



**Connecticut River Atlantic Salmon Commission
Turners Falls, Massachusetts
Meeting Minutes
June 19, 2014**

Agenda Items:

1. Determination of Quorum, Approval of Today's Agenda & Minutes of the November 22, 2013 Meeting (Hyatt)

Chair Mr. Bill Hyatt called the meeting to order at 10:10 a.m.

Mr. Hyatt opened the meeting, and the Commissioners and staff introduce themselves followed by the general audience. Only the NOAA/NMFS representative was unable to attend.

The minutes of the last CRASC meeting on November 22, 2013 were reviewed. A motion to accept the minutes from that meeting was made, seconded, all were in favor with two typo corrections noted.

2. Report of the Coordinator and TECH Shad / River Herring subcommittees (Sprinkle)

Mr. Sprinkle provided a handout and reviewed his Coordinator report, refer to attachment for details. An update on fishway upstream passage counts was provided as of June 17. The total adult salmon returns were very low for all facilities. However, American shad passage counts were relatively high, with the Holyoke count at the 75th percentile (at 365K with long-term mean value 304K), and counts for shad passed upstream of Turners Falls Dam being the third best in its time series, the same as for Vernon Dam. With that said, the passage "rate" relative to Holyoke Dam is approximately 10% which while a substantial improvement over its time series is still well below the 40-60% management plan goal. Vernon Dam appears to again be positioned to fall within the plan's 40-60% passage from the total passed upstream of Turners Falls Dam. It was noted that although fishway counts did not reflect it, the relative abundance measures from the USFWS river herring population assessment suggested a substantial increase in abundances, particularly in the lower Farmington River. More information on that will be covered in a later agenda item. Sea lamprey counts were on the lower end of expected range of variability (long-term mean passage value at HFL is 34K). Various figures on data time-series were reviewed. Two figures were shown that described both river discharge and water temperatures for the spring to this date, illustrating the relatively high and sustained early spring flows and cool temperatures that delayed effective fishway operation and thus passage, which was compressed as a result. Other river basins, beginning with the Susquehanna and moving northward were reviewed and discussed for fish counts of shad and herring mainly. Interestingly the Hudson River fisheries program detected large increases in blueback herring abundance this year compared to 2013 and earlier. Alewife counts at the many coastal fishways that states monitor were mixed in terms of adults. The poor adult salmon returns were a consistent theme for Merrimack River and the various Maine rivers. Mr. Gephard noted that pre-fishery abundance indexes had indicated this was to be a poor return year.

Mr. Karl Meyer stated that he had been locked out of the Vernon Dam public fishway viewing area on 6/15 in daytime hours. He asked why that should be the case and if something could be done.

Chair Hyatt asked and received a motion that was seconded to accept this Coordinator report, all were in favor.

Mr. Sprinkle referred to a second handout/report that covered updates for the Shad and River Herring subcommittees. Mr. Sprinkle noted the two subcommittees had met in February and materials from that meeting could be obtained from him. A review of USFWS river herring assessment and restoration activities was given describing sampling activity, with summaries on the numbers of alewife and bluebacks by sex and sample area that had been sampled to date and the number brought back to the lab for age structure processing. Fish sample sizes are

large with over 2,000 blueback captured and processed and 209 alewife (not commonly seen and then only early in spring, lower river). Relative abundance, catch rates, as reported in fish/min was substantially greater in many sampling areas for a sustained period. Although fishway counts remained very low for bluebacks, similar to last year, the assessment program showed catch rates 4-8 times greater than those observed in 2013. This was not completely unexpected. Mr. Sprankle noted the 2010 juvenile shad survey by CTDEEP had its highest ever blueback herring abundance that year, which would translate to age-3 fish last season, but more likely age-4 fish in 2014. This ongoing study will be able to clearly demonstrate the extent of this cohort's contribution from the large otolith sample later in the year. In addition it was noted that USFWS captured and transferred ~4,600 bluebacks from Wethersfield Cove CT and assisted CTDEEP in obtaining 1,000 bluebacks they transferred into the middle Farmington River. Some preliminary age structure information for bluebacks sampled during 2013 was provided for the Farmington (age-8 oldest) and Westfield River (age-6 oldest) then relative abundance measures were reviewed by area and date for 2013.

Chair Hyatt asked if the juvenile shad index (CTDEEP Seine Survey) was also high in 2010. Mr. Sprankle referred to a data table and noted that it was among the highest values documented in that time-series.

