



RHODE ISLAND
**SALTWATER
ANGLERS**
Association



P.O. Box 1467, Coventry, Rhode Island 02816

401-826-2121

www.RISAA.org

April 3, 2025

Chairman Shanley
House State Government and Elections Committee
via email: HouseStateGovernmentandElections@rilegislature.gov

RE: Support H. 5706 and H. 5453
Do not support H. 6126

Dear Chairman Shanley and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Rhode Island Saltwater Anglers Association (RISAA) we want to explain our position on the proposed legislative solutions for reforming the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC). We support bills H. 5706 and H. 5453 because they eliminate the politically appointed council and provide opportunities for significant improvements in how the regulatory functions of the CRMC can operate. We do not believe H. 6126 provides enough meaningful reform, so we do not support H. 6126. We believe that eliminating the politically appointed council is the most important change needed. Bills H. 5706 and H. 5453 accomplish that change.

RISAA represents over 7,500 recreational anglers who contribute significantly to Rhode Island's maritime economy, generating millions in economic activity through fishing, tourism, and conservation efforts. Our members have experienced significant challenges with the CRMC from an aquaculture permitting process that favors the promotion of aquaculture at the expense of recreational uses of Public Trust waters to failures in permitting offshore wind involving the mass resignation of CRMC's fisheries advisory board.

We are against proposed bill H. 6126 because it fundamentally fails to address the core structural problems within the CRMC:

1. **Persistent conflict of interest.** Maintains a politically appointed council structure that inherently compromises objective coastal resource management. By keeping a council with members who may have vested economic interests, these bills perpetuate a system ripe with potential conflicts of interest.
2. **Weak accountability.** Allows volunteers to have final decision-making authority raising questions about reliability and efficiency in agency decisions, quorum issues, inconsistencies in decision-making, and gaps in council member expertise. NOAA has similarly raised concerns about governance inefficiencies, including delays in critical decisions and the need for improved training for council members.
3. **Aquaculture Permitting Concerns.** The current and proposed structure maintains the conflict where the same CRMC staff member is responsible for permitting, promoting, and enforcing aquaculture without a separation of duties. This leads to:
 - Potential bias in permit approvals
 - Lack of transparent decision-making
 - Prioritizing economic interests over environmental conservation
 - Delays in permitting decisions
 - No advocate for non-commercial public interest and protection

4. **Legal representation and conflict of interest.** H. 6126 does not add a staff attorney who would be dedicated to supporting the council only. Currently the council hires a private practice law firm that represents the council, staff, and has other clients in addition to lobbying for other clients at the State House.

A member of RISAA served on the House Commission to study CRMC in 2021 to 2022 so we are familiar with the changes recommended by the Commission. During the proceedings, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which provides almost 40% of CRMC's funding, gave testimony for the Commission. NOAA indicated that while the coastal agency structure in RI is unusual but acceptable to them, NOAA did express concerns that CRMC's current structure has led to difficulties in achieving quorums for council meetings, delays in addressing critical matters, and insufficient training for council members.

We have done extensive analysis of the proposed 2025 CRMC reform bills introduced in the House and the Senate. We hope the attached grid will be helpful to the members of the Committee. It compares each of the bills and provides RISAA's perspective on the pros and cons of each one. Please contact us at any time if you have any questions regarding our comments.

In conclusion, we hope that CRMC deficiencies can be corrected through bills like H. 5706 and H. 5453 that eliminate the politically appointed Council.

