

Molluscan Shellfish Subcommittee Meeting (Virtual)
March 4, 2021

p.p. Charlie Robertson 10.26.21
Carolina Bourque

Chair Bourque called the meeting to order at 8:00 a.m. with the following in attendance by webinar:

Members

Carolina Bourque, LDWF, Lafayette, LA
Jason Rider, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Erik Broussard, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Portia Sapp, FL DACS, Tallahassee, FL
Robert Caballero, LDWF, New Orleans, LA
Jason Herrmann, ADCNR/AMRD, Dauphin Island, AL
Evan Pettis, TPWD, Rockport, TX
Christine Jensen, TPWD, Dickinson, TX
Ryan Gandy, FWC, St. Petersburg, FL
Byron Webb, ADPH, Mobile, AL

Speakers

Sandra Brooke, Florida State Univ - Coastal and Marine Lab, St. Teresa, FL
Shaye Sable, Dynamic Solution, Baton Rouge, LA
Megan La Peyre, LSU Ag Center, Baton Rouge, LA

Others

Chad Hanson, PEW Charitable Trust, Crawfordville, FL
Angelos Apetios, USM/GCRL Thad Cochran Marine Aquaculture Center, Ocean Springs, MS
Megan Gima, USM/GCRL Thad Cochran Marine Aquaculture Center, Ocean Springs, MS
Eric Weissberger, NOAA Restoration Center, Silver Spring, MD
Chris Hollenbeck, TX A&M, Corpus Christi, TX
Brian Callam, LSU/SeaGrant & LDWF, Grand Isle, LA
Scott Rikard, Auburn Shellfish Lab, Dauphin Island, AL
Leslie Sturmer, Univ of FL – FL Sea Grant, Cedar Key, FL
Bill Walton, Auburn Shellfish Lab, Dauphin Island, AL
Adriane Michaelis, Auburn Shellfish Lab, Dauphin Island, AL
Ali Robertson, Gulf of Mexico Alliance, Ocean Springs, MS
Andrew Richard, NOAA Office of Aquaculture, Silver Spring, MD
Anne Birch, The Nature Conservancy, Indian River, FL
Brady Carter, LDWF, Bourg, LA
Bestor Ward, Ward Properties, Inc., Mobile, AL
Charlie Culpepper, FL DACS, Tallahassee, FL
Chris Blankenship, ADCNR, Montgomery, AL
Chris Steffen, TPWD, Galveston, TX
Christopher Lemaire, Louisiana Department of Health, Baton Rouge, LA
Curtis Hemmel, Bay Shellfish Co., Terra Ceia, FL
Denise Kinsey, LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA
Derrick Chelikowsky, TX A&M, Corpus Christi, TX
Earl Melancon, Nicholls State Univ. and LA Sea Grant, Thibodaux, LA

Elizabeth Robinson, LSU, Baton Rouge, LA
Emma Clarkson, TPWD, Corpus Christi, TX
Jess Beck-Stimpert, NOAA Fisheries, SERO, St. Petersburg, FL
Kristine Cherry, NOAA Fisheries Office of Aquaculture, Silver Spring, MD
Matthew Davis, FWC, Apalachicola, FL
Robert Adami, TPWD, Corpus Christi, TX
John Scarpa, TX A&M, Corpus Christi, TX
Sharon McBreen, PEW Trust, Orlando, FL
Steve Pollock, Triple N Oyster Farm, Grand Isle, LA
Tom McCrudden, Great Florida Shellfish Company, Tequesta, FL
Tomena Scholze, FWC, St. Petersburg, FL
Zachary Olsen, TPWD, Rockport, TX
Brady Carter, LDWF, Bourg, LA
Ryan Bradley, MS Commercial Fisheries United, Long Beach, MS
Jason Saucier, MDMR, Biloxi, MS
Caitlyn Young, NOAA Restore Science Program, New Orleans, LA
6 unknown callers

Staff

Dave Donaldson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Charlie Robertson, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Steve VanderKooy, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS
Debbie McIntyre, GSMFC, Ocean Springs, MS

VanderKooy, IJF Program Coordinator, opened the meeting and welcomed those who were able to attend today virtually. **VanderKooy** reminded everyone that the presentations from this meeting and the session to follow will be available on the GSMFC's homepage and YouTube channel at [Molluscan Shellfish Subcommittee - YouTube](#)

Donaldson thanked the group for their participation today with everything going on. He stressed the importance of this committee and its work.

Adoption of Agenda/Approval of Minutes

The agenda was adopted with changes on motion by **Herrmann** and second by **Jensen**.

The minutes of the September 22, 2020 virtual meeting were unanimously approved on *motion by Jensen and second by Caballero*.

