

Marine Resources Administration Monthly Report

DECEMBER 2023

Marine Resources Administration Staff:

Joseph Cimino, Administrator- MRA

Russell Babb, Chief - BMHS

Jeffrey Brust, Chief - BMF

Heather Corbett, Supervising Biologist

Jeffrey Normant, Supervising Biologist

Craig Tomlin, Supervising Biologist

Michael Celestino, Research Scientist I

Colleen Brust, Research Scientist II

Linda Barry, Research Scientist III

Peter Clarke, Principal Biologist

Maryellen Gordon, Principal Biologist

Gregory Hinks, Principal Biologist

Brian Neilan, Principal Biologist

Jenny Tomko, Principal Biologist

Jamie Darrow, Senior Biologist

Brendan Harrison, Senior Biologist

Andrew Hassall, Senior Biologist

Matt Heyl, Senior Biologist

Amber Johnson, Senior Biologist

Chad Power, Senior Biologist

Jen Pyle, Senior Biologist

Scott Stueber, Senior Biologist

Alissa Wilson, Senior Biologist

Megan Swain, Environmental Specialist II

Richard DiVaccaro, Environmental Specialist I

Conor Davis, Assistant Biologist

Danielle Dyson, Assistant Biologist

Samantha MacQuesten, Assistant Biologist

Stacy VanMorter, Assistant Biologist

Jessica Daher, Program Specialist

Nina Colagiovanni, Biologist Trainee

Tyler Harris, Biologist Trainee

William Maxwell, Technician I

Shana Fehring, Technician II

Les Frie, Technician II

Chuck Karr, Technician II

Jonathan Klotz, Technician II

William Barker, Senior Wildlife Worker

Brielle Colledge, Wildlife Worker

Michael Swist, Wildlife Worker

Lauren Strazzeri, Permit Coordination Officer I

Karen Bates, Technical Assistant II

Kathryn Ford, Agency Services Rep I

Ryan Alianell, ASMFC Fisheries Technician

Sharon Otto, ASMFC Fisheries Technician

Joseph Shehata, ASMFC Fisheries Technician

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****MARINE FISHERIES/MRA****

MEETING SUMMARIES

- **Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission-ASMFC**

- Staff attended ASMFC's Intermediate Stock Assessment Training Part II in Arlington, VA from December 11th to 15th. Part II consisted of a mock assessment workshop to help advance participants overall ability to understand, review, and contribute to the data preparation and stock assessment modeling activities performed during a stock assessment.
- The American Eel Plan Review Team (PRT) met via conference call on December 4 to finalize the 2022 fishing year review document which will be submitted to the Board in January.
- The American Eel Technical Committee (TC) met via conference call on December 18 to review the FMP's requirement to collect harvester trip level catch and effort data under Addendum I. The American Eel Plan Development Team (PDT) asked the TC to review fishery-dependent CPUE harvester level reporting, discuss state data collection programs and provide a recommendation to the PDT regarding continuing this requirement. The proposal being considered by the PDT is to include in the Draft Addendum VII options to modify the CPUE reporting requirement. The rationale for considering such options is that the CPUE data have not been used in the stock assessment as originally intended. In the 2012 and 2023 benchmark stock assessments, these data were considered but the assessment team decided against their inclusion because they were not considered indicative of trends in the stock as a whole, and differences in baiting practices and bait preference vary geographically which can confound the accuracy of fishery-dependent CPUE data. The 2023 stock assessment peer review panel also noted that given the variety of fishing gears and fishing areas, the analysis of fishing effort would not be straightforward. The 2023 stock assessment and peer review reports indicate that there is no plan to use the fishery-dependent CPUE data moving forward. As such, the PDT is considering including an option that would make it voluntary for states to collect these CPUE data for American eel. This would allow states to continue collecting the data if desired but relieve some burden from states that do not have a need for them. The TC discussed this proposal and concluded that there are no concerns with considering an option to make this reporting requirement optional. The TC noted that if the PDT includes options in the Draft Addendum to consider removing this requirement, the language should be clear that state collection of the trip level effort data would become voluntary or optional, and it will be determined by the state whether harvester or dealer reporting of these data is required. They also clarified that they do not recommend any changes to the requirements for reporting landings.
- The ASMFC Horseshoe Crab Stock Assessment Subcommittee met via webinar on December 19 to review progress on models, analysis, and research recommendations. Modeling and analysis updates included those for sex ratio, tagging, natural mortality, power analysis, ARIMA model, NEFOP discards, and the CMSA model. Further work on these tasks will be reviewed in a call scheduled for February 28, 2024.

