

# PARTNERSHIP FOR A RESILIENT APALACHICOLA BAY

## MEETING #10

Wednesday, March 19, 2025 - 12 Noon to 3:30 PM EST

Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve

108 Island Drive, Eastpoint, Florida

**Facilitator:** Betty Webb

**Members Present:** Anita Grove (ANERR), Shannon Hartsfield (Oysterman), Roger Matthis (Oysterman), Ottice Amison (Franklin County Commission), Bruce Millender (Seafood Dealer), Cameron Baxley (Apalachicola Riverkeeper), Jim Estes (), Portia Sapp (), Chad Hanson (Pew), Grayson Sheppard (), David Barber (Seafood Dealer), Devin Resko (FWC), Ken Jones (), Kim Miller (ANERR), Andy Kane (UF), John Creamer (FWC), Erika Burgess (FWC), Jenna Harper (DEP), Joel Trexler (FSUCML), Sandra Brooke (FSUCML)

**Visitors:** Betsy Mansfield (FSUCML), Anna Cohen (FSUCML), Doug Brown (Community Member)

**12:46** *Call Meeting to Order and Welcome - Ottice Amison - President*

*Review Agenda - Betty Webb, Facilitator*

- Annual Meeting, this is the 1 year mark!

**12:48** Annual Meeting Call to Order

- Confirmation of Officers, current officers were elected for a 2 year term, asking to officers to stay on for the year
  - o Anita makes a motion to confirm all officers, Bruce seconds, approved
- Confirmation of New Year Schedule
  - o Motion by Bruce, Seconded by Anita and Jim, approved

**12:50** Annual Meeting Adjourned

**12:50** Monthly Meeting Called to Order

- Minutes Approval from the last meeting, motioned by Ken, Seconded by Shannon
- 501©3 update – Partnership is officially a non-profit, and did it retroactively, so can now start applying for grants

**12:51** FWC Update – Devin Resko

- Thanks for Partnership attendance at the FWC Commission meeting, well received
- Update on Oyster Biologist for AB
  - o have interviewed folks, but no offer given
  - o position re-advertised with Tallahassee HQ (due to logistical hurdle) – however position will have routine and regular travel throughout Franklin Co.
  - o Position ad closes at the end of the month, rolling review of applications
- To date no oyster related items that have been significantly reduced or cut from the State budget
- FWC Commission meeting outcome → holding stakeholder engagement workshops
  - o Looking at schedules to have 2 meetings throughout the spring in person, and 2 virtual meetings (Dates contingent on location)

- Will also have meetings in Pensacola and St. Augustine
- April 15<sup>th</sup> & June 3<sup>rd</sup> in person (tentative)
- May 1<sup>st</sup> and June 5<sup>th</sup> for virtual (tentative)
- Meetings will primarily focus on Apalachicola Bay, but also touch on statewide measure
- Asking for feedback on location to be held for good engagement and participation – Expecting 100 people
  - *Grayson suggests County Courthouse Annex, Office will ask folks in the Commission Office about availability*
  - *High School, the Armory, and the community center also suggested*
  - *Office and Michael Marone will reach out to Devin about location options*
- First meeting will be to gather opinions on approval or disapproval of lots of management options
- Also will have restoration workshop – looking at week of May 26<sup>th</sup>

Questions: (Italics are responses from

Chad: What is the structure of the workshops?

- *Will be a presentation and then asking for a lot of feedback on many different things, potentially use iClickers for quickly gathering feedback, and then a question session at the end for discussion*

Office: Have to talk about navigational hazard, about to move into the busy season, and already had issues with groundings, need signage out there because someone will get hurt without it

