

Sea Urchin Zone Council Meeting Summary May 5, 2023 in Brewer, ME

DMR staff: Melissa Smith, Lulu Bates, Robert Russell, MPO Tim Cormier

SUZC members present: Tracey Sawtelle (Chair), Alan Knowlton, Stephen Bechard, Sinuon Chau, Joe Leask, Clint Richardson, Mark Nickerson,

SUZC members absent: Chuon Muth (resigned), Randy Ramsdell, Tim Peterson, Tim Robbins, Teresa Johnson, Larry Harris, Brian Preney

Public: Paul Gray, Fred Gray, Michael Eaton, Justin Gebo

Meeting commenced at 3:10 pm.

I. Welcome and Introductions

Chair T. Sawtelle welcomed the group and asked everyone to introduce themselves around the room, both council members and audience.

II. Election of Officers

There was no quorum to allow for Council motions. There was consensus by the members present to maintain current officer positions: T Sawtelle (chair) and B Preney (vice chair).

III. Approval of last meeting summary (4/28/2022)

There was no quorum to allow for Council motions. The council members present saw no issues with the meeting summary, however, approval of meeting minutes for April 28, 2022 was postponed.

IV. Industry Summary of past season

General comments for Zone 1 is that the area is “getting thin” with regard to urchins. Areas that have been traditional ledges are becoming less reliable. Many of the “normal” spots no longer have harvestable urchins. There were comments about observing seed or smaller urchins on bottom or around lobster traps but they were not growing out to legal size. Divers also observed urchins in unexpected places, which resonated with other harvesters in the room. There was also a comment that red Irish moss may be choking out the urchins in the area and is not a feeding source.

In Zone 2, Cobscook – there were comments related to peanuts that were of low quality, especially in Whiting/Denny’s Bays. There were some larger, harvestable sized urchins in the area, but in low abundance. Also suggested that perhaps there was a food scarcity issue.

Harvest around Goose Island seemed to have remained fair, with row quality being reasonable throughout the season with plenty of kelp in the area. There were also some observations of seed urchins.

V. DMR Season Summary

L. Bates presented the annual landings summary comparing the current season with the previous season. Additionally, L. Bates also incorporated data from the last 5 seasons to highlight changes in roe quality. R. Russel presented an update on the annual DMR Dive Survey. R. Russell also commented that the DMR Dive survey would begin next week (May 8th onward).

A general decline has been observed in reported landings, active harvesters and also within the fishery independent survey. There was a general comment to modify the “active harvesters” metric to require a minimum of two days of activity, rather than just a single harvest day. See appendix for slide presentation.

VI. Discussion on 2023-2024 Season Specifications

M. Smith updated the Council that the Department had no plans to alter the number of totes for each zone nor the number of harvest days currently permitted by each zone. The only discussion point the Department wanted to promote was the removal of September from the range of harvest months, with the understanding that water temperatures are changing and comments received from both harvesters and dealers indicated that shifting the harvest of urchins may provide a better quality product.

M. Smith shared seven draft calendars for review plus an additional two calendars for the Limited Access Area in Whiting/Dennys Bays.

There was no quorum to allow for Council motions, so the Council members present along with the audience gathered in groups to discuss the various draft calendars produced for each zone and sector. There were a few minor changes recommended for Zone 2 Early Drag and Zone 2 Early Dive calendars.

There were mixed opinions offered for the optimal Zone 2 Late Drag calendar. It was determined that by March, urchins in the Deer Isle area were beginning to shift towards spawning status and was best to no longer harvest. However, harvesting of urchins in March down in Cobscook area was both requested by harvesters in the area as well as the dealers for additional late season product. Generally, there was a request to have up to 10 opportunity days in the month of March.

There was no immediate resolution to these conflicting suggestions of the calendar. M. Smith made the observation that if the calendar opportunity days could be increased to 50 days, while maintaining the 30 harvest days, that perhaps it would achieve goals of drag harvesters in the west and east of Zone 2. However, the Department did not discuss the potential increase of opportunity days and it would need to be discussed as a recommendation from the Council.

