

The State of Aquaculture in the Salt Ponds
Kettle Pond Visitor Center, 50 Bend Road, Charlestown, RI
June 29, 2017, 5:00 – 7:00 p.m.
Summary Notes

Event Purpose:

1. Understand from different perspectives the state of aquaculture in the Salt Ponds.
2. Answer any questions or concerns from the community about aquaculture in general.

Moderator: Jennifer McCann, Director for the U.S. Coastal Programs, Coastal Resources Center and Rhode Island Sea Grant Program, University of Rhode Island (URI)

Topic Experts:

Dave Beutel, Aquaculture Coordinator, RIMC
Art Ganz, President, Salt Pond Coalition
Eric Schneider, Principal Biologist, Marine, RI DEM
Robert Rheault, Executive Director, East Coast Shellfish Growers Association
Dave Prescott, South County Coast Keeper, Save the Bay
Bryan DeAngelis, Marine Habitat Scientist & Program Coordinator, The Nature Conservancy

Resource People:

Ken Ayars, Chief Division of Agriculture, RIDEM
Louise Bishop, President and CEO, South County Tourism Council
John Riendeau, Director, Business Development at RI Commerce Corporation

Special Note: This program is part of the Rhode Island Shellfish Initiative. The Initiative recognizes the economic and cultural value of shellfish to Rhode Island. Through it, state agencies, industry, academia and community partners will further efforts to sustainably manage local shellfish stock, promote economic growth and jobs, and celebrate Rhode Island's unique food cultures. At: <http://www.rismp.org/> or on Facebook @shellfishRI

5:00 Welcome and Purpose – Alicia Eichinger, Executive Director, Salt Pond Coalition and Jen McCann, URI Coastal Resources Center/RI Sea Grant

A. Eichinger welcomed the group of 70 people and J. McCann explained that the purpose of the meeting was to understand and listen to different perspectives concerning the salt ponds, the aquaculture industry, and the people who live and visit there – including Rhode Island residents and those from other states. She said that there is great activity – recreation, tourism, aquaculture, and other uses – at the ponds and they are significant to many people. McCann said that everyone's comments and questions were important, and that the questions would be collected on comment cards and answered by the panelists, topic experts and resource staff available for information.

5:15 The State's Perspective – Dave Beutel, Aquaculture Coordinator, RI Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) and Janet Coit, Director, RI Department of Environmental Management (DEM)

Eric Schneider, a DEM marine fisheries biologist, indicated that J. Coit was unable to attend but had wanted to be there and would be following up with the organizers. He said that DEM is very supportive of the relationships that came from the Rhode Island Shellfish Management Plan (SMP) process as the

effort, and now the Rhode Island Shellfish Initiative, speaks to the continuing need to address conservation, enhancement and restoration efforts for shellfish. He said DEM and the CRMC continue to collaborate with a variety of government, community and industry partners.

Dave Beutel, the CRMC Aquaculture Coordinator, said that it is important for all stakeholders to continue to participate and be part of CRMC public processes. He said that due to the SMP, state agencies enjoy much better communication with each other, even if they don't always agree. He agreed with Schneider that the SMP and the Shellfish Initiative are serving important roles in the state's shellfish planning.

5:25 The State of Aquaculture

Dale Leavitt, Professor of Marine Biology, Roger Williams University

Leavitt explained the basic biology involving eutrophication, a condition when a pond becomes over fertilized with nutrients, generally from sources like birds or human sewage, and algae overgrows and disrupts the health of the water and its environment. He said that there are more studies now showing that bivalves or filter feeders like clams and oysters can take some of the excess nutrients out of the water. Dr. Leavitt said that while it would be unrealistic to expect that bivalves could clear ponds of all nutrients, it is worth it to continue to study the issue and see what role they can play. As only one of the salt ponds is even close to the five percent limit (Point Judith Pond at 4.2%) for aquaculture, the other ones are not, so putting more shellfish in the waters could help lower the overall nutrient load.

John West, Owner, Moonstone Oysters

J. West has more than 20 years of experience with shellfish aquaculture and he showed the audience how different kinds of farming gear have changed dramatically for the better over the years. He showed how the bags and cages that shellfish are now grown in save farmers time and money, and are safe to have in the public sphere. He said he sees much job and industry growth for shellfish farming locally, and said there is a big restaurant and raw bar market driving this interest. He said that there are very good job training programs for young people looking to get into this kind of work – he said the work can be hard, and the weather can be cold, but for people who like it, it's great and plentiful work. He said he works hard on his farm to make sure the public understands the activity and has the chance to ask any questions they might have concerning where his gear is, and where they can go on the pond's surface with kayaks, for example.

