



Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office 2017 Year in Review





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VISION

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

MISSION

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



About Us

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 154 federal staff and 64 contractors, with an average annual budget of approximately \$48.2 million. Directed from the Regional Office in Gloucester, Massachusetts, we also have four field offices in the Greater Atlantic region: Orono, Maine; Sandy Hook, New Jersey; Annapolis, Maryland; and Gloucester Point, Virginia. In addition, we have port agents and other industry liaison staff in Sedgewick, Maine; Portland, Maine; Gloucester, Massachusetts; New Bedford, Massachusetts; Point Judith, Rhode Island; East Hampton, New York; Toms River, New Jersey; Northfield, New Jersey; Belle Haven, Virginia; and Hampton, Virginia.

From the Regional Administrator

I am proud to present the third annual report of the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO). In this Report, you will read about the scope and variety of GARFO's accomplishments in Fiscal Year 2017. Sometimes we at GARFO feel as if we are constantly responding to short term crises – “putting out fires” we call it. But I think this year should be remembered as the culmination of several major, years-long efforts to improve ocean conservation. I would particularly like to highlight three such actions:



- We finalized the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Deep Sea Coral Amendment in December. This action closes an area the size of Virginia to bottom trawling to protect corals in offshore canyons.
- We also finalized Mid-Atlantic Council's Forage Fish Amendment in September. This action prohibits developing a fishery for important prey species, helping to conserve the food chain required by more valuable fish, marine mammals, and seabirds.
- We published a final rule designating critical habitat for Atlantic sturgeon, helping to conserve these endangered fish.

At GARFO, we must follow the laws of the land, but we strive to find flexibility within those laws to help fishermen. For example, in response to new information, we implemented a windowpane flounder emergency rule in 2017 to remove gear restrictions early and help preserve fishing opportunities. Also, GARFO staff worked closely with the *Illex* squid fleet to better understand daily fishing operations. This allowed us to delay a closure for several days, allowing for additional fishing opportunities and about \$1.25 million in revenue.

We continue to work on streamlining government processes. I am particularly proud that our Protected Resources Division, working with our partners, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Highway Administration, found ways to reduce informal consultation times under the Endangered Species Act from an average of 50 days down to an astonishing 8 days. And although it is far from being finished, we made good progress this year developing a system for storing fishery dependent data in a single database, which will greatly streamline the analysis of fish catches.

None of our accomplishments is ours alone. One of the keys to GARFO's success is the dedication and commitment of our many partners. Indeed, one of the accomplishments of which I am most proud is our continued efforts to improve collaboration with our partner institutions. It is hard to measure the benefits of an extra phone call to keep someone in the loop or of taking a few moments to think about who else needs to see an email, but the dividends of that extra effort are huge.

This will be my last Annual Report, as I am due to retire in 2018. Although I am leaving GARFO, the challenges of managing living marine resources in New England and the Mid-Atlantic are not going away. In the coming year, I expect there will need to be significant attention paid to summer flounder and Atlantic cod. And, the devastating deaths this year of 17 North Atlantic right whales requires us to explore creative ways to protect this iconic species. I am confident, however, that GARFO and our partners will face these challenges head on. By working together, by sharing information and perspectives, we can accomplish great things.

Sincerely,



NOAA
FISHERIES

Promoting and Preserving Sustainable Fisheries



Managed 42 Fish Stocks for Sustainable Use

In 2017, we managed 42 fish stocks in collaboration with the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, the New England Fishery Management Council, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. We worked on rebuilding 14 stocks that are considered overfished (population size too low) and on preventing overfishing (too many fish being caught) on 8 stocks that experienced overfishing in 2016. Overall, commercial fishery values increased in our region in 2016, with the majority of states seeing greater revenues and higher landings.

Established Measures to Protect Unmanaged Forage Fish Species



In September, we approved and implemented the Mid-Atlantic Council's Unmanaged Forage Omnibus Amendment. This amendment establishes the first set of regulatory measures on the Atlantic coast aimed specifically at protecting certain previously unmanaged forage species because of their importance to the food web. Forage species are typically small, with an adult length of less than 10 inches, and feed mainly on plankton. They serve as a food source for commercially and recreationally important fish, marine mammals, and sea birds. The goal is to protect the ecological role these species play in the Mid-Atlantic and to collect more information on catch.

