

Chesapeake Bay oysters get more attention at pivotal time

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Robert T. Brown pulled an oyster shell from a pile freshly harvested by a dredger from the Chesapeake Bay and talked enthusiastically about the larvae attached—a sign of a future generation critical to the health of the

nation's largest estuary.

On an overcast November morning, he culled market-sized oysters and tossed them into a basket. He slid smaller oysters and shells back into the bay, as watermen on several other nearby boats did the same in southern Maryland.

"It's not all doom and gloom like the environmentalists say it is," Brown, who is president of the Maryland Watermen's Association, said after catching his 10-bushel-per-day limit. "We have a large number of small oysters that are going back overboard. I'm looking for us to have a good season this year, and we're looking for a good one next year. As long as we have small oysters, we will have big ones."

Not everyone shares Brown's optimistic assessment of the [oyster](#) population. The state's first-ever formal stock assessment supported claims by environmentalists that oyster numbers have experienced a sharp decline—down 50% since 1999.

The study estimated market-sized oysters dropped from 600 million in 1999 to about 300 million in the Maryland portion of the bay in 2018. The University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science collaborated in the study at the request of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, after the state legislature mandated it.

Del. Kumar Barve, a Democrat who sponsored a measure to create a new management process for oysters, said lawmakers are taking action, "because that's how close we are to the precipice."

Oysters play an important role in the bay's ecosystem because of their water-filtering capabilities. They also create reefs for habitat for other bay life.

"The oyster is vital to the health of the bay," Barve said. "Without oysters, the Chesapeake Bay will collapse."

Last month, the DNR added two neutral facilitators to a state oyster advisory panel to help bridge the differences between environmentalists, who want to curtail oyster harvesting, and watermen, who fear too many regulations will destroy their livelihoods. At a recent meeting, panelists took turns describing expectations and concerns about a fresh start.

Memo Diriker, one of the two facilitators named by the DNR, said he believes there is more common ground than people realize, because everyone wants more oysters in the bay.

"Our job is to start building those bridges," said Diriker, who is director of the Business Economic and Community Outreach Network at Salisbury University.

Many panelists said they were tired of prolonged discussions that have ended in stalemates in past years.

"It hasn't produced anything monumental, so I'd like to see some change in that direction," said Jason Ruth, of the Harris Seafood Co., one of the last oyster shucking processing plants left in Maryland.

Allison Colden, a Maryland fisheries scientist with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, said the assessment indicated oyster harvesting is happening beyond sustainable levels in more than half of Maryland waters. Colden, who is on the panel, said in an interview that "we all need to come together and figure out how we're going to keep this moving forward for the future."

Gerald Winegrad, a former state senator who led on environmental issues when he was in office, said he believes the wild oyster harvest

should be phased out completely over five years, while compensating harvesters to shift to oyster farming.

DNR chief Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio said the stock assessment provides "the best available science" to move forward. She also says the state's oyster management plan has been updated, with the goal of creating a sustainable oyster fishery in eight to 10 years.

The dockside value of the commercial oyster harvest in the bay for Maryland was \$8.6 million for the 2017-2018 season, according to the stock assessment, though additional economic value is added through aquaculture, processors and seafood dealers.

The Maryland General Assembly, which is controlled by Democrats, passed measures in the last legislative session relating to oysters. One of them permanently protects five oyster sanctuaries. The other puts new members on the [advisory panel](#) and requires the DNR to work with the University of Maryland's Center for Environmental Science to develop consensus recommendations.

Republican Gov. Larry Hogan vetoed both measures. Lawmakers overrode his first veto. The other veto could be overridden as soon as January.

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