



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

*Environmental Protection and Restoration
Environmental Education*

House Bill 500

Dredging on Man-O-War Shoals – Prohibition

Date: February 16, 2022

To: Environment and Transportation Committee

Position: **SUPPORT**

From: Allison Colden, Sr. Fisheries Scientist

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation strongly **SUPPORTS** House Bill 500 as means to protect the last remaining three-dimensional oyster reef in Maryland waters. HB 500 would prohibit destructive dredging of buried oyster shells at Man-O-War Shoals by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Man-O-War Shoals, located near the mouth of the Patapsco River in Baltimore County, is the last remaining relic three-dimensional oyster reef in the upper Chesapeake Bay. MOW Shoals once supported a robust oyster population and currently serves as important habitat for several commercial and recreational fishes.

Proponents of dredging at Man-O-War Shoals cite falling oyster numbers throughout the Bay as a need to remove shell to place in other areas; however, the limited, short-term shell availability of shell is unlikely provide a significant benefit and is outweighed by the adverse effect on habitat. For example, if DNR dredged MOW Shoals, and 100% of the shell were allocated to the oyster industry, targeted plantings on the top five harvest-producing areas could only cover 2% of the oyster habitat in those regions, planted one time. Given the half-life of oyster shell is estimated to be 3-6 years and oysters do not usually reach market size until 3 years old, those areas could be harvested twice before the shell is gone. Without a long-term plan to increase oyster habitat in the Bay through restoration and sustainable harvest management, the dredging of MOW Shoal will result in a net loss of oyster and fish habitat.

Though the number of oysters on MOW Shoals has diminished, the habitat remains critically important for American eel, shad, bluefish, croaker, herring, striped bass, summer flounder, blue crab, spot and weakfish. Annual trawl surveys have documented 38 different fish species in the vicinity of Man-O-War Shoals. The loss of recreational angling opportunities was one of the most often cited sources of opposition to this permit in the Army Corps' public comment process. In total, 54 out of 57 public comments to the Army Corps opposed the permit to dredge MOW Shoals, including several County Oyster Committees and the Maryland Watermen's Association.

Fortunately, recent scientific studies have demonstrated that alternatives, including granite and crushed concrete, are a viable substitute for oyster shell, with stone and crushed concrete reefs supporting as many or more oysters as shell reefs with similar rates of survival. Additionally, pilot studies in Virginia have utilized gravel as substrate on harvest bars, which supported high levels of recruitment and were described by local watermen as a "viable option." DNR's 2019 Maryland Oyster Management Plan includes plans to

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The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) is a non-profit environmental education and advocacy organization dedicated to the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay. With over 300,000 members and e-subscribers, including over 109,000 in Maryland alone, CBF works to educate the public and to protect the interest of the Chesapeake and its resources.

utilize these types of alternative materials on harvest bars in pilot programs in Maryland, which if successful, further reduces the need for shell.

Given the newly demonstrated efficacy of alternative substrates, the extremely short-term and limited benefit the shell from MOW Shoal could provide, and the negative impacts to fish habitat, CBF believes the dredging of the last remaining three-dimensional oyster reef in upper Chesapeake Bay is ill-advised.

CBF urges the Committee's FAVORABLE report on HB 500. Please contact Dr. Allison Colden, Maryland Senior Fisheries Scientist, at acolden@cbf.org or 443-482-2160 with any questions.