Oyster model inventory: Identifying critical data and modeling approaches to support restoration of oyster reefs in coastal U.S. Gulf of Mexico waters

Drs. **LaPeyre** and **Sable**, USGS and Dynamic Solutions, presented an oyster inventory model, funded by PEW Charitable Trust. The purpose of the project was to identify what tools currently exist to address restoration needs in the Gulf and inventory the various oyster models. The first step in building the database was locating the environmental data which was broken down into a series of maps available by estuary. Hydrodynamic and water quality models built by private industry could limit availability or integration into research and management. At this time, there are 35 models included in the database.

The project evaluates each of the models based on what information they provide: recruitment, connectivity, larval transport, etc. It is hoped that a general geospatial habitat suitability index (HSI) modeling framework could be applied consistently across estuaries. The current inventory model provides special layers of data and models, documents published work, as well as provides existing environmental data which drives the oyster models. This project is the final stages and will hopefully be published by the end of April, early May.

Inventory of Oyster Restoration Projects in the Gulf

S Brooke, FSU, presented an inventory of oyster restoration projects in the Gulf. This inventory funded by Pew Charitable Trust, draws on a database going back to the 2010 DWH disaster. A total of 48 of the projects focused primarily on oysters with MS receiving the bulk of the funds. In constructing this database, it became apparent that different funders required different levels of accountability. The goal of the inventory is to determine the success of the restoration projects and if they will be sustained in the future.

Current Protocol/Rules for Importation by State

The subcommittee then discussed the current rules by state for importation of live shell for broodstock or seed in the region. There is concern that availability in some states may be limited due to strict rules on sourcing of broodstock and certification requirements.

Oysters imported to FL have to have FL broodstock and a health certificate or an Official Certificate of Veterinary Inspection (for aquaculture purposes). This is true for oysters used for aquaculture and restoration. AL and MS only allow Gulf broodstock to be used in their waters. Live shell from the East Coast may only be used in restaurants and are not for planting. Currently, no certification is required other than to be sure seed is dermo free.

LA requires a health certification done by a qualified lab for all imported shellstock whether for aquaculture or restoration and only allow Gulf broodstock which must be disease free. A health certificate is valid for two months from each supplying hatchery outside LA and must be shown to be parasite free when coming from FL or TX.

There are two distinct genetic populations of oysters in TX so broodstock must originate from the respective region. TX will temporarily allow disease-free certified triploid oysters that are a cross between an established Gulf tetraploid and a TX diploid or TX diploids that have been chemically induced as triploid. After Dec 31, 2027, Texas will require broodstock collected in Texas waters and propagated in a hatchery located in Texas.

Potential MSSC Membership Modification

VanderKooy reviewed the list of current subcommittee members and made some suggestions as to possible advisory or ad hoc seats for consideration. He invited everyone to make suggestions as to potential valuable additions to the membership. Several potential seats were mentioned related to restoration and habitat, as well as oyster data in general. It was agreed that when a 'need' came up for expertise, the subcommittee could invite people to participate. If the need was continuing, the group should consider at that time if a permanent seat should be added. **VanderKooy** and **Donaldson** indicated that covering travel for invited speakers was not a problem and that this approach has worked for the other subcommittees. The subcommittee determined that the membership would remain as is for now.

Restore LOI Updates

Several states have been included in the recent NOAA Restore Letters of Intent (LOI). **Dr. Caitlyn Young**, Science Coordinator for RESTORE Science Program at NOAA, provided general updates of the ongoing process. Applications are currently being reviewed and awards should be announced in early summer. These LOIs are non-binding. To date, there have been just under 60 LOI submitted and they expect that a total of 20 awards will be made. The goal is for the management and academic communities to work together and open up the lines of communication between researchers and managers.

Reporting for Off-Bottom Harvest by State

This topic is a continuation of the subcommittee's discussion last fall regarding how people are reporting aquacultured oysters vs traditional, on-bottom. **Sapp** stated that, in FL, they report the two sources of oysters to ISSC split; cultured production is reported by counts and wild harvest is reported by weight. All data is put together with clams. **Gandy** noted that the state trip ticket has a check box for aquaculture harvest however compliance is not required and therefore reporting is not consistent. When reported to NOAA, it will indicate wild or aquaculture landings however the aquaculture numbers are not accurate.

There are definitely two standards at this point for reporting oyster production. **Broussard** wondered if NOAA's total oyster meat pounds the best way to continue forward? In MS, off-bottom oysters are reported by piece on their trip tickets. Whatever standards are suggested, both the ISSC and NOAA would have to get on board. Several states are using or determining what are appropriate conversion factors to address the cultured product for inclusion with wild product. Despite the combining in the overall landings, each state has the ability to split out both sources through trip tickets. The group will continue to research and discuss this issue in future meetings.