- **Public Hearings**

- NJ held a second public hearing in-person on December 5th to gather public comment on ASMFC's draft Addendum II to Amendment 7 which considers striped bass management measures to reduce fishing mortality to the target and support stock rebuilding by 2029. 49 people attended the hearing. Support for specific recreational fishery options in the Addendum varied but the majority of commenters supported either remaining status quo (28" to <35") or option B (28" to 31"). Common themes from public comment included: anglers on-the-water experiences appear at variance to stock

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status and management action, there is great distrust in fisheries data, and there seem to be regional differences in striped bass availability. The striped bass Management Board will vote on any revisions to management at their January 2024 meeting.

- **Miscellaneous**

- Staff attended via webinar the quarterly meeting of the Delaware River Cooperative on December 4th. Topics of the meeting included agency updates on yearly sampling projects, review of the American shad indices values for 2023, and discussion with staff from the Army Corp of Engineers on revisiting the COOP's Timing Restrictions Guidance Document. Two of the American shad index values exceeded their benchmarks, but no management action is currently required due to the index only being in exceedance for 2 of the past 5 years.
- Staff participated via webinar in a meeting of the Delaware River Cooperative's Recreation Creel Survey subcommittee on December 14th. The purpose of the meeting was to continue work on a proposed survey design and potential RFP to present to the Policy Committee at their January meeting. The survey is being designed to meet the requirements of the American shad SFMP to estimate recreational harvest as well as to collect catch, harvest, and biological data for other popular recreational species such as striped bass, trout, and smallmouth bass.

INDEPENDENT FISHERIES

- **Delaware River Seine Survey**

- The 2023 Delaware River seine survey was completed on October 26. The overall 2023 YOY striped bass index is 0.232 which ranks 38th in the 43-year time series and is lower than the 2022 index of 0.77.

- **Eel Surveys**

- The fall portion of the 2023 Yellow Eel Pot Survey was completed on November 17. Over a six-week period, strings of pots (four pots each) were set and tended 40 times at 20 individual locations in Great Bay. The total number of yellow stage American eels caught was 203, averaging 5 eels per string. A total of 73 eels were tagged and released and there were 7 recaptures. One was tagged in Oct 2022, one in May 2023 and the other 5 were tagged within a week or two of being recaptured. Additionally, 39 otolith samples were collected to supplement the commercial fishery sampling program, 30 were examined for swim bladder parasite presence (0 present) and 30 were examined for sex (18 male, 4 female and 8 undetermined). A total of 217 conger eels were caught as bycatch during this sampling period.

- **Herring Surveys**

- Staff are prepping the River Herring database in anticipation of its migration into the MRA's MS Azure database platform. The anticipated merger into the new platform is early January. The Seine Database is fully prepared for the merger while the gillnet database is being revamped to be more user friendly.

- **Sturgeon Receivers**

- In 2023, 86 individual Atlantic sturgeon, 19 sand tiger sharks, 6 sandbar sharks, and 1 striped bass were identified from a total of 101,749 detections. 426 individual tags have yet to be identified. Staff have begun the process of procuring new equipment for the 2024 sampling season including new receivers and a new ruggedized tablet for downloading data in the field.

DEPENDENT FISHERIES

- **Access Point Angler Intercept Survey-AP AIS**

- Data for the November Fishdump were reviewed, and necessary edits were submitted.

