



New England Fishery Management Council

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PRESS CONTACT: Janice Plante
(607) 592-4817, jplante@nefmc.org

Scallop RSA Surveys Gather Essential Data During COVID-19

The industry-funded Sea Scallop Research Set-Aside (RSA) Program earned its weight in gold this year by providing the sole source of 2020 scallop survey data during the coronavirus pandemic.

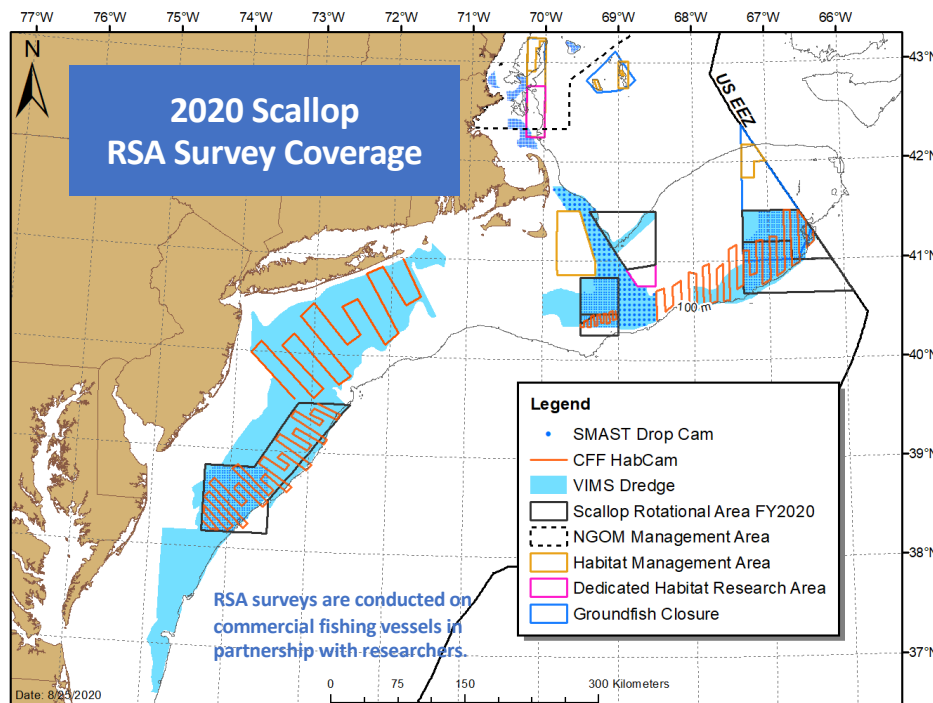
NOAA Fisheries typically conducts an annual survey for Atlantic sea scallops on the *R/V Hugh R. Sharp*, a research vessel owned and operated by the University of Delaware. This year, however, the federal survey was canceled due to COVID-19 precautions. The cancellation of this important federal survey meant that essential information related to the current status of the resource would be missing for 2020.

The New England Fishery Management Council relies on updated survey information to set annual specifications for the scallop fishery. RSA surveys have been complementing the federal survey for roughly 20 years now and have been helping to provide detailed snapshots of biomass and new recruitment of small scallops on Georges Bank and in the Mid-Atlantic area. Recently, RSA surveys have been helping the Council

gain a better understanding of the status of scallops in the Northern Gulf of Maine as well.

When the pandemic complicated federal survey operations, commercial fishermen and outside researchers quickly responded to work cooperatively with NOAA Fisheries to double-down efforts to increase RSA survey coverage this summer.

The New England Council's Scallop Plan Development Team developed a list of recommendations outlining areas where the additional RSA coverage would be most helpful. Then, Council Executive Director Tom Nies transmitted the list to Northeast Fisheries Science Center Director Dr. Jon Hare.



2020 Scallop RSA Survey Partners

Coonamessett Farm Foundation (CFF)

Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS)

School for Marine Science and Technology, UMass Dartmouth (SMST)



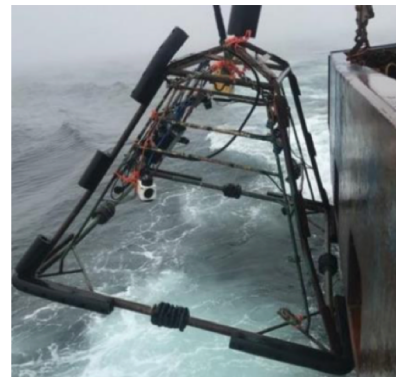
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In short order, the Science Center amended several 2020-2021 RSA awards to make it possible for the additional survey work to take place, and the RSA partners took numerous public safety and travel precautions before embarking on their surveys.