- Bruce: there needs to be buoy markers, because there are charter fishers that have worked their whole lives here, and they don't know what's going on with some of the sites
- *FWC doing additional mapping to understand where problem areas might be*
- *Marked areas with Law Enforcement buoys for extreme low tides*
  - *They disappeared within the month*
  - Shannon: Need 3 bar tie downs (3 foot sand augers) or anchors to hold it down, cannot use concrete or cinderblocks
- Bigger the markers the better, Cameron suggests some buoys that are out on a lawn somewhere
- Bruce: Is there any timing information that this can be done? Need to mark with reflector tape as well
  - *This will be high priority, want to move quickly*
  - *Looking at all options, not just marking, but also signage at the ramps, etc.*
- Office: Two weeks in to Spring break, this is going to be a pretty busy next couple of months

Shannon: Since oysters started growing on the material, there are no cracks on to wedge the tongs into, when the oysters grow big, you're not scraping the oysters off the rocks, you're going to kill a lot of oysters while trying to harvest (Talking about the material put out by FWC)

- Won't be able to tong oysters off the current material, kill more than you save

- Going to have to chisel the oysters off the rock, because the rocks are really big, can't bring them up
- Sandra: How is this different from tonging on ABSI reefs?
  - Shannon: The rock is so much different, the rocks are way heavier/ denser, oysters won't break off the rock on the FWC restoration
  - Sandra: It's not just the size of the rock, but also the type of the rock then
  - Shannon: They are growing nice in clusters, but they are breaking
  - Sandra: ABSI used local quarry limerock, FWC use Kentucky blue limerock which is harder than the local quarry rock
  - Shannon: Lots of flat surfaces on the bigger rock allows for oysters to grow flat on them, the rock is very strong so when you hit the rock it breaks the oyster, not the rock, ABSI rock was rounder
- Ottice: Can FWC go on the boat with Shannon to show them visually what he's talking about?
  - *Yes, they have to be on a boat next to him, but yes, there is an opportunity to go out on the water to see what he's talking about*
  - Shannon: Divers are also having issues with collecting the oysters off the rocks as well
- Ottice: In the future either have to do a different type of rock, or a smaller size
  - Shannon: The smaller rock that has been previously put out there, it's still there, some of it has sunk, but there has been a lot of poaching, areas that have been getting oysters previously, there are none now – not dead oysters, just nothing
    - The poachers are using dredges and taking everything
    - Have sites marked that have been reliable, and now there they are empty
  - Sandra: With the smaller rock, the oysters were growing around the smaller rock, and the rocks were ending up in the bags, as folks were not breaking the oysters off the rocks
    - Question is, can you knock oysters off the small Kentucky rock as easy as the local softer limestone
    - Bigger material worked better for growing oysters, and getting them in up to market size
  - Andy: Kentucky limerock that is being referred to, sounds like it is more dense, flatter, and likely less porous – which is probably driving the inability to cull oysters off them
    - How does the growth compare between fresh and older rock?
    - Is there less shell parasites on the oysters on this rock? And could that be contributing to the strength of holding?
      - Little early to tell the answer of these questions, FWRI will likely shift to more quantitative monitoring at the end of this year, and at the start of 2026*
  - Shannon: The bottom of the bay has changed within the last couple of months, lots more little crabs, and fish and types of grass, things that haven't seen since the collapse

- Finding areas of oysters where a few years ago you weren't finding anything
- Finding areas that have decent oysters on it that have not been planted
- Still not doing like it should be, but doing better
- Jim: Would be nice to get samples of the rocks at the meeting to look at them and can visually see the differences at the Partnership meetings
  - Roger: If you felt them with the tongs, you would understand
  - Shannon: Worst thing that happened was the half shell market changing to being paid by the weight, so folks don't knock oysters off the rocks, or knock off the smaller oysters, younger generation didn't care how they made the weight

**\*\*\* Something to address in the regulation suggestions, move away from measuring by weight – FWC wants to have a conversation about type of unit**

