

Pallone wants reef-building to continue

Published in the Asbury Park Press 1/23/05

One would think that after 40 years of building artificial reefs along the New Jersey coastline, and after all the good that has come from these structures, that renewing the federal permit to continue the program would be a cinch.

It is not.

Herb Moore Jr., director of government affairs for the Recreational Fishing Alliance, said there are organizations and individuals who oppose reef building.

John Geiser "The New Jersey reef program has proven to be a resounding success since its inception, and incredibly popular with the recreational fishing public," he said. "But there are people out there who oppose it."

Rep. Frank Pallone Jr., D-N.J., has weighed the concerns of commercial fishermen and a few environmentalists about artificial reefs against the benefits from the reef program and come out solidly on the side of the reef program.

The opposition to reef building has occurred at a critical time when the state Division of Fish and Wildlife is applying for renewal of the building permit from the Army Corps of Engineers.

Pallone wrote Frank J. Cianfrani, chief of the Philadelphia district office of the engineers, expressing his support for reef building.

"The artificial reef program has been a tremendous success for New Jerseyans," he said. "By creating new habitat for a variety of fish species, including black sea bass, scup, summer flounder and tautog, these reefs have provided high quality year-round fishing spots.

"This is a tremendous benefit to the 800,000 recreational anglers in New Jersey and the \$1.5 billion industry they support," he said.

"Unfortunately beach replenishment, sand and gravel mining and commercial dredging have robbed New Jersey's natural sea floor of many of the firm substrate features that attract certain types of fish. The reef program has restored and created critical habitat for these fish species, replenishing stocks and providing additional fishing opportunities."

Pallone reminded that the division is proposing to consolidate the permit authorization process for all 14 artificial reefs into one permit, continue deploying artificial material on the existing sites and creating one new artificial reef site.

Opponents of the reef system claim that the reef material is not natural to the environment, attracts fish species to its structure and sometimes prevents commercial fishermen from netting or dredging on the grounds.

Moore counters that the state's reefs have played a significant role in the state's fishery as federal, regional and state bodies, along with private citizens and organizations, have dedicated a great amount of resources to rebuilding and managing marine fisheries.

"New Jersey's artificial reef sites are teeming with life in areas that would otherwise be relatively barren," he said.

"New Jersey's artificial reefs have become even more important for quality of life, the recreational fishing industry and our marine ecosystem in recent years due to the loss of coastal habitat from beach replenishment projects.

"Beach replenishment projects have resulted in the loss of habitat in two ways: when the sand is dredged offshore and when the sand is pumped on the beach. When the sand is dredged offshore, it often destroys important habitat for New Jersey's marine ecosystem such as underwater ledges, hills and lumps that fish inhabit," he said.

"Sand pumped on the beach has covered rock jetties, sea walls, flumes to coastal lakes and nearshore structure, all of which is vital to New Jersey's marine life and important to New Jersey's recreational anglers," he said. "Sand being pumped onshore and covering this structure has eliminated a tremendous amount of marine habitat along our coast."

Moore reminded that the state loses important marine habitat each year because of commercial fishing operations. Clam dredges, heavy metal scallop gear, roller rigs and bottom trawls all destroy habitat such as old wooden wrecks, underwater ledges, sand hills, lumps, soft pumice-type habitat and crustacean-covered structures.

"This makes the artificial reef program all the more important, because while we are losing vital habitat from the sources above, and more, the reef program is adding vital habitat for marine life," Moore said.