



# Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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## American Eel Technical Committee Meeting

December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025

1:00 pm – 3:00 p.m.

**Technical Committee Attendance:** Kim Bonvechio (FL), Ingrid Braun-Ricks (PRFC), Brad Chase (MA), Casey Clark (ME), Caitlin Craig (NY), Sheila Eyler (USFWS), Corinne Flora (NY), Shakira Goff (VA), Matt Lee (NH), Todd Mathes (NC), Pat McGee (RI), Kevin Molongoski (USGS), Jim Page (GA), Alexis Park (MD), Eddy Perri (USFWS), Mike Porta (PA), Jen Pyle (NJ), Troy Tuckey (VIMS), Ellen Waldrop (SC), Tim Wildman (CT), Chris Wright (NOAA), Jordan Zimmerman (DE)

**Commissioners in Attendance:** Erika Burgess (FL), Jesse Hornstein (NY, Board chair)

**AP Member Attendance:** Mitch Feigenbaum (AP Chair)

**Staff:** Caitlin Starks (FMP Coordinator), Samara Nehemiah (stock assessment scientist)

### Discussion of Aquaculture Plan Criteria

The Board tasked the Technical Committee (TC) with reviewing the criteria for selecting aquaculture harvest sites in Addendum V. In reviewing the Maine aquaculture plan in July 2025, the TC felt some of these criteria were not met and that some of the language should be reviewed. C. Clark of ME suggested that some of the language of the criteria as written may not apply to Maine because there is already a commercial glass eel fishery in place. ME noted that as a state they would still want to see recommendations kept coastwide but made some suggestions on the criteria.

C. Starks noted that there are two options for addressing any concerns with the current Addendum V language: 1) modify the language in the addendum, which would require a new addendum, would be a longer process, and may not be necessary at this stage; or 2) develop a TC memo that outlines how the TC recommends these criteria be evaluated in various scenarios. There was large support for a memo instead of an addendum process, and the TC agreed to draft a memo that clarifies the interpretation of the criteria in the addendum for the Board to consider at its February meeting.

#### *Criterion 1*

ME recommended that criterion 1 (establish glass eel monitoring) be removed entirely for all proposals for consistency. The TC discussed this suggestion and S. Eyler and B. Chase expressed opposition to removing criterion 1. S. Eyler noted that this was an important criterion for evaluating NC's aquaculture harvest and that it provides an opportunity to collect more information in scenarios where there is not a lot of information already. She suggested allowing for caveats but not to remove this criterion entirely. B. Chase noted that the language of

'preference' in Addendum V was intended to allow for exemptions and highlighted the need for monitoring if states want to establish new harvest.

S. Eyster suggested that the criterion could note that glass eel monitoring should occur in the jurisdiction covered by an aquaculture plan. So, if the state is already doing monitoring, then nothing additional needs to be done.

There was also some discussion on what indices could be used for monitoring. M. Lee asked if harvest in a system could be used in lieu of monitoring program to understand effects of aquaculture. C. Clark thinks it could potentially be done but would require some further thought and discussion. In the case of ME, most harvest for aquaculture is taken after the commercial harvest, so there may not be a direct relation.

### *Criterion 2*

ME recommended criterion 2 remain as is. This was generally supported and the TC did not have much discussion on this criterion.

### *Criterion 3*

ME suggested the following language for criterion 3: "Watershed characteristics that are prone to relatively high mortality or that otherwise make the watershed unlikely to produce large numbers of adult eels. Characteristics could include steep gradient, multiple dams, or small drainage area." This language suggests that high mortality of glass eels would lead to fewer adult eels.

It was also noted that they see a lot of mortality through cannibalism in ME. B. Chase agreed with the suggestions for criterion 3 put forth by C. Clark. He also noted that it could be worthwhile to include language to suggest that one or two of these criteria can be relaxed if a plan can demonstrate that harvest won't have future impacts on stock recruitment.

T. Mathes provided an example for NC's previous proposal, which was initially held to strict criteria. In their proposal, they provided information on water quality and distance of water bodies, among other variables. T. Tuckey suggested that future proposals be clear on why there are high mortality rates in that system.

### *Other discussion*

TC members also discussed the utility of YOY monitoring across states including the management decisions that are made due to the YOY samples. J. Zimmerman asked whether there is any information or support that can be put in the memo that help the Board and the TC understand how monitoring helps drive management decisions. C. Clark suggested that fishery-independent monitoring helps ME understand the bigger picture regarding eel population more than harvest information. He suggested it helps inform seasonal changes (e.g., temperature) and how that may affect glass eels at specific locations, and helps understand harvest impacts through comparisons of locations with and without harvest. Overall, C. Clark noted ME's

monitoring program is representative of the entire state dynamics, but that these programs could be site-specific depending on the conditions of the system they operate in.

