

Chapter 5. Recreational Shellfisheries

Brief Overview of Commercial Shellfisheries

Each year, nearly ten thousand people obtain recreational shellfishing permits and head to Connecticut's tidal flats and coastal waters to harvest a wide variety of shellfish, including clams, oysters, mussels, and scallops. Revenue from permit sales alone contributes over \$100,000 to the local economy². Harvest methods range from walking along the bottom feeling using one's feet or hands to dig for clams, to raking the bottom with a variety of hand rakes. Oysters and mussels can be gathered by hand or with long-handled tongs while scallops are typically harvested with a scoop net.

Regulatory Roles and Management

- The Department of Agriculture is the lead agency on shellfish in Connecticut. Direct responsibility is assigned to the Bureau of Aquaculture & Laboratory Services, an organization that is responsible for managing commercial and recreational shellfishing for the entire Connecticut coast.
- DA/BA is responsible for classifying all Connecticut shellfish growing areas in accordance with the National Shellfish Sanitation Program- Model Ordinance. This effort involves extensive water quality testing and shellfish meat sampling as well as inspection of potential shoreline pollution sources.
- With few exceptions, shellfish commissions are responsible for managing the shellfisheries and shellfish grounds within the boundaries of their municipality in cooperation with DA/BA.
- Shellfish commissions are comprised of volunteer members appointed by their town leadership. Many commissions pay wardens to enforce local shellfishing regulations.
- The shellfish commissions manage shellfish resources in municipal waters according to the NSSP-MO, as interpreted by DA/BA. Each town enters into a Memo of Understanding (MOU) with DA/BA that spells out the details of: (1) a management plan, including rainfall and water quality monitoring, (2) determination of conditions for closing and re-opening of shellfish grounds, (3) a detailed communication plan that ensures that the public is promptly informed of closures, and (4) enforcement requirements.
- The management of harvest areas requires the shellfish commissions to conduct an extensive water sampling program that includes the collection of routine samples during normal and adverse conditions, and samples taken after rainfall to facilitate reopening an area after a closure. For example, in Stonington the average number of sets of samples per year over 2012-2014 was 22.7, nearly twice per month.
- The commissions are responsible for delivering the samples to DA/BA laboratory and the DA/BA provides the analysis at no cost to the towns.
- Shellfish grounds must be closed if (1) there is a release of untreated or partially treated sewage into the water or (2) the area around the shellfish ground receives rainfall that exceeds the "trigger" for the shellfish grounds. The trigger is defined as the amount of rainfall that requires the closure of a shellfishing area; for recreational harvest areas the triggers are usually one or two inches.

- To reopen an area, the seawater and periodically the shellfish meats must be tested to ensure that the level of bacteria has returned to the minimal level allowed by NSSP-MO requirements.
- Local commissions are also responsible for setting harvest and size limits, selling permits, managing wardens, and maintaining open/closed signs, demarcation signs and buoys.
- The licensing of commercial harvesters in municipal waters falls under the jurisdiction of municipal shellfish commissions. Shellfish commissions may designate areas to be used for commercial harvest and charge fees for this activity. The commissions also coordinate with state and federal agencies regarding the use of aquaculture gear in municipal waters.
- Recreational harvest areas must be periodically restocked to replenish the shellfish. Commissions purchase shellfish for stocking beds from local growers.

Benefits of Recreational Shellfishing

- Recreational shellfishing provides a safe and wholesome source of food, while simultaneously encouraging public interest in the marine environment.
- Many of the recreational harvesters are from towns that are far from the coast. For example, two-thirds of the Stonington's and about half of Guilford's recreational permits are issued to non-residents. Without recreational shellfish permits, these non-residents might have less of a vested interest in marine health and water quality of Long Island Sound.
- Recreational shellfishing not only engages the public with Long Island Sound, it connects the public to the commercial sector of the shellfish industry. A robust recreational program bolsters consumer confidence in the safety of locally caught shellfish.
- Routine water quality testing for shellfisheries purposes helps to identify coastal pollution sources, which leads to corrective action and adds to the data about Long Island Sound and its tributaries.
- Recreational shellfishing also contributes to the local economy. Each year, shellfish commissions in the coastal towns issue thousands of permits. The fees are used to purchase shellfish to restock the shellfish grounds, hire wardens to patrol the shellfish grounds, and numerous other activities. Local shellfish are also purchased to replenish recreational areas, which helps the commercial sector and fosters a positive relationship between the towns and the local industry. In addition, recreational clambers purchase hand rakes, which range in price from \$30 to \$100, and other items. Dr. Robert S. Pomeroy of the University of Connecticut is attempting to quantify this economic impact and expects to conclude his study later this year.

Challenges to recreational shellfishing

- Much of Connecticut's shoreline is privately owned; therefore, access to many recreational shellfish grounds is severely limited.
- In addition, growth in the number of private docks and the expansion of marinas and mooring areas encroaches on the area available for recreational shellfishing.

- Following rainfall events, stormwater carrying animal waste, oil, and other contaminants from roads and lawns runs off of paved surfaces into coastal waters, polluting shellfish beds. Managing storm water is another large challenge that will require the cooperation of all levels of government, as well as homeowners and business owners.
- Managing the water sampling requirements of the NSSP-MO is becoming increasingly difficult for the volunteers of the shellfish commissions so it is vital that processing of samples continues to be free of charge and resources for the transportation be made available.
- Currently, all shellfish seed is imported from outside of the state. While strict regulations are in place, importation still presents the risk of introducing disease, unwanted species of harmful algae, biofouling organisms and other pests.
- The aging of recreational shellfishers and shellfisheries managers is being observed in several towns. Because commissions typically provide senior citizens with a discounted permit fee, they in turn lose revenue as the harvesting population ages. Shellfish commission members have a valuable knowledge base that is lost when members leave the commission. Commissions must undertake education programs to engage youth. This is vital to the continuation of the programs and to develop a cadre of individuals interested in serving on the voluntary municipal shellfish commissions.