

Potomac River Fisheries Commission's

2011/12 New Oyster Revitalization Plan

Under direction from the Commission, the Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel developed a Revitalization Plan for the Potomac River public oyster fishery as a means of “jump starting” the oyster resource in the river. The Panel was directed to develop a “put - and – take” public oyster fishery that would be self-sustaining. All of the commercial license holders in the Potomac will be investing in the future health of the resources in the river. Funding for this Revitalization Plan would come from the new Commercial License Registration fee, oyster license fees, the new oyster surcharge fee, oyster taxes, money set aside by the Commission for oyster repletion, and public/private sponsorships from businesses along the Potomac and citizens who are passionate about restoring the oyster resource and traditional way of life on the river. The Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel visualized replenishment of the oyster fishery in three phases: (1) rotational planting of triploid oyster seed (a put-and-take public oyster fishery) on the oyster management reserve areas; (2) planting of diploid seed on other productive oyster bars; and (3) planting diploid seed on sanctuary areas to protect brood stock.

Phase 1 - Oyster Management Reserve Program and Surcharge Fee

The Commission designated Cobb Island Bar and Ragged Point Bar as Oyster Management Reserve Areas and closed them to the harvest of oysters as of January 1, 2011. The Oyster Management Reserve Program will start with the purchase of 5,000 bushels of triploid spat on shell, planted in the spring/summer of 2012 (2,500 bu / 5-acre plot) on each of the management reserve areas. The second planting of 5,000 bushels will occur in the spring of 2013, and the third planting will occur in the spring of 2014. The first harvest would take place in 2014 from the first planting. This rotational harvest plan would continue in this pattern. Only hand scrapes will be used to harvest these oysters. The goal is to produce about 10,000 bushels of market oysters per year initially, and to harvest when the market price is best. Participation in the Oyster Management Reserve Program requires the purchase of a hand scrape license (either personal or vessel) and payment of the \$300 oyster surcharge for three consecutive years.

A model has been developed to help illustrate this Oyster Management Reserve Program (available from the PRFC office) and it takes into account a certain amount of planting mortality and natural mortality. There are no guarantees that there will be 10,000 bushels available to harvest during the third and subsequent years, but there could be. As most of the watermen are aware, there are risks in the oyster fishery such as predation by cow nose rays, freshets, illegal harvest and weather events that could wipe out or severely limit survival of the oysters. Members of the Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel support this program and feel that is the best direction to take to get the public oyster fishery back on track. In order for this Management Reserve Program to be self-sustaining, it will need at least 35 people initially to participate (purchase hand scrape license and pay surcharge fee for three consecutive years), and the deadline to get into the first year of the program has been extended to May 1, 2012. In the event that less than 35 people choose to participate in the Management Reserve Program this year, the program may be cancelled and the \$300 surcharge may be refunded, or the Commission may delay the start of the program for one year.

Phase 2 – Oyster Replenishment

Oyster license fees and surcharge fees collected from tongers and oyster buyers will be directed to oyster replenishment using diploid seed on oyster bars in the hand tong area of the river. In addition, public and private sponsorships will be encouraged to help finance this replenishment program.

Public/Private Sponsorship Program for Revitalization of the Oyster Fishery

Important stakeholders who conduct business either on or adjacent to the Potomac River are being contacted to participate in helping to revitalize the Potomac River public oyster fishery by sponsoring part of the oyster replenishment program. The Potomac River Fisheries Commission is interested in planting native oyster seed on some of the historically productive oyster bars to help “jump start” the oyster population, as one phase of the replenishment program. These oyster bars will be carefully managed and monitored, and the public oyster fishery will be conducted under a controlled plan. Harvesting oysters has been a traditional way of life for the watermen and the stakeholder’s participation will help preserve and continue it; however the traditional public fishery is undergoing change. Now watermen will be sharing in the investment for the revitalization of the resource and their future fishery as well.

We anticipate that this program will involve the corporate sponsorship of several stakeholders and it may also include service sponsors such as marinas, restaurants, seafood dealers and any business along the Potomac River, as well as private citizen sponsors who are passionate about the river and want to preserve our public oyster fishery as a traditional way of life on the river. There may be graduated levels of sponsorship. Participation in this program should draw positive publicity to the region and be considered as an example of cooperative effort and community support.

Phase 3 – Sanctuary Areas

This phase of the Revitalization Plan entails planting diploid seed on sanctuary areas in the river to protect oyster brood stock. Funding for this phase of the plan may come from some of the public/private sponsorships; however this is still in the developmental stage.