

To: Department of Marine Resources

From: Jefferson Oranellas (Chair) on behalf of the Maine Mussel Fishery Improvement Project

Subject: Request for mandatory harvester reporting for the wild mussel fishery

We are writing to request harvester reporting for the wild mussel fishery in Maine state waters.

Our working group 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 Samantha Tipton), Atlantic Aqua Farms (formerly J.P.'s Shellfish; Stutts Armstrong), Maine Shellfish Company (Jim Markos), and Moosabec Mussels (Ralph Smith). We came together several years ago to start a formal fishery improvement project because mussels do not currently meet the sustainable seafood sourcing criteria of Hannaford Supermarkets. Hannaford, like many other buyers in the marketplace, has criteria in place requiring a management plan and data and monitoring that informs management. Wild mussels from Maine do not meet the 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 major 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 few years, we have primarily focused our attention on the research and data collection needs of the fishery. Our key goals for this fishery are for better ongoing data collection to be put in place, and ultimately for a fishery management plan to be put in place. However, right now we are focused on increasing the data available about this fishery and would like to request that mandatory harvester reporting be implemented in the mussel fishery.

Background

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 from dealers:** Working group members who purchase directly from fishermen have been submitting monthly data to the FIP facilitator (the Gulf of Maine Research Institute), for analysis of harvest location information. This includes data from Moosabec Mussels, Atlantic Shellfish via Cape Cod Shellfish, and (formerly) 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 and effort data:** We made a formal request to the Department for mussel landings data in 2019 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. A total of four sampling trips have occurred in commercially important areas from the fall of

2019 to the spring of 2021 thanks to funding from the John Sage Foundation. Working group members helped to determine commercially important areas, rather than identifying random sample sites, given the limited funding available. Sample sites were identified in areas of the Jordan River, Skillings River, Taunton Bay, Harrington River and Addison River. Sampling efforts recorded length and weight of adult mussels and seed mussels from 12 sampling sites, resulting in information collected from over 3,200 individual mussels. The volume of data is small, but it is providing some indicators and helping determine what types of data should ideally be 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, with the intent 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 after hearing Jefferson's testimony, which we greatly appreciated.

Value of harvester reporting

Without consistent fishery-independent surveys or assessments of mussel populations, fishery-dependent data can provide important indicators and trends over time to better monitor the health of this fishery. Knowing when, where, and how many mussels are being removed, as well as the effort involved to harvest them, will provide a more consistent source of data that can be analyzed and tracked.

A key priority in requesting harvester reporting is our interest in the Department capturing harvest location data and tracking it over time. Currently, it is our understanding that mussel landings are only reported to the state by dealers and they report which *port* the mussels were landed in, but not the location where the mussels were *harvested*. The dealers involved in our group have been voluntarily sharing the harvest location data they receive from fishermen, which they must keep on file in case of a recall, but do not normally report to the Department. Our group has collected this data to establish a baseline and to inform other research we conducted, but we are not the right home for this data in the long-term.

The harvest location data from fishermen is valuable because it provides a dataset over time of the footprint of the commercial fishery and how it changes seasonally and year-to-year. Understanding the key commercial areas for mussel fishing and how they might change over time is important for guiding any research or data collection and informing further management of the fishery. Given the limited resources dedicated to studying mussel populations in the state, this knowledge is important.

Harvester reporting is also important to collect in conjunction with dealer reports so that there is better verification of the data being reported by each stakeholder group and any major discrepancies can be addressed.

Finally, landings data from harvesters can be used by the Department to assess other indicators like catch per unit effort and how it changes over time. Even if the Department is unable to make such indicators publicly available due to confidentiality rules in reporting, it will be important information for the Department to use in making management decisions about the fishery.

Ultimately, we would like to see harvest location, date, volume, and effort data collected for mussels on a monthly basis similar to other fisheries in the state.