

R.I. Working on Shellfish Management Plan

By SARAH SCHUMANN/ecoRI News contributor

NARRAGANSETT — Monday night's kickoff of the [Rhode Island Shellfish Management Plan](#) drew a full audience: commercial quahoggers, oyster farmers, recreational diggers, habitat restoration experts, biologists and regulators. All were eager to ascertain the purpose of this new planning process, which will be co-led by the state Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) and overseen by the Coastal Resources Center.

Drawing on the experience garnered through recent collaborative planning efforts such as the Ocean Special Area Management Plan (Ocean SAMP), the plan will engage stakeholders in providing comprehensive policy guidance regarding state management and protection measures for shellfish resources in state marine waters. Shellfish is a general category that includes bivalves (quahogs, steamers, mussels, oysters, scallops and razor clams) and gastropods (conchs and other snails).

Shellfish have been an important part of the history and culture of Rhode Island for a long time, said Bruce Corliss, dean of the URI Graduate School of Oceanography, but their continuance is far from certain. Noting the threats of pollution and habitat loss, Corliss said, "This plan is part of a larger effort to promote coastal sustainability and resilience."

Regulators have grappled with several issues related to shellfish in recent years, according to the DEM's Mark Gibson. These issues include a burgeoning aquaculture industry, an increasing interest in shellfish culture as a way to restore degraded water quality, and lingering questions about the number of commercial shellfishing licenses in the state. The new plan would begin by bringing all of these issues together under a common conceptual umbrella.

As in the Ocean SAMP, stakeholder participation will be a core part of the planning process. That process begins later this month, when the project team holds three meetings for interested stakeholders. Stakeholder concerns and knowledge will be synthesized into a management plan later this year. That document will undergo extensive review and revision and will be finalized in October 2014.

When discussing the impetus behind this new planning process, several speakers made reference to the economic value that shellfish harvesting and aquaculture provide for Rhode Island. But many also alluded to a benefit that can't be measured in dollars and cents: the state's general fondness for the quahog and its relatives at the bottom of Narragansett Bay.

"Digging a quahog or picking mussels off a rock is a really special part of being a Rhode Islander," DEM director Janet Coit said.

Other speakers at the Jan. 7 meeting included Sen. Susan Sosnowski, D-South Kingstown, and Rep. Eileen Naughton, D-Warwick.

Both celebrated the diverse mix of stakeholders in attendance and expressed hopes for fruitful collaboration.

The Rhode Island Foundation, the Sharpe Family Foundation, the Prospect Hill Foundation, and the Coastal Institute funded the plan development process.