

MREP: To help fishermen be effective participants

by Cheryl Daigle

Imagine 15 fishermen, a dozen or so fishery managers and policy-makers, and several representatives from other marine resource professions spending three days together at the same lodging. Much of each day is spent in a single classroom setting, and meals are taken together, family-style, at three large tables.

In the current New England fisheries climate, it sounds like a recipe for disaster. Yet, that is exactly the script for the new program being held by the Marine Resource Education Project (MREP). And, by the accounts of those who have participated, it is anything but a disaster.

Based on the premise that effective fisheries management in the Gulf of Maine needs the cooperation and collaboration of managers, scientists, and fishermen, the MREP has set forth an ambitious program. Emphasis is on immersing fishermen and a smaller number of marine fisheries professionals in workshops focused on how scientific information is gathered and interpreted and how the regulatory and management process works.

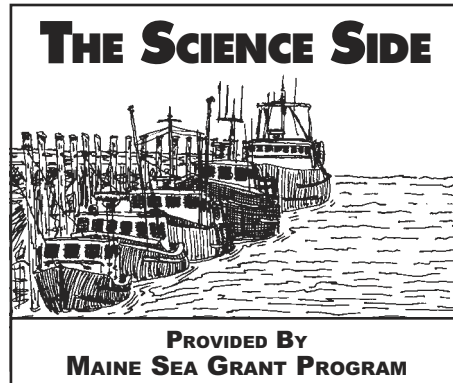
But the goal is really broader than lectures and the presentation of information. The program is designed to increase communications between these three groups overall, and bring them closer together in understanding of what each can contribute toward effective management.

"We can't make good fisheries management without informed input from fishermen," said John Williamson, MREP coordinator and chair of the Research Steering Committee for the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC).

Along with Dr. Mimi Larsen Becker and Dr. Andy Rosenberg of the University of New Hampshire, Williamson received federal funding from the Northeast Consortium in 2001 and 2002 to conduct a series of six two-part programs. Each program includes a three-day science module followed a week or so later by a three-day session on fisheries management.

Programs, which all take place at the New England Center in Durham, NH adjacent to the UNH campus, were held in April and November/December of 2002. The next sessions are scheduled for April of this year.

A 10-member board of directors with six representatives from the fishing



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industry, one fisheries manager, two scientists, and an educator, assists with planning, course design and implementation, recruitment of participants, and evaluation of the program overall.

Fishermen reaction

Fishermen, who are compensated for their time away from fishing, are either invited to apply or inquire about the program after hearing about it from others. The MREP strives for participation by fishermen representing areas throughout New England as well as people from other marine fishery-related sectors.

The session held last fall, for example, included fishermen from Maine, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and New York, as well as representatives from various commercial fishery associations, Maine Sea Grant, the Gulf of Maine Aquarium, and the Ocean Conservancy. A good industry cross section was involved, from small boat to big boat fishermen, big scallopers, and day boats.

The response from participants has been predominantly positive, whether they are fishermen new to the science and management process, or those whose involvement in fisheries management is a part of their everyday work.

Fishermen who already have a lot of experience with the management process still found the program worthwhile.

"As an adviser on two councils, I'm fairly involved in the whole management process, but I still found (the MREP



Peter K. Pryor photo

John Williamson, who helped conceive the MREP and now serves as its coordinator.

courses) to be educational," said Dan Farnham, a groundfish fisherman from Montauk, NY. Farnham serves as an adviser on golden tile fish for the Mid-Atlantic council and on the whiting committee for the New England council.

"For fishermen not involved in the management process, it's a great thing to go to," said Farnham. "They learn when to be involved — a lot of fishermen think they can go to one council meeting, but that's not how it's done. Council members already have their minds made up at that point."

The MREP sessions make it more clear to fishermen what constraints scientists and managers are faced with when providing and interpreting data and making management decisions.

Dale Page, a groundfish fisherman from Boothbay, ME, also keeps up to speed on regulations and is active in the management process. But the sessions gave him insight into what the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the New England council are up against in complying with the law.

"The scientists themselves understand there's a lot they don't know, but the way the regulations are written doesn't give them any leeway," said Page.

"They gave us more information on exactly how they interpret the information they get when judging the size of fish stocks," said Page. "I don't necessarily agree with how they go about it, but it gave me a better understanding of their perspective."

Informal interactions

The MREP strongly encourages participants to stay at the lodging for the three days and eat meals as a group. Both Page and Farnham echoed comments by other participants at the fall session who found the informal interactions with fishery managers to be particularly helpful.

