**Mussel FIP Project Update for DMR**

We are writing to update the Department on our wild mussel fishery improvement project. Our working group came together two and a half years ago, and includes the following members: Acadia Aqua Farms (Fiona de Koning), Cape Cod Shellfish (Jefferson Oranellas), Euclid Fish Company (John Young), Hannaford Supermarkets (Justin Turner and Nathan Jewell), J.P.’s Shellfish (Stutts Armstrong), Maine Shellfish Company (Jim Markos), and Moosabec Mussels (Ralph Smith). We came together because mussels do not currently meet the seafood sourcing criteria of Hannaford Supermarkets and we are trying to change that. Hannaford, like many other buyers in the marketplace, has criteria in place to look at how a fishery is being managed and what kind of data and monitoring is informing that management. Wild mussels from Maine do not meet that criteria because there is no management plan in place and no regular assessments of the mussel populations, which puts the fishery at risk of losing access to the market. This risk goes beyond Hannaford, since other buyers have similar criteria in place.

A fishery improvement project (FIP) uses the power of the private sector to address challenges in a fishery, and major buyers across North America look to FIPs as an opportunity to source seafood from a fishery that is actively working to improve. We are attaching here a letter of support from Sea Pact, a group of leading North American seafood companies, that demonstrates the increasing attention of major buyers to FIPs and to sustainable fisheries management in general.

Our FIP has been publicly posting our progress on FisheryProgress.org, the global FIP tracking site. Over the past two and a half years, we have focused our attention on the research and data collection needs of the fishery, as well as the management needs. Our big goals for this fishery are to see better ongoing data collection put in place, and ultimately a fishery management plan. We are not yet requesting a fishery management plan, but wanted to update you here on our recent work and make you aware of our interest in requesting a management plan in the near future.

**Research update**

We believe good data is the foundation of smart fisheries management. Our group has been focused on gathering and improving the data available on mussels in Maine. We have focused on three key areas of work:

* **Harvest location data:** Working group members who purchase directly from fishermen have been submitting monthly data to the FIP facilitator, GMRI, for analysis of harvest location information. This includes data from Moosabec Mussels, Atlantic Shellfish via Cape Cod Shellfish, and Eastern Maine Mussels via J.P.’s Shellfish. This data has been useful for documenting and identifying key commercial mussel fishing areas and the seasonal shifts in harvest location.
* **Landings data:** We made a formal request to the Department for mussel landings data and received and analyzed the available data going back to 2008. We know there are gaps in this data due to confidentiality, but we analyzed the trip and county level data that we did receive to look at catch per unit effort trends.
* **Field work:** We secured a small amount of funding for sampling research in the intertidal zone. We conducted sampling in Frenchman’s Bay in October 2019 and again in May 2020, measuring numbers, volume, lengths, and weights. Further sampling will happen this summer and fall, and possibly next spring. The amount of data is a small fraction of what we would ideally hope for, but it is giving us some indicators and helping us to determine what types of data we want to see collected in the long-term by the Department. We also made an effort to make this sampling complementary to previous sampling work conducted by the Department.
* **Advocating for resources:** Our working group chair, Jefferson Oranellas (Cape Cod Shellfish) offered testimony on LD 961 in May 2019 to the Marine Resources Committee, in hopes of ensuring that mussels would be included in the scope of a bivalve shellfish research fund. His testimony made the Committee aware that the bill as written excluded mussels, and they amended it to include mussels. DMR Commissioner Keliher offered support, as well, after hearing Jefferson’s testimony.

**Industry Outreach**

In the past year, we have also conducted outreach to discuss our project and our goals with mussel fishing industry members who are not formal members of our working group. We have had one-on-one phone calls with fishermen, and held an industry meeting in-person in Jonesport in November 2019. Fishermen were recruited to attend the meeting by Ralph Smith of Moosabec Mussels and Dan Rogde of Atlantic Shellfish. There was a positive response to the project, and those at the meeting appreciated being made aware of why the project is in place and the high-level research and management goals. Some of the fishermen who were present are active in other fisheries in the state where there is more management in place, and there was understanding from the group why management is necessary. We had planned to do another in-person meeting this spring, which was derailed by the pandemic, but we still plan to do more outreach in the coming months.

**Moving Forward**

Obviously, the pandemic has upended business for everyone, including state agencies. We know that your capacity and resources at DMR may have changed because of the current crises, and we understand that resources and capacity were already a challenge for this fishery. We are reaching out to let you know that we are still committed to this project and to our goals, and that we are still working to put together details of a request for a fishery management plan, which we hope will be ready later this year. We would like to learn more about your level of capacity to begin addressing such a request in the next 12 months. We look forward to hearing from you, and we are open to discussion at any time. Thank you for your time.