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Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

Testimony in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 683

Oyster Management Plan – Harvest – Study

Wednesday, February 27, 2019

The Delmarva Fisheries Association (DFA) urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 683, which will require the Department of Natural Resources, as part of its fishery management plan for oysters, to study the effectiveness of oyster harvest, in particular the efforts by the Commonwealth of Virginia, to facilitate oyster propagation and restoration. SB 683 gives a voice to the Oyster Advisory Commission, local Oyster Committees and working watermen, groups that have advocated for controlled harvest since the replenishment program was summarily halted after nearly 50 years of measurable success.

Tens of millions of dollars have been spent on the alternative substrate program and other strategies supported by certain environmental groups. Various surveys have concluded that these projects are out-performing bars where public harvest is permitted. However, it does not appear that these surveys are in fact comparing “apples to apples.” Climate factors such as precipitation, salinity and temperature impact disease and other conditions that affect oyster growth and survival from year-to-year. Comparing juvenile oysters planted at different times in different conditions must be managed carefully to avoid attributing success or failure to the wrong factor(s). Additionally, the gear used to survey can skew data in one direction or another. From our review of the research, we are concerned that improper control of data collection parameters renders the results of comparing sanctuaries to publicly accessible areas inconclusive and we hope this legislation will begin to redress these inconsistencies.

It is also worth noting that in the recently released Oyster Stock Assessment, peer reviewers analyzing the efficacy of the sanctuaries said the following, *“Sanctuary and habitat plantings, and aquaculture operations should not be considered a part of the standing stock of the fishery, nor part of the reproductive capacity of the fishery. Doing so will overestimate the spawning potential, and the contributions of sanctuaries, habitat plantings and aquaculture*

are as yet unclear and likely vary greatly by source.”¹ In plain terms, the concrete castles supported by special interest groups do not have a demonstrable impact on the health of the Chesapeake Bay; they may in fact be detrimental (i.e. impact tidal movements, algal blooms, etc.) and further study is warranted on these materials.

DFA members rely on a productive and sustainable oyster fishery for their livelihoods and the vitality of Maryland’s historic fishing communities. It is concretely in our best interest to support measures that increase the presence of this iconic bivalve in the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. All that we ask is that measures that include the wild harvest aren’t rejected due to a smear campaign that demonizes our industry. Rather, we support a balanced, scientific inquiry that analyzes the positive and negative impacts of harvesting using the same criteria applied to sanctuaries and aquaculture; level the underwater field and let’s find a strategy that works for all Maryland residents wishing to enjoy our State’s natural resources.

For these reasons, DFA urges a FAVORABLE report on SB 683.

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¹ Rago, Paul, Hennen, Daniel and Monroe, Daphne. “*Review of A Stock Assessment of Eastern Oyster, Crassostrea virginica, in Maryland Waters of Chesapeake Bay*” (Annapolis, August 2018), page 5.

