

Committee: House Environment and Transportation
Legislation: HB 1133
Position: SUPPORT
Date: March 2, 2022

Dear Chairman Barve and Members of the Committee:

The Severn River Association (SRA) requests a favorable report for HB 1133, which would accelerate oyster restoration in the Severn River.

Introduction

At the outset, SRA wants to emphasize that it supports oyster restoration throughout the Chesapeake Bay. We are mindful that House Bill 1133 seeks to move ongoing restoration work from the Manokin River to the Severn River. The SRA does not intend to diminish restoration effort in the Manokin – which we very much hope one day resumes – but to advise the legislature of the unique opportunity to use the hiatus on the Manokin to restore oysters in the Severn--Maryland's capital river.

Background on Severn River Oyster Restoration

The entire Severn River (7,804 acres) was officially designated as an Oyster Sanctuary in 2010. Despite that designation, there has not been oyster restoration on a scale like that in the other tributaries targeted for restoration pursuant to the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Agreement.¹ The Severn River contains 1,383 acres of historic oyster bottom consisting of twenty seven historic oyster bars, twenty five fully within the sanctuary and two extending over the boundary (in addition to several reef areas that have been constructed that are not on historic oyster bars.) The DNR has defined 1,020 acres as currently restorable oyster habitat in the Severn River Oyster Sanctuary (not including reefs created from alternative substrate).²

Communities along the Severn River are among the strongest supporters of oyster restoration in Maryland. They have shown continued support for sustained oyster restoration. In 2018, the SRA and Oyster Recovery Partnership launched Operation Build-a-Reef, an enthusiastic, home grown oyster restoration program that has planted over 85 Million spat-on-shell planted since inception. Severn River residents are passionate about restoring oysters to the Severn River. The Severn River has over 300 volunteers supporting over 1500 cages of oysters through the Marylanders Grow Oysters (MGO) program. We believe this is the largest single-tributary MGO program in the Chesapeake Bay. Moreover, in 2018 advocates with SRA lobbied the Oyster Advisory Commission to be selected as the 5th targeted tributary for large-scale oyster restoration pursuant to the Bay Agreement, because we know that with the level of investment those tributaries receive for oyster restoration, the Severn could once again be made into the thriving river it once was.

Oyster planted in the Severn do very well. Despite the record rainfall of 2018 and the subsequent low salinity levels in 2018-2019, the survivability of the plantings of 2018 is high, based on data from

¹ https://www.chesapeakebay.net/documents/FINAL_Ches_Bay_Watershed_Agreement.withsignatures-HIres.pdf

² https://dnr.maryland.gov/fisheries/Documents/AnneArundel_ComplexPlan.pdf

SRA-sponsored reef monitoring dives in 2020 and 2021. These data are collected by deeply motivated volunteers and outside partners. The SRA has a reef monitoring protocol in place and plans to monitor oyster reefs for the long term, working with organizations such as Black Girls Dive Foundation. The SRA also monitors water quality at each oyster planting site which shows acceptable levels of dissolved oxygen and salinity for oysters to survive in those areas.

Policy Considerations

The Severn river presents the opportunity to study large-scale restoration on the upper western shore where disease prevalence for oysters is lower than the other restoration tributaries due to lower salinity. Historically the Severn had 27 significant oyster bars. Based on the excellent survival rate and even some limited natural reproduction resulting from restoration efforts to date, we expect that with enough brood stock and dense enough plantings that the Severn will experience sustainable spat set. Thus, the Severn oyster restoration would be a great test case for other bay tributaries with low salinity that used to have oyster bars, to see how successful restoration may be in the upper Bay.

Additionally, the Department of Natural Resources has developed the " Anne Arundel Complex-Magothy, Severn and South Rivers Oyster Restoration Plan"³ which can be used as a framework for siting specific plantings for large-scale oyster restoration in the Severn. This detailed plan "evaluates areas within the Magothy, Severn and South River sanctuaries that are suitable for restoration efforts. The plan includes specific areas targeted for restoration work, an analysis of the seed required, and an estimated cost." Thus, much groundwork has already been accomplished to facilitate direction of State and Federal resources for oyster restoration into the Severn River, should public opposition to the restoration work in the Manokin result in passage of HB1133.

Respectfully submitted,



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³ https://dnr.maryland.gov/fisheries/Documents/AnneArundel_ComplexPlan.pdf