

My name is Robert Howes, and I am a third-generation commercial waterman. Harvesting oysters is my livelihood and how I provide for my family. I have spent my life working on the water and learning about the oyster industry from the ground up.

In addition to wild harvesting oysters as a commercial waterman, I have also invested in the future of the industry by growing oysters on an aquaculture lease. This experience has given me a broader understanding of oyster growth, habitat needs, and sustainable production.

I currently serve on the County Oyster Committee and the Oyster Advisory Commission. Through these roles, I have dedicated many hours to learning about the science, policy, and management practices that affect the oyster fishery in Maryland.

As someone deeply involved in both harvesting and growing oysters, I believe strongly in protecting and sustaining the resource for future generations. My 15-year-old daughter is already learning about the industry and beginning projects focused on oyster growth. Like many watermen, I want to ensure that the Chesapeake Bay continues to support both healthy oyster populations and the communities that depend on them.

I believe it is important that oyster management decisions remain adaptive and based on current conditions. Some oyster sanctuaries in Maryland have not been planted, restored, or actively managed for decades. Without regular shell planting or restoration efforts, these areas can become silted over and may no longer function as productive oyster reefs.

When areas remain closed for long periods without active restoration, it is reasonable to reevaluate whether they are achieving their intended purpose. In some cases, controlled and carefully managed harvesting could help improve these areas by returning shell to the bottom and encouraging new oyster growth.

Watermen are on the water every day and often serve as the first line of observation for changing conditions on oyster bars. Responsible harvest practices can help maintain productive oyster habitat while also supporting the working waterfront communities that depend on this fishery.

I believe that evaluating long-unused sanctuaries and considering adaptive management approaches—such as limited access, rotational harvest, or pilot programs—could benefit both the oyster population and the watermen who rely on it.

Maryland's oyster industry has supported families and communities for generations. With thoughtful management and collaboration between scientists, regulators, and watermen, we can continue to protect this resource while ensuring that it remains a viable livelihood for future generations.

Thank you for your time and consideration in support of SB075.