“There was a lot of value to meeting people involved in management and interacting informally with them,” said Farnham. “At full council meetings, you really don’t get much interaction with council members. Everyone is wound up, and it’s not the place to talk informally.”

There was plenty of time between the presentations and panel discussions at the MREP sessions for fishermen and managers to interact and speak on a first-name basis.

“To be able to sit down and have breakfast, lunch, and dinner with Paul Howard — that’s a good experience, absolutely,” commented Farnham.

Howard is the NEFMC executive director.

At meetings, fishermen do not get the chance to explore issues in the way participants were able to do at the three-day sessions.

“It was much more informal than going to a council meeting. We sat down and talked to council members one on one,” said Page.

“I recommend to other fishermen to take the course if they get the opportunity,” he added. “Overall, I thought the program was real informative and a good opportunity to interact with people from all different aspects of the fishery.”

Several participants expressed frustration with the fisheries science module, or reportedly appeared to fall asleep, but others found it educational.

“This program makes it a lot easier to digest the science side of it; but, it still could be simplified even more,” commented Farnham.

The science session relied on examples from several different fisheries to get across the way data is collected and interpreted.

“I wish they’d picked one particular fishery and chased it all through the science and regulatory process — it would make it easier for some people to grasp,” said Page.

Management sessions

At the management session, topics included a report on collaborative research, a substantial overview of the agencies that manage marine fisheries, the



Peter K. Prybor photo

Industry participants in the first MREP program included, from left, Mary Beth Tooley, Maine herring, and a MREP director; Liz Rowell, Rhode Island groundfish; Steve Welch, Massachusetts groundfish; and Glenn Robbins, Maine herring.

regulatory process and the best times to get involved, industry trade organizations, and the role of Congress. One afternoon was devoted to learning how to negotiate effectively, including a role-playing exercise that switched the perspectives of the participants to a position they typically would be in conflict with.

“I really enjoyed the presentation by Margaret Spring, the congressional staffer,” said Patrice Farrey, executive director of the Maine Lobstermen’s Association, who describes the legislative part of the fisheries management process as being like a black hole.

Spring, a senior counsel for the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans and Fisheries, gave a detailed overview of the role that Congress plays in fisheries management policy and how fishermen, scientists, and managers can influence congressional action.

“Her level of knowledge was very impressive — she had a good grasp of what the issues were,” Farrey added.

“Overall, the program clarified for me a lot of the things that typically frustrate me in the day-to-day aspects of my job,” said Farrey. “I didn’t realize before how the different layers of the regulatory process slow things down.”

While fishermen and managers usually come together over points of frustration, Farrey highlighted how the program forces participants to spend a couple of days with people they might otherwise just talk with on the phone.

“It puts a real human face on them. I

found people to be sincere, and pretty dedicated to their job,” she said.

“It helps knowing people really are doing their best; it’s the system that’s just crazy,” added Farrey.

Some of the session on fishermen’s involvement in the management process was overly optimistic, she said.

“Sometimes it’s one loud voice who has time on his hands, but it really needs to be multiple voices weighing in on an issue. There’s a lot of subtlety to the process,” Farrey said.

One perspective that was missing was that of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), which has interstate management authority for state waters fisheries.

“It would have been helpful to have the ASMFC perspective in the room when we were having discussions because that process is different. It’s different for a reason, and it also affects a lot of fishermen’s lives,” Farrey said.

Programs to come

“It’s an evolving program,” said Mary Beth Tooley, a member of the MREP board of directors. “Changes to the second program held last November and December were based on comments from participants in the first session and board members who reviewed notes from the session.”

While it is still early to evaluate the effectiveness of the MREP, some participants have put their new understanding of the management process to immediate use.

“We have seen fishermen from the first session who weren’t previously very involved in management go to council meetings, make compelling comments, and propose changes to regulations,” Tooley said. “It was very nice to see that.”

That involvement is key to the success of MREP. A community of fishermen who have a solid grasp of the science used in management decisions and who understand the regulatory process can provide a strong voice for a future of sustainable fisheries.

“If the objective of this is to get people

more involved and educate them to be effective lobbyists, that’s great,” said Farnham. “Hopefully, the people who take the two courses will follow up and become more involved in the management process.”

The next MREP modules to be held include: science, March 31-April 2; and management, April 14,15, and 16.

For more information, check the MREP web site at <<http://www.mrep.unh.edu/>>. Or contact John Coon at UNH in Durham, phone (603) 862-0654; fax (603) 862-4976; and e-mail <jrcoon@cisunix.unh.edu>. ■