

Marine Resources Administration Monthly Report

SEPTEMBER 2024

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

ASMFC/MAFMC/COOP/NOAA/ACCSP

- The compliance report for American Eel (data year 2023) was submitted to ASMFC. A new reporting requirement was implemented in 2024: to quantify the escapement rate of American eels from State waters and to summarize any dam/impediment additions or removals. New Jersey does not conduct research to quantify escapement. There was a Statewide Dam Removal Partnership (SDRP) quarterly meeting held in late September. Information and/or updates released from this meeting will be provided in the next compliance report.

MEETING SUMMARIES

- **Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program-ACCSP**
 - Staff participated in two proposal ranking review sessions, which were designed to assist newer members in the ACCSP RFP process.
 - Staff attended the in-person Joint Operations and Advisory Committees Meeting in Charleston, SC.
 - FY25 Proposals were reviewed on day 1
 - Final rankings were submitted and results presented.
 - Recommendations were prepared for the Coordinating Council.
 - Program updates were given.
 - NJ Staff's 2 year service as Chair ended.
 - NJ Staff will now sit on the Funding Subcommittee.
- **Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission-ASMFC**
 - Staff attended a meeting of the ASMFC's Shad and River Herring Technical Committee via webinar on September 23. The purpose of the meeting was to review updated Sustainable Fishery Management Plans for river herring from New Hampshire and Maine, for American shad from Massachusetts and Connecticut. After brief presentations from each state, the TC recommended that the Board approve all of the SFMPs as presented. New Hampshire also reviewed their proposal to reopen the state's river herring fishery which had been closed due to failure to achieve abundance benchmarks. The TC could not reach a consensus for a Board recommendation to approve the reopening of the fishery since although the previous few years' index values were above the benchmark requirements, there was an insufficient amount of consecutive years in a row above the benchmark than the 5 consecutive years recommended in the TC SFMP guidance document.
 - Administration staff participated in a call of the rec reform FMAT/PDT. Major topics of discussion centered around revisions to one of the matrix approaches to management (biomass matrix) and related accountability measures. Due to time constraints, it is unclear whether provisions for 'exceptional circumstances' will be addressed in the public information document. All draft alternatives will be finalized by early October for review by ASMFC/MAFMC for their consideration in October.
 - Administration staff participated in a conference call of rec reform FMAT/PDT subgroup focused on management matrix options related to when overfishing is occurring. The group reached consensus on a number of issues, though is likely to meet one last time to finalize recommendations to the full FMAT/PDT.
 - Administration staff participated in a meeting of the striped bass technical committee and stock assessment subcommittee. The TC-SAS reached consensus on an update model configuration and projections to determine what percent reduction is needed to comply with the FMP (the exact reduction is not yet known pending some final work); the TC-SAS agreed to a suite of approaches to

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develop measures designed to reach said reduction once it is known. While the final model results are not yet available, it is very likely that the fishing mortality management trigger has been tripped, requiring reduction of F to the target in 1 year; additionally, preliminary projections suggest rebuilding under target F is not possible, which will require additional reductions. The final model results will be available in time for the October management board meeting for use in management, should the Board approve the assessment.

- Administration staff participated in a conference call of the rec measures setting FMAT/PDT. Most discussion centered around whether to focus management matrices (e.g., percent change approach) on total removals (harvest + dead released fish) or harvest alone. In principle, total removals is a wholistic approach to management, but regrettably, due to time constraints, the FMAT/PDT is not likely to be able to perform analyses that would help inform stakeholders of the implications of using one over the other. The FMAT/PDT will wrap up its work developing alternatives by late September or early October and there is still much to be done.

INDEPENDENT FISHERIES

• Delaware River Seine Survey

- The Delaware River Seine Survey concluded sampling for the month of September. A total of 56 striped bass were caught, with 51 recorded as young of year (YOY). The preliminary September YOY index (geometric mean) is 0.407, which is higher than the September 2023 index of 0.264. As of October 1, the preliminary annual YOY index is 0.625 which ranks 31st in the 44-year time series. This is higher than the 2023 annual index of 0.260.
- Data from the Delaware River Seine Survey was compiled and provided to Michael Thompson (DRBC). He is working on the DRBC's State of the Basin report and requested catch data for a variety of indicator species.
- Files on the V Drive were updated to include 2023 Delaware River seine data. In addition, the survey webpage was updated to include annual summary data through 2023.

