagation focuses:

- We received a MEPA certificate permitting the Town to continue its century-long practice of clutching the harbor with shells to create juvenile oyster habitat. We distributed 352,840 pounds of sea clam shells in cultch strips throughout the harbor. We received ten more loads to overwinter for next June.
- We planted 245,000 oyster seed and 300,00 quahog seed.
- We bought 501 bushels of state-monitored contaminated quahogs and put 276 bushels in Chipman's Cove and 225 bushels on the jetty side of the Indian Neck Recreational Area. These passed state testing in October and Chipman's Cove was opened at the end of the month. The Indian Neck Recreational Area will remain closed until next June to ensure we have a well-stocked summer shellfishery in 2021.
- We had a successful pitting year, with little to no mortality of our seed oysters, 600,000 of which had been donated by grant holders from their spat collectors. The department bought its own spat collectors and deployed them in the Cove and on our propagation bed. The set this year seemed to come early and resulted in negligible catch in the Cove, but the hats on our grant did well.

#### Other points of interest:

- The federal channel was dredged to great relief, but a tugboat grounded near Mayo Beach and the propwash sediment caused damage to clam nets and topography on two grants. From now on, a site visit will always be conducted with the dredge and tug companies on a negative tide prior to work commencing so we can demonstrate the work's proximity to shellfish resources and the tight quarters within which they will be operating.
- Shellfishing is the economic driver for the town's year-round economy and many town initiatives intersect with shellfish resources and activities. The department has taken a much more active role in participating in, educating and providing input to other town, state and federal committees, projects and efforts. This requires a great investment of staff time and resources, but it is worth it to ensure our shellfishing traditions and way of life can continue sustainably and prosperously into the future.
- In addition to Selectboard and Shellfish Advisory Board meetings, we collaborated extensively with the Conservation Commission, the Dredging Task Force, the Comprehensive Wastewater Management Planning Committee, the Natural Resources Advisory Board, and the newly formed Rights of Public Access Committee.
- We also participated in the Mass. Shellfish Initiative, the Inter-Municipal Shoreline Management CZM Resiliency Grant, stormwater management grant opportunity discussions, the Herring River Restoration Project, Mass. Oyster Project, the Center for Coastal Studies aquaculture gear identification and clean ups, shellfish disease testing with Barnstable County Cape Cod Cooperative Extension, Mass. Audubon of Wellfleet Bay Lieutenant Island access working groups and IFAW marine mammal rescues.

The Mass. Division of Marine Resources is also feeling a surge in workload complicated by state COVID workplace restrictions. We were unable to get state statistics by publication deadline but will communicate them to the Town when we receive them.