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- The draw for December consisted of 141 site assignments and 3 completed head boat assignments that yielded a total of 380 intercepts (153 SH, 45 CH, 153 PR, 29 HB). There were 3 cancelled assignments in December.
- Staff continue to make updates to the Vessel Directory and Site Register in preparation for 2024 sampling.
- December mileage is being validated and submitted for reimbursement.
- Wave 2 Summary: 646 intercepts: 206 SH, 51 CH, 355 PR, 34 HB
- Wave 3 Summary: 2168 intercepts: 760 SH, 219 CH, 1014 PR, 175 HB
- Wave 4 Summary: 2563 intercepts: 764 SH, 319 CH, 1145 PR, 335 HB
- Wave 5 Summary: 1361 intercepts: 426 SH, 83 CH, 628 PR, 224 HB
- Wave 6 Summary: 1333 intercepts: 412 SH, 140 CH, 696 PR, 85 HB
- **For-Hire Telephone Survey-FHTS**
 - There were 150 vessels drawn for December with 44 of those vessels responding. This resulted in a response rate of 29.3%. All weekly mailings were sent out to vessel representatives.
 - Staff began to work through the last of the vessel updates for the 2023 season within the NOAA Vessel Directory. Staff will begin to look towards 2024 and make edits as needed for the upcoming sampling year.
- **NJ Saltwater Recreational Registry Program-NJSRRP/Volunteer Angler Survey-VAS**
 - As of December 15, 2023, there were 141,216 individuals and 677 for-hire vessels registered with the New Jersey Saltwater Recreational Registry Program (NJSRRP) for 2023. (Last month: As of November 30, 2023, there were 140,275 individuals and 674 for-hire vessels registered for 2023).
 - Migration of the Saltwater Registry to the NJFW licensing system was completed and went live on December 15. Volume is believed to have contributed to some system issues for registrants.
 - As of December 29, 2023, there were 11,044 individuals and 173 for-hire vessels registered with the New Jersey Saltwater Recreational Registry Program (NJSRRP) for 2024 in the NJFW ELS. Over 9,300 registrations were obtained within the first week of the system going live.
- **Striped Bass Bonus Program-SBBP**
 - The 2023 Striped Bass Bonus Program (SBBP) closed on December 31, 2023. The webpage was updated, and the public was notified via email and social media posts. A total of 12,408 individual anglers and 159 party/charter boats participated. The current 2023 bonus harvest is 52,877 lbs. from 8,327 fish, which represents 24.5% of the quota. Individual anglers harvested 1,230 fish and party/charter boats harvested 7,097 fish. The 2023 harvest will likely increase as staff continue to enter reports and finalize the data. Currently, the 2023 bonus harvest ranks as the highest (in numbers of fish) and 5th (in total weight harvested) in the time series. The 2023 bonus harvest increased by about 45% from 2022.

OUTREACH

- Template comments and initial submissions for the 2024 Marine Digest were submitted to the editor on December 12. The first draft is expected by mid-January for review. A shelf date of May 10 was confirmed.

ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS (Marine Resources Administration)

- **Wind Energy**
 - New Jersey Research and Monitoring Initiative (RMI).
 - Staff participated in weekly Department internal RMI meetings and weekly meetings with DSR for project planning.

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- Additional meetings were held to discuss projects and concepts in development including the archival PAM large whale study, the sea turtle tagging proposal (which has now been approved for funding), surfclam stock enhancement, and benthic habitats.
- Staff drafted descriptive text for upcoming requests for proposals for research related to mitigation of offshore wind impacts on fisheries through technological development, non-extractive techniques, socio-economic assessment, novel fishing methods, and benthic studies.
- Permitting support
 - Staff continued to work on mitigation options for the colocation of NJ Ocean Trawl strata and the ASOW and Orsted leases.
 - Staff attended the ASOW N Interagency meeting in November and Community Offshore Wind in December.
 - Staff continued biweekly meetings with the permitting staff of ASOW1.
 - Staff reviewed Geotech permit applications from Invenergy and Community Offshore Wind.
 - Staff reviewed the preliminary Final Environmental Impact Statement for ASOW S (which contains ASOW1 and ASOW2) and provided comments to OPPN and began drafting comments for the DLRP for the Federal Consistency determination. Part of the review included a report from ASOW S regarding how micro siting, or proposed short distance relocation of turbine foundations, can reduce impacts on prime fishing areas.
- Board of Public Utilities
 - Staff continued to provide support to the BPU for its review of applications for NJ's 3rd Solicitation for Offshore Wind.
 - Staff continued to work on the Environmental Protection and Advanced Research Analysis portion of the Strategic Plan 2. This included data management for the cable constraints assessment and stakeholder & public input.
 - Staff met several times with OPPN and the BPU regarding the Environmental Terms and Conditions for the Board Order for Solicitation 3. The Board Order, which is anticipated for late January 2024, is the contract between the State and S3 awardees. Staff reached out to the NOAA Northeast Fisheries Science Center and Greater Atlantic Fisheries Office for recommendations regarding requirements for monitoring and research. Text was provided to OPPN and BPU regarding mitigation and reporting of impacts to marine resources.
- Stakeholder Support
 - Staff made a presentation to the Mid Atlantic Chapter of the American Fisheries Society in November and sat on a panel for offshore wind and fisheries. The presentation described decision making regarding designing large scale research programs. At that meeting, staff had meetings with academics from Rutgers and Stockton Universities, colleagues from other state's fisheries offices, developers (Invenergy and Community), and the principal investigators for several offshore wind research projects.
 - Staff sent learning opportunities to and responded to inquiries from the Marine Fisheries Council Offshore Wind Committee and the Department's offshore wind email.
- Federal Permitting
 - Staff met with NOAA Fisheries staff and provided comments to OPPN regarding the Draft EIS for Maryland Wind.
 - Staff reviewed an application from Equinor/Beacon Wind to include testing of suction bucket foundations in the Site Assessment. Comments in support were provided to OPPN and BOEM because there is the potential for this new technology to greatly reduce the noise, and therefore marine mammal impacts, produced by construction. Beacon later reached out to