- Anita: Also hearing more and more about poaching too, any way to address this?
  - Poaching is bad, but the dredging is particularly bad for the environment, and people are taking the material away along with it
  - Rock is good because it's staying where we put it, but maybe there is something to top it off to help ease tonging
  - Sandra: We and the poachers know where the oysters are, FWCLE could know where they are, and we know they go out at night, why is it so hard to enforce?
    - Shannon: Just selling them on the side of the road by the bucket
- Chad: Lessons to learn about restoring the habitat versus developing the fishery, so need to think about doing both and using tools to do both
  - Shannon: Once you put the big material down, the small stuff slides off it
- Erika: Please call every time you see trucks with them or folks selling them
- John: Since 2020, only received 26 calls about oyster infractions from the community, will take a community to help with enforcement
  - Grayson: The bay will shut itself down if folks are not making a living, self-policing will happen when there is a fishery that people are being affected by the poaching
  - Roger: Afraid the problem is that there is a general consensus of not approving of the bay closure, so they aren't going to call about it
    - Ottice: This is driven often times by misinformation, people believe that the whole bay is covered in material and oysters
    - Shannon: There were really only a few people fishing, there would be an influx of people as people found more oysters to catch, but then would go away when they couldn't make a living
- Bruce: 1) Re-iterate that the markings need to happen. 2) Go out with Shannon and have FWC to have a visual on what is happening with the reefs
- Doug: Wants to reiterate that the Partnership has a Facebook page, have 166 followers, please re-post things to get the word out

1:47 Break

## 2:05 Committee Updates

- *Finance Committee: Ken Jones*
  - Nothing major to report now a 501©3
  - If folks have ideas about grants, let Ken know
    - Ex: NFWF, Triumph, etc.
    - What type of grants would the Partnership be interested in developing and applying for, need to think about how group wants to go out and get money?
    - Otlice: Not clear that work like this would be applicable to Triumph (qualification of producing jobs is hard to meet)
      - Will reach out to Erin about the RESTORE org
    - Anita: Shoaf precipitated a grant to reach out to younger fishermen to reach out to them
      - With the RESTORE money, certainly fits under restoration and NFWF
- *Technical Committee: Chad Hanson (Summary document presented)*
  - Met a number of times since the last meeting, narrowing on preliminary technical recommendations, still working on putting more specifics on things
  - Committee seeks to meet with FWRI and DMFM to discuss specific management strategies, restoration methods, and monitoring protocols
  - Working on recommendations for restoration, management, and monitoring
  - Restoration recommendations:
    - Overall approach has several tasks, restoring habitat, increasing habitat availability for oysters, making it a more robust fishery
    - Goal should be to increase habitat to enhance ecosystem services and ecological functions
    - Create structures that can withstand high energy conditions
    - Data and analysis on restoration efforts, larval transport modelling, habitat suitability and environmental design
    - Shannon: Have an issue with modelling, can be manipulated, not favorable on modelling, commercial oystermen know where material needs to go, material needs to go back to where oysters have been harvested on bars for the past 50 years (past the light poles they grow scissorbills, and are not a marketable oyster), just throwing away material out away from the river
      - Jim: Think most of it doesn't have to do with where the material is going to go, what models do is tell you things about what you don't know. Some of the modelling will tell us about things we have not collected data on. The point of it is to give us some idea and how it fits with what they oystermen say. Larval transport models can tell us about impacts of reef degradation on the flow of the water