B. Chase noted that MA's YOY surveys are fit into sampling for other surveys so that there is no additional cost. He thought their survey did have value as a signal of recruitment failure and has become an index of abundance in stock assessment. T. Tuckey also noted that in many of the years throughout most surveys' time series, programs have been monitoring eels under very low abundance regime. Therefore, we do not have information about what recruitment looks like when abundance is high and this should be kept in mind for long-term monitoring. Additionally, the stock assessment shows that recruitment is highly variable along the coast and there is value to having numerous sites along the coast to be able to understand coastwide trends.

Some members expressed interest in developing clarification on the monitoring requirements going forward. Additionally, M. Feigenbaum noted that if the TC should have conversations about the viability of the YOY surveys, the AP would like to participate in those conversations.

### **Consider Florida Proposal to Discontinue Young-of-year Sampling**

K. Bonvechio gave a presentation on FL's proposal to discontinue the YOY sampling. FL has only one sampling site in NE FL (Guana River) that is free flowing at high tide, and she noted they only collect glass eel with active gears (e.g., dip netting every 30 min) rather than passive gears. FL had some concerns with the utility of this sampling program as they typically catch much fewer eels than other states (<20 eels a year). Therefore, it was suggested that their catch rates may not provide an accurate estimate of recruitment. Due to the high costs per eel, FL has prioritized funding sampling efforts for other eel life stages that could potentially be more useful for management. They noted that the University of North Florida (UNF), who conducts the survey, did secure outside funds for the 2026 sampling season but this is not a guaranteed funding source.

FL noted that they conduct other surveys (e.g., electrofishing surveys) that target other life stages, which are provided to the stock assessment subcommittee annually, but their surveys have not previously been considered in the stock assessment. E. Burgess added that there is a strong financial strain right now and FWC's evaluation is that there are better ways to invest their money in eel monitoring.

There were some concerns raised about potentially losing this survey as it is the most southern YOY survey along the coast. B. Chase noted that the index from this survey performed well in the power analysis during the last benchmark but also recognized there is a high cost to FWC to continue. A. Park would like to see the survey continued because of location of the survey and because it could reflect more trends that are affecting this region that should be explored.

The TC also recognized that there are some reasons to discontinue the survey. Some TC members recognized that it is difficult for a state to justify continuing a survey that isn't producing significant results. Additionally, members recognized that the high cost per eel may be unsustainable without understanding the utility of the survey. GA noted that they also had a survey that was ineffective, which they decided to discontinue for a more productive survey.

However, S. Eyler noted that surveys that see 0's in their catches are not necessarily unproductive and could highlight a trend in the area. J. Zimmerman was concerned about the implications of coastwide monitoring requirements if the TC were to support ending a survey in one state. TC members were interested in how FL's electrofishing surveys could be used to replace information lost by the YOY survey.

Overall, TC members felt they needed more time to evaluate FL's data given that it performs well in the power analysis. Members suggested that the TC should look at the stock assessment contributions and management use of Florida's surveys compared to all coastwide YOY surveys. B. Chase suggested the TC evaluate the stock assessment report to evaluate the impacts of the coastwide surveys. Additionally, TC members suggested a data prioritization exercise to help states better prioritize their sampling efforts going forward.

The TC decided to meet again to continue the discussion on this task and develop a recommendation on FL's YOY survey. Thus, the TC noted that it will not have a recommendation at the February meeting.

### **Discuss Sampling Changes at Gardy's Millpond**

T. Tuckey discussed changes to YOY sampling at Gardy's Millpond after a dam breach. The pond now has two entry points for the glass eels. T. Tuckey asked for guidance on how to continue sampling at this site as they have 25 years of data and wanted suggestions on whether they should seek out another site along the Potomac River. However, it was noted that finding an alternative site would be difficult.

The TC discussed the benefits of retaining this site, given the long time series. TC members suggested looking for correlations of new two-entry site dynamics with historical data. It was also suggested to install eel ramps below both "spillways". Overall, there was consensus to maintain the data stream at this location, but to make note of the changes to the system and potential survey impacts.

### **Elect TC Chair and Vice Chair**

The TC elected K. Bonvechio as Chair with no opposition. K. Bonvechio will serve in this role until the end of 2027.

There were no nominations for Vice Chair. C. Starks will follow up with TC members regarding nominations for this position.

### **Next Steps**

C. Starks will schedule a follow-up meeting in January 2026 to look at FL data and YOY surveys. At this meeting the TC will look at the data considered in benchmark assessment, how data sources were used in the assessment, how surveys rank compared to other YOY surveys, and how similar YOY surveys are to other surveys in the region.

The TC will develop a memo regarding the aquaculture criteria. C. Starks will draft the memo and send it to the group with a meeting summary. The TC will aim to have edits back by January 9<sup>th</sup>.