

2022 WELLFLEET SHELLFISH DEPARTMENT ANNUAL REPORT

2022 was defined by a return to normalcy after the pandemic caused by COVID-19. With restaurants re-open and the public longing for pre-pandemic freedoms, the markets for shellfish took off. We heard reports from long-time shellfish farmers that they had never had so much demand for both oysters and quahogs at the same time and at competitive prices. They were able to sell their inventories in the spring and then turn to wild harvesting to meet buyer orders. Three years without ice (supplemented, one can hope, by the department's ongoing propagation efforts) meant that wild stocks of oysters and quahogs in the harbor were abundant. The West Side with its high catch limit and accessibility by boat for intertidal pickers also greatly contributed to an increase in the wild commercial oyster harvest. During the summer and fall, oyster growth was impressive, and by fall and early winter, supplies were such that dozens of commercial shellfishermen were able to pick their limits in both Chipman's Cove and Duck Creek daily. It is a privilege to support both the economic stability of local shellfish harvesters and the environmental sustainability of the fishery through our propagation efforts.

Grant Activities

- The Shellfish Department began grant inspections in April and finished them in September, completing inspections of 157 grants totaling 108 operational shellfish farms.
- This year, the department put a major focus on compliance with the minimum productivity regulation 7.12.1. Minimum Levels of Investment and Production in which there must be an average of \$1,000 worth of product sold per year per acre. Since 2017, the department has been doing grant inspections yearly and comparing those to grant holders' annual reports, as required by the regulations. This resulted in three grants being forfeited due to failing to meet minimum productivity requirements.
- In 2022, the collaborative work of the department with the Selectboard meant that five grants came up for lottery, and by the end of the year, two had been awarded.
- The Selectboard revoked the grant license for Aquacultural Research Corporation in May, in enforcement of the domicile regulations, 7.8.1 and 7.8.2. This caused much controversy in the shellfishing community with many shellfishermen opposed to such action given the business's long-time involvement here, its role in getting the aquaculture industry started in Wellfleet and belief that it should be grandfathered in. Others felt that because they were not domiciled in Wellfleet, they simply did not meet the regulations.
- More than 1,600 racks were left out during the winter; it was our third consecutive year without ice.
- The department's enforcement of grant fee payments resulted in four license holders losing their grants because they did not pay their fees within six months as required by Mass. General Law and the town's shellfishing regulations.
- There were a number of grant transfers and grant extensions approved this year, and by the end of 2022, there were 160 grants with 133 grant license holders operating 108 farms in Wellfleet Harbor.

Wild Fishery

- A conservative estimate of commercial catches is more than 4,187 bushels of oysters, (nearly quadruple that of 2021), 1,393 bushels of quahogs (about 10 percent less than 2021), 94 bushels of blood clams (about half of last year's catch) and 203 bushels of bay scallops, (slightly up from last year).
- The recreational shellfishery once again saw a noteworthy increase from the year prior. A conservative estimate of recreational catch totals is more than 418 bushels of oysters, up 32% from 2021, and 160 bushels of quahogs, up 7%. Additionally, the number of recreational permit holders fishing increased 24% from 2021.
- We sold 1,045 recreational permits, totaling \$52,400 and 169 commercial permits, totaling \$38,805. This represents almost a three percent increase in revenue from 2021.
- The department continued to conduct orientations for first-year commercial permitholders to provide helpful guidance for newcomers. We continued sending welcome emails to recreational permitholders detailing important regulations, fishery updates and areas open for harvest. Monthly emailed "Shellfish Criers" to commercial harvesters continued with important news and reminders all year long.
- We encountered fewer problems with recreational shellfishermen taking seed and exceeding the weekly catch limit than last year. This year, we continued to educate them about seed, marking permits with an "S," as well as catch limits and license stipulations. We saw an increase in compliance, issuing only two written warnings.