This new information will help inform future scientific assessments and management decisions.

Removed Gear Restrictions for Trawl Vessels in Southern New England

In September, we removed the selective gear requirements trawl vessels fishing in certain areas in southern New England used to limit flatfish catch. The gear restrictions were required because the windowpane flounder catch in 2015 exceeded the limit. However, we were able to remove the restrictions when we received new information indicating that the 2016 catch of southern windowpane flounder did not exceed the catch limits. Removing the restrictions resulted in approximately \$2 million in additional catch of yellowtail flounder, winter flounder, summer flounder, and scup. This type of responsive management provides fishermen with increased fishing opportunities.

Increased Black Sea Bass Quotas Based on New Information

In May 2017, we were able to announce a 53-percent increase in the 2017 commercial black sea bass quota and a 52-percent increase in the 2017 recreational harvest limit based on the benchmark stock assessment released in December 2016. The new scientific information showed improved recruitment and declining fishing mortality rates since 2007 and supported these higher catch limits. In addition, accountability measures put in place to account for an overage in 2015 were removed in May 2017 in response to the new assessment. This allowed both commercial and recreational fishermen to take full advantage of the good news on the health of the fishery for the remainder of the 2017 fishing year.



Hosted Two Recreational Fisheries Roundtables

In April 2017, we heard from nearly 30 private anglers and for-hire captains about their primary concerns with recreational fisheries management at two separate roundtable meetings. The first was in New Jersey during contentious summer flounder management discussions. The second was held in New Hampshire to discuss the difficulties around cod and haddock fishing. Regional Administrator John Bullard was joined by Russ Dunn, National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Advisor, to hear directly from recreational fishermen on how we can work better toward our common goal of sustainable and accessible recreational fisheries.

Piloting 100-Percent Electronic Monitoring for Groundfish Sectors

NOAA Fisheries partnered with The Nature Conservancy, Gulf of Maine Research Institute, Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance, and 14 commercial fishermen to test the feasibility of using EM for catch accounting purposes in the groundfish fishery. This project, which is in its second year, uses participating vessels' actual discards for catch accounting. Data collected through this project is aiding efforts to improve the functionality of EM, refine at-sea catch handling protocols, and support future implementation of an audit-based EM program.

Piloting Electronic Monitoring in Atlantic Herring and Mackerel Midwater Trawl Vessels

Working with 12 commercial vessels, we are evaluating the utility of electronic monitoring in the Atlantic herring and mackerel midwater trawl fisheries. In addition to evaluating electronic monitoring for catch retention and discards, the pilot project also aims to familiarize the fishing fleet with electronic monitoring, gain industry input on operations, and refine cost estimates. Results from this project will help inform the implementation of the Industry-Funded Monitoring Omnibus Amendment and the development of future electronic monitoring programs.





Hosted Community Resilience Workshop

For two days in June, we hosted more than 50 people, including community leaders, fishermen, fishing industry representatives, scientists, and state and federal representatives from New England, to help us better understand the challenges facing fishing communities. The discussion centered on what communities need to adapt to changes in the distribution of historic fish stocks, devastating storms, and losses in waterfront infrastructure. As a result of the workshop, we are working to improve information flow and make management, permits, and regulations more flexible and agile to respond quickly to changing conditions. We plan to hold another workshop in the Mid-Atlantic in the spring of 2018.

Working Collaboratively to Develop Deep-Sea Coral Protection Areas in the Mid-Atlantic and New England

In collaboration with fishermen, the environmental community, and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, we implemented the first-ever proactive management action under the discretionary authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Act to protect deep-sea corals, which provides vital habitat for fish and invertebrates, including commercially important grouper, snapper, sea bass, rockfish, shrimp, and crab. This development of this plan included a workshop during which fishermen and environmental advocates worked with fisheries managers and habitat experts to develop area boundaries that the Mid-Atlantic Council then approved. The final rule, published in December 2016, protects 24 million acres (20 times larger than Grand Canyon National Park) of ocean bottom from bottom-tending fishing gear. We are currently at work on a similar action with the New England Council.