Several calendars were easily accepted by the harvesters present. Chair Sawtelle made the recommendation to offer the calendars with the discussed amendments to the Commissioner for review and proceed with a follow-up virtual meeting next week to allow for a review and approval of the calendars by the Council. It was determined that a webinar meeting scheduled for **Thursday, May 11, 2023 at 3pm** would be the best timeframe.

Council agreed with this plan for moving forward.

VIII. Other Business

Future Sea Urchin Research Workshop

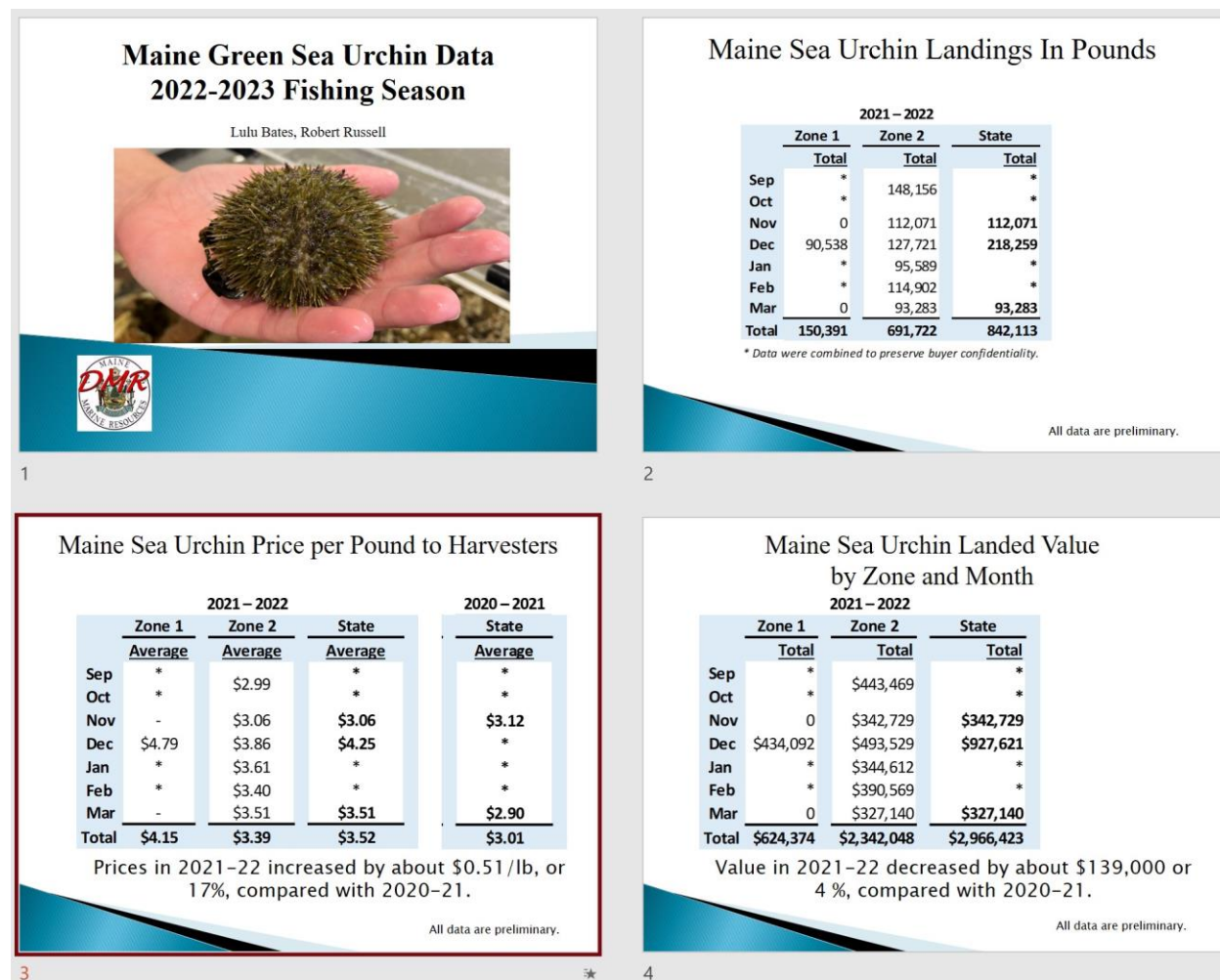
M. Smith updated the Council and audience of the continued interest to conduct sea urchin research in Maine state waters. There were at least two new or ongoing projects that are related to spawning and seasonality of urchins. It was suggested that a workshop in June, before field season would be the best timeframe to host a half day gathering.

