

EXPEDITING THE OYSTER'S RECOVERY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The native oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) is one of the Chesapeake Bay's keystone species and of great ecological, economical, and historical importance in the Commonwealth. Fortunately, during the 2019 legislative session, the General Assembly authorized an increased investment in efforts to improve the pace of ecological and fishery restoration efforts. These efforts support maintenance of the state's commercial fishery and the wide array of ecosystem services provided by healthy oyster habitats. With additional enhancement activities taking place and growth in the wild population of oysters throughout the state, now is the time to further investigate the success of these efforts and plan for the successful management of this resource in the future.

CHALLENGE

The Chesapeake (meaning "great shellfish bay" in Algonquin) Bay once boasted oyster reefs so expansive they posed navigation hazards to explorers and watermen. Today, oyster populations in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries remain a fraction of their historical numbers. Overfishing, disease, and pollution have all taken their toll on this keystone species. There was a time when the oyster population in the Bay was so vast, the entire 19 trillion gallons of water could be filtered in less than a week. Today, our current population takes a whole year to filter the Bay. As oyster restoration efforts increase to meet WIP III goals, the available supply of shell has dwindled while the cost per bushel has increased. This has created logistical problems in finding enough shells to complete projects.

Finally, the Code of Virginia still contains an outdated section related to the possible introduction of the non-native *Crassostrea ariakensis* that is no longer necessary due to the restoration success of the native oyster.

SOLUTION

Restoring Virginia's oyster population will require broad partnerships, wise management of the existing oyster resource, and adequate resources. Fortunately, targeted successful restoration efforts are being implemented by a host of federal, state, and nongovernmental organizations to increase the oyster population and meet the oyster goal for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement.¹ At the same time, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) has strived to implement a fishery management plan that ensures the overall health of the oyster population while allowing for the culturally significant fishery to remain active.

To meet the growing demand for oyster shells, oyster shell recycling programs need to be ramped up and the process to use alternative substrates (such as stone) for reef restoration expedited.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Direct the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science to comprehensively map and sample all oyster growing areas in the state.

Maximize the reuse of the state's oyster shell resource by creating economic incentives for shell recycling and reducing the disposal of oyster shells in landfills.

Expedited permitting for alternative substrates for use in oyster restoration projects.

Update state code in order to remove references to the possible introduction of the non-native *Ariakensis* oyster.

After the Roast

Photo by Victoria Kennedy