• Eel Surveys

- Due to a broken vessel, the Yellow Eel Pot Survey which was set to begin on September 16 has been delayed. A new start date of October 15 has been scheduled.
- Data from the Glass Eel Survey was compiled and provided via MOU to Chris Bowser (NYDEC). Mr. Bowser is looking to compare the onset and peaks of annual migration by sites/regions.

• Raritan-Sandy Hook Bay Complex Inventory Project

- The Raritan Inventory Project began on September 4, 2024, and was completed in 6 days. All 16 otter trawl stations, 16 seine stations and 12 gillnet stations were completed.
 - Gillnet sampling consisted of primarily smooth dogfish (n = 110), bluefish (n = 20), and Atlantic menhaden (n = 11), but also caught butterfly, cownose ray and Atlantic croaker.
 - Otter trawl sampling consisted of primarily bay anchovy (n = 974), spot (n = 27), Atlantic moonfish (n = 26), and bluefish (n = 22). Other species collected consisted of weakfish, Atlantic croaker, summer flounder, butterfly, black sea bass, blue crab, and Atlantic menhaden.
 - Seine sampling consisted primarily of Atlantic silversides (n = 1,587), bluefish (n = 85), striped killifish (n = 56), and blue crab (n = 54). Other species collected consisted of Northern kingfish, striped anchovy, bay anchovy, Atlantic menhaden, white mullet, spot, and mummichog.
 - Sixteen eDNA water samples were collected and filtered from otter trawl stations and nine eDNA water samples were collected and filtered from seine stations.

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DEPENDENT FISHERIES

- **Access Point Angler Intercept Survey-AP AIS**
 - FishDump data for August was reviewed and comments were submitted.
 - The draw for September consisted of 167 site assignments and 10 head boat assignments that yielded a total of 648 intercepts (237 SH, 49 CH, 246 PR, 116 HB).
 - 1 Site Assignments and 4 Head boat Assignments were cancelled due to weather.
 - Staff continue to make updates to the Vessel Directory and Site Register in preparation for Wave 6.
 - September mileage is being validated and submitted for reimbursements. July and August reimbursements have been completed as of September 30.
 - Wave 2 Summary: 489 intercepts: 185 SH, 15 CH, 243 PR, 46 HB
 - Wave 3 Summary: 1873 intercepts: 744 SH, 168 CH, 801 PR, 160 HB
 - Wave 4 Summary: 2830 intercepts: 1027 SH, 282 CH, 1099 PR, 422 HB
- **Commercial Fisheries/Quota Management**
 - Reported 2023 landings from New Jersey's American eel commercial reporting totaled 48,681 pounds of American eel. Jersey landings decreased in 2023, with landings nearly 4,000 pounds less than 2022. Estimated harvest catch per unit effort (pounds per trip) for 2023 was 158.57. This is less than the 2022 CPUE of 169.49 and the time series average of 176.97. In 2022, 60.2% of yellow eels caught were commercially harvested as food, while 34.2% were harvested for bait. Disposition was unknown for 2,724 pounds.
- **For-Hire Telephone Survey-FHTS**
 - September sampling included weeks 36-39. 264 vessels were drawn for the month: 138 responded, resulting in a response rate of 52.2%.
 - Staff continue to work in the NOAA vessel directory updating vessels when new changes are needed. The imports inbox was also sorted through merging existing vessels with HMS permits and creating new vessels for newly submitted permits. Updates were submitted earlier than usual in the event of a possible federal shutdown.
- **NJ Saltwater Recreational Registry Program-NJSRRP/Volunteer Angler Survey-VAS**
 - As of September 30, 2024, there were 111,513 individual and 1,212 for-hire vessel registrations obtained with the New Jersey Saltwater Recreational Registry Program (NJSRRP) for 2024. (Last month: As of August 30, 2024, there were 107,182 individual and 1,196 for-hire vessels registered for 2024 in the NJFW ELS).
- **Striped Bass Bonus Program-SBBP**
 - Staff have issued permits to 9,943 individual anglers and 143 party/charter boats. The current 2024 bonus harvest is 3,618 pounds from 495 fish.
- **Tournament Sampling**
 - Staff collected bluefish samples from the party boat Golden Eagle on September 26th.
 - Staff attended the New Jersey Beach Buggy Association Youth Surf Fishing Tournament on Island Beach State Park on September 14. Staff set up an outreach table during the registration period and assisted kids with basic fish identification before the fishing segment began.
 - During 11 tournaments and three party/charter boat trips, staff measured over 170 summer flounder, 100 bluefish, 50 black sea bass, 19 spot, 18 black drum, nine blue crab, six white perch, two oyster toadfish, one Atlantic croaker, one northern searobin, one northern stargazer, and one striped bass. Otoliths have been collected from over 100 bluefish, 50 black sea bass, and 10 summer flounder.