Mr. Fisk asked why are the bluebacks not passing if their numbers appeared to be increased? Mr. Gephard replied it is not clear what the mechanisms are, but at Rainbow Dam he and others saw schools of bluebacks in and around the fishway entrance they just did not move up into the ladder.

3. Report of the Technical Committee (Slater)

Dr. Slater provided a handout on the CRASC Technical Committee's recent meeting on June 12, 2014 and the various subcommittees activities with the exception of shad and river herring covered earlier. That hand out is included in its entirety here:

Fish Passage Subcommittee

John Warner (USFWS), Brett Towler (USFWS), and Melissa Grader (USFWS)

Holyoke – Connecticut River

- The USFWS, NMFS, MADFW, MDEP CRWC, and TU are very close to a final agreement with HG&E on a new downstream fish passage facility for the Holyoke Project. The facility includes a new rack/fish screen, upper and lower level fish bypasses that combine all flow to the bascule gate location, a plunge pool for safe egress and design features to improve guidance of shad to the spillway fish lift entrance. Construction is set to begin late this year and be completed by January 2016. Post construction evaluations of the facilities will following in 2016.

Connecticut River FERC Relicensings

- Study plans for both the TransCanada and FirstLight Projects have been approved by FERC.
- In 2014, studies related to hydraulics, instream flow studies and other studies of the physical environment will be undertaken.
- Due to the Vermont Yankee shutdown, all fish and water quality studies have been postponed to 2015 so that results reflect the post-VY river conditions.
- Consultation with and FirstLight and TransCanada is continuing on study details for 2014 and more will follow for the 2015 studies.

Mr. Fisk asked about the status of the Northfield Mountain Pumped Storage entrainment study that had gone to dispute by USFWS with a hearing. Mr. Sprankle reviewed that at the hearing, the company offered a sampling design that on further review and input by USFWS was viewed as acceptable. An experimental design will be included in the September Study Plans. A related topic on a Dec 2013 NOAA letter to FLP and FERC stating that ESA consultation was to be required for sampling for shad eggs (part of spawning study) and the fish assemblage study, downstream of Turners Falls. That resulted in FLP notifying FERC they were dropping those activities. The agencies have worked with the company and consultants to develop modifications that may allow approval via NOAA without FERC being directly responsible as "lead" federal agency – which they state they will not do. FERC had explained that they would not go to ESA consultation with NOAA, no precedent apparently (surprisingly) so the

studies would otherwise be dropped from the Study List. Status was unresolved at this time but FLP was willing to work with the agencies.

Mr. MacCallum asked if the CRASC can assist in any way on this. Dr. Slater replied it would be best to wait and see how NOAA responds to any suggested alternative courses. Chair stated that if FERC process is an issue to allowing work we need done being done for relicensing we need to see what can be done, CRASC should be ready to assist on that. Dr. Slater noted he would keep the CRASC updated. Mr. Meyer asked if it was a private group looking to do a survey could they not apply for a permit? Dr. Slater – yes, as was done with consultant working with EPA money for fish survey, the FERC process has FERC as lead fed agency, so different.

Manhan River Dam – Manhan River

- Construction of the fishway is complete and the fishway is operating.
- There is a temporary DC-powered video monitoring system in place; however, there are gaps in recording. Review of the data is underway. Based on the data that has been reviewed so far, 11 sea lampreys have been recorded passing upstream of the dam. As these data are from what we believe is the beginning of the Manhan run, we expect substantially higher numbers once data review is complete (unfortunately, two of what could be the “peak” run days were not recorded: June 9 and 10). At least three other fish species have been documented using the ladder to move upstream or downstream past the dam (species yet to be determined).
- Thanks to Brett Towler, Brian Waz, Alex Haro and Ken Sprankle for helping to make fishway adjustments and set up monitoring equipment and to Melissa Grader for reviewing the video.
- The intent is to have an AC-powered monitoring system in place for next year’s passage season.

Fishway Preseason Inspections

- 4 year that USFWS fishway engineers have met with dam owners and resource agency personnel at the fishways prior to the season to confirm correct operation.
- April 2: Holyoke and Turners Falls
- April 9: Vernon
- All facilities looked good- just a few small adjustments needed.

