COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Marine Resources Commission
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Virgina Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel

Members:

Stefanie Taillon, Deputy Secretary of Natural and Historic Resources
The Honorable Alex Askew, Virginia House of Delegates
The Honorable Richard Stuart, Senate of Virginia
The Honorable David Marsden, Senate of Virginia
The Honorable Hillary Pugh Kent, Virginia House of Delegates
The Honorable Jamie Green, Commissioner, Virginia Marine Resources Commission
The Honorable John Cosgrove, Deputy Commissioner, Virginia Marine Resources Commission
The Honorable J.J. Minor, Former Marine Resources Commission Associate Commissioner
The Honorable Bill Pruitt, Former Marine Resources Commissioner
The Honorable Chad Ballard, Former Marine Resources Commission Associate Commissioner
The Honorable Ronald Owens, Executive Secretary, Potomac River Fisheries Commission
Dr. Jim Wesson, Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Joseph Grist, Deputy Commissioner, Marine Resources Commission
Todd Janeski, Virginia Commonwealth University
Jackie Shannon, Chesapeake Bay Foundation
AJ Erskine, Virginia Marine Resources Commission Associate Commissioner
Dr. Roger Mann, Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Tommy Kellum, W.E. Kellum Seafood
Rich Harding, Purcell's Seafood
Ben Johnson, Johnson and Sons Seafood
Andy Lacatell, Saltwater Consulting RVA
Beverly Ludford, Pleasure House Oysters
Keith Lockwood, United States Army Corp of Engineers
Kevin Schabow, National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration
Nikki Rovner, The Nature Conservancy
Mike Congrove, Oyster Seed Holdings

Abstract:

Historically, the Marine Resources Commission (the Commission) has received formal advice from technical workgroups regarding the enduring strategies for restoring and maintaining the sustainability of Virginia's oyster population. This guidance has been facilitated periodically through the Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel starting in 1990. The 1990 Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel concentrated on combating diseases affecting the resource. The subsequent 2006 Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel focused on the long-term health and sustainability of both the replenishment program and the oyster industry as a whole. The recommendations produced from these panels outlined ambitious forward-thinking goals aimed at preserving and increasing existing oyster stocks while enhancing the commercial industry that relies on them. Tangible progress from these past recommendations has been achieved through a range of programs, including the creation of reef habitats, the implementation of a quantitative assessment of the annual survey, and the creation of the Conservation and Replenishment Program. With the recent positive growth of Virginia's oyster resources and the historical importance of the industry, long-term planning must prioritize safeguarding this vital resource and its future.

Building on the successful methods of previous Blue Ribbon Oyster Panels, the Blue Oyster Panel will convene in 2025 to develop comprehensive recommendations for the sustainable management of the Commonwealth's oyster resources, with a short-term focus on the future of the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Oyster Outcome under the Chesapeake Bay Program's Beyond 2025 Phase II process. Formally established by Governor Youngkin's Executive Directive 10, "Positioning the Commonwealth for Continued Success in Chesapeake Bay Restoration Efforts", the panel is one of the Administration's strategic initiatives focused on the holistic, science-based protection of living resources. As appropriate, these proposals will be presented in a report to the Governor and provide policy recommendations for actions taken either by the Commission or legislatively. The recommendations and collaboration of industry and scientific leaders will be fundamental in planning for the sustainability and vibrancy of Virginia's oyster ecosystem. Moreover, it will address present challenges and future hazards inherent in managing this invaluable natural resource, ensuring a holistic approach for long-term sustainability and enhancement.

Format and Approach:

The Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel is composed of individuals with diverse backgrounds and expertise in oyster management and business to foster comprehensive discussions. Appointments are made by the Secretary of Natural and Historic Resources, in consultation with the Marine Resources (MRC) Commissioner, for three-year terms. The MRC Commissioner shall serve as the chairperson. Members are expected to provide valuable insights and actively participate in problem-solving discussions. While panel membership does not have term limits, the chairperson will review attendance and participation at least every three years. The panel will emphasize consensus-building in developing its recommendations. The Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel will convene at least twice per fiscal year, with a goal of meeting in May and November.

Given the urgent timeline of the Beyond 2025 Phase II process, the panel's inaugural meeting will be held in January 2025 to discuss the Oyster Outcome. Following the May meeting, the panel will submit a draft report with recommendations to the Commissioner for review within 30

days. After the Commissioner's review, the finalized report will be submitted to the Governor's office by July 1 annually. Management recommendations intended for implementation before the fall fishery season will be presented to the Shellfish Management Advisory Committee and the Marine Resources Commission (Board) by October 1 each year.

