

2023 WELLLFLEET SHELLFISH DEPARTMENT ANNUAL REPORT

After another ice-free winter, we were able to open the Herring River early and were greeted with an ample supply of oysters that corresponded with a very strong market. We took great joy in seeing our intrepid harvesters legally harvest limits of oysters from both the Herring River and Chipman's Cove seven days a week. It lasted until April 30, when Chipman's Cove closed, but markets remained strong throughout the spring, which provided good harvest opportunities for both wild shellfishermen and shellfish farmers who returned to their grants with the warming weather. In my tenure as Shellfish Constable (6+ years), this is the best bay scallop season I have ever seen with a half dozen boats active in the fishery for the entire season. We experienced heavy recreational efforts at the Indian Neck seasonal area with adequate harvest noted. The winter hot spot for recreational shellfishermen was Chipman's Cove. We enjoyed an above-average oyster recruitment year on our spat collecting devices and received generous donations of seed oysters from our wonderful grant holders. We had an AmeriCorps member, Henry Torpey, serve with us, and he greatly helped our propagation efforts. We'd like to thank Town Administration, the DPW, the Harbormasters and our group of dedicated volunteers for making our work possible.

Grant Activities

- In January, at the recommendation of the Shellfish Advisory Board, the Selectboard decided to subdivide two vacant three-acre grants in the deep-water area of Indian Neck into four 1.5-acre grants that were moved slightly inshore to be within Town-owned property boundaries. These were awarded through a lottery later in the year along with a grant that was given back to the Town due to not meeting minimum productivity. We received 21 applications for the lottery. We worked with each grant holder on the steps for obtaining local, state, and federal permits to use these new grants.
- We spent a significant amount of time on grant issues and paperwork, including minimum productivity conversations, a grant extension compromise, renewals, transfers, commercial permit hardship exemptions, creating maps, and state reporting and correspondence. We investigated reports of grant holders not following shellfish sales regulations and resolved the issues with educational enforcement.
- The absence of a Principal Clerk for more than a year had ripple effects on our department, increasing our workload and taxing our resources leaving us with a backlog of grant license renewal and transfer paperwork. We worked seamlessly with the Principal Clerk and Town Clerk to cross-train, define roles and adopt a process for ongoing responsibilities. Through our combined efforts, we successfully completed all 2023 shellfish grant transfer and renewal licenses.
- Revenue from grant fees was just over \$12,000. At the end of 2023, we had 120 family farms, 162 grants and 136 grant holders farming 213 acres, as always, the largest aquaculture town in the state.

Wild Fishery

- A conservative estimate of commercial catches based on our observations on patrol is more than 4,381 bushels of oysters (up slightly from last year), 765 bushels of quahogs (about 80% less than 2022), 281 bushels of blood clams (more than double last year's catch) and 812 bushels of bay scallops (up 75% from last year).
- The recreational fishery was constant with the number of permit holders fishing the same as last year. A conservative estimate of recreational catch totals is more than 311 bushels

of oysters and 231 bushels of quahogs. These numbers reflect about a 25% decrease in oyster harvest and a 44% increase in quahog harvest from 2022.

- We sold 1,011 recreational permits, totaling \$58,440.00 and 236 commercial permits, totaling \$55,361.00. This represents almost a 20% increase in revenue from 2022.

Propagation Efforts

- The Shellfish Department again participated in the state-run contaminated quahog relay. We purchased 425,000 quahogs at a cost of about \$0.07 per clam--an incredible value. We distributed almost 315,000 quahogs to Chipman's Cove and almost 110,000 to Burton Baker Beach in the recreational-only shellfishing area. After passing state testing, Burton Baker opened to harvest on August 20, and Chipman's Cove on October 27.
- The department planted 270,000 hatchery oyster seed, about 90,000 of which were paid for by county and state funds. We received about 200,000 wild hat oyster seed donations from generous growers. All this seed is overwintering in our pits. We broadcast last year's hatchery oysters and some of last year's grown-out hat seed to Keller's Corner, a commercial-only harvest area, and to the Indian Neck recreational-only area. We received generous donations of an estimated 120,000 adult oysters from farmers, which we put in Chipman's Cove. We put the last big oysters from our grant in the Cove, too.
- We cemented and deployed 92 spat collecting devices for juvenile oyster recruitment split between Chipman's Cove and our grant. This year produced a fantastic set, and we estimated a total of 500,000 oyster seed collected.
- We submitted a comprehensive cultching report from 2020 to 2023 to the Conservation Commission, which can be found [on our website](#). The report outlines, in detail, our activities, and we are continuing to seek permitting for expanded areas in Wellfleet Harbor for cultching. Our Orders of Condition were renewed with some revisions.
- In 2023, we placed 20-22 cultch strips in Chipman's Cove, one on Indian Neck and eight in Blackfish Creek. In the Herring River, we placed five in Area 5 near our grant, eight in Area 6A near the gut, and a dozen behind Pebbly Bar.
- Thanks to Mass Oyster Project and our amazing volunteers, we deployed 600 bags stuffed with oyster and quahog shells from their restaurant recycling program to Chipman's Cove as another spat collecting tactic. We distributed these shells with a discreet amount of oyster seed in the fall to the Herring River area near our grant.
- With the help of AmeriCorps and at the suggestion of a shellfisherman, we moved 25,000 oysters from one side of the Herring River dike to the other side (still within the prohibited area) to save them from destruction as part of the Herring River Restoration Project construction of a temporary bridge.

