



## Fact Sheet: Oyster management in Maryland – Impacts to St. Mary's

The Hogan Administration wants to help watermen harvest more oysters, and it is backing away from the state's commitment to restore the oyster population. He is offering to open 'sanctuary' reefs to harvest. The Administration must manage oysters both for watermen and for the largest stakeholder in the state: Marylanders. The Administration should continue meaningful projects to expand healthy, protected oyster reefs, and should keep 'sanctuary' reefs off-limits to harvest.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE ST. MARY'S RIVER

- Local watermen are proposing to harvest all of the St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary except for that part of it where we have built the oyster reef.
- In the past four years, harvest in the lower St. Mary's River has increased seven fold due to recruitment downriver from the sanctuary. Opening the sanctuary to harvest will likely reduce overall harvests in the entire river.
- Ecological services, such as water clarity, are apparent to many living along the river. Harvest would return us to conditions we witnessed prior to 2010 with clouded waters and fewer fish.
- Oysters are living longer in the St. Mary's sanctuary, an indication that they are developing resistance to disease. Harvest would negate these gains and limit the oysters' chances for developing disease resistance.
- Currently less than 15% of the St. Mary's River is designated sanctuary and more than 80% is open to harvest. The watermen's plan would reduce sanctuary area to less than 1% of the entire river—an amount that will serve little ecological value and severely limit the ongoing research and study of the river by St. Mary's college of Maryland and others.
- Through the St. Mary's River Project (1998-2007), the federal government invested \$3 million to study the river and from 2009 to 2016 the St. Mary's River Watershed Association has invested \$254,000, (\$25,000 grant from the State of Maryland), in oyster restoration. The watermen's proposal to harvest the sanctuary will effectively negate all this work.

### BACKGROUND—THE ROAD TO OYSTER RECOVERY IN MARYLAND

- In 2010 Maryland adopted a science-based, 10-point plan to increase the oyster population. Three key parts of the plan were: harvest oysters sustainably through scientific management, protect and expand areas of no harvest, and encourage robust oyster aquaculture.
- For oysters to recover in Maryland waters, at least 24 percent of productive oyster bars must be protected as 'sanctuaries' where no harvesting is allowed.
- The plan called for targeting five sanctuary bars for major oyster plantings. Scientists said such mega-bars provide the best hope for oyster reproduction, and for learning how oyster reefs function.

- The plan was meant to benefit everyone. More oysters overall will mean a healthier Chesapeake Bay, cleaner water, habitats for fish and other aquatic life, and an improved livelihood for oystermen. Some experts estimate that we could have 10 billion additional oysters in the Chesapeake by 2025 if we stick to our plan.

#### THE PLAN IS WORKING

- By various measures, Maryland's oyster restoration program is working well. A draft report issued in July by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources says oyster biomass continues to increase on sanctuary bars. Reproductive potential on these bars also continues to rise, the report concluded.
- In 2015 Maryland and its federal and non-profit partners completed the 350-acre man-made reef in Harris Creek off the Choptank River. Two other large, man-made reefs are under construction in the Little Choptank River, and the Tred Avon River. Scientists say these restored reef systems will serve as incubators to spur the oyster population in the whole Choptank area. Investing in other large reef systems will boost the population in other areas, but only if they are left alone to grow, reproduce, and form three-dimensional structure.
- Oyster aquaculture has exploded, with 370 leases on more than 5,379 acres. St. Mary's County leads the way with 88 leases. Watermen are involved in 66 percent of permit applications, providing them economic benefits that should allow reduced harvest pressure on natural reefs.
- Harvests of wild oysters has multiplied, thanks largely to favorable natural conditions for oyster reproduction and growth, and recruitment from sanctuary areas.

#### RAISE YOUR VOICE FOR THE ST. MARY'S OYSTER SANCTUARY AND EARMARK IT FOR RESTORATION

- Oysters belong to all Marylanders – all stakeholders' views should be given equal weight.
- We must continue to invest in oyster reef restoration. Tell the Hogan Administration to continue investment in two more sanctuaries, AND DESIGNATE THE ST. MARY'S RIVER for restoration.
- Tell the Administration to leave at least 24 percent of reefs as 'sanctuaries' off-limits to harvest, as is currently the case. NO SANCTUARIES SHOULD BE OPENED TO HARVEST, especially the St. Mary's which is functioning well improving water clarity, developing disease resistance, enhancing fishing opportunities, and has increased harvests downriver.

Call us to learn more (301)904-2387 or visit our website: [www.SMRWA.org](http://www.SMRWA.org)

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