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Watermen Propose Limited Harvest In St. Mary's Sanctuary

The St. Mary's River Watershed Association (SMRWA) received a phone call last night from a member of the Watermen's Association of St. Mary's County inviting us to attend a meeting tonight on a proposal to open the St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary to commercial harvest of wild oysters. In response to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources' invitation to submit such a proposal, the St. Mary's county oyster committee (a separate entity from the Watermen's Association) was preparing a proposal for a limited harvest using power dredges on a large portion of the sanctuary known as Horseshoe Bar and upriver including Box Oak Bar to Martin's Point.

MEETING TONIGHT AT 6:30
CARTER BUILDING, GOVERNMENT COMPLEX
LEONARD HALL DRIVE, LEONARDTOWN



The SMRWA has long stood against the harvest of wild oysters in the St. Mary's River sanctuary. In January 2012, SMRWA wrote to then Secretary John Griffin (MD DNR), "We are opposed to the approval of any commercial operations that impact current thriving and reproducing oyster bars within the river's sanctuary."

SMRWA staff attended the February 18-19 oyster summit in Fredericksburg Virginia hosted by the Chesapeake Bay office of the EPA. Renown scientist Don Boesch, Director of the University of Maryland Center for Estuarine Science, stated, "Not only do we need to manage oyster fishery to maximize harvest, we need to give the oysters a chance to rebuild structure." He stated unequivocally that there was a vital place in fishery management for areas to be completely off limits to harvest so that the oysters can rebuild their natural infrastructure or reefs.

In the following Q&A session, renown scientist Mark Lukenberg, Virginia Institute for Marine Science, stated that working the bottom, as watermen claim is vital, is not only unnecessary, but bad practice. "...do not need to work a thriving reef to keep it healthy. In fact, cultivating the bottom in the winter just increases barnacles [and] will maintain a degraded bar..", he said. Later in the day he added, "Working the bottom only serves one purpose - putting oysters into the market."

SMRWA encourages our members and the public to voice their concerns and opinions on this matter by attending the meeting tonight, calling or writing your representatives in Annapolis, and writing Governor Hogan. Please include Delegate Deb Rey (Deborah.Rey@house.state.md.us) with your input as she serves on the Governor's Oyster Advisory Commission and has asked us to keep her informed on this matter.

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Photo caption: Waterman on St. Mary's River dredging oysters.