



**Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
Business Resources Committee Meeting**

June 17, 2020

Zoom Meeting

You must register here: <https://disl.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJctf-iorjwrG9RcNc5jQi5JrXGbTE8uoj1W>

1:30 pm -3:00 pm

Agenda

Meeting Objectives:

- a) Introduce Alabama Oyster farmers and discuss challenges and opportunities
- b) Discuss options for leveraging BRC talents to aid Alabama's Oyster Farmers

1. Welcome & Introductions

BRC Co-chairs- Eliska Morgan & Frank Smith

2. Review and approval of minutes

3. Old Business

- a. Role of the BRC and interest in Alabama Oyster Farming – Eliska Morgan & Frank Smith

4. New Business

- a. Introduction of oyster farmer panel
 - Steve Crockett, Point aux Pins Oysters
 - Rosa Zirlott, Murder Point Oysters
 - Chuck Wilson, Navy Cove Oysters
- b. Panel Discussion – Challenges/Opportunities/Synergies
- c. Next Steps

5. Adjourn



Minutes

In attendance: Eliska Morgan, Frank Smith, Don Bates, Rusty Grice, Beth Walton, Rosa Zirlott, Chuck Wilson, Steve Crockett, Jimmy Lyons, Herb Malone, Beth Thomas, Wiley Blankenship, others on phone.

Staff: Roberta Swann and Christian Miller

The meeting was conducted via Zoom and started at 1:30. A motion was made to accept the minutes from the previous meeting. Motion was approved.

Frank began with giving an overview of how the BRC got involved with the oyster industry.

- Frank noted that the previous meeting on April 28th provided a good overview of all facets of oysters in Alabama, ranging from the state of the fishery to the origins and current state of oyster aquaculture in the State.
- BRC was looking for one issue in the CCMP that they could promote/help implement. The Committee has coalesced around the issue of oysters and more specifically the oyster aquaculture industry in Alabama.
- Eliska agreed and stated that some of the areas that have been indicated as needs for the industry in general include: capital, primarily for new farms to get started and expand; marketing for established farms; helping with the workforce and financial assistance related to COVID impacts.

Next Christian introduced the three oyster farmer panelists and allowed each of them an opportunity to talk about their farms and respective businesses.

Steve Crockett, Point aux Pins Oysters

- Steve's Farm is located on Point aux Pins peninsula which extends south into Mississippi Sound just west of Bayou La Batre in an area known as Grand Bay.
- Began with the oyster gardening program ~2000 working with Kim Hamilton (grad student) who was collecting data from all the oyster gardeners and discovered that oysters along Point aux Pins had the best growth rates leading them to try oyster farming at this location.
- Lost the farm in Katrina, but rebuilt and was approached by Bill Walton who encouraged him to give it another try and experiment with four different methods for oyster culture, settling on the Australian long-line method around 2009.
- Since 2010 (post-oil spill) have been selling premium oysters to supply the half shell market.
- Currently have ~1 acre in production and start with ~300,000 seed oysters in the spring and bring those to market size in 12-18 months.
- Have weathered some storms, the oysters generally do well but the infrastructure has taken some hits.
- Recommended reading the Bitter Southerner article to get a good overview of the industry in Alabama. <https://bittersoutherner.com/oysters-alabama-style>

Chuck Wilson, Navy Cove Oysters

- Chuck mentioned that he'd worked with LaDon and Roberta for a while as a past Sea Grant Director in Louisiana and appreciates the work the NEP does in the community and especially their efforts with aiding the oyster industry.
- Each of the farms is a little different, with Navy Cove being a for-profit research farm. As a Sea Grant Director Chuck interacted with Bill, Beth, LaDon, etc. and researched and invested in a lot of the oyster culture methods that are currently in use by the industry today.
- Navy Cove is a relatively small farm on the north shore of Ft. Morgan about three miles east of the ferry landing.
- Produced about 200,000 oysters last year and received about 300,000 seed oysters this year. Started in 2012 with one cage provided by Auburn U. now up to 150 cages and positioned to triple production over the next couple years.
- Great potential for future growth which is supported by the majority of established farmers in Alabama.
- Areas for help: loan programs for new farmers, branding of Alabama oysters, improving sewer infrastructure to reduce SSOs and reduce the number of harvest closures.