Additionally, L. Bates updated the Council on a recently submitted research proposal by DMR to Maine

Sea Grant that would entail a 2 year expansion of the existing DMR Urchin Dive survey to include the full 9 regions plus additional monitoring parameters. An announcement of project funding is expected in the Fall.

Meeting adjourned at 5:00pm.

Appendix:



Maine Sea Urchin Roe Index (%)

	2021 – 2022			2020 – 2021
	Zone 1 Average	Zone 2 Average	State Average	State Average
Sep	*	11.1	*	*
Oct	*		*	*
Nov	-	10.8	10.8	12.6
Dec	11.0	12.1	11.7	*
Jan	*	12.2	*	*
Feb	*	12.3	*	*
Mar	-	12.4	12.4	13.8
Total	11.0	11.7	11.6	12.6

Roe indices in 2021–22 decreased by about 1 point, compared with 2020–21.

All data are preliminary.

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Number of Active Urchin Harvesters (fished at least once)

2021–2022 Active Harvesters fished at least twice				2020–2021 Active Harvesters fished at least twice			
	Zone 1	Zone 2	Total		Zone 1	Zone 2	Total
Dive	17	40	*	Dive	19	43	*
Drag		34	*	Drag		47	*
Total	17	74	91	Total	19	90	109

40% of licenses were active in 2021–22.

2021 Sea Urchin Licenses			
	Zone 1	Zone 2	Total
Dive	33	81	114
Drag	12	100	112
Rake		1	1
Unk	1	1	1
Total	46	182	228

There were 17 (16%) fewer active harvesters in 2021–2022 compared with 2020–21.

All data are preliminary.

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How Many Days were Fished?

2021–2022 Mean Number of Days Fished per Harvester

	Zone 1	Zone 2
Dive	10.6	17.6
Drag	10.6	15.7

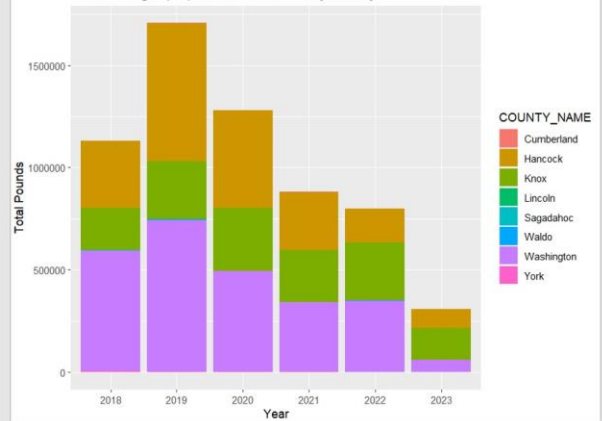
2021–2022 Percent of Harvesters Fishing All Days

	Zone 1	Zone 2
Dive	33%	5%
Drag		11%

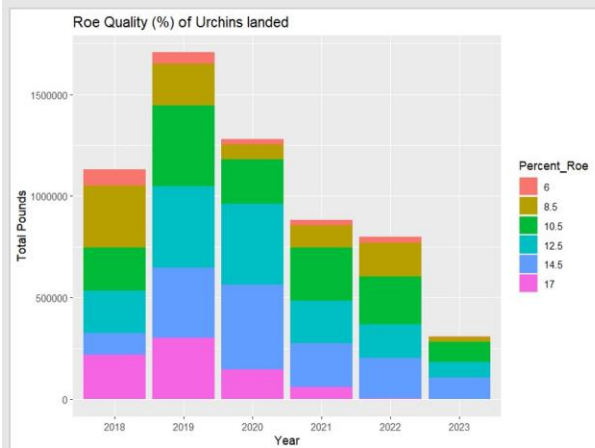
All data are preliminary.