Withdrew Approval of Groundfish Sector IX Operations Plan

In March 2017, Carlos Rafael, a.k.a. “The Codfather,” pled guilty to falsifying at least 700,000 pounds of fish caught by his vessels who made up the majority of Groundfish Sector IX, fishing primarily out of New Bedford. Rafael was sentenced to 46 months in prison in September 2017. After consultation with the New England Fishery Management Council, we withdrew Sector IX’s operations plan in November 2017, as the sector’s enforcement committee had not yet completed an investigation of the sector’s operations issues or determined the full extent of the sector’s non-compliance. We will continue to work with Sector IX’s new Board of Directors to clean up the mess left behind by Rafael’s criminal enterprise.



Protecting Living Marine Resources and Their Habitats

Completed Five-Year Review with Recommended Actions to Help Right Whales

We completed a five-year review to make sure North Atlantic right whales are accurately listed under the Endangered Species Act. The review concluded that right whales are properly listed as “endangered.” Although progress had been made toward recovery of the species, in recent years they have experienced low rates of reproduction, longer calving intervals, declining abundance, continued mortality from vessel and fishing gear interactions, change in prey availability and increased transboundary movement and risk that has slowed recovery efforts. To address these shortcomings, we implemented a series of actions to promote species recovery. These actions include designating a Right Whale Recovery Coordinator; working on identifying a new Recovery Team; increasing collaborations with Canada to reduce vessel strikes and gear entanglements; convening a bilateral working group with Canada to focus on addressing the science and management gaps that are impeding the recovery of North Atlantic right whales in U.S. and Canadian waters; and re-examining the effects of fisheries on right whales.

Declared an Unusual Mortality Event for the North Atlantic Right Whale

We worked very closely with NOAA Fisheries headquarters staff and collaborated with regional partners and Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada to declare an unusual mortality event (UME) for the North Atlantic right whale in August. This UME declaration will provide access to world class veterinarians, oceanographers and biologists that will help us assess the cause of the UME, will provide resources to help with the investigation of over a dozen right whale deaths since April 2017, and will make available additional resources to respond to any new strandings that occur.



Formed Feasibility Subgroups to Reduce Large Whale Mortalities

Despite closed areas and gear modifications put in place to reduce the serious injury and mortality to large whales, the recent increase in large whale strandings suggest that additional measures may be needed. Based on the events in 2017, we are forming two Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team Subgroups to investigate the feasibility of using whale release rope (rope with a 1,700 lb breaking strength) and alternative approaches to gear marking. The other group will consider the feasibility of ropeless fishing. Research and findings of these two subgroups will be presented next fall to the ALWTRT at-large so they can make an informed decision on the feasibility of these techniques.

Celebrated Efforts to Restore Endangered Atlantic Salmon

In June, researchers, academics, fisheries managers, non-governmental organizations, and members of the local salmon club came together to recognize the hard work that has gone into restoring the Penobscot River's habitat for sea-run fish. The Penobscot River Restoration Project removed two dams and improved passage around two others. As a result, critically endangered Atlantic salmon, as well as American eel, river herring, shad, and other sea-run fish have improved access to hundreds of miles of their historic habitat.

We recognized two individuals who have been instrumental in helping to restore this population of endangered fish. We presented Claude Westfall with the 2017 International Year of the Salmon Inspiration Award for his work as the founding member of the Veazie Salmon Club, his help defeating the proposed reconstruction of the Bangor Dam and the construction of the Basin Mills Dam, and for being the driving force behind the Maine Atlantic Salmon Museum. We presented Andy Goode with the 2017 Species in the Spotlight Award for his work on the Penobscot River Restoration Project, the removal of Coopers Mills Dam, and improvements to the Head Tide Dam on the Sheepscot River.

