



Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
Business Resources Committee
August 12, 2020, 2:00 pm – 3:30 pm
Zoom Virtual Meeting



Agenda

Meeting Objectives:

- a) Management Conference Committee Status Review
- b) Discuss challenges of Alabama oyster farmers and opportunities for partnerships
- c) Formulate strategy for developing Dauphin Island oyster project and marketing opportunities to promote Alabama oysters
- d) EPA-NEP Program Evaluation Team Q & A

1. Welcome and Introductions

BRC Co-Chairs:

Eliska Morgan, Thompson Engineering
Frank Smith, Wilkins Miller Wealth Management

2. Review and Approval of Minutes

3. Old Business

- a) Management Conference Committee Status Review
- b) Review Challenges/Needs of Alabama Oyster Farmers

4. New Business

- a) Status of Aloe Bay Project
- b) Dauphin Island Oyster Project
- c) Marketing Alabama Farmed Oysters
- d) EPA-NEP Program Evaluation Team Q & A
- e) Schedule next meeting

5. Adjourn

Minutes

In attendance: Frank Smith, Wilkins Miller Wealth Management; Beth Walton, Oyster South; Eliska Morgan, Thompson Engineering; Herb Malone, Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Tourism; Renie Kennemer, Thompson Engineering; Jimmy Lyons, ASPA; Collete Boehm, freelancer; Jeanette Kelson, Wood; Don Bates, Osprey Initiative; Rick Frederick, Enviva; Rusty Grice, MASGC; Beth Thomas, Alabama Power

EPA-NEP PE Team: Romell Nandi, EPA Headquarters; Kathy Hill, Indian River Lagoon NEP; and Chris Plymale, EPA Region 4

Staff: Roberta Swann, Bethany Hudson, Herndon Graddick, and Christian Miller

Takeaways

- The BRC has reviewed challenges facing the oyster aquaculture industry in Alabama which fall into the following broad categories: Access to capital, Access to water bottoms, monitoring/management, and marketing/awareness.
- The BRC has decided to focus on several projects related to supporting the oyster farming industry in Alabama and formed sub-committees to work on the following: Finance/capital availability, Marketing, Dauphin Island Oyster Project.
- The CORE project run by MASGC, and partially funded by Alabama Power represents an early success for the BRC as they focus on aiding the local oyster farmers.
- The BRC participated in a discussion with the PE Team and plans to review their membership and strategically address needs for new members based on their current focus of supporting the local oyster farming industry.

Frank called the meeting to order at 2:05 and made a motion to accept the minutes from the last meeting. Eliska made a motion to accept which was seconded by Colette Boehm. The minutes were approved.

Christian gave an update on what MBNEP Management Conference Committees have been working on:

- **GNC:** Coal ash education, watershed planning status, and legislative activities
- **PIC:** Watershed planning, project implementation, and shorelines planning
- **FC:** Strategizing for the long-term sustainability for the MBNEP
- **SAC:** Stressor evaluation, watershed modeling, comprehensive ecosystem modeling for the greater Mobile Bay Watershed
- **BRC:** Oyster aquaculture/support for restoration, Marketing campaign for farm-raised oysters, access to capital for commercial fisheries interests
- **CRC:** Development of a work plan to address trash, litter, and marine debris
- **CAC:** Focusing on citizen science: WQ, flooding, SSOs, phytoplankton, DO, invasive and native plant species, and other data collection opportunities

Review of Challenges facing oyster aquaculture industry:

- **Availability of capital-** There is interest in creating some type of low-interest loan program to provide funds for individuals looking to start new oyster farms and fishing businesses as well as to help modernize the fishing fleet. The mechanisms for doing this are well established, but some work needs to happen behind the scenes to stand such a program up.
- **Availability of water bottoms** – Access to water bottoms is limited. For individuals that don't own land on waterfronts open to oyster harvest the only current option is leasing riparian rights from other land owners. Efforts are ongoing with the State and other landholders to provide more opportunities for leases.

- **Monitoring and Management** – The regulations governing opening and closing of shellfish harvesting are antiquated and there is a need/desire to improve the local real-time monitoring network to allow for better local management of the industry. Also a need exists to continue upgrading sanitary sewer infrastructure to the reduce SSOs and resulting closures.
- **Marketing and Awareness** – A need has been expressed by the farmers to help aid increase awareness of Alabama farmed oysters through various marketing efforts.