Doug McLean, Senior Planner, Town of South Kingstown

D. McLean said that his office provides aquaculture permit reviews from the municipal side, and that the town works very hard to make sure that both CRMC and the permit applicant and any other community or public or private sector interests are aware from the start about the review. He said that there have been great strides made both with the mapping capabilities and the extent to which the parties collaborate well before a decision on the permit is rendered. Doing so enables changes to be made to the application early on so a suitable permit that all parties can live with is arrived at as soon as possible, he said. McLean said that most of the concerns with aquaculture applications have to do with potential impacts to navigation and recreational boating, as well as to the nature of the equipment being used, and what type of process the future owner plans to undertake to keep the farm clean and gentle to the environment. He described two experiences with Camp Fuller; one involved a cooperative applicant who was willing to make changes that the camp needed and even started an education program about

aquaculture with the camp; the other applicant was not flexible and his application had to be denied. McLean said that early collaboration among all the parties is critical for application success and community satisfaction.

Robert Lyons, Chair, Charlestown Coastal Pond Management Commission and Owner, Ocean House Marina

R. Lyons said that the collaborative spirit with which his commission and CRMC and municipal parties have engaged with applicants has been productive and beneficial. He thanks CRMC's Dave Beutel for his service in ensuring CRMC is active at the table and engaged with the public on these issues. He explained that his commission works hard to ensure that the salt ponds represent a balanced and fair use of activities, and that it's important that pristine Type 1 waters are protected as fully as possible. He said that he has been pleased to work with aquaculture applicants who show that they are willing to compromise and respect the community goal of keeping the salt ponds as environmentally healthy as possible for this and future generations. He said some of the ponds naturally lend themselves to more aquaculture activity than others, as activity is necessarily restricted by the degree to which water access is available. He said that he and the commission members will continue to work with the government, community and private sector to ensure that balance and opportunity are both met as appropriate.

6:15 Discussion

After the panelists spoke, the audience submitted a range of questions to panelists and topic experts to provide answers to the questions. Some of the questions had to do with how to maintain respect and balance between uses on the water – how can the aquaculture industry live peacefully with the neighbors, residents, tourists and recreational users who want clean and beautiful ponds? To that end, Robert Rheault, Executive Director of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association, said that it absolutely critical that all farmers – especially the new and incoming growers – are educated about the need to be honorable members of the public, or “commons,” that the ponds represent. He said he and his colleagues have worked very hard for years to make sure that they are extremely responsible, caring entities for the ponds, and that all farmers must continue to work very hard to make sure new growers keep this trust with the public. Otherwise, he said, aquaculture will not be able to continue at the ponds. West emphasized again that he takes it as an opportunity to engage kayakers in discussion about his lease, and he said that in general, leases are safe areas for kayaks to skim over – that the equipment is many feet down.

There were also more questions about how to get young people or fishermen who have lost their jobs into the business, and West said that there are a variety of programs now available to make sure people can enter the industry and transition into it. The audience also wanted to know more about how to address eutrophication in the ponds so the problem can be resolved, and the panelists and topic experts said that the long-term answer is for communities to work vigilantly with government, community and industry interests to keep nitrogen – human and animal waste – out of the water for good. Leavitt said that this is not an easy task, but that it must be the end goal, and that while shellfish filtering can help, it can't solve the problem alone.

There was discussion about how shellfish make up part of the state's new food planning effort, which focuses on locally grown products. Other topics included how the tourism industry can both promote the aquaculture industry as a sightseeing draw while also being a good community partner for a clean and healthy environment. People also asked about how sea level rise could impact the salt ponds and

the Rhode Island coastal, with Save the Bay Keeper Dave Prescott indicating that the best way for the public to address the incremental rise is to be educated and be involved in community resiliency planning.

Finally, people also asked questions about the length of aquaculture leases (15 years, renewable for 10, so long as an applicant passes annual reviews with CRMC), and whether these leases should only be allowed to Rhode Island residents (CRMC's Beutel said anyone can apply for a lease.).

After the discussion, McCann said that there will be more public events about this topic and she said information about these programs will be shared widely so people continue to participate in the dialogue. She thanked everyone for coming and contributing.

7:00 Adjourn