OUTREACH

- Administration staff participated in a call with radio host Tom P to talk about NJ's volunteer angler program. Staff talked about what the program is, why it is important for anglers to participate, and how they

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can participate. Staff also reviewed some highlights in the program's history (e.g., interesting catches). Tom P expressed interest in a follow up interview later this year to talk about ASMFC/MAFMC risk policies and their influence on allowable catches.

- The theme and layout for the 2025 Marine Digest was finalized: Coastal Habitats. Assignments will be given to staff the first week of October, with first drafts due on November 8. All first-round submissions will be provided to the editor on November 22.

ENVIRONMENTAL MATTERS (Marine Resources Administration)

- **Wind Energy**
 - New Jersey Research and Monitoring Initiative
 - Eighty-three Letters of Intent were received by NJ Sea Grant for the RMI RFP; all focus areas were included. After the RFP was posted, the indirect cost rate for all state contracts was changed from 10 to 15%, consistent with the federal rate. This would affect all state contracts executed on or after October 1. The RMI Steering Committee is considering an extension on the due date; regardless, it is expected that there will be fewer proposals as rewriting budgets may not be feasible.
 - As the first projects from Phase 1 near completion (e.g., the NARW aerial survey, surfclam research dredge), staff began working with the Principal Investigators on extending the work into the construction and operation period. The Rutgers glider project was the first to be approved for additional work.
 - Staff attended and presented at the Scientific and Statistical Committee meeting of the Mid Atlantic Fisheries Management Council. Staff reached out to this Committee to identify types of studies and data that could be collected in RMI studies that would directly support fisheries management.
 - Board of Public Utilities Collaboration
 - Staff continue to review applications for Solicitation 4 for offshore wind. Working with staff from the Division of Science and Research, the Office of Permitting and Project Navigation, and the BPU, a rubric was developed to facilitate comparison across bids. The first set of comments will be due in early October.
 - Staff worked with the BPU, Ramboll, and Kearns and West to plan Information Gathering Sessions for the Strategic Plan update (OSWSP2) to be held in early October. Key stakeholders were identified and contacted and, a presentation was prepared on the components of the Environmental and Advanced Research Analysis.
 - Offshore Wind Project Support
 - Staff provided contact information for recreational fishers to Empire Offshore Wind to assist with their socio-economic study being conducted by Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute and NJ commercial permit holders to Leading Light Wind to help them identify the owners of gear in their lease area.
 - Regional coordination
 - Staff worked with the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management on the scoping process for the second offshore wind auction in the Central Atlantic. This included gathering information about the planning area off NJ, presenting at the Task Force Meeting, and assisting with the in-person stakeholder meeting that was held in Atlantic City. Staff has been engaged in the spatial planning process to identify highest conflict areas for NJ fisheries. Meetings on the subject were held with staff from the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office, BOEM, and NOAA's National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science.

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- Staff shared information with other states about the process we use for power purchase agreements, and how environmental, fisheries, and data sharing requirements were built into the solicitations. The Regional Wildlife Science Consortium, other states, and developers have expressed interest in NJ's precedent-setting solicitation guidance and aligning on these requirements, and a meeting was held with the New York State Energy Development Authority to discuss.

