

Issues at fishermen's forum touch local concerns

Island has one of three clam flat preservation projects

by Karin Dixon

ROCKPORT—The 32nd annual Fishermen's Forum held at the Samoset Resort March 2-5 had a number of programs and panels on fisheries that were of direct local concern to Island residents.

One of these was on Municipal Shellfish Aquaculture, during which Hannah Annis of the Department of Marine Resources announced a one-year Inter-tidal Mussel Dragging Pilot Project being offered to three municipalities: Deer Isle-Stonington, Bar Harbor, and Gouldsboro. The three communities were offered this opportunity to work with the DMR as a result of their concerns about inter-tidal mussel harvesting and dragging in the soft-clam conservation areas, which show clear signs of depletion.

Dr. Brian Beal from the University of Maine in Machias, who had moved from the Shellfish Aquaculture panel to the audience, bolted up after hearing Annis's summary of the issues, "This is absurd," he said. "After all of the effort, the seeding, to hand-plant and protect the soft-shell clams in the conservation area, then they can be wiped out by a mussel-dragger without penalty?" Annis replied that hand-harvesting clams in those areas, which also disturbs the seed beds, is likewise without penalty. She recognized local efforts to conserve the habitat, to seed clams, and then to protect the seeded clam flats, and acknowledged that, in many cases, the time and effort is swept away, fruitless, by inter-tidal mussel-dragging prior to harvest. This option to participate in the restoration project includes helping to draft a comprehensive conservation plan, which should address their concerns.

The Shellfish Aquaculture panel emphasized that the regional DMR's Shellfish Management staff will work with municipalities, helping to maximize eligibility for grants and other funding to pay for wardens to enforce observance and protection of conservation areas. The panel also presented examples of ways to grow seed stock successfully, as well as sharing information on hatcheries to buy from.

Zone C lobstermen solidly behind seeding efforts

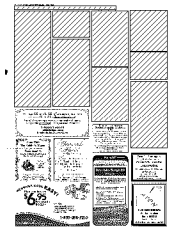
The lobster hatchery of Stonington weighed in at the forum, with a count of 40,000 stage IV lobsters being distributed throughout Zone C in its first year. The hatchery's space, donated by the Stonington Co-op, is projected to produce 100,000 lobsters for the coming year. Zone C fishermen, grants, and public and private donations enable the research, labor, and distribution of this supplementary seeding. Robin Alden, executive director of Penobscot East Resource Center, which helps support the hatchery, projected next year's expenses to exceed \$100,000 for research, supplies, and labor.

Ted Ames, of PERC, explained, "We're very optimistic in spite of this year's power outage and other factors in the mortality rates...which kept us from some of the distribution areas. With just a little more money and a little more time to keep them to stage V, we think we can demonstrate good survival rates. Without good survival rates you're just shooting off your own foot."

Vance Bunker of Matinicus wondered if and when there would be a release in his area, acknowledging that Matinicus lobstermen were aware of last year's problems. Ames responded, "It was Matinicus that put us over the top for funding last year; you'll be the first this year, and thank you for your support." Ames said Matinicus has some of the best lobstering in the zone and yet still represented 65 percent of last year's funding by lobstermen, suggesting they are investing in the future.

Dr. Rich Wahle, of Bigelow Laboratory who, like Ames, specializes in biochemistry and fisheries ecology, showed a film of seeding the lobsters and reiterated the importance of tracking them: "We will expand the hatchery capacity this year, continuing releases under the same protocol, and use genetic fingerprinting to distinguish them from the wild stock." Wahle and Ames agreed that two extra weeks, allowing the lobsters to reach stage V development, would bring recovery rates up. Currently they are estimated at 5 percent or less. Ames said hatchery seeding trials in British Columbia and Norway with stage V lobsters produced 30-percent survival rates, since lobsters at this stage are more likely to stay where they are released.

The hatchery is the result of the decline in



Zone C's habitat and stock: local lobstermen responded by seeking donations, community support, and the help of Penobscot East Resource Center. The lobstermen themselves pick where the lobsters are released in this determined effort to repopulate Zone C to a sustainable level for the 1,000 licensed lobstermen who harvest at a rate of 15,000,000 pounds a year.

Ames said it takes five-plus years for a lobster to mature; through area management—the Zone Councils—“we have control of the rate of entry, an apprenticeship, limits to fish a certain amount of traps, and [we] make sure the people entering the system have the same ethics as those who are there. The local lobstermen are setting a precedent by taking responsibility and protecting their resource with seeding and brood stock. Create “sweat equity” and preserve the great American idea of becoming a self-made man.”

In whose best interest?

Mandatory reporting for the lobster industry will be in effect by January 2008. Accord-

ing to Carl Wilson of the DMR, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Addendum X requires Maine lobstermen to comply with the following: “By random selection 10 percent of all licensed lobstermen have to submit a monthly report including the one-line-per-day log” of traps hauled, pounds landed, dealer sold to, and in what general area caught, by zone and miles. One fisherman asked, “...is this a conflict of interest or in our best interest?” From the standing-room only crowd came a barrage of questions: who would have access to the information provided, why does it have to be vessel-linked, and how can we be sure this is protected and confidential? George Lapointe of the DMR attempted to clarify. “The catch statistics and effort statistics are essential...and through the

work of ASMFC we've gathered valuable data to minimize cuts. We aren't doing this to add to the state government.” Heidi Bray, also of the DMR, said, “Asking for data is healthy, and crucial.” And even though Toni Kerns of the ASMFC followed by saying that “a public license is not confidential, but this landings data is,” fishermen already participating voluntarily, and others, were unwilling to be singled out and quoted, and left with great skepticism, perhaps wondering if they will suffer trap cuts at their own hands with the IRS as an audience.

Newfoundland warns

New England: stop procrastinating

The Area Management panel presented the chilling economic effects Newfoundland has suffered in the Marine Protected Areas of Gilbert Bay, Leading Tickles, and Eastport, in hopes to motivate others to work together now to avoid the same results. It was said that the unemployment rates in some of these areas are 93 percent. Craig Pendleton of the Area Management Coalition explained, “The ‘my job is to kill as many fish as possible in the least amount of time for the most amount of money’ theory doesn't work anymore.” Gerry Cushman, a dragger fisherman from Port Clyde, commented, “How can we get the community more united? To me we need more money...I support area management because we don't want to lose our product, and our rights and privileges to eat and catch fish.” The panel recommended that local municipalities work with the fishermen toward a comprehensive plan, and a compromise leading toward downsizing the take rather than facing complete closure. Pendleton stressed that if steps in this direction are not taken immediately the reality of individual transferable quotas will hit ground-fishing here as hard as it has hit our Canadian neighbors.