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provide more information and staff plan to follow up with colleagues and a marine acoustician to better understand the potential for this mitigation measure.

- Regional coordination
 - In November, staff attended the Regional Wildlife Science Consortium meetings of the Protected Fish Species Subcommittee, the Habitat & Ecosystem Subcommittee, and the State Sector Caucus.
 - Staff hosted the monthly meeting of the Central Atlantic Offshore Wind and Fisheries group in November and December. Final lease areas in the Central Atlantic have been announced; despite comments from the Department, promising new fishing grounds for Atlantic surfclam were not included in the spatial planning.
 - Staff continued monthly meetings with the fisheries engagement team from Community Offshore Wind.
 - Staff hosted the monthly NJ Surfclam Research Needs meeting, which was again focused on developing the concept of a large scale surfclam fishery enhancement mitigation program. Staff also continues to work with the Responsible Offshore Science Alliance (ROSA) to coordinate this project.
 - Staff attended ROSA's presentation to the Mid Atlantic Fisheries Management Council regarding coordination of project-specific and regional monitoring. Staff have been working with ROSA on this topic for some time and provided information on defining goals and strategies for prioritizing information needs. Staff participated in the regulator meeting hosted by ROSA in December.

ADMINISTRATIVE/MISCELLANEOUS (Marine Resources Administration)

- **Licensing Operations**
 - Staff worked tirelessly throughout the holiday season to renew the 2023 and 2024 commercial and recreational marine and shellfisheries licenses, totaling 560 licenses sold, and 334 new shellfish lease agreements and extensions.
 - Staff coordinated with the reporting compliance unit to ensure mandatory reporting requirements were met, as well as shellfisheries biological staff, to gather proper permitting and insurance documentation for new leasing requirements.
 - Staff collated and mailed out the 2024 tautog regulatory information packet, seasons and closings notification for black seabass and summer flounder, as well as the commercial crab pot and Delaware Bay crab dredge transfer application packets to all respective license and permit holders.
 - Staff also assisted with coordinating and resolving the multitude of phone calls due to the Saltwater Registry migration to the NJFW licensing system.
- **Regulatory/Legislative**
 - Notices of Administrative Changes (NOACs)
 - A draft NOAC modifying commercial summer flounder and black sea bass trip limits filed with the OAL on December 29, 2023, for publication in the February 5, 2024, NJ Register.
 - A NOAC requiring approved vessel tracking devices to be installed and functioning by February 29, 2024, for all federally-permitted lobster fishing vessels was drafted for NJ Marine Fisheries Council review and approval at the January 4, 2024, meeting.
 - Rulemakings
 - MRA rule team continues to develop a new multispecies rule proposal amending N.J.A.C. 7:25-18.5A Artificial Reefs, along with other subchapters and sections pertaining to marine fisheries. The first draft proposal is currently under review.

