



News

Dorchester criticizes oyster sanctuary plan

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CAMBRIDGE With nearly 20 percent of proposed oyster sanctuary areas in Dorchester waters, the Dorchester County Council has written to Maryland Department of Natural Resources Secretary John Griffin, questioning the creation of sanctuaries where oysters are growing from spat paid for by public tax dollars.

"The Dorchester County Council has, for the past 11 years, made significant investments in a local oyster replenishment program," Council President Jay Newcomb wrote in the Jan. 28 letter to Griffin. "To date, we have provided \$153,500 in public taxpayer dollars toward protecting the longevity of the oyster harvest in our county.

"We fear that, through the establishment of the proposed sanctuary areas, that investment will now benefit private watermen. This was never our intention when choosing to make this public investment and it would be wrong to allow those funds to not be utilized for the sustainability of our local watermen and our seafood harvesting industry."

Among the areas for proposed sanctuaries in the Choptank is the river's Oyster Shell Point Bar, where the county has invested \$30,000 during the past three years to plant oyster spat.

"Those oysters are now ready for harvest," the letter to Griffin reads, suggesting that "closing those waters through a non-public sanctuary is not only an immediate hardship to our local watermen but also a miscarriage of the intent of the public dollars used to make the harvest available."

Dorchester's county council also notes in its letter to the DNR secretary that "the state has already closed waters in the Choptank River around Sandy Hill (oyster bar), despite that area having benefited from the local replenishment program and a \$30,000 investment of local taxpayers funds."

The council also told Griffin that the DNR's oyster restoration program "will require that approximately 19 percent of the proposed 24 percent goal for state designated sanctuary areas be identified in waterways in or around Dorchester County, including the Choptank River and the adjacent waters of the Chesapeake Bay.

"This is, by far, the largest percentage contribution to the state's proposal by any affected county and is disproportionate hardship for our citizens," Newcomb wrote to Griffin.

"If the Little Choptank River is put into a state-owned sanctuary as proposed, Dorchester County watermen who rely on hand-tonging will be decimated as this is the only remaining area in our county for watermen to practice this harvesting method," the letter from the Dorchester council reads. "This seems to be a direct contraction to the governor's goals of job creation and job protection which is critical to our local economy and to the economic recovery of our state."

Finally, the Dorchester County Council asked for a delay in finalizing the sanctuary proposal, which had been planned to occur by Feb. 19.

The date to create a final sanctuary plan has been moved back, according to Secretary Griffin's Feb. 3 to members of the Eastern Shore legislative delegation, including Sen. Richard Colburn, R-Mid-Shore.

"Our target date for submitting new regulations will be pushed back," Griffin writes in the Feb. 3 letter, "but only to allow us to constructively work through as many issues as possible, or until we decide that we have reached an end point of productive discussions."

The DNR secretary also writes that, "We will take the necessary time to work with you and the industry, particularly to address mapping concerns and, subject to the conditions we have articulated, make any appropriate modifications."

Sen. Colburn spoke optimistically about working on a compromise with the DNR on the oyster sanctuary proposal after receiving the Feb. 3 letter from Griffin and meeting with the DNR secretary Friday morning with other members of the Shore delegation.

"The Department of Natural Resources is negotiating in good faith," Colburn said during a telephone interview following Friday morning's meeting with the DNR secretary in Annapolis. "I'm happy the process is proceeding."

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