Background:

The native oyster *Crassostrea virginica* plays a vital role as a keystone species in the Chesapeake Bay and Eastern Shore seaside lagoons, driving Virginia's seafood industry with an annual value exceeding $1 billion and playing a pivotal role as a key fisheries habitat and providing clean water. Beyond economic significance, these oysters serve as vital fisheries habitat and contribute to water quality by filtering pollutants. Despite long term challenges like habitat destruction, pollution, and disease, recent collaborative efforts have sparked a resurgence in the health of this natural resource. Today, Virginia boasts the largest public oyster replenishment program in the country and leads the world's largest oyster restoration effort. VMRC's dedication to oyster restoration sets a national standard, benefiting both the environment and the local economy. In 2023, the public oyster season achieved a 35-year harvest high, with stocks showing stability and growth. Notably, Virginia has experienced consistently high and increasing natural spat set since 2019, surpassing 70-year records in some areas. While celebrating these achievements, it's vital to acknowledge ongoing challenges. Therefore, convening a planning workgroup is imperative to address future issues and ensure the sustained vitality of our oyster stock and the prosperity it brings.

Objectives:

To create long term policy strategies for consideration by the Marine Resources Commission and the General Assembly on topics to include:

Overarching Issues:

1. Increased Oyster Production: Strategies to boost oyster population growth through hatchery programs, selective breeding, and habitat enhancement continued industry revitalization.
2. Improved and Expanded Habitat: Exploration of alternative substrates, reef construction, and restoration of degraded habitats to support oyster populations.
3. Sustainable Harvest Policies: Consideration of policies based on scientific evidence to ensure the long-term viability of the oyster fishery.
4. Improved Water Quality: Collaboration with stakeholders to implement measures for water quality improvement funding in areas of oyster economic importance, benefiting both oyster health and ecosystem resilience.

Detailed Discussion:

1. 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement – Oyster Outcome: Establish a clear and shared understanding of the current state of the oyster population, including its status and metrics. Develop a comprehensive review of Virginia’s oyster protection tools and their legal limitations, such as the use of non-harvest areas and sanctuaries. Provide guidance on what “restoration” should entail in the context of a revised outcome. This includes defining a suitable management approach and identifying measurable criteria for determining the success of restoration initiatives.

2. Fossil Shell Exploration: Investigate the feasibility and potential benefits of utilizing fossil shell as substrate for oyster habitat restoration. Evaluate ecological and economic impacts.
3. Alternative Substrate Options and Future Research & Development: Explore innovative substrate materials and techniques for oyster reef construction. Invest in research for long-term solutions.
4. Stock Evaluations: Conduct comprehensive evaluations of oyster populations throughout the year to assess stock health and annual mortality rates in both public and private industries. Expand quantitative methods for accurate assessment of oyster populations, identifying trends and areas requiring intervention.
5. Funding Solutions: Explore diverse funding sources, including public-private partnerships, grants, and legislative appropriations, to support oyster restoration initiatives.
6. Apprentice Partnerships: Integrate VMRC Commissioner's Waterman's Apprentice Program to train new generations of oyster growers, harvesters and processors, fostering sustainability and innovation within the industry.
7. Fossil Dredge Operations Multi-Year Contracts: Incentivize long term planning and contracting for the harvest of fossil shell to ensure annual consistency.
8. Future Additional Seed and House Shell Planting: Develop strategies for expanding seed production and enhancing oyster recruitment. Promote the recycling of shell material to support reef development in Virginia waters and the Potomac River.
9. Creation of Harvestable Reefs: Designate areas for the establishment of harvestable reefs, balancing conservation objectives with economic interests.
10. Reef Height Above Benthic Level (Changes): Monitor changes in reef elevation relative to benthic levels, assessing the effectiveness of restoration efforts and adapting strategies as needed.
11. Sudden Unusual Mortality Syndrome (SUMS): share observations, identify patterns in affected areas, and explore mitigation strategies like selective breeding or habitat modifications. Discuss research gaps, improvements in monitoring and reporting protocols, and suggest actionable recommendations for collaboration among scientists, aquaculturists, and policymakers to address this critical issue.

Conclusion:

The Blue-Ribbon Oyster Panel is committed to restoring and sustaining Virginia's oyster resources, recognizing their critical role in both our environment and our economy. By working together and embracing new ideas, the panel aims to tackle the long-term challenges facing oyster populations, ensuring this iconic resource remains abundant for generations to come.
In addition to setting clear and realistic goals, the panel is dedicated to finding practical, effective solutions to meet them. Through collaboration with local communities, scientists, and industry leaders, the panel strives to balance conservation with the needs of those who rely on oysters for their livelihoods.