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- A rulemaking proposal to expand the Commissioner's authority to modify rules via NOAC to expeditiously comply with any management requirement established under an approved fishery management plan. The proposal is currently under review with OLA and DAG.
- An additional multispecies rulemaking is underway and will incorporate a reorganization of all Marine Fisheries-related rules under N.J.A.C. 7:25B.
- Legislative Activity – State
 - A3677/S2186, Asm. Stanley (D18), Verrelli (D15), Asw. Jaffer (D16), Asm. Calabrese (D36), Asm. Greenstein (D14), Asm Smith (D17); Prohibits sale, distribution, import, export or propagation of certain invasive species without permit from Department of Agriculture; establishes NJ Invasive Species Council. Passed in Assembly and sent to Governor 69-0-0 on 12/21/2023.
 - A5806, Asm. Moriarty, Asm Sauickie (R12); Appropriates \$48 million from constitutionally dedicated CBT revenues to DEP for State acquisition of lands for recreation and conservation purposes, including Blue Acres projects, and Green Acres Program administrative costs. Passed in Assembly 72-0-0 on 12/7/2023. Received in Senate on 12/11/2023.
- Legislative Activity – Federal
 - H.R. 6841, (Rep. Levin, D-California), a bill to amend the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 to allow the Secretary of Commerce to establish a Coastal and Estuarine Resilience and Restoration Program, and for other purposes. Introduced on December 15, 2023, and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.
 - H.R. 6814, (Rep. Graves, R-Louisiana), a bill to require the Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere to assess certain offshore oil and gas platforms and pipelines for potential use as artificial reefs, and for other purposes. Introduced on December 14, 2023, and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.
 - H.R. 6784, (Rep. Stauber, R-Minnesota), a bill to amend the Endangered Species Act of 1973 to provide for protective regulations when a species is listed as an endangered species. Introduced on December 14, 2023, and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.
 - H.R. 6781, (Rep. Bonamici, D-Oregon), a bill to amend the Marine Debris Act to reauthorize the Marine Debris Program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Introduced on December 14, 2023, and referred to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and in addition to the House Natural Resources Committee, for a period to be subsequently determined by the Speaker, in each case for consideration of such provisions as fall within the jurisdiction of the committee concerned.
 - H.R. 6730, (Rep. Roy, R-Texas), a bill to rescind amounts made available for the Department of Commerce Nonrecurring Expenses Fund by the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, and for other purposes. Introduced on December 12, 2023, and referred to the House Energy and Commerce, and in addition to the House Budget Committee, the House Financial Services Committee, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, the House Natural Resources Committee, the House Oversight and Accountability Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the House Judiciary Committee, for a period to be subsequently determined by the Speaker, in each case for consideration of such provisions as fall within the jurisdiction of the committee concerned.
 - H.R. 6641, the “Keep America’s Waterfronts Working Act”, (Rep. Pingree, D-Maine), a bill to amend the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 to establish a working waterfronts Task Force and working waterfronts grant and loan programs, and for other purposes. Introduced on December 12, 2023, and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.

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- S.3180, “Working Waterfront Preservation Act”, (Sen. Collins R- ME), a bill to establish a working waterfronts grant program. Introduced and referred to Committee on Environment and Public Works on November 1, 2023.
- H.R. 6677, the “Seawall Expansion Act”, (Rep. Lynch, D- Massachusetts), a bill to amend the National Levee Safety Act of 2007 to include in the definition of levee hard or manmade structures, and for other purposes. Introduced on December 7, 2023, and referred to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.
- S. 3389, the “Fishing Industry Safety, Health, and Wellness Improvement Act of 2023” or the “FISH Wellness Act of 2023”, (Sen. Markey, D-Massachusetts), a bill to authorize safety and prevention training programs for fishing vessel operators and crewmembers, and for other purposes. Introduced on December 4, 2023, and referred to the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee.
- H.R. 6567, the “Strengthening Capacity for Disaster Resilient Territories Act”, (Rep. Velazquez, D-New York), a bill to require the Federal Emergency Management Agency to establish a Territorial Disaster Recovery Program to continuously identify, monitor, and address factors and capability gaps that hinder the execution and completion of recovery activities relating to major disasters by eligible entities located in the territories of the United States. Introduced on December 1, 2023 and referred to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.
- H.R. 6546, (Rep. Bentz, R-Oregon), a bill to amend the Endangered Species Act of 1973 to allow certain activities to be carried out with regard to certain fish held in captivity or a controlled environment. Introduced on December 1, 2023, and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.
- S. 3348, the “Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Amendments Act of 2023”, (Sen. Sullivan, R-Alaska) a bill to amend the Harmful Algal Blooms and Hypoxia Research and Control Act of 1998 to address harmful algal blooms, and for other purposes. Introduced on November 27, 2023, and referred to the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee.
- S.318, the “Save Our Seas 2.0 Amendments Act”, (Sen. Sullivan), a bill to amend the Save Our Seas 2.0 Act to improve the administration of the Marine Debris Foundation, to amend the Marine Debris Act to improve the administration of the Marine Debris Program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and for other purposes. On December 5, 2023, the report to accompany the bill was filed and the bill was placed on the Senate Legislative Calendar. On December 13, 2023, the bill passed the full Senate by unanimous consent.
- S. 1421, the “Country of Origin Labeling Online Act” or the “COOL Online Act”, (Sen. Baldwin, D-Wisconsin), a bill to require origin and location disclosure for new products of foreign origin offered for sale on the internet. On December 13, 2023, the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee reported the bill with an amendment in the nature of a substitute and without written report. On December 13, 2023, the bill was placed on the Senate Legislative Calendar under General Orders.
- S. 1381, the “Coastal Habitat Conservation Act of 2023”, (Sen. Cardin, D-Maryland), a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior, through the Coastal Program of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, to work with willing partners and provide support to efforts to assess, protect, restore, and enhance important coastal landscapes that provide fish and wildlife habitat on which certain Federal trust species depend, and for other purposes. Introduced on April 27, 2023, and referred to the Senate Environment and Public Works

