



Testimony in Opposition of HB 1231 Natural Resources – Fisheries – Oyster Management

February 26, 2024

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony in **OPPOSITION** to **HB 1231**, which pertains to oyster management in Maryland. This bill, if passed, would have detrimental effects on the health and sustainability of our state's oyster population and the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem as a whole.

Senate Bill 922 seeks to repeal a provision of law that prohibits the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) from altering existing oyster sanctuary boundaries until an updated oyster management plan has been developed. This change is premature and ill-advised for several reasons.

As adopted by the DNR, the current oyster management plan fails to meet the statutory requirements outlined in Natural Resources §4-215. This section mandates that any oyster management plan must end overfishing, achieve target fishing rates, increase oyster abundance, enhance oyster habitat, and facilitate the long-term sustainable harvest of oysters. However, the existing plan falls short of meeting these essential criteria in Eastern Bay.

Given the failure of the current management plan to meet statutory requirements and effectively manage the oyster population, it is inappropriate to remove sanctuary protections until a revised plan is in place. Senate Bill 922's proposal to repeal these protections disregards the importance of safeguarding oyster sanctuaries, risks further harm to Maryland's already vulnerable oyster population, and drives the cost per bushel down for working watermen.

Moreover, Senate Bill 922 includes provisions to expand the areas eligible for power dredging to include Eastern Bay without proper consideration of the potential ecological or economic consequences. This expansion was not included in the consensus recommendations from the Oyster Advisory Commission and undermines ongoing efforts to develop specific management recommendations for Eastern Bay.

Allowing fair-weather fishermen to enter the Eastern Bay oyster fishery using the most efficient method of harvest (power dredging) is potentially damaging to the greater oyster ecology of the region, as well as unfair to commercial fishermen who rely on the fishery to round out a year's work on the water.

It is also important to note that the **Eastern Bay Oyster Coalition Workgroup**, composed of members from various sectors, including non-governmental organizations, recreational fishing,

ShoreRivers

Isabel Hardesty, Executive Director

Annie Richards, Chester Riverkeeper | Matt Pluta, Choptank Riverkeeper

Ben Ford, Miles Wye Riverkeeper | Zack Kelleher, Sassafras Riverkeeper

seafood industry, and local and state government, is currently working towards providing specific recommendations for oyster management in Eastern Bay. Their expertise and collaboration are invaluable in ensuring the long-term sustainability of Eastern Bay's oyster population. Rushing to expand power dredging into Eastern Bay before the completion of this process would undermine the integrity of the collaborative effort and risk exacerbating existing ecological and commercial fishery concerns. See full list of members here:

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Ben Ford, ShoreRivers, Miles Wye Riverkeeper
Vicki Paulas, Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center
Ward Slacum, Oyster Recovery Partnership
Dan Sweeney, The Nature Conservancy

RECREATIONAL FISHING

Mark Galasso, Tuna the Tide Charter Service

SEAFOOD INDUSTRY

Scott Budden, Orchard Point Oyster Co., Aquaculture
Moochie Gilmer, Queen Anne County Waterman, Clam Harvester
Nick Hargrove, Talbot County Waterman, Aquaculture
Jeff Harrison, Talbot County Waterman
Richard Jones, Queen Anne County Waterman
Matt Latham, Queen Anne County Waterman
Jason Ruth, Harris Seafood Company, Queen Anne County Waterman, Aquaculture
Troy Wilkins, Queen Anne County Waterman

LOCAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT

Kathy Brohawn, Maryland Department of the Environment
Brian Callam, Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) - Aquaculture & Industry Enhancement Division
Chris Judy, Maryland DNR, Shellfish Division (Designated Alternate: Jodi Baxter)
Jim Moran, Queen Anne County Commissioner

Therefore, please consider the importance of waiting until the Eastern Bay Oyster Coalition Workgroup's recommendations are available before making any decisions that could impact the future of our oyster population and the health of the Chesapeake Bay. In the meantime, I urge an **unfavorable** review of SB 922. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Ford, Miles-Wye Riverkeeper, on behalf of ShoreRivers