

Choptank

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Maryland. From 2009 to 2011, new oyster sanctuaries were designated and established in the Choptank Complex, including the Little Choptank River, the Tred Avon River, and Harris Creek, in Talbot and Dorchester counties. This is in addition to sanctuaries established in Hooper Strait and the Nanticoke River in Dorchester.

A plethora of organizations and outside interests are playing a role in the plight of Dorchester's oysters. Spat on shell have been introduced by the billions and federal dollars are being spent in the millions.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Maryland's Oyster Advisory Commission, local watermen, the Dorchester County Council, a Montgomery County delegate, the Maryland Legislature, Gov. Larry Hogan, the Shore Delegation, U.S. senators and congressmen, the Trump Administration, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Clean Chesapeake Coalition, the Delmarva Fisheries Association, the Army Corps of Engineers, Maryland House Bill No. 924, other state legislation, and other interests, all have influenced, and will continue

to influence Dorchester waters.

NOAA is tracking the progress of Bay restoration. Its "2016 Maryland Oyster Restoration Update" is available at chesapeakebay.noaa.gov and details the work in the Choptank Complex. According to the report, as of 2016, 3.1 billion oysters, mostly spat on shell, were planted on 563 acres in the complex at a cost of \$47.6 million. In Harris Creek, \$27.7 million has been spent on 2.13 billion oysters planted on 351 acres. In the Little Choptank, 814 million oysters were planted on 178 acres, costing \$17.8 million. In the Tred Avon, about \$2.1 million has been spent on 153 million oysters planted on 35 acres. Plans call for oysters to be planted on about 400 more acres of the complex.

Much of the planting, restoration work and research is being done by the Maryland Oyster Restoration Interagency Workgroup, which is a combination of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Baltimore District, NOAA, DNR, and the Oyster Recovery Partnership. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation has also planted oysters in the complex.

Doug Myers is Maryland senior scientist for CBF. He spoke Thursday aboard the *Patricia Campbell*, while CBF volunteers and crew dropped spat on shell on targeted areas in the Little Choptank Sanctuary. Mr. Myers said oysters are considered a "keystone" species. Established oyster reefs, and their inherent habitat, help support 300 other species in the Bay. Also, an adult oyster can filter up to 50 gal-

lons of water per day.

According to a DNR report on oyster sanctuaries available at dnr.maryland.gov/fisheries, the newest sanctuaries established in 2010 were chosen to, "Protect about half of the Bay's most productive oyster grounds ('best bars') as determined by an analysis of Fall Survey data compiled from 1996 to 2007."

These "best bars" include the Choptank Complex, and have come at a cost of more than just federal dollars.

Watermen have worked the Bay since the 17th century. The image of a waterman appears on both Dorchester's and Maryland's seal. Much like the Bay's many fisheries, watermen are in decline. When the sanctuaries were established in the Choptank Complex, Hooper Strait and the Nanticoke, oyster harvesting was closed to watermen.

DNR's "best bars" in Dorchester County were some of the most productive historic oyster fisheries in the entire Bay. This includes the Little Choptank and its many tributaries.

Tom Bradshaw is vice president of the Dorchester County Council. He is an executive board member of the seven-county Clean Chesapeake Coalition, and a board member of the Delmarva Fisheries Association. He comes from a long line of Dorchester watermen and farmers.

"The Little Choptank was the nursery that watermen used to get their brood stock from," Mr. Bradshaw said. "It was like God's per-

fect nursery for oyster breeding grounds. Watermen pulled seed from there and it went everywhere from Virginia to Rock Hall."

Besides being used as a source to seed the rest of the Bay, the Little Choptank was a perennial source of a bountiful harvest for market. In years past, before the Little Choptank Sanctuary was established, workboats would come and go by the hundreds each day during prime oyster season. Now there is no action on the Little Choptank, as the submerged ground there is highly protected, and hotly contested by watermen and conservationists.

The very same conditions that support "God's perfect nursery," and watermen in Dorchester County, are viewed by conservationists as a key staging area for the Bay's renewal. Those who would like to see an ecological resurgence speak of potential in 25 to 100 years. In the meantime, Dorchester watermen wonder how they will survive, pay their bills and feed their families.

With so many stakeholders, special interest groups, and other interests involved, in many ways, all eyes are on Dorchester County and the Little Choptank River.

Editor's note: The next story in the series will focus on House Bill 924, the Oyster Advisory Commission, and DNR's work to soon establish two new sanctuaries in Bay tributaries.

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