

# New England Fishery Management Council

Scallop Survey Group Call Re: COVID 19 & 2020 Survey Season

Friday, May 8, 2020

1:30pm – 3:00pm

Conference Call

**Scallop AP and Committee: Please note that the status of proposed and planned work may have changed between the time survey groups met on May 8, and your meeting.**

Council staff, NMFS staff, and the 2020 scallop survey groups participated in a conference call on May 8, 2020 from 1:30pm – 3:15pm. Each survey group provided an update on the outlook for competing survey work in 2020, and Council staff reviewed potential timelines for completing specifications, and a set of draft ‘guiding principles’ for completing 2021/2022 specifications process.

## Key Information/Discussion Points

1. The health and welfare of all survey groups and industry partners is paramount. The 2021/2022 specifications can be completed with using data from last year’s survey information (basically a two-year specifications cycle). No survey group should feel forced or obligated by NMFS or the Council to complete work this year – arrangements can be made to delay projects/awards.
2. Five survey groups planned to complete survey work in 2020. VIMS, SMAST, CFF, ME DMR received scallop RSA awards, the NEFSC had contracted with the R/V Sharp to complete surveys in the Mid-Atlantic and on Georges Bank. Each group is navigating varying sets of institutional constraints.
  - a. CFF and ME DMR are currently planning to move ahead with their survey work. ME DMR hopes to start surveys in early June, and CFF plans to survey with HabCam v3 starting in late June/early July.
  - b. VIMS, SMAST, and the NEFSC all face constraints at this time. VIMS and SMAST are awaiting further guidance at the state level (VA and MA), and from their university systems. Both VIMS and SMAST have been actively working with their respective institutions to develop plans and protocols for conducting surveys during the COVID-19 pandemic. The NEFSC survey is subject to NOAA policy and the ability of the R/V Sharp to sail (UNOLS vessel) as well as its availability. All groups will be facing public health policies in the various states where surveys depart and land.
3. With the situation surrounding COVID-19 evolving daily, additional guidance is needed from states, universities, and NOAA before a plan for the 2021/2022 specifications process can be more fully developed. The Council should expect delays in the schedule that has been used in recent years, which includes taking final action at the January 2021 Council meeting.
4. There was general support for developing a set of ‘guiding principles’ for completing the 2021/2022 specifications cycle. More information is needed before these can be finalized and presented to the Scallop Committee. For example, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is expected to provide additional guidance in the coming weeks.

## Detailed Updates from 2020 Scallop Survey Groups

### Virginia Institute of Marine Science: Dredge Survey

5. VIMS is scheduled to survey the Mid-Atlantic, NLS, CAI, CAII. This is expected to take three survey trips and a total of ~35 sea days to complete. The original plan was to begin survey during the first week of May and finish by early July.
6. Constraints at the state and institutional level:
  - a. State: VA has limited travel, and there is a stay at home order in effect until June 11th. June 12th is overly optimistic to start field work.
  - b. VIMS: There is overarching institutional guidance for conducting research during the pandemic. There may be some flexibility to complete this fieldwork and VIMS is currently exploring how the survey can be conducted differently to comply with state/VIMS mandates. For example, looking into limiting the number of crew and researchers on the vessel.
7. VIMS is awaiting further guidance from the state. Planning and other preparations are moving ahead, but specifics on how to move the survey forward is currently unknown.

### SMAST: Drop Camera Survey

8. The drop camera was awarded to survey in the NLS, MAAA, CAII, and the Gulf of Maine. The original plan was to begin surveys during the first week of May and finish by the end of June.
9. SMAST has developed a COVID-19 sailing plan based on CDC and state guidelines that includes the testing of the crew and researchers before sailing, and taking daily temperature readings; however, the UMass Dartmouth public health office has not authorized the survey work at this time.
10. The Drop Camera surveys are generally 5-7 day cruises. SMAST explained that the cruises could be extended to complete more work (~2 weeks) and limit the overall number of cruises needed.
11. Arrangements have been made to allow for annotations to be completed at home vs. in a shared lab space.
12. SMAST expects that additional guidelines from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts re: COVID-19 will be available around May 18<sup>th</sup>. Until this time, the group is in a holding pattern, similar to VIMS. After the guidelines are available, SMAST expects that they would have a better sense of what work might be able to be completed.

### Coonamessett Farm Foundation: HabCam v3

13. The CFF HabCam is scheduled to survey the Elephant Trunk, Hudson Canyon, NLS-S-deep, Closed Area II and surrounds, and the southern flank of GB. No delays are expected at this point in time and the group is planning to sail in late June/early July.
14. CFF expects that their survey will take ~18 days spread over two cruises. Planning to do 100% of the annotations at sea. If a smaller crew ends up sailing, this plan could change, and some annotations would be done shoreside.
15. CFF has developed COVID-19 protocols for research and noted that they have continued with some research projects during the pandemic.

### NEFSC: HabCam v4 and dredge on the R/V Sharp

16. The survey was scheduled to sail the week of May 11<sup>th</sup> out of Lewes, Delaware, with the first leg in the Mid-Atlantic. The NEFSC had planned for 3 cruises, Legs 2 and 3 would sail out of Woods Hole.
17. The survey is delayed and has not been rescheduled. When the survey might sail needs to be renegotiated as the Sharp is not a NOAA vessel.
18. The NEFSC survey is subject to NOAA policy, the ability of the R/V Sharp to sail (UNOLS vessel) and getting on the schedule. NEFSC may also have state policies to comply with.
19. If there are reduced seadays – one option would be to prioritize HabCam over dredge work. This tool can be operated by a smaller crew, could be easier to maintain social distancing. No decision has been made at this time on whether this approach would be pursued.
20. NEFSC is planning to do annotations at sea during the cruises.
21. Dr. John Hare will be communicating official updates on the status of this survey. No final decision has been made.

