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Oysters in Chesapeake Bay – The Tide IS Changing

Capt. Rob Newberry, Chairman
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The oyster population in Chesapeake Bay is a very contentious issue right now. Everybody is very concerned with the direction oysters are taking. Over the past several years many things have been done to address this ongoing issue. The creation of sanctuaries for the oysters, the taking of productive bottom as a conservation measure, forced days off during the work week, bushel reductions in harvest, tens of millions of dollars of taxpayers money invested in restoration efforts with no return on investment, the creation of a new-fangled Oyster Advisory Committee (OAC) by the Maryland General Assembly, multiple bills by the Maryland General Assembly restricting areas to work and long-term closures of oyster areas, and many, many scientific studies and models being conducted. My God, with all this going on, the oysters are still in trouble? Not so fast, Quick Draw! Not only has the commercial Harvest increased by over 200,000 bushels in 3 years (despite the covid-19 pandemic limiting Market sales) but the good Lord has seen to it that the oyster population is increasing on its own thanks to extremely high spat counts of small oysters throughout areas of the Bay where oyster men and women are working.

Two of the top specific items of concern are (1) the productivity of sanctuaries that have been in place (sitting idle) for over ten (10) years now, and (2) the solution of how to get more oysters rapidly in the waters of Chesapeake Bay. These two questions were recently answered at the OAC meeting on Monday, May 10th. As per law set forth by the Maryland General Assembly, a model of oyster restoration had to be developed and implemented to determine the best process for restoring oysters in the Maryland portions of Chesapeake Bay. At the meeting, certain options were applied to THE model to determine the best outcome for productivity



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not only for oyster replenishment, but also for boosting the sanctuaries. Two scenarios were entered into this model. One was status quo and the other was the Maryland Seed and Shell Program. (Just a quick note, the seed and shell program had been used by the State from 1960 to 2006 with unparalleled results but was abandoned for dubious reasons in 2006 per the demands of CBF and CCA). Both scenarios had remarkable differences when applied to the model. The status quo basically did absolutely nothing to increase any factor of the oysters and even got worse as time moved forward. The sanctuaries were worse per the model. On the other hand, the seed and shell program when applied to the model showed fantastic results, including increases in biomass, Harvest, shell as substrate, nutrient reductions and increase in Harvest Revenue. So, the question is, are the oysters as bad off as they say they are? And by they, I mean the environmental non-government organizations that have been stating this horrible problem with the oyster population. With the biomass increasing, the Harvest numbers increasing, the spat numbers increasing - all in the face of the industry taking forced days off and bushel reductions and the pandemic affecting the market. The oysters are not only sustainable, but for the past 3 years have shown an increase in abundance. But let it be noted, all the areas of increase of substantial numbers are in areas were those in the wild Oyster industry have been working and investing and planting seed and shell. So, by using 100% scientific facts generated by studies done by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and by the model (by UMCES) that has been created by law per the Legislature, the conclusion is plain and simple: Sanctuaries are not working as they were advertised (baby oyster incubators) and the Seed and Shell Program that we used for 40 plus years should have remained in place and, most important of all, must be reinstated immediately.

Now the environmental groups will say that the seed and shell program looks good, but where are we going to get all the shell that is needed. Plain and simple folks – Man O’War Shoals in upper Bay. This area has been 100% approved by all State and federal government agencies for the dredging of valuable oyster shell but remains on hold at the Maryland Board of Public Works for



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approval. There are an estimated 150 million bushels of natural oyster shell available that could help rehabilitate and create 15,000 acres of oyster habitat throughout Chesapeake Bay. So common sense would tell you that if I were an environmentalist and a conservationist this would be a good thing. The problem is that someone needs to convince the organizations and advocates who would rather restore oysters at the expense of the wild commercial fishery that it is in scientific fact a good thing. For non-scientific reasons (including s self-imposed lack of oyster shell), they prefer to use alternative substrate such as rock, marl, and concrete rubble instead of natural oyster shells. Wake up people! When and why have people become so comfortable with the dumping debris and rubble into the Bay and calling it oyster substrate?

So, after 10 years of studies, prolonged waiting, investing millions of taxpayers' dollars in the Choptank River complex and other sanctuaries with no return of investment, and over 50 meetings of the OAC, it is time to do what the mandated study and model have shown to achieve the best outcomes. The information was presented to the OAC and UMCES modelers; the model was run per the statute, and time is of the essence (in advance of future natural spat sets). All indicators point to re-establishment of the Seed and Shell Program for the benefit of all aspects of oyster replenishment and restoration, and spend some smart money on the dredging of Man o War Shoals for a shared supply of indigenous Chesapeake Bay oyster shell...

Sincerely,

Capt. Robert Newberry
Chairman