

Galilee port overhaul drawing new business

By [Claudia Chiappa](#) - 10/28/2022



ON COURSE: Daniel Costa, Port of Galilee manager for the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, examines the improvements being made along the commercial waterfront at the port. PBN PHOTO/-MICHAEL SALERNO

Jon Williams knew the moment he visited the Port of Galilee that this was a “logistically perfect” location for his crab business.

The owner of the New Bedford-based Atlantic Red Crab Co. had always looked at Rhode Island as a strategic place for his fishing business, but suddenly the idea of owning a location at the Narragansett port seemed attainable. And Rhode Island’s multimillion-dollar investment into modernizing the port made the prospect even more attractive.

“It isn’t an inexpensive business,” Williams said. “I want to make sure that I’m investing my finances and resources in the right area, that they’re secure in the long term.”

Now Williams is in the process of renovating the waterfront commercial property at 270 Great Island Road. The result will include a modern,

9,000-square-foot, two-story building, a 4,000-square-foot dock and a 130-foot pier.

The Port of Galilee is one of the four state-managed fishing ports and one of the largest ports on the East Coast. The National Marine Fisheries Service ranked it the fourth-highest-value fishing port on the East Coast and 18th in the U.S.

It supports 200 commercial fishermen and businesses, and it is a vital part of Rhode Island's commercial fishing industry, which supports more than 4,000 jobs across all sectors and provides almost \$420 million in economic impact statewide, according to a 2017 University of Rhode Island study.

But until a few years ago, much of the Port of Galilee was in disuse.

"Basically, the entire infrastructure was crumbling," said Meghan Lapp, a fisheries liaison at Seafreeze Shoreside Inc., a frozen seafood and ice company at the port.

Lapp witnessed firsthand the neglect that the port experienced for years. Unstable pilings, rotted bulkheads, widening sinkholes, crumbling infrastructure – it was becoming not only a concern for the success of the business but a public safety hazard.

But in the last few years, the R.I. Department of Environmental Management has invested millions of dollars into renovating and updating the port's infrastructure.

DEM currently has four large-scale projects underway at the port with a combined cost of \$15 million. This includes replacing more than 1,000 feet of bulkhead, replacing four commercial vessel docks, replacing cross-bracing and piles on numerous docks, asphalt repair work and upgrading firefighting and electrical capacity.

A lot of the focus has been on updating the port infrastructure to mitigate the effects of climate change, said DEM spokesperson Michael Healey. This includes increasing the height of bulkheads and docks to keep ahead of rising sea levels.

Daniel Costa, DEM's port manager, calls the bulkheads "the most critical and most expensive component" of Galilee's infrastructure.

"The biggest improvement has been replacing the bulkheads," Costa said. "The replacement ... has led to a lot of business security with the surrounding leaseholders conducting business in the port."

So far, construction company Narragansett Dock Works Inc. has dismantled and reconstructed three docks and replaced about 500 feet of bulkhead, says Matthew Melchiori, Narragansett Dock Works president who is also supervising the project.

One dock and about 600 feet of bulkhead are left to be fixed.

"DEM is making a huge investment in the Port of Galilee," Melchiori said. "I've owned my business for 27 years, and this is the first time we've seen this kind of money dumped into the port. It's well overdue."

Future improvements will be funded by a \$46 million allocation from federal American Rescue Plan Act money that was included in the fiscal 2023 state budget for the upgrades in the infrastructure at the Port of Galilee.

The renovations underway have already encouraged businesses to invest more money into their operations, reassured that the port will stay standing for years to come.

Seafreeze Shoreside, which employs about 40 people, says it has recently invested millions of dollars into expanding at the port, including improving its freezer capacity, adding a new vessel and updating its infrastructure.

"Because DEM has been willing to invest in that infrastructure, it gives us confidence that the state is supportive of our industry in the long term," Lapp said. "Because we have the confidence they will maintain the infrastructure, we have the confidence to invest in our business."

Williams, too, says his investment at the port was largely motivated by the ongoing updates.

"Up and down all of the coast it seems like we aren't keeping up with the progression and so docks aren't being maintained and rebuilt in a timely basis," Williams said. "That's why it was very attracting when we realized the state shared the vision to improve it."

Williams says more businesses are likely to follow his lead.

"This is the first fishing community in the Eastern Seaboard that's getting this upgrade and it will demonstrate it's very well spent because the strongest players in the industry will gravitate towards there," he said.