Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

Division of Marine Fisheries

Strategic Plan (2021-2025)

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Executive Summary

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's Division of Marine Fisheries (hereafter DMF) is the state's leading agency in marine fisheries science and management. The DMF is headquartered at the Fort Wetherill Marine Laboratory in Jamestown, RI, with the Coastal Fisheries Laboratory in Wakefield, RI on Point Judith Pond serving as a field office. The program consists of over 20 full-time staff working toward protecting, preserving, and promoting marine resources of Rhode Island through sustainable fisheries management.

The DMF has constructed a Strategic Plan on the Division's continued and future initiatives. This framework is intended to serve as a guidance document for DMF, and as an informational tool for our partners and stakeholders on our continued work and goals for the upcoming years. While specific to the DMF, this Strategic Plan shares similar themes with those of the Department, ensuring consistency between the DMF and Department's overall mission. The goals presented are also shared among fisheries science and management entities throughout the region, allowing for unified efforts towards maintaining sustainable fisheries and ecosystems.

The mission of RI DMF is *to manage and enhance Rhode Island's marine resources and habitats through sound science, informed management decisions, and education*. In doing so, the DMF looks to strengthen the role that marine life serves in supporting Rhode Island's ecology, economy, and heritage. This mission will be achieved by aiming to accomplish four overarching goals, each with themes and associated actions that will be used to guide the DMF toward continued success in achieving its mission.

Goals

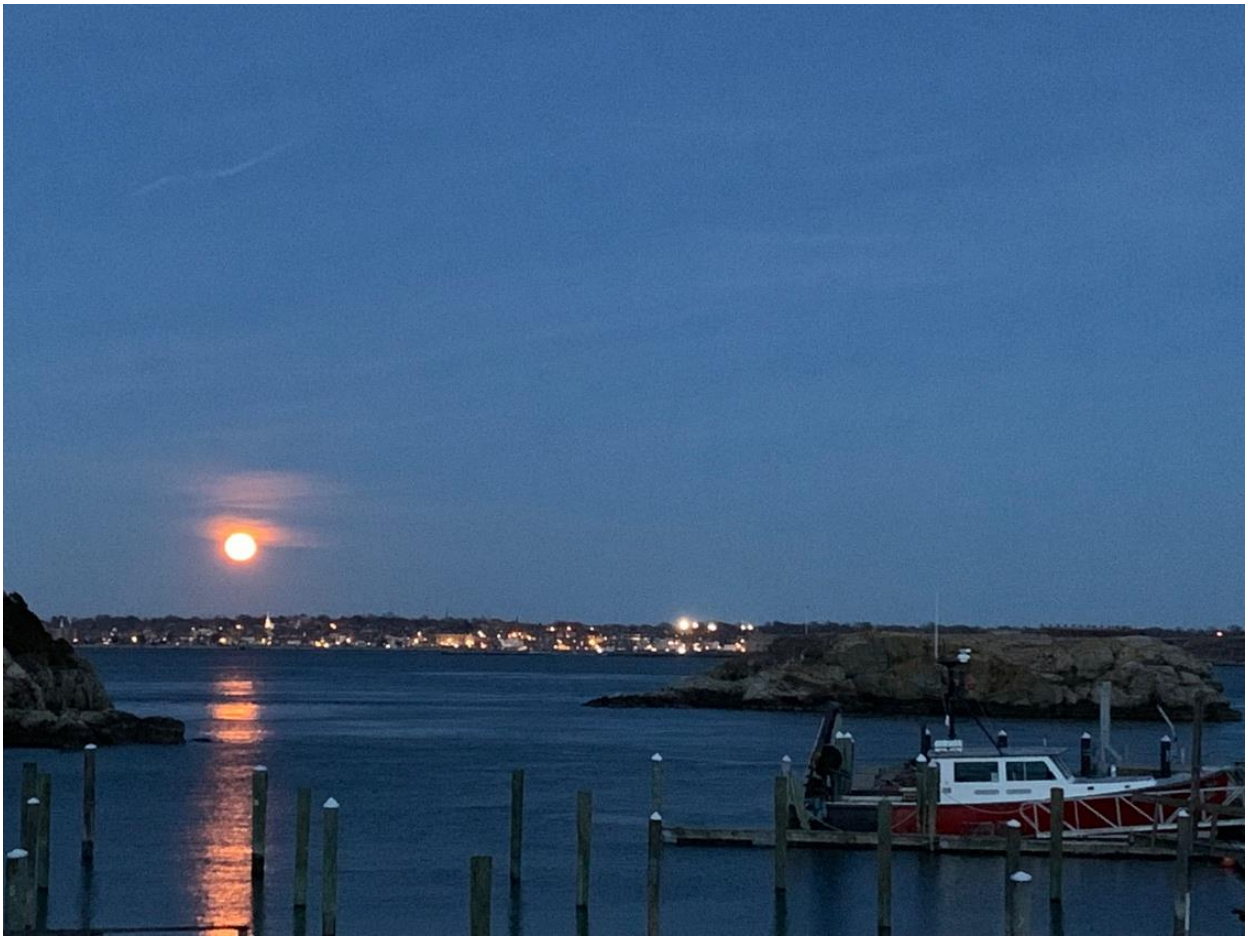
1. Advance our understanding of marine natural resources
2. Support fisheries using innovative and adaptable programs
3. Enhance partnerships that further the sustainable use of marine ecosystems
4. Promote professional development opportunities for the betterment of staff and the state's services