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Committee. On July 26, the Environment and Public Works Committee ordered the bill to be reported favorably without amendment and without written report and the bill was placed on the Senate Legislative Calendar. On December 11, 2023, the report to accompany the bill was filed.

- **Scientific Collection Permits**

- Twenty scientific collecting permits have been issued for 2024. An additional six applications have been reviewed and will be processed upon receipt of all required materials.

****MARINE HABITAT & SHELLFISHERIES/MRA****

Offshore Wind, Restoration, Enhancement, Mitigation, and Habitat

- **Environmental Review/ Waterfront Development**

- Staff reviewed and provided comments to the Office of Environmental Review on several pre-applications, Land Management Reviews, and Waterfront Development permit applications.
 - LMR PSE&G Liberty State Park
 - MRA reviewed a PSE&G project seeking to conduct ground resistivity readings in an open area for designing a new substation. MRA provided comments on the project.
 - NEPA Review NAVY Atlantic Fleet Training
 - MRA reviewed the U.S. Department of the Navy (including both the US Navy and US Marine Corps) and the US Coast Guard's proposal to conduct military readiness training and research, development, testing, and evaluation activities in the Atlantic Fleet Training and Testing Study Area. MRA provided comments on this proposal.
- MRA staff worked with DLRP staff on several mapping interpretations.

- **Ocean Acidification Team (OA Team)**

- Staff attended the Ocean Acidification (OA) Team's monthly meeting. Staff began drafting research notes on the relationship between seagrasses and ocean acidification to provide to the team.

- **Shell Recycling Program**

- Staff continue to coordinate with Shell Recycling Program participants for weekly shell collection and investigate additional venues.
- Staff finalized the submission of a grant application for the Shell Recycling Program and shell planting efforts in the Mullica River as a part of the Coastal Zone Management Habitat Protection and Restoration Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) Competition.
 - If awarded, funding would significantly expand the current Shell Recycling Program, including plans to add fifteen additional restaurants, public drop-off locations, and educational programs within Atlantic City. Additionally, funding would result in 25,000 bushels of shell planted annually within the river (most planted in a single year to date has been 6,000 bushels).
- Staff collected **148** bushels of recycled shell in the month of December.
 - Ending 2023 with **3,570 bushels** collected. A **6%** increase from 2022's collection.
- Staff continues to work with budgetary staff on the purchase of a barge for the shell planting efforts in the Mullica River.
 - Staff anticipates the barge to be purchased and used for this coming summer's shell planting.

- **Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV)**

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- Staff research long-term monitoring and sentinel sites in other states including those states close to New Jersey to develop strong methods for implementation of monitoring sites for SAV throughout the state.
- Staff began planning fieldwork for the 2024 year and mapping of northern coastal rivers, which is anticipated for the Spring/Summer of 2025.

Aquaculture and Shellfish Leases

• 2024 Lease Renewal

- December 31st, 2023 marked the last day of the lease renewal period after beginning on October 16th.
- Lessees had more than a 2-month window to schedule an appointment or arrive in person to pay for, and sign, the 2024 Lease Renewal & new Lease Agreement.
- Staff assisted **172** shellfish Lessees with their lease renewal and signed agreement over the 2-month period.
 - 6 Relay Lease Lots were relinquished.
 - 2 Shellfish Lease Lots were relinquished by the Lessee.
 - 11 Shellfish Lease Lots were relinquished by Non-payment.

• Lease Utilization and Inspection Database

- Staff have begun working on compiling information into a single leasing database in hopes of generating users a report rapidly and efficiently with all relevant information about a given lease lot.
- Staff have been utilizing ArcGIS Pro to estimate the percentage of open water vs lease lot coverage in all bays along the Atlantic Coast of New Jersey.

• Aquaculture Development Zone Shed Lot Inspections

- Staff inspected the shed lots within the Dennis Creek WMA held by ADZ 4 lease holders for compliance with the shed lot lease agreement requirements.
 - Staff also inspected the road that connects Rt. 47 with the shed lots and leased ground beach access to determine if maintenance was needed.

