

Ocean SAMP Stakeholder Meeting #7
Notes, June 30, 2009
Hazard Rooms A & B, URI Bay Campus

Purpose of the Meeting:

- Present SAMP related information on Marine Mammals and Sea Turtles
- Discuss Next Steps for Ocean SAMP project

Welcome and recap of the Ocean SAMP process – Ken Payne/Jennifer McCann, URI

Ken Payne, facilitator, told the audience of 80 people that several of the SAMP topics are ones that are close to people's hearts and values, and that the value that people place on marine mammals and sea turtles is "distinct and very high." He said topics such as this one receive close attention from regulatory and academic sources, but are also significant in terms of their ability to generate strong public interest, following, and concern. The SAMP process, he said, is fully aware of such interest, and tonight's speaker, Dr. Robert Kenney, is targeted to fulfill that need.

New Ocean SAMP Developments – Grover Fugate, CRMC

Fugate told the group that the state has committed additional funds to cover more studies, such as avian research. He said that the additional funding will enhance the SAMP process and that the SAMP process is on schedule. He also reported that other Atlantic states, including Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Delaware, are stepping up efforts to become the first state to achieve implementation of a wind farm.

Ocean SAMP plans for the Summer and Fall – Jennifer McCann, URI

McCann provided an overview of the SAMP meetings and events which have taken place up to this point, and also described the next phase of the process which we are moving into – the writing of the SAMP document. She said that starting September 1, 2009, a draft chapter of the SAMP will be provided for each stakeholder meeting. She said that the SAMP document is an ecosystem document which takes human interactions with the environment into account, and that it's much more than simply a guide as to where to locate a wind farm. "It's more than that – it's ecosystem management and it's about what is happening out there," she said. McCann provided a timetable to the group and described how the chapter drafting, reviewing and adopting processes will take place.

CRMC Chairman comment – Michael Tikoian, CRMC

Tikoian told the group that the CRMC is committed to the CRMC process and is working to ensure the process is successful. He said some media accounts have not portrayed the SAMP process accurately.

Marine Mammals and Sea Turtles

Kenney's presentation shared information about each of the higher priority mammals and sea turtles found in the SAMP area and in Rhode Island ocean waters. Some of the animals are common to Rhode Island; others only make appearances during certain seasons or because they are migrating north or south. During his presentation, Kenney indicated that animals such as right whales, humpback whales, and fin whales (especially fin whales) do make appearances in Rhode Island waters, but in general don't seem to be present in large numbers and not year round. Some turtles, such as leatherbacks and loggerheads (leatherbacks much more so), can also be found in the area when the water is warmer. He said that whaling used to be common in America up through the 19th century, and some whale populations are still relatively low. He said dolphin, porpoise, and seal numbers are much higher, with our resident harbor seal garnering regular attention – the seals use 29 haulout sites in Narragansett Bay. Rome Point, North Kingstown and Cormorant Cove, Block Island, are among the biggest haulout sites for the seals in Rhode Island (See Kenney presentation for complete overviews of the animals). Kenney said that in terms of SAMP issues related to mammals, noise can injure them and cause deafness to varying degrees and ship traffic can be a problem in terms of collisions and noise. Other human-caused issues could be electromagnetic fields, or habitat loss.

Q & A

Q. Can you use drones (to track animals)? A. (Kenney): You can, but the lower you go, the slimmer the slot you get.

Q. Can we turn acoustic data into abundance data? A. (Kenney): We want to, but we're not there yet (he also indicated that there is research taking place at URI, such as through Jim Miller, who spoke at the prior SAMP meeting in May, that explores this issue.

Q. How do we move ahead with the research in terms of wind farms? A. (Kenney): I would think that what we'll do is focus on the piledriving plan and think about mitigation and real-time observation, and figure out when's the best time to do it, when's the window of opportunity.

Q. Are we starting to see the impacts of climate change on the animals? A. (Kenney): We've seen some habitat shifts already – white sided dolphins have shifted, and we've seen changes with humpbacks. They follow the food and adapt quickly.

Q. Are there other kinds of marine mammal strikes besides those caused by boats?
A.(Kenney): No, they tend to avoid things.

Next Meetings – September 10 and October 6, 2009, Coastal Institute, URI Bay Campus