

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2009 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 103

(Delegate Eckardt, *et al.*)

Environmental Matters

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Department of Natural Resources - Shell Dredging - Permit Application

This emergency bill extends the deadline by which the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) must apply for an oyster shell dredging permit by seven months (from December 1, 2008, to July 1, 2009).

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill does not materially affect State operations or finances.

Local Effect: None.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Current Law: Chapter 325 of 2008 requires DNR to apply to the Maryland Department of the Environment and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for permits to dredge buried oyster shells by December 1, 2008, if the Oyster Advisory Commission (OAC) recommends the application. Before making such a recommendation, OAC has to review the findings of the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) concerning evaluation of oyster restoration alternatives for the Chesapeake Bay.

Background: At its peak, the bay's oyster population acted as a natural filter, removing 133 million pounds of nitrogen annually. Affected by diseases, habitat loss, and harvest pressures, the oyster stock has significantly declined. Today, the oyster population has dropped to less than 1% of its original population, and remaining oysters remove only about 250,000 pounds of nitrogen from the bay each year.

An EIS is being prepared by Maryland, Virginia, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers evaluating the option of introducing a nonnative oyster as a means of establishing a self-sustaining oyster population, in addition to other alternative approaches to increasing oysters in the bay. In October 2008, a draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) for oyster restoration in the bay was released that proposed introducing the Asian oyster and continuing efforts to restore the native oyster. The final EIS is scheduled to be published in the Federal Register in April 2009, with the Record of Decision published approximately two months later.

OAC, formed pursuant to Chapters 113/114 of 2007, included in the findings of its 2007 interim report that implementation of a large-scale oyster bar habitat rehabilitation program, dependent on the availability of large quantities of oyster shell and alternate substrate materials, is necessary for oyster restoration in the bay. A scientific peer review panel for EIS has similarly indicated that oyster restoration will depend on a large-scale oyster bar rehabilitation program.

DNR's permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Maryland Department of the Environment authorizing dredging in the upper bay expired in September 2006 and was not renewed due to stakeholder conflict. In response to Chapter 325 of 2008, in August 2008 OAC adopted a statement encouraging DNR to seek a permit to dredge fossil shell at Man-O-War Shoals, which is located at the mouth of the Patapsco River. Man-O-War Shoals is an historic oyster reef and popular sport fishing destination estimated to contain between 86 and 103 million bushels of shell, the single largest known shell deposit in the State. DNR developed a draft permit application that proposes dredging a total of 30 million bushels of oyster shell at Man-O-War Shoals. However, DNR is holding the application until the OAC interim report is completed, as it is expected to contain shell dredging program recommendations.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Cross File: SB 175 (Senator Colburn) - Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs.

Information Source(s): Department of Natural Resources, Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - January 28, 2009
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