

Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office 2015 Year in Review



NOAA
FISHERIES



In New Bedford, Massachusetts: Regional Administrator John Bullard, NOAA Administrator Kathryn Sullivan, and New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell.

From the Regional Administrator

It gives me great pleasure to introduce our Year in Review Report for the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) for fiscal year 2015 (October 2014-September 2015). We are charged with the stewardship of living marine and diadromous resources from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina through Maine using science-based conservation and management. We undertake a wide array of activities in support of that mission.

One of this year's major accomplishments is the development of our strategic plan for 2015 through 2019. In this plan, we identify seven specific objectives to work towards in the coming years. They are:

Sustainable Fisheries: Ensuring sustainable fisheries and promoting fishing communities throughout New England and the Mid-Atlantic.

Protected Resources: Managing, conserving, and rebuilding populations of marine mammals and endangered and threatened marine and anadromous species in rivers, bays, estuaries, and marine waters of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic.

Habitat Conservation: Protecting and restoring marine, estuarine, and riverine habitats to support sustainable fisheries and protected resources.

Community Resiliency: Enhancing fishery community resiliency in order to ensure sustainable fisheries, recovery of protected resources, and healthy habitat.

Aquaculture: Encouraging a thriving marine aquaculture industry in both state and federal waters.

Organizational Excellence: Maintaining a well-trained and proficient workforce.

Customer Service/External Communications: Fostering a well-informed and engaged public.

This report highlights some of our key accomplishments for the past year. Though it is far from a complete list, it represents the things of which we are most proud. In this report, you will find examples of how we are building productive and sustainable fisheries that create and sustain jobs in fishing communities, as well as provide opportunities for recreational enjoyment; how we are building plentiful domestic sources of seafood; how we work towards the recovery and conservation of protected resources and ecosystems on which they depend; and, how we are establishing healthy habitats that support healthy ecosystems.

If you have any questions or suggestions about this document, please feel free to contact Dr. Kevin Chu (kevin.chu@noaa.gov), the GARFO Assistant Regional Administrator for Stakeholder Engagement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Bullard". The signature is stylized and written in cursive.

About Us



VISION

A future in which the American people continue to benefit from a healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems in the Greater Atlantic Region.

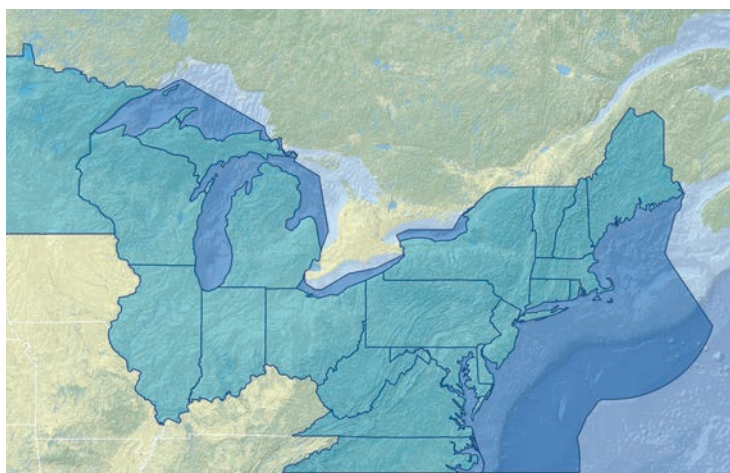
MISSION

Stewardship of living marine and diadromous resources through science-based conservation and management.

The Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office

The Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) is responsible for the science-based stewardship of the nation's living marine and diadromous resources and their habitats throughout approximately 100,000 square miles of the Northwest Atlantic. The region encompasses the temperate, structurally complex large marine ecosystem from Maine to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina; the Great Lakes; and the rivers and estuaries within this range.

GARFO employs approximately 155 federal staff and has an average annual budget (2013-2015) of approximately \$60 million. Directed from the Regional Office in Gloucester, MA, we also have four field offices in the Greater Atlantic region: Orono, ME; Sandy Hook, NJ; Annapolis, MD; and Gloucester Point, VA. In addition, we have port agents and other industry liaison staff in Sedgewick, ME; Portland, ME; Gloucester, MA; New Bedford, MA; Point Judith, RI; Saunderstown, RI; East Hampton, NY; Toms River, NJ; Cape May, NJ; Belle Haven, VA; and Hampton, VA.





Protected Depleted Northeast Groundfish Stocks

The Gulf of Maine cod stock continues to be in poor condition. To protect the stock, we implemented emergency measures reducing catch limits for Gulf of Maine cod. We also worked with the New England Fishery Management Council to develop long-term measures to protect these stocks and with groundfish fishermen to mitigate the impacts of cod restrictions by providing access to healthy stocks.