“The RSA survey partners conducted their surveys safely and were able to revise their survey areas to collect critical data in places where the federal survey would have operated,” said Dr. Hare. “I am very aware of the challenges and am extremely grateful to all for making these surveys a success.”

2020 Scallop Research Set-Aside Program Surveys – Expanded Coverage Here’s What the Survey Teams Accomplished

➤ **School for Marine Science and Technology (SMAST) at UMass Dartmouth:** SMAST conducted a drop camera survey that covered several areas on Georges Bank and parts of the Mid-Atlantic, including in Closed Area II, most of Nantucket Lightship, and the Elephant Trunk Access Area. SMAST also willingly diverted sea time and RSA pounds from a planned research project to conduct additional survey work in the Great South Channel, an area that would have been covered by the federal survey. This shift in focus will greatly benefit proper management of the resource as the Council continues its work to set 2021-2022 specifications through Framework 33 to the Atlantic Sea Scallop Fishery Management Plan.



Left, SMAST's drop camera, which was used during the 2020 RSA scallop surveys.

– SMAST photo

A Note of Thanks from Chairman Quinn

“We want to thank the RSA teams for the hard work they put into completing the 2020 survey season,” said Council Chairman Dr. John Quinn. “They willingly adjusted their original plans to ensure that important scallop bottom was covered in the absence of a federal survey.”

Chairman Quinn added, “We’ve all had to learn how to adapt in the face of adversity this year. Our RSA partners went the extra mile to ensure the Council would have adequate survey information to properly manage the most valuable fishery under our jurisdiction. They did this under difficult circumstances, and I know I speak for all of us at the Council in saying we genuinely appreciate their efforts.”

➤ **Coonamessett Farm Foundation (CFF):** CFF conducted Habitat Mapping Camera (HabCam) surveys of Nantucket Lightship South, all of Closed Area II and the southern flank of Georges Bank, and the Mid-Atlantic Access Area. In addition, once it was announced that the federal survey



Habcam deploying. – CFF photo



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on the *R/V Sharp* was canceled, CFF quickly mobilized to add an additional HabCam cruise to cover stations off Long Island and the New York Bight that would have been completed by the federal survey.

- **Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS):** VIMS successfully completed its original survey plan, which involved extensive coverage of the Mid-Atlantic Bight, Closed Area II and surrounds, the Nantucket Lightship region, and part of Closed Area I.

In addition to this full list of scheduled work, VIMS also expanded coverage to include the Great South Channel, an area that would have been covered by the federal dredge survey.

Positive Preliminary Findings

SMAST, CFF, and VIMS all detected high concentrations of juvenile scallops in Closed Area II. Surveys in the Mid-Atlantic also detected signs of incoming recruitment around Long Island and the New York Bight.

A Few Quick Points of Interest

- Scallops are among the most surveyed of all fishery species in the Northeast, largely owing to the Scallop RSA Program and the long-running annual federal survey. The absence of a federal survey in 2020 was an anomaly caused by the coronavirus.
- [Scallop RSA Projects](#) are developed by scientists and fishermen who work together to meet research priorities established by the New England Fishery Management Council. NOAA Fisheries manages the RSA competitive grant process used to review and select RSA projects for funding. Project awards are made in pounds of scallops that are taken off the top of annual allocations and set aside for research purposes. Money from the sale of scallops harvested from these RSA-awarded pounds is used to support the research.
- Since 2000, the RSA program has supported 195 projects by setting aside nearly \$165 million worth of sea scallop quota. Of these funded projects, 86 were resource surveys.

The New England Council's Scallop Plan Development Team will review preliminary results from the 2020 RSA Surveys on Thursday, October 15, 2020. The meeting notice and webinar registration information is available on the [PDT meeting webpage](#).



On deck during a past RSA survey trip. – VIMS file photo