



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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Virginia Marine Police Targets Oyster Poachers

~ Increased enforcement and toughened penalties aim to protect booming oyster stocks from unscrupulous thieves ~

NEWPORT NEWS, VA. – The Virginia Marine Police will combat oyster theft by air, land and sea in an intensive effort to crush what has become an epidemic of poaching. The public oyster season opens tomorrow, Oct. 1.

“We mean business. We will vigorously pursue anyone who violates the oyster regulations, and we will prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law,” said Virginia Marine Police Chief Rick Lauderman. “Stealing oysters from the public oyster grounds, private leased grounds or from oyster sanctuaries in particular will not be tolerated. Oyster poaching in Virginia will stop.”

A number of Marine Police Officers have been dedicated to search for oyster violations as their top priorities. An airplane will prowl the skies, patrolling for suspicious activity on both public and privately leased oyster grounds. Other techniques and equipment will be used as well.

And the Virginia Marine Resources Commission comes armed to this fight with a renewed commitment to revoking violators’ commercial fishing licenses and with a new tool: Revocation of all saltwater fishing privileges, as allowed by a new state law that went into effect on July 1. The Marine Police is the Commission’s law enforcement division.

In fact, the Commission recently adopted new sanction guidelines that call for the revocation of commercial fishing licenses for even a single egregious offense. This is a tougher standard from prior guidelines, which called for a license suspension hearing on a third court conviction of fishery regulations within a calendar year.

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Just last week, on Sept. 24, the Commission voted unanimously to revoke the fishing licenses of five commercial oyster harvesters who had pleaded guilty in criminal court to repeatedly harvesting more than their daily allowable bushel limits of oysters. Two of those five watermen saw their licenses revoked for a year, followed by a year of probation, and three were revoked for two years, which is the maximum allowed under current state law.

“Those who violate our oyster laws will face arrest as well as the revocation of both their licenses and their right to fish in tidal waters,” said VMRC Commissioner Jack Travelstead. “They could be banned from any type of commercial fishing activity, even packing fish someone else caught. They’ll need another line of work for awhile. We anticipate a good oyster season this year, and law-abiding watermen should not have to suffer because of thieves.”

Oysters are ecologically and economically important, and the Commission is committed to preserving a resurgent oyster stock and to protecting a substantial investment in oyster replenishment, Travelstead said.

A single adult oyster can purge up to 50 gallons of water a day, and help clean the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Oyster reefs provide important forage and refuge habitat for invertebrates, as well as juvenile crabs and finfish species.

Over the past decade, the oyster harvest in Virginia has increased ten-fold, from 23,000 bushels in 2001 to an estimated 250,000 bushels in 2012. In that time, the dockside value of the oyster harvest increased from \$575,000 to more than \$8.26 million. The harvest is projected to jump to 320,000 bushels this year, which would make it the largest oyster harvest in Virginia since 1987.

“Oyster stocks are on the rise. We have invested a lot of time, effort and money into making that happen,” said Travelstead. “More oysters in the water may tempt some unscrupulous watermen. If so, this is a warning. We will not allow these stocks to be plundered.”

The Marine Resources Commission spent \$2 million on oyster replenishment this summer, thanks to a historic level of funding from Gov. Bob McDonnell and the General Assembly.

Roughly 1 million bushels of oyster shells were planted on public oyster, which was an estimated 1 billion individual empty oyster shells, enough to fill approximately 4,000 dump trucks.

Every \$1 spent by the state to plant oyster shells yields \$7 in economic benefits in the form of larger harvests and increased jobs for oyster shuckers and oyster packing houses when the oyster larvae that attach to the shells grow to market size in three years.

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