

up to the **MINUTE**



WORKING GROUP ON AQUACULTURE REGULATIONS FORGES AHEAD

By David Alves

Originally formed in 2000, the R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council's (CRMC) Working Group on Aquaculture Regulations worked to explore changes in aquaculture regulations and enhance communication between industry and regulators—a process that served CRMC well until last year.

In early 2007, questions arose about the lack of a long-term plan for aquaculture development in the state, especially in light of increased demand for aquaculture leases in the salt ponds. Because of these questions, the R.I. Marine Fisheries Council (RIMFC) decided to withhold all opinions on aquaculture leases until a plan was in place. (CRMC regulations require the agency to solicit opinions on all aquaculture leases from RIMFC and from the R.I. Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM).) As a result, the CRMC decided to reconvene the working group in the hope that communication could be restored. It's important to note that the early working group meetings dealt with Narragansett Bay and had not considered the salt ponds. These meetings would focus on the salt ponds.

The working group began meeting in the spring of 2007 and was composed of representatives from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), industry, academia, federal and state regulatory agencies, and state legislators. As background, the group reviewed the current extent of aquaculture leasing in the state, which remains quite small—only 110 acres leased or 0.037 percent of state waters. Because there was also concern about the expansion of aquaculture activities in the salt ponds, the group reviewed those statistics as well, finding that aquaculture comprises less than 2.5 percent of the water area in each of the four ponds with aquaculture leases—in Ninigret Pond, leasing is only 0.25 percent.

Based on these meetings, the biology subgroup, chaired by David Bengtson, University of Rhode Island (URI) fisheries and aquaculture professor, issued a draft report last fall. Following a review and comment period, the full working group unanimously accepted the report in January 2008. The biology report suggested a number of scientifically defensible changes including:

- Limit shellfish aquaculture to 5 percent of any water body
- Seek funding for research into interactions
- Establish an interagency board to make disease recommendations
- Fund disease monitoring in wild and cultured populations
- Continue participation in aquatic nuisance species and further activities
- Continue to protect natural resources in leasing process
- Encourage best management practices for the aquaculture industry

The full report can be accessed on the CRMC website at www.crmc.ri.gov/projects/aquaculture.html.

Another working group achievement has been to conduct—thanks to David Beutel, Rhode Island Sea Grant fisheries extension specialist—a charting project for all of Rhode Island's salt ponds. Beutel also conducted the mapping project for Narragansett Bay during the first working group meetings.

Additionally, the working group has approved a standardized marking for aquaculture farms, and is working on suggested program changes for the CRMC and RIDEM regulations concerning aquaculture. As in the first series of working group meetings, the most important achievement has been increased communication between all of the industry groups.

The working group hopes to finish its work this summer. What remains to be done? Arrive at consensus on suggested regulatory changes. Once these are made, an aquaculture development plan will be drafted and the changes and plan will be submitted to the regulatory agencies.

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