- Chad: Combining data sources, including stakeholder experiences, collaborative approach, not a one size fits all approach
- Management recommendations:
  - TAC for any given season should be determined using the most recent and best available monitoring data to estimate population abundance and density
  - FWC should work with the PRAB to develop guides to harvest areas to enable compliance
  - Quotas based on pre-season monitoring data, alternative to spatial management – require check stations to track harvest
    - Individual quotas an option to maintain equity
  - Bay should remain closed to all oyster harvest during the summer months (Jun – Aug)
  - Historical “summer bars” should be included in the fishing season when the water quality monitoring allows harvest
  - Fishery area opened where there are at least ??? bags of market-sized oysters per acre. The fishery will be closed again at pre-determined level, to be identified by FAC in conjunction with stakeholder groups. This will require frequent monitoring during harvest season to ensure areas are not depleted.
    - No rationale on 400 bags, strawman number – question about how many it should be. Is there data on the number of bags
    - PRAB: Replace 400 with XXX or TBD so that we aren’t putting out a specific number until sure
    - Erika: Don’t understand what the bullet fully says – about fishery closed at a pre-determined level – idea that FWC is monitoring throughout the season of density or take?
      - Chad: Could be either/or, or a combination. Plays into what monitoring is available. Ideally, on the water monitoring determines density thresholds and then sets timing for closure of areas when it reaches that threshold. Want to have conversations with FWC about the feasibility of this approach.
      - Sandra: This is why the alternative proposed is TAC which is determined just at the start of the season, and then only check stations are needed for monitoring.
      - Ottice: Check stations likely not going to happen as no state agency has funding for that. But you have 2 departments that require reporting, and could use that collected data to monitor. Go to the seafood houses for the info. FWC has it from the bar to the house, FDACS has from the house to the consumer. That’s all the monitoring you need to the legal harvest. Already have the accountability there, don’t need to re-invent the

wheel. FWC needs to come talk to the industry, the information is there.

- Portia: Talking with FWC about the processing facilities and collaborating. Know that Alabama came and presented about the grid system, is the industry open to that or no?
  - Shannon: Wants an update from them as to how they are doing now. They are getting overharvested because the fisher population has grown. Biggest problem here is the bushel/ unit system. Shift from number of bushels to number of pounds that they are paid for.
- Jim: In theory agree with the requirements of writing things down, but have done check stations in the past because of great concern about undersized oysters. They were sold to and by undersized oysters. Asked to come in the oyster houses to observe and catch the fishers in the act. Not going to have any continuity of legal authority because chain of custody. Dealers not open to it, because the regulators were overzealous and overly tough on the dealers.
- David: Best thing that happened to the industry was the oyster check stations, dealers have no authority to enforce things with fishers. Can refuse to not buy the small oysters, but they can just sell them somewhere else.
- Jim: But back in the day with a lot of oyster fishers didn't check every bag because there were too many people.
- David: With the time limit, people are going to oyster until the last minute, and then you have people lined up trying to get their oysters in on time, and don't have time to dump bags and check every bag.
- Jim: With the history of distrust, don't think there is any other way than doing limited check stations, and there is a way to do it more efficiently and less costly than previous attempts. People didn't abide by the rules of collecting the data, people pool the catch, or split it up, and so there is issues with the catch data of the past. Have to do things smart, have to trust each other, need accountability for those that didn't fill trip tickets out.
- Chad: One task for the technical committee is go back and get an update from the folks in Alabama and how it is working or not working.
- Ken: Do we want to add one more bullet that basically says how the determination to close the fishery is made.

Who is going to take the information and say things are done (FWC). Needs coordination step. – Betty agree, maybe add verbiage to it to bring it to their attention and make sure they are expected to make the decision.

- Harvest on restoration sites should remain prohibited until at least ??? years post-deployment completion and/or sooner if monitoring data demonstrates they can be opened for harvest. This would require increased enforcement to avoid illegal harvest
  - Shannon: How was 2 years determined?
    - Chad: Most common number used in other locations, location dependent
    - Sandra: Highlight that the rec is either 2 years or when the data shows that opening could happen
    - Shannon: Poaching on these areas are still going to be a big problem, won't keep people off these areas, enforcement is going to be hard. Have to keep it equal, how are you going to punish the bad fishers without punishing the good.
    - Ken: So how would you change that sentence? (not addressed)
  - Andy: That statement is based on knowledge that AB can produce a harvestable sized oyster in a year, but what is built into the recommendation is sustainability, want to have multiple generations come out of the restoration efforts. Just a timeframe for increasing sustainability. Looking at poaching is a separate but very important issue, may no be specific to the timing of this statement.
  - Shannon: Recruitment is not coming round, and there is die-off, aren't seeing recruitment replacement to fill in those die-offs, seeing through the season
    - Wants an experimental harvest area to see what happens to recruitment and growth
    - Erika: So don't know if recruitment is changing significantly between years or lack of harvesting
    - Sandra: Having recruitment initially, and then die-off and it seems to level out, as populations develop you have habitat limitation, it is lower. Successful recruitment on a mature reef is likely less than the new material, probably a natural process. When we need to get concerned is when recruitment is going down with removal and there is not replacement settlement. Could be different dynamics for natural versus fished bars.
    - Sandra: For the 2 year mark, rather than putting a limit on when to open up, let the population decide
    - Shannon: Exactly, when you're culling oysters, you cull the small ones out to replace them back in the same