(1) Advance our understanding of marine natural resources

The DMF strives for its marine resource management to be based on scientific, defendable data. This practice ensures that proposed regulations meet the associated goals and provides transparency in how regulations are constructed. Advancing the knowledge base on these marine resources and their ecosystems is critical for both answering the vast marine science questions that remain, as well as how our understanding of these systems change through space and time, particularly with climate change. The DMF is committed to independently and cooperatively working with the fishing industry and research partners toward the many scientific elements that are used to ensure sustainable marine ecosystems.

- Resource Monitoring
    - Maintain and advance ongoing fisheries-independent monitoring programs and their required infrastructure that assess the relative abundances of marine fish and invertebrates across their life cycle and over time
    - Continue both commercial and recreational fisheries-dependent sampling programs and implement innovative techniques to improve data collection with stakeholder partners
    - Develop restoration and enhancement guidance plans, such as those identified by the RI Shellfish Initiative, that include identifying data gaps, research needs, and enhancement opportunities
- Stock Assessment Science
    - Implement new and traditional methods for both data-rich and data-limited species for understanding the status and sustainability of marine species of Rhode Island
    - Link research recommendations of regional and local stock assessments with DMF programs though new or ongoing research endeavors
- Habitat Evaluation
    - Ensure marine resource and habitat protection through participation in permitting review (e.g., dredging activities, aquaculture siting, renewable energy development)
    - Support and improve marine spatial planning data products used during responses to oil spills, chemical accidents, and other environmental emergencies
    - Identify and conduct regular assessments of essential fish habitats and their associated fauna, including eel grass, kelp beds, and oyster reefs
    - Evaluate and promote initiatives that enhance marine habitat (e.g., artificial reefs, oyster restoration, conservation moorings) , increasing the resilience and the ecosystem services provided by these habitats
- Directed Research
    - Advance our scientific understanding of marine species, their habitats, and the users they support via directed research projects
    - Leverage existing and new data to understand the impact of climate change on marine ecosystems
    - Develop analytical tools that support the development of ecosystem-based fisheries management measures

- Enhance participation and partnerships involving protected species ecology and stranding events to restore these species' populations and mitigate mortality events
- Promote and participate in science that furthers our understanding on fish and fisheries interactions with offshore wind development
- Seek cooperative research opportunities that allow for addressing applied scientific questions, such as right whale interactions and fish discard mortality



(2) Support fisheries using innovative and adaptable programs

Marine fisheries have been a cornerstone of Rhode Island's heritage for centuries, supporting recreational opportunities, the State's economy and businesses, and sustenance both locally and globally. The DMF aims to provide harvesters flexibility that ensures access to marine resources when possible and at sustainable levels. Through outreach, flexible and creative solutions, and a progressive mindset toward the future of fisheries management, the DMF looks to improve and continue its approach towards cooperative fisheries management.

