

Maryland Oyster Advisory Commission Charter 2012-2014

Maryland's oyster plan, President Obama's Chesapeake Bay Protection and Restoration Executive Order, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Native Oyster Restoration Master Plan all call for substantial increases in oyster habitat and oyster population within Chesapeake Bay. Several issues must be addressed to fulfill the goals of these state and federal programs, and these issues shall constitute the focus of the Oyster Advisory Commission for the next two years. The Oyster Advisory Commission reflects the diversity of interests in oysters that exist in the state of Maryland; recommendations from the Commission are integral to strengthening the development of the issues specified in this charter.

Oyster Fishery Management Plan (FMP)

In addition to its restoration component, Maryland's oyster plan also calls for the development a science-based management framework for the wild oyster fishery in Maryland. Unlike the other major fisheries in Maryland which are managed according to biological reference points (e.g. blue crab and striped bass), oyster harvest is controlled by daily bushel limits that have no link to oyster population dynamics. To manage oysters according in a more scientifically-based manner, the Department of Natural Resources is developing a series of potential biological reference points (target and threshold fishing levels, and biomass targets) on appropriate spatial scales, and a summary of tradeoffs associated with various reference point options. The Department is committed to working with the oyster industry to develop management strategies that provide watermen with increased flexibility while adhering to biological reference points.

Charge: Provide input to the Department on various options for biological reference points. The Department is particularly interested in the OAC's perspective on tradeoffs incurred under various reference point scenarios.

Outcome: OAC's recommendations will be incorporated in the document describing the reference point options, which will then be submitted for public review.

Charge: Provide guidance to the Department on the implementation of biological reference points.

Outcome: Once biological reference points are determined, provide suggestions on how best to implement the reference points.

Charge: Provide input to the Department on goals for Maryland's wild oyster fishery.

Outcome: Provide a range of social and economic goals for the Department's consideration.

Charge: Review and provide comments on final draft of the oyster fishery management plan before it is submitted for public comment.

Outcome: Comments for the Department to consider incorporating into the fishery management plan before it is sent out for public comment.

Cost-Effective Oyster Restoration

Oyster reef restoration may cost as much as \$200,000 per acre depending on whether the reef needs oyster seed, substrate, or both. Currently, there are limited resources for consistent multi-year monitoring of restored areas, which is critical for gauging effectiveness of restoration strategies and techniques. Information gained from monitoring is vital to ensuring future success. In addition, the amount of routine water quality monitoring within the Chesapeake Bay main stem and tributaries has been greatly reduced in recent years. Water quality information is essential for understanding changes in oyster populations, targeting restoration areas, and for tracking impacts of land use. Furthermore, water quality data can aid in the development of biological reference points and fisheries management plans by determining the potential of different areas to support oysters.

President Obama's executive order calls for the restoration of 10 Maryland tributaries by 2025, and the goals set by the Oyster Metrics Team in support of the executive order call for the restoration of 50-100% of the restorable bottom in these tributaries.

Currently, the state is contributing \$7,000,000 to oyster restoration in Harris Creek. Restoring nine other tributaries similar in size and condition to Harris Creek can be expected cost approximately the same amount of money. Given the current economic conditions, continuation of this funding is uncertain. Therefore, additional sources of funding for oyster restoration and monitoring must be identified and secured.

Charge: Identify potential sources of oyster restoration funding. This includes examining cost effective options for restoration, identifying new potential funding sources, and exploring innovative financing mechanisms.

Outcome: Recommend innovative financing options and cost-effective restoration strategies for the Department to consider in support of its oyster restoration program.

Protection

As oyster habitat is restored and oyster abundances increase, it is essential to protect this significant investment of state, federal, and private funds. A primary threat to oyster habitat and to oyster survival are land use practices that cause damage to oysters and their habitat in the form of sedimentation, eutrophication, or the alteration of critical shoreline habitats.

Illegal fishing activity is a second and potentially significant threat to restoration success. Recently, the state has increased penalties for illegal oyster harvest, instituted a bushel tagging system to better track harvested oysters, and bolstered monitoring of fishing grounds through the Maritime Law Enforcement Information Network (MLEIN). The Commission should work to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and recommend strategies to improve enforcement of closed oyster areas.

Charge: Work collaboratively with the Bay Program Sustainable Fisheries Goal Implementation Team and others to educate local land-use planners and decision makers about the importance of land use decisions to oysters.

Outcome: Provide an overview of the connections between land use and oyster restoration, making recommendations that inform land use decisions to improve the success of oyster restoration.

Charge: Evaluate the effectiveness of current oyster enforcement strategies.

Outcome: Recommended strategies for improvement in enforcement of closed oyster areas.

Charge: Given the current duties of the Natural Resources Police, evaluate the potential of increasing patrols to facilitate aquaculture and restoration activities.

Outcome: Provide suggestions to the Department on ways to increase patrols of aquaculture and restoration sites.