



Chesapeake
OYSTER ALLIANCE
10 Billion for the Bay

ANNAPOLIS AQUACULTURE – CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION – CHESAPEAKE BEACH OYSTER CULTIVATION SOCIETY
COASTAL CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION MARYLAND – DOWNTOWN SAILING CENTER – FRIENDS OF ST. CLEMENTS BAY
LIVING CLASSROOMS FOUNDATION – MARK STREET VENTURE, LLC – ORCHARD POINT OYSTER COMPANY
PIRATES COVE OYSTER COMPANY – SHORERIVERS – ST. MARY’S RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION
TRUE CHESAPEAKE OYSTER COMPANY, LLC – WATERFRONT PARTNERSHIP OF BALTIMORE

House Bill 932

Oysters – Rotational Harvest – Pilot Program

DATE: March 1, 2023

POSITION: **OPPOSE**

The Chesapeake Oyster Alliance is a broad coalition of non-profits, community organizations, oyster growers, and business owners with the shared goal of adding 10 billion oysters in the Bay by the year 2025. With a focus on oyster restoration, science-based fishery management, and increased aquaculture, the Chesapeake Oyster Alliance aims to accelerate oyster recovery efforts and in so doing the recovery of the Chesapeake Bay.

We, the above-listed members of the Chesapeake Oyster Alliance **strongly OPPOSE House Bill 932** and **recommend an UNFAVORABLE report** from the House Environment and Transportation Committee. This bill would establish a pilot program to allow harvest in up to 47,705 acres of oyster sanctuary in the Little Choptank River and lower mainstem portion of Chesapeake Bay.

Maryland’s oyster sanctuaries were established in 2010 as a critical component of Maryland’s three-pronged approach to oyster recovery. An oyster sanctuary, by definition, is an area where oyster harvest is prohibited. Unlike harvested areas, oyster sanctuaries are intended to support the long-term growth and reproduction of oyster populations and development of three-dimensional oyster reefs that are critical habitat to Bay organisms. These benefits can only accrue in sanctuaries where oyster reefs are left undisturbed by harvest. In harvested areas, oyster reefs are repeatedly damaged by harvesting equipment, oyster populations are truncated by harvest, habitat loss is accelerated by the removal of shell, and sustained production requires continual shell and oyster seed input.

Both the Little Choptank and Lower Mainstem oyster sanctuaries have benefitted from their sanctuary designation. The Little Choptank was named one of Maryland’s five restoration tributaries and has received nearly \$24 million in investment in oyster restoration since 2014. The removal of harvest pressure in the Lower Mainstem sanctuary has allowed biomass there to almost double since its designation in 2010. These areas are currently serving the critical functions of providing habitat and bolstering local oyster populations.

Unfortunately, HB 932 would undermine the purpose and progress of oyster sanctuaries by allowing up to 47,705 acres of oyster sanctuary be opened to harvest, solely for the purposes of enhancing the economic gains of the oyster fishery. This activity and motivation conflicts with the purpose of sanctuaries and the statute governing the management of state fisheries. NR §4-215 states that fishery management measures “may not... have economic allocation as its sole purpose.”

Additionally, the General Assembly recently passed SB 830, a bill that required a diverse group of oyster stakeholders to develop consensus recommendations for the management of the public oyster fishery. Among the options considered, but not supported, were opening non-restoration sanctuaries to harvest and allowing rotational harvest in the restoration tributaries, including the Little Choptank. These options received a maximum of 24% support, indicating opposition from both oyster industry and non-industry stakeholders. Clearly, this bill does not represent the interests of the industry it would seek to support.

Protecting the viability of Maryland's oyster sanctuaries is critical to long-term recovery of the oyster population. This bill is simply an ill-advised effort to ensure that watermen are allowed to take oysters from protected sanctuaries, regardless of the impact on the oyster population or the long-term viability of the oyster industry.

For these reasons, the Chesapeake Oyster Alliance respectfully recommends an unfavorable report on House Bill 932 from the Environment and Transportation Committee. Please contact Tanner Council (tcouncil@cbf.org) with any questions.