• Aquaculture Development Zone Buoys

- Staff retrieved four hazard buoys marking the ADZ 3 area warning boaters of the leased grounds.
 - Buoys were removed for the winter while there is less boat traffic and aquaculture activity to conduct annual maintenance.
- Buoys marking ADZ 4 along the cape shore seaward of the Dennis Creek WMA will be scheduled for removal and maintenance in the coming weeks.

• NJEMS Shellfish Lease Development

- Staff continue to provide data, testing, and feedback on the development of incorporating the leasing database into the NJEMS program. Staff are also working with the Bureau of GIS to allow GIS to input data directly into the NJEMS system.

State Fisheries and Quota Management

• 2023 Direct Market Harvest Program – Oyster Dredge Fishery

- Staff compared and reviewed the 2023 harvest reports (Call in, Weekly, and Dealer reports) to determine the final harvest numbers for the 2023 Direct Market Harvest Program season. Final regional and total harvest is as follows:

Region	Boat Days	Total Bushels	CPUE	% of Total
Medium Mortality Market	215	28,343	131.8	29.6%
Shell Rock	160	25,468	159.2	26.6%

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High Mortality Market	257	41,850	162.8	43.7%
TOTAL	632	95,661	151.4	

- Harvest Season April 3 – November 24, 2023
 - Post-Transplant Quota:
 - Medium Mortality Market Region – 28,556 bu.
 - Shell Rock Region – 25,598 bu.
 - High Mortality Region – 41,645 bu.
 - Individual License quota was increased by 398 bushels after the transplant and is 1,198 bu. per license.
 - 80 Dredge boat licenses
 - Call-in documenting on water activities to Delaware Bay Shellfisheries Office required.
 - Weekly Harvest & Dealer Reports required.
 - Oyster Dredge Boat License Consolidation (10:1)
 - Requires Oyster Dredge Vessel License Consolidation Application and Administrative Consent Order (ACO) to allow up to 10 licenses to be harvested from 1 Designated Harvest Vessel (DHV).
 - 4 Active DHVs with 10 Consolidated licenses
 - 1 Active DHV with 9 Consolidated licenses
 - 1 Active DHV with 8 Consolidated licenses
 - 2 Active DHVs with 7 Consolidated licenses
 - Total = 71 Licenses

○ Season Tag Sales and Final Harvest Highlights:

	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Total
Single (\$2)	3,200	1,304	4,356	2,680	2,446	2,216	1,474	236	0	17,912
Cage (\$48)	500	379	749	720	214	307	288	90	0	3,247
Revenue	\$30,400	\$20,800	\$44,664	\$39,920	\$15,164	\$19,168	\$16,772	\$4,792	0	\$191,680
Harvest (bu)	N/A	15,488	17,969	14,888	15,924	10,581	6,389	7,129	7,293	95,661

- **Oyster Tonging Fishery**

- Staff started selling tonging tags in October 2023.
- The tonging season opened in November and will run through April.
- Season Tag Sales and Harvest Highlights

	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Mar	Apr	Total
Single (\$2)	100	200	200				150
Revenue	\$200	\$400	\$400				\$300
Harvest (bu)	N/A	76	161				237

- **Delaware Bay Shellfish Council Meeting**

- Meeting held December 5, 2023
- Held in person at the Rutgers Haskin Shellfish Research Lab and by webinar/conference call on MS Teams. Log in instructions posted to NJ Fish & Wildlife webpage <https://dep.nj.gov/njfw/councils-and-committees/shellfisheries-council/meetings/>

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- Letter to Secretary of State
- Agenda drafted and posted to NJFW webpage
- Oyster Resource Development Account printouts reviewed
- Delaware Bay Office revenue totals reviewed
- Lease Ground Transfers for Council approval
- Updated 2024 Lease Renewal status
- 2023 Direct Market Harvest Program update
- Oyster Tonging Fishery Update
- 2024 Stock Assessment Workshop, S.A. Review Committee members selected for Council and Industry
- Discussions to be proactive with misleading information in the media pertaining to Vibrio and shellfish.
- **Atlantic Coast Shellfish Council Meeting**
 - There was no December Shellfish council meeting for the Atlantic Coast Section.

