



CHESAPEAKE BAY COMMISSION

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Testimony

Bill Number/Title: HB 911 / Natural Resources – Fishery Management Plans - Oysters
Committee: Environment and Transportation
Hearing: February 12, 2019
Position: Support with amendments

Background

The Chesapeake Bay Commission is a tri-state legislative commission created by law in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia to advise the members of the three general assemblies on matters of watershed-wide concern. Its fundamental purpose is to assist each assembly to develop legislation and policies that foster the collaborative and practical restoration of the Chesapeake Bay and its watershed.

The Commission has a long history of engagement on policy issues related to the management of the Bay's living resources. For example, over an eight-year period in the 1990s, the Commission led the efforts of the Bi-State Blue Crab Advisory Committee to develop shared solutions to the contentious issues between Maryland and Virginia. Currently, the Executive Director of the Commission is a member of Maryland's Oyster Advisory Committee.

Position

The Commission supports HB 911 with the amendments offered by the sponsor. Due to the delays created by the veto of the original bill and the subsequent override, it is necessary to adjust the dates in current law related to creation of the revised Oyster Advisory Commission (OAC), the interim report dates, and the final report.

The bill also strikes the provision that allows the OAC to potentially exempt themselves from the State's open meetings law. It is important to remember the source of this provision and hence why it was included in the original bill. To a large extent, this process is modelled on a project called "Oyster Futures" that was coordinated by UMCES and done with federal grant funding. The professional facilitators felt that to have an open dialogue among stakeholders with divergent interests closed meetings would prove most effective. While that, in theory, has merit, transparency and public awareness throughout the development of the OAC recommendations is in the interest of the State and may expedite the adoption and implementation of an updated fisheries management plan.

Despite the many contentious issues related to the management of the State's oyster resources, the stock assessment - which the legislature directed be prepared - has provided a new science-based assessment of both population levels and sustainable harvest. But translating this knowledge into a plan that enhances both the economic and environmental benefits of oysters will not be easy. The General Assembly has shown the leadership to outline a new paradigm for oyster management in Maryland and you now ask the practitioners to complete the script within the policy side boards established you have established.