State Oyster Highlights for On and Off-Bottom

Gandy stated that there is a five-year closure of Apalachicola Bay to allow for restoration. Other areas are open such as Suwannee Sound. **Sapp** said that on the aquaculture side, there are now leases that have been executed. There are close to 800 aquaculture leases, the majority of which are clam leases. Applications have slowed down but they are still ongoing for new areas.

Herrmann reported that the oyster season is successful in AL. Average sacks per harvester was 5.5 over 47 days. AMRD is now opening Saturdays to allow young people to try tonging because interest has dropped considerably. A new grid system was employed over all of the AL waters to try to move people from over-harvested areas and on to other areas. AL is only tonging and they rarely open areas to dredging but a dredge permit is required. **Walton** stated that SEAGRANT in AL may be able to help with this. **Webb** provided information regarding oyster farms. Total farm count was 2.3M harvested in 2020. The curve is going up.

Broussard said that MS had no harvest season on-bottom in 2020. The reefs were closed. Off-bottom is growing but there were major setbacks from hurricanes. A total of 52 acres are leased.

LA has 1.7M acres with 400K leases per **Bourque**. There has been a decrease in the last 10 years with 2019 being the worst ever. There were not many landings in 2020 because the reefs are still in recovery mode. Oyster season just opened in two areas using dredges and sacks with a limit of 25 sacks/day.

Harvesters gave up before five days was up because there was no market to move harvests to. LA has published an oyster strategic plan which is on their website.

Caballero presented a report on alternative oyster culture in LA. There are currently 166 acres enrolled and seven leaseholders. Still recovering from 2019 flooding, oyster demand has plummeted due to the pandemic and hurricanes. Aquaculture permits are for ten years. Harvest numbers for the industry cannot be reported due to confidentiality. The moratorium has been lifted on oyster leasing and applications are being accepted but it is a five-stage process. LA oyster management and rehab strategic plan has been released. Hopefully this plan will make some funds available for hatchery research and education and outreach.

Pettis reminded everyone that TX is finally implementing their oyster program and they have received two applications. **Jensen** stated the numbers for San Antonio Bay. They are not producing quite as much in that area this year. Galveston Bay was fished out and has to be closed in January. There are still some oysters in Copano Bay and LaVaca Bay. She stated that it looks to be a good season but not as good as last year. All of this is dredging. It is illegal to harvest by hand within 300 feet of shore in TX. There is a 30 sacks/day limit.

A question came up regarding how recommendations are determined for opening/closing oyster reefs in each state. LA conducts a dive survey in July as a water bottom assessment and uses the Soniat shell budget model to make recommendations for oyster management. FL traditionally utilizes dive transects in the Apalachicola area but since this area is now closed, testing will be done elsewhere. The sampling methods in AL are evolving, but are concentrated on areas where there is a high enough density of oysters to include in the harvest estimate using quadrat dive surveys mostly. They are testing the use of a grid system to leave oysters where overharvesting may have occurred. MS is doing reef assessments similar to the other states and make recommendations to their commission to open or close harvesting. TX has a regular monitoring program and the oyster data is reviewed in September. They look at the percent of undersized oysters and marketable oysters and utilize a traffic light system. A predetermined control rule is used to make recommendations. They are also exploring the potential of using the Soniat shell budget model.

Other Business

Bourque explained that LA has been approached to use oyster reefs to determine water quality carbon credits. She asked if any other people have been approached. **Sapp** stated that the state of Maryland may have some information on this subject. There is some language in FL legislature regarding clam and oyster reefs for such. **Herrmann** said that there has been no involvement in AL but he is interested in hearing about this subject. **Broussard** has not heard of any such programs in MS. **Clarkson** from TX stated that there have been inquiries but nothing solid has happened yet. Perhaps this is a good future topic to discuss at our next meeting. **Bill Walton** asked if the subject is only carbon credits or does it include nitrogen also. He stated that there is a private company engaging in this. **Walton** will provide what info he can find.

Christina Morhman, Gulf of Mexico Alliance, gave a brief overview of the Oyster Management Data Workshop they had hosted the day before. The workshop explored oyster-related datasets, prioritized data for inclusion in the Gulf of Mexico Open Data Platform (GOMOD), and will continue developing an oyster management community of practice for the Gulf region. The workshop was not recorded but if

anyone is interested in further information, **VanderKooy** will provide a link. **Donaldson** pointed out the importance of these groups working together and encouraged collaborations like this.

Next Meeting

With no further business, **Herrmann** motioned that the meeting be adjourned with a second by **Caballero**. The meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m.