ADMINISTRATIVE/MISCELLANEOUS (Marine Resources Administration)

• Licensing Operations

- Front office licensing staff issued 18 commercial and recreational marine and shellfisheries licenses, totaling \$906.00 in revenue, while shellfisheries lease fees totaled in \$1,751.34.
- There were 2 Atlantic Coast Aquaculture lease ground applications processed, as well as 2 lease transfer requests.
- In preparation for 2025 license renewals, staff prepared and mailed out over 1,000 commercial marine license renewal letters and applications to all current licensees.
- Staff attended a virtual meeting held with licensing vendor Aspira and administrative staff to discuss current licensing issues and possible resolutions. Staff conducted thorough testing of POS system for CY25, as well as the reporting database, Insights, to report any errors and recommend potential resolutions.

• Regulatory/Legislative

- 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. The Proposal Launch meeting was held on September 11, 2024.
 - 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 DOL.
 - 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
 - None to report
- Legislative Activity – Federal
 - H.R. 9821, (Rep. Dingell, D-Michigan), a bill to improve the management of forage fish. Introduced on September 25, 2024, and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.
 - H.R. 9705, (Rep. Ocasio-Cortez, D-New York), a bill to direct the Secretary of Commerce to establish the Oyster Reef Restoration and Conservation Program. Introduced on September 19, 2024, and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.
 - H.R. 9533, the "ESA Amendments Act of 2024", (Rep. Westerman, R-Arkansas), a bill to amend the Endangered Species Act of 1973 to optimize conservation through resource prioritization, incentivize wildlife conservation on private lands, provide for greater incentives to recover listed species, create greater transparency and accountability in recovering listed species, and limit reasonable and prudent measures. Introduced on September 10, 2024, and referred to the House Natural Resources. Ordered to be reported (amended) by the Yeas and Nays: 22 – 13 on September 19, 2024.
 - H. Res. 1423, (Rep. Posey, R-Florida) a resolution expressing support for the designation of the week of September 21 through September 28, 2024, as "National Estuaries Week". Introduced on September 6, 2024) and referred to the House Natural Resources Committee.

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- H.R. 8704, (Rep. Carter, R-Georgia)/ S.4948, Sen Manchin, Joe (I-WV), a bill to require the Secretary of Commerce to establish a grant program to foster enhanced coexistence between ocean users and North Atlantic right whales and other large cetacean species. Ordered to be reported (amended) by a roll call vote of 23 to 13 on September 19, 2024.
- H.R. 5103, the “Fishery Improvement to Streamline untimely regulatory Hurdles post Emergency Situation Act” or the “FISHES Act”, (Rep. Donalds, R-Florida), a bill to require the Director of the Office of Management and Budget to approve or deny spend plans within a certain amount of time, and for other purposes. Ordered to be reported (amended) by unanimous consent on September 19, 2024.
- H.R. 8811, the “America’s Conservation Enhancement Reauthorization Act of 2024”, (Rep. Wittman, R-Virginia), a bill to reauthorize the America’s Conservation Enhancement Act, and for other purposes. Ordered to be reported (amended) by unanimous consent September 19, 2024.
- H.R. 9747, the “Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025”. (Rep. Cole, Tom, R-OK) This legislation would fund the federal government through December 20, 2024. both the House of Representatives and the Senate passed on September 25. On September 26, 2024, the President signed the bill making it Public Law 118-83.
- S3791/H.R. 8811, America’s Conservation Enhancement Reauthorization Act of 2024. (Rep. Wittman, Robert J., R-VA). 05/08/2024 passed the Senate (15 co-sponsors. None from NJ) 09/09/2024 substituted in House Committee on Natural Resources (5 co-sponsors. None from NJ)

- **Section 10**

- Staff attended multiple in house and joint meetings with sturgeon staff from other states to determine the feasibility of contracting an environmental consultant to draft an Atlantic sturgeon Habitat Conservation Plan in support of NJ’s Section 10 permit application. NJ, NY, and DE plan on submitting a joint Section 6 funding application by the end of October in order to pay for hiring the contractor to develop the regional HCP.

- **Scientific Collection Permits**

- Ninety-five scientific collecting permits have been issued in 2024. One additional application has been reviewed and will be processed upon receipt of all required materials.

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

September highlights will be added to next month.