



Friends of Maine's Seabird Islands

January 10, 2015

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Rockweed Working Group
c/o Chris Vonderweidt
Maine Department of Marine Resources
21 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Dear Working Group Members;

Since the majority of our board members have full time jobs, we regret that we cannot attend your meeting in Bangor on January 13, 2015 to testify regarding rockweed harvest impacts to the ecosystems of the Gulf of Maine. We do hope that the following will be considered as public comment, entered into the public record, and considered as you make your deliberations on your responsibilities under "An Act to Promote Rockweed Habitat Conservation through the Consideration of No-harvest Areas."

We represent three hundred members and indirectly, the dozens of small businesses who offer tour boat cruises to see wildlife and seabirds in Maine or who benefit directly from these tours. According to the 2005 Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge, Dr. Charles Colgan found that such seabird viewing generated between \$5 million and \$10 million in 2001 dollars for local businesses.

We urge you to seriously consider the negative effects of rockweed harvest on shorebirds, seabirds and waterfowl. We are concerned about the direct impacts of the disturbance caused by harvest during the nesting season, but we are even more concerned about the longer-term impact to the birds of removing rockweed near nesting colonies and feeding areas. Nesting seabirds can only go a certain distance from their colonies to find food before the energetics of the process undermine successful nesting efforts. These birds rely entirely on small fish whose nursery areas and hiding places are in rockweed on their nesting islands. Likewise, most shorebirds are feeding directly on small invertebrates that are rockweed-dependent. Eider chicks rely on the rockweed for protection when they dive to get away from gulls and eagles.

We are also surprised that your committee was not tasked with trying to protect nursery areas for fish in and of themselves, considering that all the food chain of the Gulf of Maine is based on these areas, and rockweed is certainly the foundation of many fish nurseries. Not only do these areas support the birds we value and the tour boat industry that those birds support, but they support the commercial fishing industry so important to so many fishermen and the general economy. We urge you not to potentially ruin some existing small businesses to benefit the relatively new business of rockweed harvesting.

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Marine Resources

On another topic, although some nesting islands are owned to low tide by the National Wildlife Refuge System or National Park Service, where federal regulations do not permit the removal of plants, including rockweed, many others have no protected status. In addition, the ban on harvesting on Refuges and Parks may not be widely known and much confusion could be avoided if the protected areas you recommend are consistent with this ban on federal property.

We urge that:

- 1) All Maine seabird nesting islands wherever they are located and to whomever they belong, should be added to the list of areas that are selected as "no cut." A list of significant seabird nesting islands exists and can be provided by either the MDIFW or the Maine Coastal Islands NWR.
- 2) All Federally-owned islands should be protected from cut explicitly to avoid confusion and subsequent prosecution of mis-informed rockweed harvesters.

We also think that any land trust lands that were purchased with North American Wetland Conservation Act funds should receive similar protection. This act provides significant funding for coastal conservation by land trusts in the state, and we believe that they will no longer be able to compete successfully for such funding if they cannot provide the long-term protection to target lands that the Act requires.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



Scott Hess
Board Chair