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Whole Weight (lbs) of Urchins landed by County



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Maine Sea Urchin Spring Dive Survey

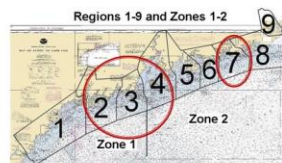
Robert Russell, Marcus Jones

May 2022



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Maine Sea Urchin Dive Survey

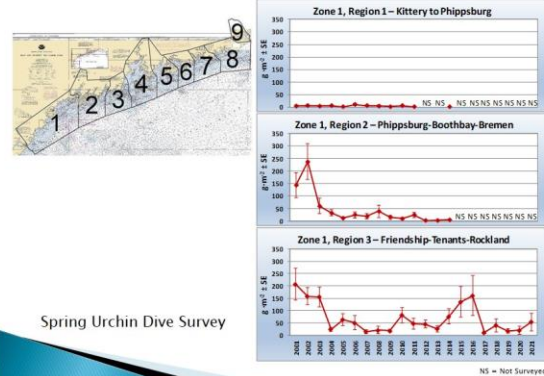


- Regions 2, 3, 4 & 7 surveyed in 2022

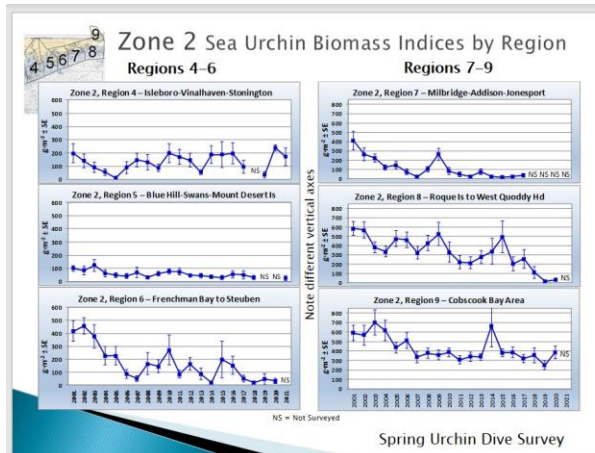
- 16 sites in each region: 5 fixed and 11 random
- Twenty 1-m² quadrats evaluated in each of 3 depth strata: 0-5m, 5-10m, and 10-15m for every site

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Zone 1 Sea Urchin Biomass Indices by Region



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2022-23 Phone Interviews

- Interviews conducted by phone from November through March
- **Total number of interviews: 45**
 - 32 divers
 - 13 draggers



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2022-23 Phone Interviews

Comments:

- "Urchins getting cleaned up quick. Should get rid of 2nd season. Urchin fishing should start in December"
- "A lot of small urchins, lot of them are no good"
- "Close the lower Whiting River one season and have the upper open, then alternate the next year"
- "Start scalloping in October and urchins in December when % roe is better. Have just one season"
- "bunched up when you find them, a lot of dead ones in the beginning of the season, mercury from dredging in Penobscot and fertilizer run off from North Haven"

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2022-23 Phone Interviews

Comments:

- "Should be a mechanism to convert the license to allow dragger to take a diver"
- "Season should start later, no September or October and more days in March"
- "It's a dying industry"



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Addendum – Follow-up Webinar via Teams, May 11, 2023 @ 3pm.

A SUZC webinar was scheduled for May 11, 2023 at 3pm to review motions for final recommendations for the 2023-2024 sea urchin season.

Attendance of members: Clint Richardson, Mark Nickerson, Tim Peterson, Tracey Sawtelle, Sinuon Chau, Alan Knowlton and Stephen Bechard; and, Melissa Smith (DMR).

M. Smith presented the amended calendars for review and discussion. No additional edits were suggested.

Motion to accept the Zone 1 calendar: Richardson/Nickerson

All approved.

Motion to accept Zone 2 calendars: Peterson/Sawtelle

All approved.

Meeting ended at 3:20pm.