

News

Oyster restoration plan touted

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Would increase oyster sanctuaries, open bars for aquaculture

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EASTON Gov. Martin O'Malley released the details of a proposed oyster restoration plan Thursday, calling for a new emphasis on expanded oyster sanctuaries and aquaculture leasing opportunities.

O'Malley announced the three-step proposed Oyster Restoration and Aquaculture Development Plan at the Annapolis Maritime Museum, the site of the city's last shellfish packing business. The plan builds on the findings of a six-year environmental impact study of oyster restoration options, and the work of the Oyster Advisory Commission and the Aquaculture Coordinating Council.

The plan, according to a press release from the governor's office, has three specific goals: to increase the network of oyster sanctuaries from 9 to 24 percent of remaining quality habitat, to open more than 95,000 acres of natural oyster bars to leasing for aquaculture, and to maintain more than 167,000 acres for the wild oyster fishery.

"Our native oyster is part of the public trust, and we have a clear and urgent responsibility to restore this iconic species to the Chesapeake Bay," O'Malley said in the press release.

O'Malley added that the move could create more than 200 jobs and bring in millions to the state's economy.

The proposed new sanctuaries include Harris Creek and the Tred Avon River in Talbot County, as well as more of the Choptank and Little Choptank rivers in Dorchester County and a large portion of the Bay west of Bloodsworth Island.

Many of the best oyster bars are located on the Eastern Shore, according to the Department of Natural Resources, and are concentrated most highly in the Choptank and Little Choptank rivers as well as the Eastern Bay. Many of the new areas proposed for public harvesting are located in the non-protected portions of those watersheds, while areas proposed for aquaculture leasing are spread out, but mainly along the western shore.

O'Malley said the state estimates that by opening up more areas for aquaculture, Maryland could host more than 150 aquaculture operations. Members of the Oyster Advisory Commission have visited Marinetics Inc., which grows oysters in floats on the Choptank River. Marinetics produces more than a million Choptank Sweets per year.

In January, O'Malley sponsored successful legislation to streamline the regulatory process and open new areas to leasing to promote industry growth.

The plan's other goals include strengthening the state's ability to protect oyster sanctuaries by installing a network of radars and cameras to help Natural Resources Police monitoring and streamlining the aquaculture permitting process.

Mike Naylor, director of the Department of Natural Resources' Shellfish Program, said public scoping will begin in January, with hearings to be held in Dorchester and Queen Anne's counties in 2010. There will be a period of public comment, followed by DNR submitting a regulatory package, more public comment, with the regulations potentially adopted by DNR in early 2010.

Since 1994, the Chesapeake Bay's oyster population has dropped to 1 percent of historic levels thanks largely to decades of overharvesting and the spread of the diseases Dermo and MSX. The acreage of quality oyster bars has declined from 200,000 to 36,000, and the number of oyster processing companies has dropped from 58 to eight in the last 35 years.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Nature Conservancy both applauded O'Malley's move.

"This plan will bring more oysters to the Bay. That will be good for the ecology and good for the economy. Oyster lovers will benefit and so will the seafood industry, with more jobs and prosperity," Bay Foundation President Will Baker said in a statement.

The environmental organizations would embrace a shift from the current practice of planting oysters specifically to be harvested by watermen. According to the Choptank Tributary Team, it costs about five times as much to place the oysters as they later sell for.

According to the two environmental groups, large interconnected oyster sanctuaries tend to thrive better than smaller, flat beds, so focusing large sanctuaries in fewer spots, as the plan calls for, makes sense.

"The plan takes major steps in the right direction of rebuilding the native oyster populations, restoring the ecological benefits of their reefs, and transitioning economic production to aquaculture," Dr. Donald Boesch, president of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science and a member of the Oyster Advisory Commission said in a press release.