Designated Critical Habitat for Atlantic Sturgeon

In August, NOAA Fisheries designated critical habitat for five distinct population segments of Atlantic sturgeon in more than 3,968 miles of important coastal river habitat from Maine to Florida. This is an important step towards ensuring the recovery of this species. The designation doesn't require new restrictions on commercial or recreational fisheries, nor does it create any preserves or refuges. Instead, the designation will guide federal agencies in avoiding and minimizing impacts to habitat critical to the recovery of Atlantic sturgeon.



Started Planning for International Year of the Salmon in 2019

Led by the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization and the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission, the International Year of the Salmon campaign aims to create awareness and foster understanding of the issues facing salmon and their importance to the communities that benefit from the resource. Working with a dedicated campaign contractor, we are planning activities to stimulate investment in research which will improve knowledge, provide the necessary data and information systems, inform a new generation of scientists, and support salmon conservation and restoration around the globe.

Increased Marine Mammal Stranding Response Capacity on Long Island, NY

After a young humpback whale stranded in Moriches Bay, New York, last year and garnered strong local and regional attention, we met with the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation, the NY Department of Environmental Conservation, law enforcement officials, U.S. Coast Guard representatives, and the Atlantic Marine Conservation Society to discuss new partnerships and reinforce existing partnerships, to help enhance marine mammal stranding response capacity on Long Island. As a result of these discussions, a new non-profit organization, the Atlantic Marine Conservation Society, was formed specifically to respond to live large whale strandings, as well as to assist with collecting data from all species of dead marine mammals found on New York beaches or at sea.



Provided Financial and Technical Support for Dam Removals

Around New England and the Mid-Atlantic, aging dams are being removed to improve public safety and restore river and coastal ecosystems. Dam removal in coastal watersheds opens access to spawning and rearing habitats for migratory fish. More than a dozen marine and anadromous fish species, including Atlantic salmon, Atlantic sturgeon, shortnose sturgeon, river herring, and American shad, need freshwater habitats to complete one or more life cycle stages. This year, we removed four dams, and provided technical assistance for another 17 dam removal projects, many of which are scheduled for 2018. We also published a new paper on channel response to sediment releases as the result of dam removals.



Reduced Impacts to Chesapeake Bay from Bridge and Tunnel Expansion

The proposed expansion of two existing tunnel portal islands along the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel (CBBT), crossing the 17-mile wide mouth of the Chesapeake Bay between Cape Charles and Virginia Beach, Virginia had the potential to result in the permanent loss of over 16 acres of benthic and open water habitat designated as essential fish habitat for 21 federally managed species, including a sandbar shark Habitat Area of Particular Concern. Through the early coordination efforts of our Habitat Conservation and Protected Resources Divisions with the CBBT District, their consultants and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Norfolk District, fill impacts have been significantly reduced to approximately 1.4 acres through the selected construction method of a tunnel boring machine versus dredged and submersed tube technology.

Completed Programmatic Consultations to Streamline Permitting Process

This year, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers revised and renewed nationwide permits (NWP) and New England States General Permits that authorize a variety of activities in habitats used by federally managed species and other commercially and recreationally important fish species. The nationwide permit and general permit program includes more than 50 different individual permits for activities including transportation, utilities, minor fill, and habitat enhancement. Programmatic consultations were completed with the New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Norfolk and New England Districts of the U.S. Army Corps to streamline consultations under the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) and the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (FWCA). Through this programmatic consultation process, we were able to issue general concurrence for a number of individual nationwide permits, and develop regional conditions for others to protect living marine resources. As a result, 90 percent of the nationwide and state general permits issued in our region do not require individual consultation with us under the MSA or FWCA.