Propagation Efforts

- The department planted about 110,000 oyster seed on our grant, which we received for free as part of a County- and State-funded program. We also had close to 500,000 of our own wild oyster seed including donations from growers that we overwintered in our pits and finished growing out on our grant. We broadcasted most of these oysters to the Indian Neck recreational only area and Chipman's Cove.
- This year, we decided not to purchase quahog seed, but rather to double down on the contaminated relay, which is showing positive outcomes with seed quahogs taking hold in Chipman's Cove, a cost of just \$0.04 a clam and efficiency in personnel time.
- We purchased 1,074 bushels of contaminated relay quahogs equal to 515,520 quahogs. We distributed 170,000 to the Indian Neck recreational only area, 345,000 to Chipman's Cove and 120,000 to the Herring River.
- Assistant Shellfish Constable Johnny Mankevetch began bullraking our 2018 year class quahogs and distributing them in the inshore areas of the Indian Neck recreational only area for quick harvest to the delight of recreational harvesters desiring littlenecks.
- The department laid a total of 75 cultch strips in the Herring River, Blackfish Creek, Duck Creek, Chipman's Cove and in front of the town grant to promote wild oyster spat recruitment. Cultching the harbor is at least a century-old tradition that helps keep our wild fishery thriving. A big thanks to the D.P.W for their great collaboration!
- We cemented a total of 81 spat collecting devices for juvenile oyster collection in 2022. Although in September, it seemed that this year was going to be less successful

than in 2021 as hats throughout the harbor did not catch a significant set, it ended up being more successful than originally thought as the set grew extremely well and became more visible than it was initially. We caught approximately 2,000 pieces of seed per stack, totaling about 140,000 wild-captured oyster seed.

Other Points of Interest

- Wellfleet's Shellfishing Policy and Regulations were amended three times this year. Changes included requiring all spat collecting devices used in Chipman's Cove to be tagged, boundary dispute procedures, an increase from 14 to 30 days for the appeal period after notification of failure to meet minimum productivity, an increase of \$10 in recreational shellfishing permits beginning in 2023, and a requirement for all grant license holders to purchase commercial shellfishing permits.
- The department assisted the Friends of the Herring River (FOHR), the Center for Coastal Studies (CCS) and Mass. Oyster Project (MOP) with studies about wild oyster spawning. The FOHR is documenting the extent and density of spat settlement under existing conditions for future comparisons as tidal restoration proceeds. The CCS focused its efforts on oyster set and sedimentation in the Herring River area in order to create a baseline to compare with post-restoration recruitment. MOP is conducting a study on the efficacy of oyster shell as compared to sea clam shell for juvenile oyster recruitment.
- The department worked closely with the Mass. Division of Marine Fisheries on a study to better understand background levels of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* in oysters throughout the vibrio control season. We collected oyster samples from farmers and the wild for seven months. We look forward to learning the results.
- In addition to many newspaper articles, the Wellfleet Shellfish Department was featured in several broadcast media pieces including [CBS Sunday Morning](#), [Tide to Table: The Remarkable Journey of Oysters](#) and [WCVB TV's Chronicle](#).
- In 2022, the Massachusetts Oyster Project's restaurant shell recycling program diverted 37,841 lbs. of oyster shells from going to the landfill. The annual Wellfleet OysterFest took place in person again and recycled 2.96 tons of oyster and quahog shells. These shells will overwinter at the transfer station and get used as cultch in the late spring, supporting new generations of native oysters in Wellfleet waters. That means cleaner water, enhanced biodiversity, and increased commercial and recreational harvest opportunities.
- The Shellfish Department has hosted an AmeriCorps Cape Cod member every year since 2018, and in 2022 we welcomed our 5th member, who is helping the department with our propagation efforts.
- We are proud to announce, although it is certainly bittersweet, that Deputy Shellfish Constable Jordan Halloran, who served a year with us as an AmeriCorps member and then took over as Deputy Shellfish Constable for our recreational shellfishing program in July of 2021, was hired as the full-time Shellfish Constable for Dennis, Mass.

For a more detailed 2022 Wellfleet Shellfish Department annual report, click "Monthly/Annual Reports" on our web page: wellfleet-ma.gov/shellfish-department.