Provided Disaster Relief for Groundfish Fishery

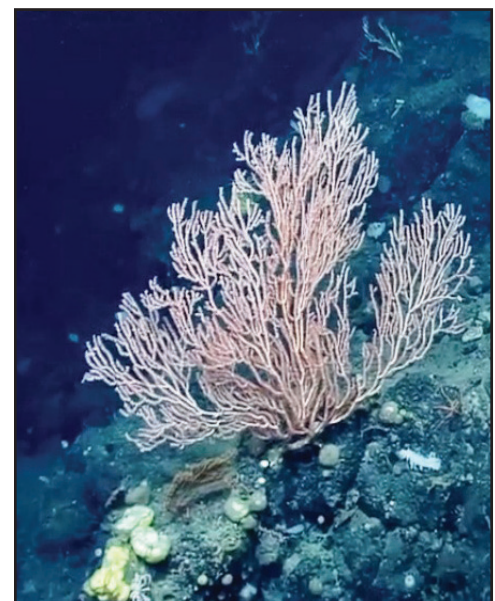
Following up on the 2012 disaster declaration by the Secretary of Commerce for the groundfish fishery, we worked with states to develop plans for distribution of \$32.8 million in federal disaster aid funds. States distributed the last of these funds in 2015 and early 2016.

Made Progress on Rebuilding Fisheries

In 2015, we removed Gulf of Maine haddock and northern window-pane flounder from the list of species for which the annual rate of catch is too high (overfishing list) and added golden tilefish and butterfish to the list of rebuilt stocks. No stocks were added to the overfished (population is too small) or overfishing lists.

Worked with Council to Initiate Protection of 38,000 Square Miles of Ocean Bottom

With the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, we helped develop a proposal to protect deep-sea corals in 38,000 square miles of ocean bottom from current and future fishing activity. The proposal was the product of a workshop during which fishermen and environmental advocates worked together with fisheries managers and habitat experts to develop area boundaries. We will continue to work on deep-sea coral protection in New England in 2016. This marks the first time that the discretionary authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Act will be used to protect deep sea corals from the adverse effects of fishing.



Worked on Conserving Complex Seabed Habitat in New England

Working with the New England Fishery Management Council and a wide range of stakeholders, we are developing measures to protect essential fish habitat for all species managed by the New England Council. The measures, if approved, would reconfigure existing closed areas to address the adverse impacts of fishing gear used in the groundfish, clam, and sea scallop fisheries operating in the Gulf of Maine and on Georges Bank and would protect more complex seabed habitat than the existing closed areas in a smaller footprint. We hope to finalize these measures in 2016.



Increased Protection for Large Whales While Decreasing Safety Risks and Economic Burden for Fishermen

Working through the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team, we changed the start date of the Massachusetts Bay closed area, reduced the closed period by one month, and increased the size of the area to 912 square nautical miles. These changes reduced the economic burden on commercial fishermen, while also reducing the risk of entanglement to large whales. We also allowed fishermen in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Maine exemptions from the minimum traps requirement in exchange for unique gear marking requirements for single traps in order to alleviate economic and safety concerns from small boat fishermen.

Enlisted New Partners to Care for Endangered Sea Turtles

The 2014-2015 cold-stunned sea turtle season was the largest on record for Massachusetts, with more than 700 live sea turtles washing up on Cape Cod beaches. This massive influx stretched the limits of local response and rehabilitation facilities. Working with our Sea Turtle Stranding Response Network partners, the Coast Guard, and by making new connections with the general aviation community, we were able to fly dozens of these endangered turtles to facilities in the southeast and Gulf coast for treatment. Shorter transportation times greatly minimized the stress of travel on these critically ill turtles.





In 2015, Atlantic salmon were chosen as one of NOAA Fisheries eight “Species in the Spotlight,” calling attention to their critically endangered status and our plan to help the species recover.

Continued Progress Toward Atlantic Salmon Recovery

Atlantic salmon, which were once native to almost every river north of the Hudson, today are only a remnant wild population in 11 rivers, all of them in Maine. The largest hurdle to their recovery is access to historical habitat, of which only 8 percent is currently accessible. Working with hydropower plants and local river restoration partners, we are restoring access to habitat by removing dams, installing fish passages, and setting high fish passage performance standards at existing hydropower dams to protect all sea-run fish and to ensure economic stability. In addition to local action, we focused on protecting these fish in international waters through multilateral agreements to reduce the effect of foreign fisheries on Maine’s population of Atlantic salmon.

**SPECIES
in the
SPOTLIGHT**

Developed New Conservation Plan for River Herring

NOAA Fisheries and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission announced the release of the River Herring Conservation Plan this year. The goals of the plan are to increase public awareness about river herring (alewife and blueback herring) and to foster cooperative research and conservation efforts to restore river herring along the Atlantic coast. The plan builds upon past and current river herring conservation projects and coordinates ongoing activities. The plan was developed with input and information provided by the River Herring Technical Expert Working Group, a group of scientists, industry representatives, conservation groups, tribal leaders, and government officials with expertise related to river herring.



River herring using the Milford Dam Fish Lift, seen through the viewing window, to access prime spawning and nursery habitat in the upper watershed.



Focused on Habitat: Penobscot and Choptank

Two habitat focus areas, the Penobscot River and the Choptank River, are part of NOAA's Habitat Blueprint campaign, a framework for strategic action across programs and with partner organizations to address the growing challenge of coastal and marine habitat loss and degradation. In 2015, we made progress in restoring habitat—oyster reefs, tidal wetlands, fish passages, culvert replacements—in both habitat focus areas.