### Maine DMR/UMaine

22. The ME DMR/UMaine dredge is scheduled to survey Stellwagen Bank and they are looking to get on the water in early June. Maine's in-state travel ban has been lifted, and they were able to complete their state waters scallop survey using modified protocols. DMR has been using PPE on the survey vessel.
23. For the NGOM survey, the biggest impediment is travel. ME DMR is currently working on logistics of running the survey out of Gloucester and is coordinating with UMaine, who are a partner in this research.
24. Looking for housing options in the Gloucester area that would allow for social distancing.

### General Notes from the Discussion:

25. The group discussed different options for COVID-19 testing before sailing. Dr. Stokesbury explained that New Bedford is running a mobile testing service for the fishing industry. Dr. Rudders said that VIMS staff had been in touch with a company that was offering rapid tests, where the results could be known later that day. There was interest in coordinating on COVID-19 testing options.
26. Enough time needs to be allotted to compile the data from all of the survey groups before the PDT meets. This includes combing data in some cases.
27. The timing of the management track assessment (week of September 14) will make it challenging to make substantial progress on the 2021/2022 specifications. Both Dr. Dvora Hart and Dr. Han Chen will be involved in both processes.
28. The SAMS projections performed well between 2018 and 2019, though the NLS-West was a failure. Using last year's data (2019 surveys) to set 2021 specifications is a possibility if the situation does not improve in the short term. It would be prudent to be cautious given the uncertainties with setting catch advice two years after the survey are completed. Setting catch advice for two years is done in other fisheries and FMPs, and has been done for scallops in the past.
29. The group discussed a scenario in which no surveys were conducted in 2020, but intensive work was completed in 2021. This was framed as a potential model for the surveys going forward if it performed well. There was some concern expressed about pushing all surveys out one year,

even if a group could survey in 2020. One issue is sea-time, as some groups could not take on additional work in 2021 if the 2020 surveys were delayed.

30. Mr. Ryan Silva explained that NMFS has circulated “Guidance for Recipients and Applicants Impacted by the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Due to Loss of Operations” to all of the survey groups. This document was sent on to Council staff for reference. The group discussed the impacts of delaying the surveys a year. One issue is trying to stretch a two-year award across three years. There are programmatic costs that were not budgeted for in this scenario. Survey groups also noted that state budgets will be severely impacted over the next few years as a result of COVID-19.

## Draft Guiding Principles Discussed on the Call:

Draft memo from the PDT to Committee asking the Scallop Committee to develop some guiding principles.

1. The health and welfare of all survey groups is paramount. The 2021/2022 specifications can be completed with using data from last year’s survey information (basically a two year specifications cycle). No survey group should feel forced or obligated by NMFS or the Council to complete survey work this year – arrangements can be made to delay projects/awards.
2. There is uncertainty over how long COVID-19 emergency measures will impact surveys of the scallop resource and limit public meetings and gatherings. The Scallop Committee may want to develop guiding principles for the development of specifications for 2021/2022 should the restrictions continue over an extended period. This would help survey groups, and NOAA and Council staff plan for and execute work, consistent with the Committee’s intent.
3. The Scallop RSA has funded several groups to complete survey work that is used to support management. The NEFSC contracts with the R/V Sharp to conduct annual scallop surveys.
4. Since the situation around scallop surveys will continue to unfold after the June Council meeting, the Scallop PDT recommends the Scallop Committee adopt the following guiding principles for the completion of 2020/2021 Specifications in light of COVID-19:
  - a. Survey Work Completion:
    - i. The health and welfare of all survey groups is paramount. The 2021/2022 specifications can be completed with using data from last year’s survey information (basically a two year specifications cycle). No survey group should feel forced or obligated by NMFS or the Council to complete survey work this year – arrangements can be made to delay projects/awards.
    - ii. The NEFSC and RSA funded survey groups should be given the opportunity to complete their planned survey work, and deliver data to the NEFSC and Council. The specifications process will be planned around the latest date that a survey group can submit the data, no later than October 1, 2020. If RSA survey projects are not able collect data to support the 2021/2022 specifications setting process, the Committee recommends that the awards be delayed to 2021, but that RSA compensation for 2020 be awarded to fund the work.
    - iii. The latest the survey data can be submitted to the NEFSC and Council for use in the 2020/2021 specifications process is October 1, 2020. If data is received from all survey groups on or before September 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Committee may try to use an expedited process to keep the usual timeline of a final vote in December. If data

is received after September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, the Council would take final action on FW33 in January 2021.

- iv. If survey groups need to limit the scope of their surveys, surveys should focus first in access areas that are candidates for fishing in 2021: MAAA, NLS-S-deep, CAII and surrounds. For these areas, it is preferable to have biomass estimates from dredge and optical surveys.
  - v. If the scallop resource is partially surveyed, the PDT will fill in data from last year's process (FW32) for whatever areas needed.
- b. Specifications Setting Process:
- i. The Committee should aim to limit the overall range of alternatives in Framework 33 to help streamline the action for submission and implementation. (Only specs, no other special measures)
  - ii. The Scallop Committee should aim to limit the complexity of spatial management alternatives in Framework 33 to help streamline the action for submission and implementation.
  - iii. The latest the Council should take action on 2021/2022 specifications is at its January 2021 meeting.