New oyster farming technique increases productivity, offers entrepreneurial opportunities

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A new oyster farming initiative has launched in the northern Gulf of Mexico. The goal of this effort, a collaboration between researchers from LSU and Auburn University, is industry adoption of off-bottom oyster culture to supplement the traditional harvest. Historically, oysters are grown on and harvested from reefs on the water bottom. In this new process, oysters are grown suspended in the water column.

Benefits of this new oyster farming technique include increased productivity; job creation; and continued production of a safe, sustainable domestic oyster supply, according to John Supan, Louisiana Sea Grant and LSU AgCenter oyster specialist, and Bill Walton, Auburn University aquaculture and fisheries specialist. Off-bottom culture also protects oysters from predators, provides a means to reduce fouling, and allows complete harvests of planted oyster seed, a major advantage over traditional oyster harvesting.

"This could be an important addition to a traditional coastal industry," said Walton. "It's clean, green and energy efficient. And, it provides business opportunities to those already in the oyster industry as well as other coastal residents."

"Through proper planning, off-bottom culture can work in harmony with other water uses and users," added Supan. "It can support both part- and full-time incomes, just like natural fisheries but with greater control over

the natural variability that dominates bottom harvesting."

Although this program was developed prior to the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the oil spill prompted increased interest in oyster farming.

"We have received more calls and questions about oyster farming in the last four months than we have combined over the prior 12 months," said Walton. "The spill has created a window of opportunity where traditional oystermen are eager, even desperate, to find ways to get back to working on the water as soon as possible."

"Catastrophe causes change," added Supan. "The challenge is to direct change to improve conditions, not to settle for status quo. This project will attempt do just that."

Both the Auburn University Shellfish Laboratory on Dauphin Island, Ala., and the Sea Grant Bivalve Hatchery at the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, or LDWF, Marine Research Laboratory on Grand Isle, La., will provide oyster seed for this tri-state project.

The project is funded through the Louisiana Sea Grant College Program at LSU and the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium by the National Sea Grant College Program's Marine Aquaculture Initiative, a national grant competition. LDWF's Fisheries Research Laboratory in Grand Isle provides research and hatchery space to researchers from the Louisiana Sea Grant. LDWF officials are also working with officials in Plaquemines Parish to develop plans for a facility that would provide space for oyster spat, oysters in the larval stage, to develop before they are utilized by industry.

"Louisiana's oyster fishery has been hit with major natural and man-made disasters in the last five years and has grown wiser for it," said LDWF Assistant Secretary Randy Pausina. "We are thrilled that

Louisiana Sea Grant and researchers at Auburn University have worked so diligently to develop new methods for safeguarding and developing our oyster reefs along the coast. Our department is going to work side-by-side with the industry and researchers to help ensure the success of our oyster fishery."

Provided by Louisiana State University

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