Protected Habitat and Marine Animals from Construction Effects of Nation's First Offshore Windfarm

Working closely with the Army Corps of Engineers and the private company Deepwater Wind, we implemented important proactive protections for both habitat and marine animals prior to the construction of the first-in-the-nation offshore wind farm. By re-routing cables to avoid sensitive areas and requiring specific construction protocols, we were able to minimize the negative effects of such large-scale in-water construction.

Improved Coordination and Collaboration for Inter-Agency Consultations on Endangered Species and Essential Fish Habitat

Over the past year, we improved relations and coordination with other Federal agencies to minimize effects of their work on endangered species while also streamlining and enhancing the efficiency of our consultation requirements. Using programmatic approaches, technical guidance, and training sessions tailored to partner agencies, we are able to better protect important species and habitats.





Hosted First Northeast Aquaculture Workshop

In September, we hosted the first-ever workshop of experts in mussel aquaculture, commercial fishing gear technology, marine science, and sea turtles and marine mammals to discuss the potential for entanglements with mussel longline aquaculture gear. Aquaculture is growing quickly in both near and offshore waters, making it increasingly important to assess the risk of interactions with protected species of marine mammals and sea turtles and to determine ways to minimize harmful and fatal events.

Increased Focus on Stakeholder Engagement

In 2015, GARFO substantially increased outreach efforts, organized through a new Stakeholder Engagement Division. In addition to a communications staff of four and a network of ten port agents located from Maine to Virginia, we developed a communications plan that guides the work of this new division to provide clear and accessible information about regulatory requirements; to improve and increase dialogue and feedback with our stakeholders; and to increase public and internal knowledge of our programs. Our port agents talked with fishermen and other constituents at more than 25 boat shows and fishing club events throughout the region. As part of our efforts to communicate more efficiently and effectively, we updated our email service and added two text alert systems (recreational and commercial fisheries) to provide timely notification about regulatory changes.

Provided Responsive Customer Service

The region's management programs require the fishing industry to obtain permits and other fishing authorizations and to submit reports of all fishing activities. In 2015, GARFO staff issued more than 7,500 fishing permits, 900 dealer permits, and 2,600 operator's licenses; transferred 500 vessel permits and 1,000 catch allocations; provided 250 catch histories and customized data requests; and fielded 6,000 inquiries from fishermen or dealers. In addition, the region monitors nearly 300 quotas and catch allocations and provided weekly updates to fisheries managers and the public. In 2015, staff made substantial improvements to the data quality assurance program to improve the accuracy and timeliness of catch accounting. The quality assurance program enabled us to eliminate a requirement for vessel owners to submit vessel logbooks for reporting periods when they were inactive ("did not fish" reports), relieving the industry of a reporting burden.



Improved Information and Resource Management

We shortened our response time to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and eliminated the backlog of open FOIA cases by switching to a new system for compiling administrative records and FOIA responses. We also began deploying new software to help the region meet the ever-increasing data demands. We laid the groundwork for modernization efforts in the area of expanded electronic trip reporting. Tools built and maintained by GARFO staff will soon be available for web submission of trip reports and mobile device reporting. These various technological improvements will provide a better and more efficient customer experience for the industry we serve.

Planned for Implementation of Electronic Monitoring and Reporting Systems

We have been working with several groundfish sectors, the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, and The Nature Conservancy to develop an electronic monitoring program that is moving towards implementation and will be the first in the region. For the 2016 fishing year, we are developing an exempted fishing permit that uses electronic monitoring for discards on groundfish trips that would otherwise have had an at-sea monitor. In 2015, we released two electronic monitoring cost analysis reports to help inform conversations about additional use of electronic monitoring in the region, and worked with several vendors to approve new electronic logbook systems.





Floating oyster grow-out cages. Photo credit: Dana Morse, Maine Sea Grant



U.S. Secretary of Commerce
Penny Pritzker

**Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and
Atmosphere, NOAA Administrator**
Kathryn Sullivan, Ph.D.

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Eileen Sobeck

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John Bullard

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

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Photos: COVER Scallops: Fishwatch/NOAA; Right whales: Khan/NOAA; Redfish: Bullard/NOAA; Fishing boat: Gilbert/NOAA; Page 2: Taylor/NOAA; Page 3: Gloucester Harbor: Perra/NOAA; Map: Szumylo/NOAA; Page 4: Atlantic cod Bullard/NOAA; Bamboo coral at Mytilus Seamount: NOAA; Page 5: Humpback whales: NEFSC/NOAA; Turtle 1 & 2: Goebel/NOAA; Turtle 3: Sampson/NOAA; Page 6: Penobscot Habitat Focus Area: Trinko/NOAA; Atlantic salmon: Goebel/NOAA; River herring: Trinko/NOAA; Page 7: Howland Dam: Penobscot River Restoration Trust; Flounder in seagrass: NOAA; Page 8: Morse, Maine Sea Grant; Page 9: Recreational fisherman: Curtis/NOAA, Fishing boat: NOAA.