Dauphin Island Oyster Project

- Aloe Bay: Several components of the project with various funding mechanisms, mostly oil spill-related. There is an ecotourism aspect that also seeks to preserve adjacent wetland areas along with a mixed-use waterfront development project. These are currently in the planning phases.
- Town of Dauphin Island is in the process of acquiring some property on the west end of the Island. The town is purchasing the uplands and the owners are donating the adjacent water bottoms. There have been preliminary discussions with the Town and AU Shellfish Lab in regards to working to set up an oyster park and lease some of these water bottoms for oyster farms.
- Aloe Bay development could provide a facility to process oysters and also include a farmers market/restaurant concept that would allow some interaction with tourists/visitors.
- Eliska is on the steering committee for the Aloe Bay project and will make sure this concept is brought up and included in the plans.
- Mayor Collier and Gene Fox (DI Town Council) were looking forward to having the oyster be the keystone product of the Aloe Bay redevelopment. They had already talked to Auburn in regards to having signage at the development. The idea of providing for an oyster park and accommodating the processing of oysters at the waterfront development fits well with the concept the Town is promoting.
- Next step would be putting together a group interested in working with the Town and Auburn to further develop this concept. It also fits with the funding mechanism to provide capital and supports the work Auburn is doing to train oyster farmers (currently the training program is suspended due to lack of available water bottoms for new leases).
- Marketing of Alabama farmed oysters is another area the BRC could help with. Working with individual groups (restaurant associations, tourism associations, Dept. of Agriculture) to highlight and promote Alabama farmed oysters.
- Sea Grant is working with funds from NOAA and Alabama Power to implement a program called CORE – Concerned Oystermen Restoring Estuaries. This project seeks to provide some funding to purchase oysters from farms that have been impacted by COVID.
- Restaurants that closed due to COVID significantly reduced demand for oysters and as a result the local farmers stopped harvesting and the oysters grew to a size that exceeded the targeted range for the premium half shell market. These oysters will be purchased from participating farmers and put out to enhance wild oyster reefs. The first round has taken place with the oysters being placed on reefs in Portersville Bay.
- Auburn is doing research with the project to determine levels of ecosystem benefits provided from triploid (non-reproducing) oysters.
- Mobile County is also looking to provide some type of oyster component to their shoreline restorations along the DI Causeway. This may provide an opportunity for oyster farmers to grow diploid oysters (capable of reproduction) as well for installation on shoreline restoration projects.
- There is a cost factor that must be considered. Oysters destined for the premium half shell market sell for \$.50/each and it's unclear of what restoration efforts would support.

- CORE came out of earlier discussions from the BRC meeting in April. Alabama Power indicated their eagerness to help out and provided funding to purchase oysters for the first round of this restoration project. This is a success for the BRC. It is anticipated that this project can be sustained for several years.
- Dept. of Agriculture has a program to highlight/promote Alabama products. That would be worth pursuing as a way to raise awareness of Alabama farmed oysters. Rusty/Auburn have already had some preliminary discussions. Jimmy mentioned that one of the Port Authority board members is on the steering committee for that program. Jimmy would be happy to help make those connections if necessary. Beth had reached out in the past, Ellie Watson is the contact.
- Several committees were then established to work on these issues.
 - **Finance:** Rusty Grice, Frank Smith, Beth Thomas
 - **Marketing:** Renie Kennemer, Beth Walton, Rick Frederick, Colette Boehm, Herndon Graddick
 - **DI Oyster Project:** Jimmy Lyons, Eliska Morgan, Roberta Swann, Christian Miller
- Sea Grant's Working Waterfronts Coalition (currently not active) has established infrastructure that could be utilized for the marketing efforts.
- Alabama Power Foundation has a program that offers low-interest loans that could be explored to provide capital funds for this project.

EPA-NEP Program Evaluation Team

- Romell introduced the other members of the PE Team and gave an overview of the evaluation process which seeks to review the current status of the NEP and provide some recommendations for helping to implement the CCMP going forward.
- Romell asked what the role was of the BRC in relation to helping businesses become better environmental stewards. Eliska stated that in order to have a strong economy we must have a clean environment. We rely on clean water and access to support a strong tourism industry. Frank said the BRC works to spread awareness throughout the business community to what the NEP is doing. Don Bates stated we are advocates first on behalf of the NEP and it is incumbent on us to adopt the practices promoted by the NEP.
- Chris asked whether the committee has considered diversifying the makeup of the committee. Eliska stated that the committee is open to any interested business stakeholders. Eliska and Frank are both new committee chairs and the COVID situation has made recruiting new members challenging. Christian mentioned the need to bring different members and voices and now that the committee has some direction we can work on growing the group. Roberta said we must be strategic in adding new members so we remain on focus. Colette mentioned the committee and NEP have done a good job of focusing on working with business interests that align with committee priorities.
- Kathy asked for a business perspective on the coal ash issue and whether or not the BRC planned to educate the business community on the issue. Beth Thomas mentioned the coal ash video developed by the NEP as a good source of unbiased information on the subject. Eliska stated that the video provides a good source of information on both sides of the issue and that she didn't foresee the BRC taking an active role in promoting one position over the other.
 - Video can be accessed here:
http://www.mobilebaynep.com/the_watersheds/tensaw_apalachee_watershed/coal_ash
- Kathy asked whether the BRC has any interest in undertaking economic studies. Herb stated that the State Dept. of Tourism does a yearly economic impact study broken down by county that is used to measure success.

A motion to adjourn was made and seconded and the meeting ended at 3:34 p.m.