

MARINE DEBRIS REGIONAL ISSUES AND ACTION PLANS: A ROADMAP TO SUCCESS

NEW ENGLAND AND DERELICT FISHING GEAR: INITIATING THE EFFORT

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New England waters contain the nation's most historic fishing grounds and are extensively utilized today by both commercial and recreational fisheries. Commercial fisheries employ a variety of gear types from fixed lobster traps to mobile bottom trawls. Significant amounts of this gear are lost every year due to frequent storms, snagging on rough topography, and abandonment by fishermen. Deep waters and rough weather make retrieving this derelict fishing gear challenging.

These factors combine to create a derelict fishing gear (DFG) issue that is very difficult to address. DFG such as net, lines and other recreational or commercial fishing equipment that has been lost, abandoned or discarded can persist in the environment for decades. Derelict gear poses a threat to marine mammals, seabirds, shellfish and fish through "ghost fishing," where the gear can attract, trap and kill a wide variety of animals. Additionally, DFG can degrade marine ecosystems and sensitive habitats, and pose a threat to human safety and restrict legitimate sanctuary uses, such as regulated fishing, anchoring and operation of vessels.

There has been extremely limited research on, and assessment of, the extent of the DFG issue in New England (approximately from Cape Cod to northern Maine). There are no good estimates as to how much DFG currently exists in the area, how much is created annually, or what impacts it might be having to target and non-target species or habitat.

The North East Regional DFG Workshop, held on November 18, 2008 at the New England Aquarium brought together members from the marine debris community from around New England and the United States. The overall objectives of the workshop were to understand the issues and implications of DFG. Participants gained an understanding of what DFG is, how it occurs, what threats it poses to people and wildlife, how it's retrieved, what obstacles exist to retrieving and disposing of it, and some possible solutions. Goals to develop a framework for addressing the issues were discussed and participants helped frame a set of problems and generate ideas and solutions for tackling them. These ideas and solutions will help to form a framework to address these issues and create action steps; and the formation of a North East working group/consortium on derelict fishing gear.

The North East Regional DFG Workshop consisted of briefings on different aspects of DFG, including examples of activities in other parts of the country, how to set up a sustainable removal program, the local interest in DFG removal, and related legal and regulatory issues. More than 30 participants worked in small groups to address the issues of (1) detecting and assessing the DFG problem (2) retrieval and disposal of DFG and (3) Legal Implications and remedies. Highlights from each breakout session will be presented, along with follow-on actions and progress that has been made to date to address the issues raised at the workshop.