

**Connecticut River Atlantic Salmon Commission
Meeting Minutes
January 23, 2002**

Agenda Items

1. Call to Order, Determination of Quorum, Approval of Today's Agenda & Minutes of Last Three Meetings

Chair Duncan McInnes called the meeting to order at 10:08 a.m.

It was determined that a quorum was present. There was no change to the agenda.

Mr. Jaime Geiger moved to accept the Minutes from the November 15, 2000, December 20, 2000, and March 19, 2001 meetings. Mr. Angelo Incerpi seconded the motion and the Minutes were approved.

2. Report of the Executive Assistant

Ms. Janice Rowan provided a brief report on Commission activities in 2001 followed by a report of the Commission's financial transactions and correspondence (attached).

3. Report of the Technical Committee Chair

Mr. Jay McMenemy provided a summary of the activities of the Technical Committee (attached).

The discussion that followed focused mainly on USFWS commitments and budget concerns. Mr. Geiger indicated that the USFWS is expecting further reductions to the Fisheries budget in 2003. The President's budget will be released on February 4, 2002. He pointed out that recent flat budgets have necessitated management of vacancies in the fisheries program to control cost increases that otherwise cannot be absorbed. Though funding stability for 2003 is at a critical point for Fisheries, Mr. Geiger indicated that he would do everything in his power to maintain USFWS commitments to the Connecticut River program. This program is among the USFWS priorities and lies above anticipated cuts to lower priority efforts like participation on the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

Mr. Geiger also shared his hope that Mr. Steve Williams would soon be appointed Director of the USFWS. With new leadership in Washington, there is a belief that the downward funding trend in Fisheries will be reversed beginning in 2004.

The State Commissioners shared the sentiment that it was critical for the USFWS to maintain its commitment to the Connecticut River Atlantic Salmon Restoration Program since the States are making commitments in hard financial times to this program based partly on the cooperative commitment of each of the other Commission member agencies.

The Commissioners also touched on a variety of concerns about the migratory fish return numbers and possible explanations. Ultimately, they charged the Technical Committee with drafting a funding proposal to evaluate the number of salmon reaching Long Island Sound, a current unknown in all data sets for the river. Similar studies are underway in Maine and Canada. The study is expected to be expensive because it will require paid commercial trawlers. The Commissioners requested that the Technical Committee develop a cost estimate that may be funded through the CTSEP fund or other sources. The need for this proposal was immediate.

4. The Nature Conservancy - Connecticut River Strategic Planning

Mr. Dennis McGrath, TNC Connecticut State Director, described the current region-wide TNC initiative to address conservation in the Connecticut River watershed on a landscape level. The first step in strategic planning, understanding the system and what must be conserved, has been undertaken internally with outside advice on fish and aquatic systems. The systems that TNC has identified to address include: the Nulhegan River, Ashuelot River, West River, Westfield River, and lower Connecticut River. The next step in the planning process, scheduled in April, will identify stresses on these systems and the source of those stressors. TNC will identify and focus on the highest priority concerns. Additional planning steps will identify strategies to abate or eliminate these stressors and identify measures of success.

A brief discussion followed Mr. McGrath's presentation. The Commissioner's were interested in how this regional planning and the resulting landscape level conservation process would impact existing TNC activities and relationships that are currently state-based. Mr. McGrath indicated that this is a new approach designed to include the state TNC offices and encourage them to work together across a seamless watershed. Since it is currently evolving, he could not be more specific in his response except that he expected the reorganization to be additive to the existing state efforts. Mr. McGrath further envisions a relationship with the Commission that brings additional capacity to the Commission through TNC's abundant staff and global resources.

Mr. McGrath was encouraged to work with the Commission to explore a complementary conservation role with the Commission in the future and an immediate role as an advocate of the Commission's goals and objectives.

5. CRASC Management Plans for American Eels and River Herring

Mr. Steve Gephard presented a draft outline for an American Eel Management Plan for the Connecticut River Basin. The draft plan was modeled after the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission eel management plan. A basin-wide plan may facilitate individual member agency restoration efforts, ensure fish passage and fishway construction for eels, with Commission support.

The Commissioners agreed that an eel management plan was appropriate. It is important for the Technical Committee to set data collection standards so that collected data is useful and relevant throughout the system. It was recognized that the Commission responsibilities are evolving from species management to systems management and that the Commission should do what is

required to sustain, restore and enhance the basin's aquatic biodiversity. However, the Commissioners also cautioned that manpower and funding should not be diverted from the existing salmon program.

The Commissioners charged the Technical Committee with finalizing the draft eel management plan without providing a deadline. They requested a progress update at the October meeting.