Salmon Subcommittee

Steve Gephard (CT) gave a quick review of how CT tried, but failed to get the USFWS to open Cronin for sea run salmon for the 2014 returns. As a result all returning sea run salmon are being released. Prior to the passage season, the Tech committee agreed on a tag and release procedure that is being followed. Steve reported that the procedure is being followed and there have been only minor issues reported- all returning salmon have been tagged successfully and released. Salmon have been observed passing both Turners Falls and Vernon- no tags were evident- although the personnel were not really looking for them.

Sea Lamprey Subcommittee

Melissa Grader (USFWS) reported that the latest draft of the Sea Lamprey status report which included major additions by Boyd Kynard was shared with the subcommittee and discussed at a subcommittee meeting held on April 14. At that meeting subcommittee members were assigned sections of the report to review and edit and a new draft will be completed this summer. The Tech committee encouraged the subcommittee to have the report finished prior to the CRASC’s fall meeting.

American Eel Subcommittee

Tim Wildman (CT) gave a very comprehensive report on the ASMFC American Eel Fishery Management Plan Draft Addendum 4 which is now out for public comment. The draft plan contains management options for all American Eel fisheries; Glass eel, Yellow eel, and Silver eel. The Tech committee discussed if and how the CRASC should express its concern for American eel conservation in this public comment process. It was decided that we should ask the Commissioners to authorize a letter from the CRASC to the ASMFC which would put the CRASC on record as 1) supporting the ASMFC’s effort to conserve and manage the American Eel and 2) consistent with our call for downstream protection of migrating silver eels in the CT basin, call for prohibitions against silver eel fisheries.

Chair Hyatt asked about the status of the ASMFC Eel Plan and request for comments. It was noted that the CRASC had likely sent a letter last year to ASMFC with a generic statement of support for more protective conservation measures – particularly for silver eels on out-migration. Mr. Sprankle was to get back to Commission to confirm that such a letter had been sent and satisfied the intent of CRASC input.

Other Business

The Tech committee discussed the desire by the Commission for a comprehensive documentation of the most recent Atlantic Salmon Restoration activities in the basin as a historical document that may be helpful in any future restoration efforts. The question is how to get this done? Several ideas were presented- such as a grad student project or hiring a contract science writer (Any Fisk, CRWC has been approached by one). Both of these options would require some funding- but how much is uncertain. Bill Hyatt (CT) reminded us that at the last Commission meeting he agreed to meet with the Coordinator (Ken) and Duncan McInnes to discuss options of how this project might proceed. This has not occurred yet, but Bill reaffirmed his intention to do so and explore all options including the ones discussed today.

4. Species Status Report (Draft) - American Shad (Sprankle)

Mr. Sprankle referred the Commissioners to a Draft Species Status Report in their folders. The rationale for the intent, design, and information of this report was discussed. It was intended to provide current species (habitat and population) status information, as well as stressors, factors affecting pop dynamics, possible CRASC strategies, challenges, priorities and priority actions among other items.

Mr. Fisk stated he thought the stressors list was helpful but should include entrainment and impingement. He also noted that Mt. Tom power station which appears to be closing has not been using their electrical fish barrier. He noted EPA has just released new rules on the matter of water intakes and discharge. He noted that the EPA/DEP Mt. Tom permit review is occurring now. He noted more information on the fish passage table would be helpful to understand it better and suggested more information to describe the issues with upstream fish passage at Turners Falls Dam as well as for Vernon Dam.

Mr. Hyatt asked about status of shad fisheries – commercial and recreational. It was noted by Mr. Gephard and Mr. Sprankle fishing mortality rates are viewed as not a limiting factors and ASMFC approved CTDEEP Sustainability plan that allows continued fisheries and harvest with monitoring and establish triggers to reduce or close fisheries (based partially on fish passage counts). Dr. Slater – the rec fish data for MA is at least 10 years old for shad fishing surveys. Mr. Hyatt noted we should identify that as a data gap. Mr. MacCallum asked if CT River is Ok relative to the other river systems and what was discussed earlier? Mr. Sprankle noted the CT run is fairly stable at low to moderate level; we are below our Plan's target numbers (based on 1.5 – 2M to mouth – and understanding that approximately 50 percent or more of the run to the mouth passes at HFL upstream. The Tech Comm has concerns for the age structure and proportion of repeat spawners at this time – it is important that stock structure be considered for stock health – not just numbers of adults. Mr. MacCallum asked about repeat spawners. Mr. Gephard noted that in the 1970s the % was around 30% and has declined and sustained currently at less than 5%. Mr. MacCallum asked about causes? Mr. Gephard noted unclear, maybe ocean conditions, maybe fish passage related effects.

