

TO: Josh Kurtz, Secretary of Natural Resources
Maryland Department of Natural Resources

RE: Funding Shortfall for Marylanders Grow Oysters

DATE: August 27, 2024

Our St. Mary's County Marylanders Grow Oysters (MGO) coordinators need your help to fully fund the program in 2025 and beyond.

Since the upper St. Mary's River and Breton Bay were named Maryland Oyster Sanctuaries in 2010, the state has completed large-scale restoration in the river but not in Breton Bay. Instead, the local community is restoring these oysters through the MGO program. Now our funding is being cut significantly.

Until the end of the 20th century, Breton Bay hosted one of Maryland's productive oyster populations. However, intensive overharvesting and disease decimated the reefs and their thriving ecosystem. In 2017, Friends of St. Clements Bay (FSCB) established the Breton Bay MGO chapter and has worked with St. Mary's River Watershed Association (SMRWA) to plant over three million oysters on a dedicated reef. In September 2023, the site produced a natural spat set.

The MGO program has similarly improved restoration in the St. Mary's River, expanding from 22 growers in 2009 to 80 in the 2023-2024 season.

Until this year, MGO volunteers received spat-on-shell, dock cages, signage, and other supplies, first from DNR and later from Oyster Recovery Partnership (ORP), with continued DNR support. Unfortunately, ORP has advised MGO coordinators that DNR's funding covers little more than 1/4 of the program's cost, and ORP cannot continue to cover the shortfall. Thus, spat-on-shell will be reduced accordingly this fall, and we will be left without the resources needed to continue our restoration progress in St. Mary's County.

MGO's impact reaches far beyond the oyster 'gardeners' who raise oysters at their docks countywide. Each year, hundreds of scouts, youth groups, and students participate in field experiences hosted by FSCB and SMRWA. On these outings, kids from every walk of life and every corner of the county learn about and participate in community efforts to help restore and preserve local water quality.

Please fund MGO fully so that our many volunteers can continue this important work in support of our watersheds' future.

Sincerely,