Oyster Advisory Commission Meeting

January 9, 2017

This was the longest meeting of the Commission in recent history – 4.5 hours. In the absence of Kelly Cox, the co-chair who usually runs the meetings, Scott Eglseder, the other co-chair, allowed the public comment period to continue until no one else had a comment. There were an unusually large number of members from the public. Interestingly, for the first time, those who were advocating on behalf of the sanctuaries far outnumbered watermen attendees. Another first was that members of the public were permitted to debate with each other. In previous meetings, this was not allowed. The result was a series of heated exchanges, but the conversations enabled people from each side to better explain why they feel the way they do. In the end, both sides felt that the exchanges were a positive development.

Man-O-War Shoals

There was a lengthy discussion of the DNR responses to federal agency questions regarding the technical aspects of the dredging application permit. Of particular interest is the section on shell needs vs. shell availability given the watermen's total opposition to using alternative substrate materials.

The total estimated shell need for the life of the 5 year permit is 11M bushels for restoration, the public fishery, and aquaculture. The permit application requests 5M bushels, thus resulting in a deficit of 6M bushels. There will, therefore, be a need for alternate materials.

The dredged shells will be distributed as follows:

- Restoration – 8.5M bushels for the next two restoration tributaries (assume 158 acres per tributary at a planting rate of 12" per acre)
- Industry – 2M bushels
- Aquaculture -- .5M bushels

Man-O-War Shoal has between 86 million and 103 million bushels of oyster shell in a 456 acre area. The original goal of the project was to dredge 30M bushels, but, due to environmental concerns about removing this amount of shell, the scale of the project was reduced to an initial permit phase of 5M bushels.

In a previous meeting, DNR was asked to coordinate with the Baltimore County Oyster Committee regarding its dredging plans. The Committee plans to continue planting seed on Man-O-War shoals and agreed that there is sufficient space for several more years in the existing planting area which is outside the proposed permit area. If the dredging permit is not approved, the Committee will expand into the proposed permit area. If the permit is approved, the Committee will expand into that area once the dredging is completed after the fifth year of the permit.

Mark Lukenbach, Virginia Institute for Marine Sciences (VIMS)

One of the Commissioners requested that Dr. Mark Lukenbach be invited to make a presentation on Virginia's oyster management policies. He is a recognized expert in marine ecology at VIMS, located at the College of William and Mary. These are some of the points he made:

- There has been a significant increase in oyster landings in Virginia from 2001 to 2014. This is due to:
    - Better fisheries management
    - Improved oyster restoration efforts
    - Development of some disease resistance in wild populations
- In most locations, planting a thin veneer of shell is not sufficient to promote the development of a sustainable reef
- Shell loss is due to: burial, fouling, dissolution, and harvest
- A 3-D oyster structure which provides persistence of shell substrate improves oyster growth and survival
- Fisheries management should be based on: harvest targets based on recent surveys, rotational harvest, and sanctuary reefs

Sanctuaries

- Throw away the notion that reefs "have to be worked to be productive"
- Sanctuary success also requires the emergence of disease resistance
- Sanctuary reefs and improved fisheries management support the development of disease resistance to both MSX and Dermo; this can only happen if sufficient numbers of oysters that survive a disease challenge remain in the water [oysters that become disease resistant develop a tolerance – they can have the organism in their bodies, but do not succumb to it]
- Restoration sanctuaries are working in some places but not in others; to be successful, they require a good location
- Creating sanctuaries in the "last best places" is more cost effective than trying to restore reefs in poor locations
- Currently, sanctuaries are limited by the availability of shell

Wild Fisheries

- Wild (public) fisheries will be helped by successful sanctuaries
- Like sanctuaries, they are also limited by availability of shell
- Quotas that are related to oyster abundance should be developed and enforced; this should include a policy of "limited entry," i.e. limiting the number of oyster harvesters

Aquaculture

- Virginia – U.S. east coast leader in aquaculture production
- In 2015:
    - 135.6M single seed oyster planted
    - $35.4M aquacultured oysters sold
    - $14.5M farm gate value

- Aquaculture development enabled by:
    - Favorable leasing laws in Virginia
    - Selective breeding for disease resistance and rapid growth
    - Triploid development and production
    - Formal and informal training programs
    - Significant private investment and innovation
    - Strong supporting science – breeding, genetics, disease diagnostics and water quality monitoring
    - Market would appear to support further growth

Conclusion: "This is not ecology vs. the fishery; it is the current fishery vs. the future fishery"

<u>Proposals for Sanctuaries from Environmental Groups</u>

DNR presented the proposals it received from "environmental groups" (includes MGOs):

•St. Mary's River Watershed Association
•Asbury Solomons Retirement Community
•Midshore Riverkeeper Conservancy
•Friends of the Wicomico River
•Phillips Wharf Environmental Center
•Mill Cove Neighbors
•Whitehall Bay Conservancy
•Chesapeake Beach Oyster Cultivation Society

Secretary Belton concluded the formal portion of the meeting by stating that DNR will review the watermen's proposals, those from environmental groups, and the letter from the Oyster Advisory Group (Bill Goldsborough's proposed oyster management plan supported by 29 groups, including CBOCS) and develop a draft oyster management plan to be discussed at the next meeting (February 13, 2017).