Coordinated Treatment of Cold-Stunned Sea Turtles

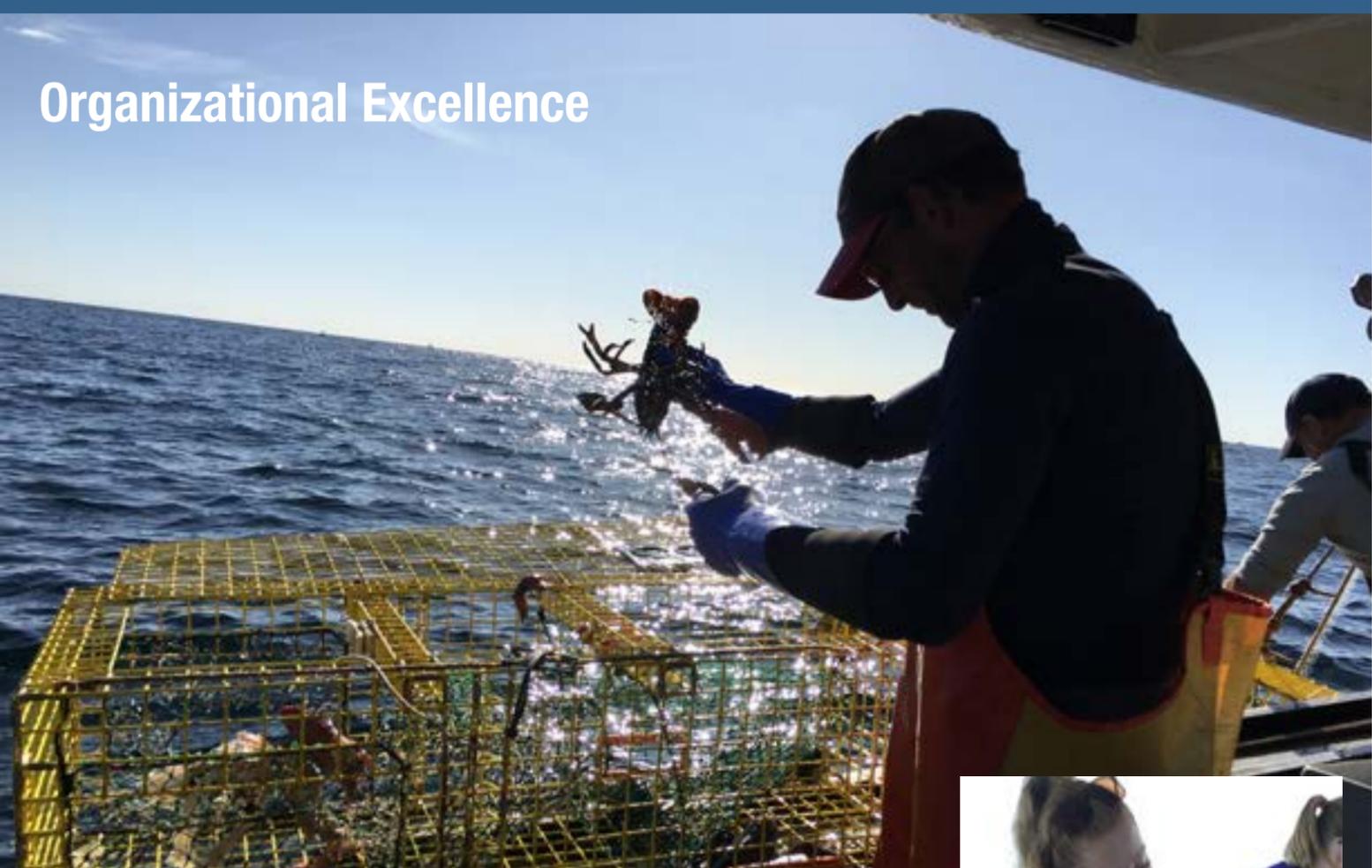
This year's stranding season was the third highest recorded, with 531 cold-stunned sea turtles washing up on beaches from Massachusetts to Virginia between October 20, 2016 and January 30, 2017. Of the 531, a total of 344 were alive at the time they were picked up from area beaches. While the majority have been treated and released thanks to dedicated care by partner organizations along the East Coast, some are still being treated at sea turtle rehabilitation facilities.



