

Committee on Resources

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U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Resources

Sub-Committee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

My name is Larry Simns, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association and my testimony today relates to the issue of introduction of a non-native oyster species to the Chesapeake Bay.

Millions of dollars have been spent over the past fifty years trying to figure out a way to get around the two parasites that have attacked the Chesapeake Bay oyster resource -MSX and Dermo. Today, we are no closer to solving the problem of how to grow more oysters in the wild than we were when we started.

If we are to going to come close to reaching a ten fold increase in oysters in the Bay by 2010, as set forth in the Chesapeake Bay Agreement in 2000, the only chance we have is to bring in an oyster that diseases are not going to kill. Five years of that time frame have already gone by and we have made no progress.

The Ariakensis oyster is not an exotic species. It has been in this country for over forty years being bred in hatcheries in the USA and raised in Oregon waters. No adverse effects have been determined in placing it with and/or growing it with other species, such as the problems found with the introduction of Gigas.

We need to be cautious, working with closed system studies, and we need Congress to help us get moving on these studies. We need funding to start and then to continue the studies that will either prove or disprove potential effects of the introduction of the Ariakensis oyster into the Maryland portion of Chesapeake Bay.

This oyster would not only help the industry but, as oysters are filter feeders, an abundance of healthy oysters would help clean the Bay waters. Septic system run off is a big problem in the Bay right now, along with sewage treatment plant overflows, development, and population growth. Left in the state it is now, without assistance, the Bay dead zones will become larger and larger until the Chesapeake Bay is non-productive.

It is imperative that federal funds become available to bring sewage treatment plants up to grade. As long as we continue to have overflows and sewage spills that load the waterways with nutrients, we cannot expect to have a healthy Bay. Good water is essential to reproduction of our resources and no matter what steps we take to help the oyster stocks recover, without a healthy environment they will not prosper.

The studies anticipated would work with the diploid and triploid Ariakensis oyster, which are treated so as to be unable to reproduce. However, we need to have an oyster that is capable of reproducing in the wild, as no amount of hatcheries will be able to take the place of natural oyster reproduction.

At first glance, we know that the Ariakensis tastes as good and looks much like our Virginica. It grows fast, and MSX and Dermo doesn't kill them before they grow to market size. Also, to date no harm has been shown to exist in areas where it is being grown.

We are not saying we want to give up on our Virginica oyster – in some areas they will continue to grow and prosper but not in numbers to sustain the oyster industry, or to be an effective tool in cleaning the water. Both of which are equally important.

We do need the studies but we all know that scientists can study data for many years and still not come to a conclusion. Time is crucial to the livelihoods of our watermen, dealers, shuckers and packers. Maryland is all but out of the oyster business and now is the time to look to the future. Maybe Ariakensis is the future, but we will not know that for sure until funding is in place and the studies are done. The one thing that we don't need is for this issue to get bogged down in scientific studies and bureaucratic jargon that could delay the introduction of this oyster.

In France they were able to get a non-native oyster species introduced in only two months. The West Coast was not far behind that time frame. With the right funding level and the right people in place, Maryland should move ahead in working with the diploid and triploid species. We need to determine the environmental impact of introducing this non-native oyster into the Chesapeake Bay, with a time frame of no more than one year of study before actual introduction of the Ariakensis oyster into Chesapeake Bay.

Statement of Larry Simns

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