Mr. Caleb Slater reported that a draft river herring management plan is currently under review by the Technical Committee. This draft plan is modeled after the existing shad management plan. Herring declines in the river remain unexplained and will require additional research to identify and address the cause. The Commissioners endorsed the need for this plan and encouraged its completion by the Technical Committee.

6. Update on CRASC Re-Authorization and Funding Initiative & Discussion on New CRASC Strategy for Re-authorization/Funding in 2002

Mr. McInnes initiated this discussion by thanking the Technical Committee and all who helped with the cooperative effort to conduct the Congressional Briefing in Washington, DC. He cautioned that the Commission must send people to Washington to talk to legislators and decision makers as much work remains to ensure re-authorization of the Compact and a funding appropriation.

The draft legislation has passed the Senate as written but with the addition of an Alaska crab rider. The bill was approved in the House by the Resource Committee with a reduced funding authorization and dispatched without action by the Judiciary Committee before Christmas. That bill has since been on the House calendar for a vote. However, The Commission received information this week that the Judiciary Committee cited a misunderstanding with House Leadership and called the bill back for further consideration. There are indications that Committee plans to reduce the authorization from \$5 million to zero.

The Commissioners did not want to see the pending legislation split into two bills - one for re-authorization and one for funding. It was considered important to identify and address the specific issue that has driven the Judiciary Committee's action. And, beyond that, the current need for additional legislative contacts was highlighted as important in getting the bill passed in the House, conferenced, re-authorized and funded.

It was agreed that action would not be taken before there is better information on problem and/or until the President's budget is released. The Commissioners charged the Coordinator with setting up a conference call after the President's budget is released (expected in a couple of weeks) so that Commissioners can discuss the current status, additional feedback, and state role in influencing the budget.

The potential role of the New England Atlantic Salmon Committee was briefly mentioned. The NEASC role is an agenda item planned for discussion at the coming NEASC meeting in Concord, NH, on January 24, 2002.

The gravity of the funding issue was driven home when Mr. Wayne MacCallum announced that the MAFW has an immediate and critical concern that may impact the state's ability to meet monitoring commitments. The MAFW is fully funded by dedicated license fees and Federal excise taxes. However, the agency cannot expend those funds, as planned, because of two problems driven by the state's administration: (1) the state is under a hiring freeze initiated last November; and, (2) the state has proposed a bill for early retirement designed to reduce the employment roles by mid-March and limit rehires. The freeze and early-outs may preclude the MAFW from hiring seasonals needed for monitoring fishways, and etc.

The Commissioners charged the Coordinator with writing a letter to Governor Swift requesting relief in this case, as needed, and under the guidance of Mr. MacCallum. Supporters were encouraged to contact the Governor for the same purpose.

In the mean time the Commissioners charged the Technical Committee with developing an alternate plan for identifying, prioritizing and addressing the most critical needs if the MAFW is unable to hire seasonals this year. The need for this plan is immediate.

7. Selection of Officers

Mr. Charlie Thoits, who headed the search committee for new Commission officers, nominated Mr. Ed Parker to be Chair and Mr. MacCallum to be Vice Chair. Mr. Incerpi seconded the motion and the Commissioners unanimously agreed to select both as the new leaders of the Commission.

It was also agreed that additional discussion was required to determine if a Secretary/Treasurer was warranted.

Mr. McInnes was thanked for his dedicated service and hard work as the past Chair of the Commission.

8. Other Business

The next regularly scheduled Commission meeting date is October 23, 2002. The Commissioners discussed the need for additional meetings but declined to schedule these except as needed.

Mr. Thoits moved to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 1:12 p.m.

CRASC Meeting Attendance
January 23, 2002

Janice Rowan	USFWS
Jaime Geiger	USFWS
Thomas D. Menard	MA Public Representative
Wayne MacCallum	MAFW
Charles F. Thoits III	NH Public Representative
Maryalice Fischer	PG&E National Energy Group
John Warner	USFWS
Dan Call	Westfield River Watershed Association
Steve Gephard	CTDEP
Jim Carroll	Connecticut River Salmon Association
Dick Bell	Connecticut River Salmon Association
Tom Miner	Connecticut River watershed Association
Nicole Wandeleaer	USFWS
Ken Gillette	USFWS
Henry Bouchard	USFWS
Gabe Gries	NHFG
Caleb Slater	MAFW
Darleen Cutting	USFWS
Corey Wright	Student Conservation Association
Ryan Mertz	Student Conservation Association
Phil Herzig	USFWS
Bob Stira	Northeast Generation Services
Steve Rideout	USGS
Dennis McGrath	The Nature Conservancy
Peter Basta	VT Public Representative
Jay McMenemy	VTFW
Angelo Incerpi	VTFW
Bob Jones	CT Public Representative
Ed Parker	CTDEP
Duncan McInnes	NHFG