- Communication with Stakeholders
    - Improve methods for communicating fisheries management items with stakeholders using traditional and novel methods
    - Increase participation of stakeholders through state and regional regulatory processes, such as Rhode Island Marine Fisheries Council activities
    - Increase services of DMF through Department partnerships (e.g., expanded permitting and tagging issuance projects with RI DEM Coastal Resources)
    - Facilitate new opportunities for industry members while sustaining wild populations (e.g., Environmental Quality Incentive Program, shellfish transplants, cooperative seeding and enhancement and restoration practices)
- Adaptability and Opportunity
    - Create novel programs that improve the flexibility for Rhode Island's commercial fisheries and can account for emerging and/or rapidly changing fisheries (e.g., aggregate landing programs, interstate landing privileges, collaborative fishing operations)
    - Improve landings monitoring tools for quota-monitored species within DMF and with regional partners that allow for maximizing harvest opportunities for fishermen
    - Create fishery management plans that recognize distinct sectors as unique, such as the Party/Charter industry
    - Develop new opportunities for fishery participation that introduce younger generations to commercial fishing
    - Enhance seafood marketing strategies that promote eating locally harvested Rhode Island seafood
- Improving Data and Streamlining Programs
    - Develop new reporting tools that improves data collection and quality, and/or facilitates easier reporting for fishermen
    - Support initiatives that improve data reporting for fisheries (e.g., electronic vessel monitoring, trap or fish tag databases)
    - Support processes that increase the efficiency and accuracy of commercial and recreational harvest data collection
    - Upgrade commercial fishing licensing structure and databases that will simplify licensing and allow integration of Department-wide licensing and permitting
    - Continue the development of fisheries-dependent data reporting to link harvester and dealer reports for more comprehensive records, easier auditing, and improved compliance and data querying

(3) Enhance partnerships that further the sustainable use of marine ecosystems

The transboundary nature of many marine species requires regional partnerships to improve our knowledge on the resources and ensure their sustainability. By developing partnerships with our peers – including other state and federal agencies, academic institutions, non-government organizations, the fishing industry, and the general public – the DMF will be able to address scientific priorities for the state that we alone would otherwise not have the resources to address. The DMF also aims to improve its outreach efforts to all stakeholders on the work we provide for the state regarding the science and management of marine fish and their habitats, and educate Rhode Islanders on what our marine waters offer, through a suite of tools that can reach people of all demographics.

- Partnerships
    - Improve research partnerships through both local entities (i.e. Rhode Island Marine Fisheries Institute, Rhode Island Shellfish Initiative) and stakeholders, as well as regional institutes or academic, government, industry, and non-government organization partnerships
    - Establish research partnerships between DMF and other Divisions within the Department
    - Enhance the DMF's involvement in fisheries management and initiatives through the various bodies involved in fisheries management (e.g., New England and Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Councils, Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program, Rhode Island Marine Fisheries Council)
- Outreach
    - Improve web-tools for enhanced learning and education opportunities on Rhode Island marine species and ecosystems, the DMF program, and the stakeholders they support
    - Foster interest and participation in recreational fin- and shellfishing via aquatic education programs
    - Maintain and improve access to coastal waters at management areas, shore access points and boat ramps to facilitate and enhance opportunities for the public to connect with the marine environment
    - Continue Rhode Island Shellfish Initiative activities that implement recommendations identified by the Rhode Island Shellfish Management Plan
    - Increase data transparency by enhancing state data visualization and accessibility using online tools and metadata for the DMF programs

(4) Promote professional development opportunities for the betterment of staff and the state's services

Creating a healthy, productive, fulfilling, and enjoyable work environment has been an active goal for the DMF. We strive to foster a work environment that promotes new opportunities for professional development that are customized to individuals' passions and meets the needs of the DMF and the associated staff's passions. In doing so, we also hope to attract new scientists and managers that view the DMF as a leader in fisheries science and management, and an opportunity to excel, grow, and contribute to the missions of DMF and Department.

- Training Opportunities
    - Pursue training opportunities that increase staff knowledge and skills to maintain and expand RI staff role in stock assessment processes
    - Provide opportunities to conduct coursework as non-matriculated students or towards higher-level education
    - Allow for staff participation in third-party lectures, training sessions and that are relative to the work and goals of DMF
    - Enhance inter-office collaboration and communication that allows for sharing knowledge and skillsets amongst staff
    - Seek new areas for DMF involvement that allow for staff to learn new field, analytical, project management, and mentoring skills
- Grant Opportunities
    - Pursue grant opportunities that allow DMF to conduct research to further the science and management of the state's marine species, their habitats, and fisheries
- Disseminating Research
    - Promote staff participation at scientific conferences for communicating DMF research
    - Report out on DMF science and research through developing and publishing technical reports and peer-reviewed literature