Surveys & Laboratory Work

- **Annual Mullica Seed Beds Survey**
 - Staff conducted the annual qualitative survey of the oyster seed beds within the Mullica River known as French's and Moss Point.
 - Live oyster vs. shell, spat counts, and length data were collected. A subsample of adult oysters was sent to Rutgers's Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory for disease testing.
 - Additionally, staff is working with MRA research scientist staff to redesign the annual survey to make it a quantitative sampling effort.
 - The updated survey will be used in 2024 sampling efforts.
- **Delaware Bay Trawl Survey**
 - Staff continues to enter data for the 2023 survey season which ran from April through October. Once entered, staff will proof and analyze the data to draft the annual performance report.
- **Dermo Disease Monitoring**
 - Staff completed the 2023 dermo monitoring season alongside Rutgers Haskin Lab staff and successfully sampled oysters from the Delaware Bay seed beds to monitor the oyster disease dermo on 11/20/23. The dermo monitoring season occurred from April to November as scheduled. Staff coordinated with Rutgers staff to present a dermo monitoring update to the Delaware Bay Shellfisheries Council during their December meeting.
- **Mullica River Sampling**
 - Staff continue to use the Biosonics MX Habitat Echosounder to help further characterize the Mullica River oyster reefs. This equipment produces accurate bathymetry maps, as well as sediment typing.
 - Staff will continue to use the equipment over the next few months in combination with bottom grabs to ground truth. This will help to develop a more quantitative assessment of this resource and inform future shell planting efforts.
 - Staff continues to post-process data collected from the BioSonics MX Habitat Echosounder to help further characterize the Mullica River oyster seed beds.
 - Staff post processed remote sensing data obtained and trained other MRA staff on the collection and post processing of this data.
 - Staff began taking patent tong bottom grabs to ground truth remote sensing data. The samples taken will be overlaid in the remote sensing imagery to help further characterize the reefs.
 - Staff began developing a training session for all Bureau of Marine Habitat & Shellfisheries staff on the post-processing of BioSonics data.

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- The presentation will take place in January to familiarize all staff with the process so the equipment can be used broadly across all Bureau programs.
- **Shell Plant and Intermediate Transplant Site Monitoring**
 - On 12/8/23, staff completed the 2023 monitoring of enhancement sites from projects conducted by the Bureau from the current and previous two years. These sites include the Intermediate Transplant Program and the Shell Plant Program. Sampling was conducted monthly from April through December alongside Rutgers Haskin Lab staff. Sampling typically occurs April through November, but the weather delayed the November sampling event until December.
- **Raritan Bay Sediment Sample Collection**
 - Staff finished processing sediment samples on grain size analysis collected from the Raritan Bay as a part of the hard clam stock assessment.

Buildings, Grounds, Vessels, and Vehicles

- **Boat Maintenance**
 - Bureau staff continue to maintain the R/V James W. Joseph and R/V Zephyrus by performing regular maintenance, repairs, and equipment upgrades as necessary.
 - Bureau staff continue to maintain state vehicles with routine and scheduled service.

Administrative/Miscellaneous

- **License Sales**
 - Revenue collected from the Delaware Bay Office totaled \$39,112.50 for December 2023.

License Type	Total	License Type	Total
Lease Fees	\$10,782.50	Dredge Boat Renewal	\$1,204.00
Assigned Fees	\$9,938.00	Menhaden	\$826.00
Nets	\$6,886.00	Tonging Tags	\$400.00
AC & DB Dredge	\$3,500.00	Application Fees	\$246.00
Commercial Crab Pot	\$3,400.00	Dealer/Shucker	\$200.00
Commercial SF	\$1,700.00	Recreational SF	\$30.00

- **E-Library**
 - Staff continued work on an e-library (Zotero) to store literature for reference. Once complete, the e-library will provide easy access for Bureau staff to all literature. It will also enable staff to add future literature as needed.

Miscellaneous

- **Marine Fisheries Infographic**
 - Staff created an infographic using Adobe Illustrator for the Bureau of Marine Habitat & Shellfisheries and the Bureau of Marine Fisheries.
 - The infographic discusses the status of New Jersey's commercial and recreational fisheries, as well as future opportunities and an approach for enhancing New Jersey's current status.
- **Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow**
 - Staff participated in a week-long training program hosted by the Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow in Mansfield, Georgia. The Program is designed for resource professionals to better understand the history and role of hunting and fishing in conservation and management.
 - The Program included an overview of funding sources, regulations, and laws and their history, a hunter safety class, certification, and hands-on experience, concluding with the opportunity to participate in a hunt on a Georgia plantation.

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- The program was an excellent experience for better understanding the role of hunting and fishing in management and an exceptional networking opportunity with resource professionals from across the country.