Mr. Hyatt asked about the recommendation for a population model? He suggested that should maybe be a later task? Mr. Sprankle noted that rationale for synthesizing all new recent data to help guide management recommendations that are only a few years away. Mr. Fisk asked if an updated management plan in 3-5 years was a reasonable time frame given relicensing needs and uses? He asked if the other species will also have status Plans? Mr. Gephard noted intention was to do brief status plans and also

work on more comprehensive management plans for each of the identified species. Mr. Fisk asked about resources to address identified priorities and noted that CRWC could maybe help on. Mr. Gephard noted that the status report can feed into the management plan. Status report can be updated each year while management plan would be at longer intervals. Mr. Fisk stated would be helpful to make it more readable for the public. Mr. Hyatt asked any Commissioners with comments on this Draft get them to Ken by Aug 15.

5. CRASC history, documentation of Salmon Program (Hyatt)

Chair Hyatt noted that he had not been able to meet with Mr. Sprankle and Mr. McInnes regarding this activity per the last meeting, but plans to during the coming months.

Mr. MacCallum stated for clarification that 2017 should be the last year of adult returns from multi-state stocking in terms of significant numbers. Mr. Gephard replied yes that is correct but CT is still stocking fry at much reduced numbers and plans to continue to do so. Mr. MacCallum asked about Cronin Salmon Station and its current fate, could that facility be used next year maybe? Mr. Gephard noted that Cronin is no longer staffed and USFWS needs money to operate that facility – he note Mr. Sprankle has held meeting with potential partner groups that USFWS is still examining for uses and options. Mr. Gephard noted that CTDEEP has looked at options with their facilities to hold adult returns for spawning and it is not likely to happen. Mr. McCallum asked so if no Cronin, no options currently to capture and hold adults? Mr. Gephard – that is correct.

Mr. MacCallum asked what is the distance limits to capture and move fish to facilities? Mr. Gephard noted no real limit – just obvious logistical concerns with staff and resources. Mr. Palmer stated that the meeting in February on adults did not have any long-term decisions made outside of letting fish swim the river in 2014. Mr. McKeon noted that Cronin is unstaffed and winterized and that USFWS is looking at opportunities for uses. Mr. Hyatt asked if it is clear what USFWS needs in terms of funding etc... Mr. McKeon noted we have provided specific information on costs of well pumps and electricity but with recent loss of the only staff person another complicating factor is now included. Mr. Normandeau asked about the National Fish Hatchery Assessment status. Mr. Hyatt noted that Cronin was not included in that. Ms. White – the plan states no hatcheries will be closed however, funding is at the regional level discretion.

6. Other Business

Mr. Hyatt asked about the status of the Landscape Conservation Cooperative, Ct River Pilot Effort and CRASC involvement. Mr. Sprankle noted that he was one USFWS member and that his agency has Tim Wildman participating and that Mr. Fisk is also a member, so there are CRASC people involved and have been voicing CRASC priorities. Mr. Hyatt stated that CRASC concerns should be addressed by this effort. Mr. Sprankle described how this effort has been welcomed by terrestrial counterparts who have not been working on scale the way CRASC and predecessor has since 1967. Mr. Fisk noted LCC-CTR is looking to create products to aid in decisions, we are learning about products and diadromous fishes with data sets they are using do not exist in similar formats – so challenging. Mr. Hyatt stated priorities for CRASC should be reflected in LCC-CTR. Mr. Sprankle noted our fishery agency approaches and processes do not readily fit the modeling tools developed. We are working to force a fit which we are told is possible and the tools do have barriers data dams to culverts for the basin. Mr. Normandeau stated that if LCC is only brook trout for fishes we are missing the boat. Mr. Hyatt stated an update would be needed on inclusion of migratory fishes at the next CRASC on this. Mr. MacCallum – we need to ensure CRASC priorities are included and need to convey that this group has been an LCC since inception in

1967, we are on the ground doing the work. Mr. Palmer noted that there is a challenge with not having something that can be taken off the shelf for migratory fishes – the data for terrestrial is all habitat coverage basis.

Meeting adjourned at 12:30PM