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Environmental Matters Committee



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Aquaculture is Farming and Fishing – And That Is a Good Thing

The Great Seal of the State of Maryland contains two figures symbolizing our beloved state's founding and bountiful natural resources; the land and the waters. These two figures, a symbolic farmer and a fisherman, remain as relevant today in our state's collective identity and political discourse as they were hundreds of years ago.

Agriculture is understood to be many different things historically, socially, economically, environmentally as well as recreationally and commercially. Most of us broadly view agriculture as the land-based raising of crops and livestock, plants and animals, for consumption and other beneficial use. In a general sense, aquaculture is no different with the unique exception being that aquaculture predominantly occurs on the water instead of the land.

Maryland state law formally defines aquaculture as both an agricultural and fisheries management activity. This definition is most clearly illuminated as our state's policy makers, along with our federal and local partners, grapple with ways to sustain both our traditional land based farming and the productive health of our states fisheries in Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. These policy challenges, by their very nature, shall and must cause new and innovative ways to keep our farmers and our fisherman as productive and viable as ever while helping to create a sustainable environment for ourselves and future generations.

One aspect of aquaculture, oyster farming, is emerging as another potentially important policy initiative to help maintain both the environment and commercial activities compatible with our state's best long-term interests. Restoring the oyster population to Chesapeake Bay to the maximum extent possible is universally accepted both scientifically and politically as an important strategy of the Chesapeake Bay Program. Great efforts and resources have been brought to bear to make this happen.

Maryland has made great strides over the last 15 years or so to establish an oyster farming industry in our state as a part of this effort. We have substantially reformed our state's leasing laws on Chesapeake Bay and streamlined our governance, oversight, and permitting processes for oyster farming. This gives us another manageable tool in helping to reduce and remove detrimental nutrients from the Bay and its tributaries while simultaneously creating jobs, revenue, and commerce.

These recent efforts have received broad bi-partisan support now through at least four different Governor's Administrations (Glendenning, Ehrlich, O'Malley and Hogan). They have also received strong bipartisan support in the legislature. Many areas of the country are now looking at Maryland as the word spreads to other states, and even internationally, regarding what we are doing on these matters right here on Chesapeake Bay.

Now here's the kicker. Oyster aquaculture, as an accepted and vibrant sector of our agriculture industry in Maryland, holds the promise of having our symbolic farmer and fisherman reach metaphorically across our state's Great Seal and shake hands in a gesture of mutual support and helpfulness.

As oyster farms help clean the waters, the natural fisheries have an environment to be vibrant, healthy, and productive for our traditional watermen. Oyster farms also can offer the land based farmer assistance from a nutrient uptake and sequestration perspective. The plowman and the waterman supporting each other to thrive and feed our state and nation. That should aid our environment by unleashing private market forces while doing so in a manner that is sustainable for the long haul. Oh, did we mention this may also tend to reduce the burden of taxpayers and consumers in the future who are also paying to help clean the Bay.

The nutrient removal capabilities of an oyster are well documented. One three inch oyster is estimated to pump 50 gallons of water a day, removing algae entrained nitrogen and phosphorous as part of its feeding and growth processes. Science is now able to quantify to a relatively high degree of certainty the amount of nutrients that are removed from the environment through the biological digestive and growth processes of oysters.

The federal EPA has now expressed some interest in the development of best management practices (BMP's) by the Chesapeake Bay Program through an expert panel currently proceeding under the auspices of the Oyster Recovery Program. This panel's charge is to evaluate the scientific efficacy and recommendations for developing a useable and viable nutrient credit trading system in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, specifically using oysters. Depending on the outcome of this evaluation, the ramifications for agriculture, oyster aquaculture, and the commercial seafood industry are potentially very large.

To that end, we will be submitting cross-filed legislation in the upcoming session of the Maryland General Assembly to add two representatives to the Aquaculture Coordinating Council - one from the MD Farm Bureau (MFB) and one from the Oyster Recovery Program (ORP). This Coordinating Council is our state's policy oversight entity for aquaculture matters. We, as state legislators, are both representatives on this Council on behalf of the Senate and House of Delegates. There are also representatives of the Departments of Ag, Natural Resources, Environment, Health, and Commerce. Additionally, there are representatives of the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension, aquaculture academic research, and the Center for Environmental Services (UMCES). Traditional watermen and aquaculture watermen also serve on the Council. The council was created in statute in 2005.

We both believe very strongly that these efforts are important in so many regards and to so many different interests, not the least of which are the traditional farmers and fishermen working in and

on our treasured environmental resources of land and water. Our hope is that the farming community and the commercial seafood industry will embrace these developments as being in their own best interests. We are hopeful that you will join us in support of this most important work. Aquaculture is agriculture and fisheries management, and that is a good thing!

Delegate Tony O'Donnell
(R) Calvert/St. Mary's

Senator Kathy Klausmeier
(D) Baltimore County

Senator Klausmeier has been a member of the Maryland General Assembly since 1995 representing Baltimore County. Delegate O'Donnell has been a member of the Maryland General Assembly since 1995 representing Calvert and St. Mary's Counties.