Sincerely,

Rhode Island Saltwater Anglers Association

Scott Travers

Scott Travers, Executive Director
Ph: 401-826-2121

Rich Hittinger

Rich Hittinger, 1st Vice President
Cell: 401-265-7602

Bill*	<u>HL 6126</u> 3/21	<u>S. 181</u> 2/7	<u>HL 5706</u> 2/26	<u>S. 775</u> 3/14	<u>H. 5453</u> 2/12
Lead Sponsor	Finkelman	Sosnowski	Cortvriend	McKenney	Edwards
Co-sponsors	Cortvriend, Dawson, Carson	Valverde, DiMario, Gu, Britto, Pearson, McKenney	Tanzi, Edwards, Finkelman, Carson, Speakman, Knight, Handy, Fogarty, Dawson	Lawson, Gu, Sosnowski, DiPalma	Cortvriend, Finkelman, Knight, Kislak, Fogarty, Shanley, Speakman, Tanzi, Abney
Summary	Reduces the Council to seven (7) members. Goes into effect January 1, 2026. New requirements for Council Members.	Requires that super majority of three-fifths (3/5) of the Council is required to override a recommendation by the CRMC staff.	House and senate version of identical bills. Replaces the Council with a Department of Coastal Resources. Transfer of the powers and duties between the two (2) authorities. Supported by Attorney General and Save the Bay. Introduced but did not pass in 2024.		Replaces CRMC with a newly created Division of Coastal Resources Management (DCRM), an entity within the DEM. Transfers authority to the DEM with duties and responsibilities to be carried out by the DCRM.
Council Members	Reduces Council Members from 10 to 7. Requires 1 to be from AG Office. Others must have expertise in environmental matters, and one must be an engineer, coastal biologist, and representative from environmental organization.	Maintains Council at 10 Members.	Council eliminated		Council eliminated
Authority	Council Members. Quorum is four members	Council Members. Three-fifths (3/5) of members required to override CRMC staff recommendation.	Director, appointed by Governor. Requires Director to coordinate with RIDEM Director on areas with overlapping jurisdiction.		RIDEM Director. New Assistant Director appointed by Governor runs new DCRM. Assistant Director reports to RIDEM Director
Staff attorney	None—Uses outside law firm to represent Council Members	None—Uses outside law firm to represent Council Members	Creates new Staff attorney employee hired by Director to support Director and staff		Uses RIDEM Staff Attorney to support Director.
Hearing Officer	Keeps requirement of two hearing officers. Option to send to subcommittee if HO not available	Keeps requirement of two hearing officers. Option to send to subcommittee if HO not available	Gives director option to hire hearing officer if Governor fails to appoint one. Hearing Officer process must follow RIDEM Hearing Officer process. Creates a Chief Hearing Officer position if there's more than one Hearing Officer.		Keeps requirement of two hearing officers. Creates new Clerk position to support HO. Option to send to subcommittee if HO not available
OMB Cost*	No additional cost, status quo	No additional cost, status quo	\$1.0mm to \$1.9mm in FY 2026		\$800k to \$1.3mm in FY2026

*Click on the bill numbers or OMB Cost headings to open the original documents.

	H 6126	S 181	H 5706	S 775	H 5453
Lead Sponsor	Finkelman	Sosnowski	Cortvriend	McKenney	Edwards
Positives	•No additional cost •Ensures continuity •Reduces number of council members to achieve quorum •Creates experience requirements for members (Env't, engineering, coastal policy, AG representation)	•No additional cost •Ensures continuity •Strengthens staff decisions by making it more challenging for council members to overrule staff decisions	•Eliminates politically appointed Council •Centralizes decision-making to professional staff through new division director reporting to the Governor. •Community Advisory Committee allows for public engagement •Dedicated staff attorney reduces potential for conflict of interest. •Allows director to hire hearing officer if governor fails to do so. •Creates stronger accountability by making Director responsible for agency and staff decisions	•Eliminates politically appointed Council •Centralizes decision-making through new division director reporting to RIDEEM Director •Uses RIDEEM staff attorney rather than outside counsel which reduces potential for conflict of interest. •Creates stronger accountability by making Director responsible for agency and staff decisions •Consolidates environmental oversight while retaining specialized coastal expertise. •Consolidates administrative operations (finance, HR, IT) under existing RIDEEM structure. •Ensures continuity since CRMC existing staff shifts to RIDEEM •Allows for reorganization of functions to separate conflicts of interest or redundancies.	
Negatives	•Final decisionmakers are still politically appointed. •Weak accountability and oversight because final decisions still made by volunteer council members. •Doesn't address embedded conflicts of interest at staff level in aquaculture area (permitting, promoting, and enforcement by one staff member). •Doesn't address need for staff attorney who could remove conflicts of interest. •Doesn't address resource requirements for agency whose responsibilities have grown more complex.	•Final decisionmakers are still politically appointed. •Weak accountability and oversight because final decisions still made by volunteer council members. •Doesn't address embedded conflicts of interest at staff level in aquaculture area (permitting, promoting, and enforcement by one staff member). •Amplifies embedded conflicts of interest (aquaculture) since more difficult to overrule staff decisions. •Doesn't address need for staff attorney who could remove conflicts of interest •Doesn't address resource requirements for agency whose responsibilities have grown more complex.	•Most costly reform option, current state budget funding for CRMC would need to expand from \$3.7mm to \$5.6mm. (OMB report) •Doesn't address embedded conflicts of interest at staff level in aquaculture area (permitting, promoting, and enforcement by one staff member). •Doesn't address resource requirements for agency whose responsibilities have grown more complex. •Jurisdictional overlaps with RIDEEM remain unresolved (eg approvals needed from both agencies which adds complexity and inefficiency) •OMB estimates between 7-15 new full-time staff needed along with office space, administrative, and technical costs to create a stand-alone agency.	•Costly reform option, current state budget funding for CRMC would need to expand from \$3.7mm to \$5.0mm. (OMB report) •Some jurisdictional overlaps with RIDEEM remain (eg approvals needed from different divisions within RIDEEM) •OMB estimates between 5-7 new full-time staff •No Community Advisory Committee for structural public engagement •Short-term disruptions to CRMC operations from transitioning to new organizational structure.	