Rosa Zirlott, Murder Point Oysters

- Murder Point oyster farm is located along Point aux Pins, neighboring Steve's farm. Got started in 2012 when Rosa was working with the Organized Seafood Association and worked with Bill and Auburn and went through the training program to learn how to run an oyster farm. Many of the traditional fishermen were/are reluctant to go into oyster farming.
- After the training course purchased land on Sandy Bay near Steve and have now expanded to have six million oysters in production.
- Built a hatchery due to issues of not being able to acquire the amount of oyster seed needed to supply the farming operation.
- Supply all the seed needed for the farm plus able to market and sell seed to other farms.
- Increased supply in order to meet demand for the product and marketing is currently the greatest need.
- Currently four months behind schedule due to COVID and now sewer overflows have shut down harvest for another three weeks.
- The product is very good but we need to raise awareness of the quality of Alabama oysters.

Discussion

- Rosa: farming is hard enough and most of the farmers lack the skills to adequately market and promote their product.
- Chuck: The State was very quick to devise a "cookbook" approach for how you apply for the various permits to get started and was very supportive. The marketing side is a challenge. How does a large farm move their product out? The Zirlotts have been effective moving their own product while we've chosen to market ours through Bon Secour Fisheries which already has a large established network.
- How do we raise the awareness of Alabama oysters? This could be the role of the BRC. It would be nice to see our product in Rouses but that takes an increase in knowledge and awareness.
- There's been some discussion in the past about a need for affordable capital. Peer lending or revolving loan fund for people interested in getting into business or expand an established business.

- Steve: access is another challenge. If you have land it's easy. If not you're going to need a boat, have a boat launch, etc. It will make your capital requirements much different.
- Don: I think there's a misconception when you say "farmed" people think of like a catfish farm, but this is not the same. There needs to be marketing to raise awareness of the quality of the product.
- Eliska: I think being able to meet with some of these restaurant groups could help raise awareness of the product. It may be more of an education campaign that is needed rather than marketing.
- Rusty: We've been working with USDA to make oysters eligible for crop insurance which would help remove some risk related to farming. Access to capital is needed. Also, I field calls every week from people who are interested in the business and the first question I ask is "where". Unless you have waterfront property in an approved area it makes it more difficult. Also interested in working with Dept. of Agriculture program "Homegrown Alabama" to help market/raise awareness of Alabama oysters.
- Chuck: Opening and closing of shellfish waters in Alabama is regulated by the AL Dept of Health. ADPH shuts down all of Mobile Bay to harvesting if the flood gauge at Barry Steam Plant goes over eight feet. There's a need to get more localized in how the waters are monitored and managed. We also have an antiquated sewer system and there is a need to upgrade infrastructure to reduce the impacts of sanitary sewer overflows impacting coastal waters.
- Rosa: Money has been appropriated for sewer upgrades in the Bayou but it's been a very difficult situation when your business gets shut down and you can't sell to your customers. It's something that is fixable.
- Steve: We should look to areas in the northeast. Island Creek Oysters in Massachusetts. Multiple farms formed a cooperative. All the oysters grown in the area are branded under the "Island Creek" name. We could do something similar in Alabama as the industry matures. I've sold primarily to Bon Secour because they have a history of marketing and I don't.
- Don: As a consumer it is frustrating to not be able to know where to go find local farmed oysters when I want them. Where can we find them and how can we celebrate them?
- Rosa: We had so many people asking that question, "where can I get them?" that we opened a store front.
- Chuck: I think the idea of having an "Oyster Trail" where you could go in and try oysters from all over the area would be successful. If you go into a lot of the farms in the northeast most of them cater to the customer. They have a place where you can sit down, get a drink, eat oysters, etc.
- Chuck: Maryland has an effort to allow selling of nutrient credits by oyster farmers to corporations who need to mitigate impacts on the environment. That is something that should be investigated locally.
- Eliska: Some people lease the riparian rights to water bottoms in order to start their farm, but could the State look at setting up a leasing program on State water bottoms?
 - Steve: That's already been done in Grand Bay. There are two acre plots that you can get trained on and then apply for a lease for your own operation.
 - Rusty: It's roughly 50 acres and it's currently full. State Lands has been investigating the opportunity to open up additional State water bottoms for lease. This is a common practice in most coastal states.
- Chuck: Maryland has a program where they provide tax credits for oyster gardeners since the oysters provide ecological benefit. We could look at a similar program in Alabama for farmers but would need to work on legislation.

- Frank: I we build up a marketing initiative and raise awareness it would be beneficial for the restaurants that carry Alabama oysters as well as the oyster farmers. Free marketing through social media could serve as an incentive for more restaurants to carry Alabama oysters.
- Beth: The Dept of Agriculture has a “Sweet Grown Alabama” initiative to market Alabama products. Oysters aren’t currently listed but that’s something to consider.

In closing Eliska said the BRC should consider all the issues they have heard and possible ways the group could aid the industry: Marketing, Education/Awareness campaign, Low interest loan programs, or getting with legislators to discuss tax credits. The diversity of this group should allow several of these efforts to be advanced.

Meeting concluded at 2:45