Approved New England Omnibus Habitat Amendment

After 14 years of research, negotiations, hearings and two additional years of review, we approved the majority of the New England Fishery Management Council's Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat Amendment 2, which updates essential fish habitat designations, habitat areas of particular concern designations, habitat management areas and measures, dedicated habitat research area designations, and groundfish spawning protection measures. The Amendment incorporates the latest scientific information to minimize the effect of fishing on that habitat while balancing the economic needs of the fishing industry. A final rule will be published in early 2018.

Organizational Excellence



Commercial Fishermen Provided Gear Training for Staff

GARFO staff attended two gear workshops to learn about fishing gear from those who know it best: commercial fishermen. Organized by New Hampshire Sea Grant and GARFO's Cooperative Research Coordinator, the spring workshop focused on gillnet and trawl gear, while the fall workshop focused on lobster gear. Staff went out on commercial fishing boats with fishermen and got a hands-on education in how to deploy and retrieve gear, how to identify species, and how to sort the catch. Overall, the workshops created opportunity for positive dialogue to occur between all parties.



Awarded Grants Totaling \$21 Million

As part of administering our \$48.2 million budget, we manage grant applications, reviews, and awards. This year, we reviewed and awarded \$21 million in grants for the Species Recovery Grants Program, Marine Mammal Rescue and Stranding Programs, Bay Watershed Education and Training Program, Atlantic Salmon Species in the Spotlight and International Year of the Salmon Initiatives, and Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant Program. In 2017, our region was awarded funding for 14 of the 41 Saltonstall-Kennedy grants awarded across the country, totaling \$3.6 million in federal support for projects addressing regionally important issues such as climate change effects on fisheries, marketing and distribution of less popular fish species, and new aquaculture systems and techniques.

Streamlined Aquaculture Permit Process

This year, the Baltimore District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began using Nationwide Permit 48 to authorize aquaculture activities within the State of Maryland in order to streamline and accelerate the review of permit actions. Working with the Army Corps, the State of Maryland and NOAA's Chesapeake Bay office, we developed regional conditions for the nationwide permit that minimize the need for Endangered Species Act and Essential Fish Habitat consultations while protecting sea turtles and sturgeon, submerged aquatic vegetation, a Habitat Area of Particular Concern for summer flounder, as well as habitat for anadromous fish.



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 2017, we issued more 800 dealers permits, 6,000 fishing permits, and 2,500 operator's licenses; transferred 500 vessel permits and 1,000 catch allocations; provided 250 catch histories and customized data requests; and fielded 6,500 inquiries from fishermen or dealers. In addition, we monitor nearly 300 quotas and catch allocations, provide weekly quota updates to fisheries managers and the public, and make catch projections to support in-season management changes, as needed.

Completed Section 7 Consultations

In 2017, we completed our ninth Biological Opinion on the Federal Highway Administration's proposed replacement of the Tappan Zee Bridge in New York, which has undergone significant project changes since it was originally begun in 2012. Our latest Biological Opinion contains updated requirements for protecting endangered species while keeping the project moving forward. We also implemented a pilot program to streamline our Section 7 informal consultation process under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Working with our partners, including the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Highway Administration, we found ways to reduce ESA consultation times from an average of 50 days down to 8 days. Decreased consultation time shortens time required for project permitting, and allows projects to proceed without delay, while maintaining a high quality of review of potential impacts to threatened and endangered species and their habitats.



Improved Communications Support and Reach

We held media training for 24 GARFO staff to help them better understand how to prepare for interacting with the media. With the acquisition of a "Go Box" containing multimedia devices, including mobile printers, a high quality camera, a Go-Pro camera for underwater shots, microphones, lights, and more, the Communications Team is now able to provide on-the-go support for strandings and other events. We also joined the social media world with our new Facebook page, jointly managed by GARFO and Northeast Fisheries Science Center.

Heard More from Fishermen and Fishing Communities



We have continued to prioritize engagement and relationship-building throughout the region. Not only did we talk to industry members, we also listened to what they were saying, and brought their comments and concerns back to the Regional Office. We continue to search for new opportunities for community engagement.



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Wilbur L. Ross, Jr.

Administrator of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Undersecretary of Commerce
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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

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