State and Town

- This year, with input from Shellfish Advisory Board, the Selectboard revised the Town of Wellfleet Shellfishing Policy and Regulations to prohibit corporations and other business entities from holding shellfish grant licenses, to prohibit the use of hydraulic dredging on grants and to redefine the Egg Island area where aquaculture is allowed as the basic outline of the existing grants currently located there.
- We continued to work with the state and other agencies on shellfish studies. We assisted Cape Cod Cooperative Extension (CCCE), WHOI and Roger Williams University with

quahog planting and harvest as part of neoplasia disease studies. We participated in a survey and study of bamboo worms in Wellfleet Harbor with the Center for Coastal Studies. We conducted water quality sampling with the state for the entire harbor.

- We met with the Town Administrator and Harbormaster about the incoming state appropriation for the Town to purchase an ice machine and are continuing to work with all involved parties. We obtained a list of town-owned properties on town water from the Assessor and created maps identifying the parcels for Town Administration to consider.
- Shellfishermen concerns about oyster mortality in Duck Creek and on the outer bars of Chipman's Cove prompted us to have oysters tested by Cape Cod Cooperative Extension. Duck Creek oysters were lightly positive for Dermo (*Perkinsus marinus*) and moderately positive for MSX (*Haplosporidium nelsoni*). The intensity of MSX indicated the occurrence of sporadic mortality. The Cove oysters were lightly to moderately positive for Dermo, but with intensities that indicated we'd see noticeable mortality.
- The state's Vibrio Control Management Plan took effect on May 19. We closely monitored commercial shellfishermen and grant holders for exposure time, proper ice and correct tags. In August, the state advised us that we had two single source cases of vibrio attributed to Wellfleet, as well as of a number of multiple source cases beginning in June.
- At the direction of Town Administration via the Selectboard, the Shellfish Department worked closely with multiple agencies, departments and the public on a proposal to mitigate the impact of dredging the Chipman's Cove mooring basin. The focus was to identify areas of the harbor that would be suitable for an oyster habitat restoration to use as mitigation for an Army Corps of Engineers requirement to obtain the federal dredging permit, and then create a plan for shellfish inputs, management and monitoring. We participated in many meetings with the commercial shellfishing community, the Shellfish Advisory Board, the Mass. Division of Marine Fisheries, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Selectboard and members of the Dredging Task Force. The shellfishing community expressed that shellfish inputs were needed in Blackfish Creek near Drummer's Cove and that it would be the least disruptive place given today's harvest effort there, so the department's plan focused on that area. However, in the end, the Selectboard decided not to enter into a mitigation plan with Army Corps, so our eight months of work was null.

Other Points of Interest

- In February, shellfishing was closed for two days due to temperatures below 28⁰ F. Ice formed in parts of the harbor, and we worked with the affected grant holders to retrieve gear. In September, the state closed all shellfishing for 36 hours due to Storm Lee.
- **Following are some updated shellfishing statistics for Wellfleet's industry from 2022. These lag our report deadline due to when state reports are distributed:**
- In 2022, Wellfleet was first in the state for the value of its shellfish landings with more than \$9.5M earned by hard-working local shellfishermen.
- More than 10M farmed Wellfleet oysters and 2M farmed Wellfleet quahogs were sold. More than 2M wild oysters are harvested by Wellfleet shellfishermen. They also harvest quahogs, bay scallops, blood clams, steamers and razor clams.
- Shellfishing is the number one year-round industry in the Town of Wellfleet. It employs roughly 10% of the resident population, or more than 300 people!