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February 9, 2017

Ms. Kelley Cox, Co-Chair (kelley@pwec.org)
Mr. Scott Eglseder, Co-Chair (scott@eglsederwealth.com)
Oyster Advisory Commission
c/o Department of Natural Resources
580 Taylor Avenue
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Declining Oyster Population

Dear Co-Chairs Cox and Eglseder, and OAC Members:

I truly think that all of us have at least one thing in common: I believe we all want to see the oyster population increase in the Chesapeake Bay. The one issue that seems to separate us is that each one of us is convinced that our method is the best. Some people think that sanctuaries are the answer; some think aquaculture is the answer; and some groups believe that growing oysters in cages and then replanting them on newly designated sanctuaries is the way to go. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) would like to create sanctuaries in two more rivers to finish their plan and then the industry thinks the most important thing that can be done is to resurrect the former shell planting program. It is apparent that the oyster industry has been seriously ignored over the last ten years and the outcome is troublesome, to say the least. We have had two experts from Virginia come before us and both have told us exactly the same thing. They said that oyster bars naturally deteriorate and if we continue to put nothing back on these bars we will continue to see a decrease in the oyster population. One thing is for sure, the oyster cannot have too many friends at this time. I truly believe all of us working together and promoting all of these different methods, will give the oyster the best chance it has had in a very long time. This is an opportunity for the Commission and the audience to work collaboratively to put together a comprehensive oyster plan, that when enacted, might make a difference for the oyster. Just think how exciting it would be if we were able to put our differences aside and come up with a plan that could actually make a difference and how proud we would be to know that we played a role in making it happen.



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The Chesapeake Bay is a very large body of water and in order to increase the population of the oysters in the Bay it is going to take teamwork. There is no one "silver bullet." All of us working together for the good of the oyster can make a difference! We can continue to argue over whose method is the best however, we will find ourselves here next year still arguing while the oyster population continues to diminish.

We could easily implement all of the different methods listed above, except for one main ingredient: the proper substrate. As has been stated many times, by many experts, the best substrate for growing oysters is oyster shells. The State of Virginia successfully uses oyster shells, the State of Maryland successfully used oyster shells for 46 years, and the different hatcheries around the state would not consider using any other material except oyster shells. Aquaculture is dependent on oyster shell and those individuals growing oysters in cages use shell for its substrate. Why? Because it works the best, is a natural material and when used causes no adverse effects to the Bay floor or to boaters.

Some on the Commission continue to say that there is no shell. This is just not the truth and no matter how many times they say it will not make it true. The purported lack of shell is a fake "crisis" manufactured by certain "stakeholders" about ten years ago. We have large deposits of shell readily available in the Bay. These facts are confirmed by the Army Corps of Engineers in their 2012 Chesapeake Bay Oyster Restoration Master Plans. DNR has filed an application to allow the dredging of some of these shells on what is known as "Man O'War Shoal." Many on this Commission have stood in the way of this permit for unfounded reasons. My suggestion is that we all come together for the good of the oyster and work as a committee to move forward in addressing the issue of shell dredging. As the OAC, we need to pressure the Army Corps of Engineers for an up or down decision concerning the Man O'War Shoal Permit. If for some unknown reason the permit is denied, then we need to immediately move to look at a new location. Other locations do exist! Once we are able to obtain a permit to dredge shell, we can then start to implement all of the various ideas, methods, and strategies to increase the numbers of oysters. As I have stated previously, without the proper substrate we will meet indefinitely and accomplish nothing. With the proper substrate, we can give the oyster population the chance of a lifetime. It is up to us!

Very truly yours,

Ronald H. Fithian (aeb)

Ronald H. Fithian
OAC Member

RHF/aeb