area. Used to seeing expansive size range of oysters, but now not seeing the range of them, more distinct size classes now.

- Ottice: Might be the difference between untouched and fished bars, in untouched nature – strongest survive or natural selection, but in the fished areas that are overturned – there is space made for maybe the weaker individuals who are less likely to compete naturally and so you see a greater distribution of sizes
- Andy: What Shannon is describing is a lack of cohort strength in the distribution we can see. Recruitment concept needs to be looked at to understand the success of the cohorts. Have seen in cohort monitoring and there are times where you get great sets, but fail to see establishment into larger individuals. This data is important for future projections of the population.
- Chad: The models and the science can be informed by these types of observations, and the model may help elucidate the reason behind these observations.
- Roger: When you have good water flow, you have good oysters. When you have bad water flow, and it gets salty, then they get eaten up.
- Shannon: When FWC said they were going to do an experimental harvest, thought they were going to choose 3-4 oystermen and choose locations on where they would harvest. Keep them in specified areas (2017 sites) for a short period of time and then study what happens with the recruitment and the size distributions. And the fishers have to keep only legal sized oysters and put them back where they came from. That's experimental harvesting.
- PRAB: Recommends changing wording to just having the closure time determined by the monitoring rather than setting a
- Monitoring recommendations:
  - Combination of oyster population and fishery monitoring should be used to determine 1) rate of harvest, 2) effect of harvest on oyster populations and 3) for adaptive management
  - Monitoring should be done prior to re-opening...
  - FWC should enhance oyster population monitoring to be more spatially and statistically robust
  - At minimum, enhanced monitoring should be done before the season opens
  - “Check stations” to monitor in-season harvest should be included in the management plan to enable adaptive management strategies and ensure allowable harvest levels are not exceeded.

- Betty: How do we move forward? How do we move these recommendations forward to give to FWC?
  - o Anita: Think this is a consensus process, have it voted on that there is agreement in general or in sections. Get it to a place where folks are comfortable and then vote on it.
- Betty: If the PRAB were to hand you something next month in April is that too late?
  - o Devin: Nope
- Shannon: To FWC – you’re listening to our discussion, are we in the ballpark of what you are discussing and considering, or are we wasting time on things that are not going to be considered?
  - o Erika: What we see here is a full arc on what things need to be considered. One thing that wasn’t touched on, about participation in the fishery.
    - Betty: You weren’t here about when presented by the Communications recommendations that get into the nitty gritty about the fishery itself.
  - o Erika: From what I have seen today, you have covered everything that needs to be considered. High level goal of 2,000 acres restored, with a sustainable fishery, with a clutching program. There are many different ways to get to this point, and as things get further along there are details to be fleshed out, and there may or may not be collective agreement of the details. If able to come up with something earlier, could present what the Partnership thinks to the public to get feedback from them. Nothing discussed seems ridiculous at all, robust logic and thought behind proposed items.
  - o Shannon: Next step should be narrowing in and honing down the suggestions and structure of things that FWC should be considered.
  - o Jim: Anything presented today too specific?
    - Erika: Speaking from the regulatory side – don’t think anything is too specific. The more specific you get however, the harder it will be to reach a consensus
- Ken: Curious about the context of going from a small sub-set of that, and how you would write rules for today’s amount of acres restored, to rules when there are 2000 acres. Are rules being written for today that can be adapted as restored area grows?
  - o Erika: Don’t have a crystal ball, so wouldn’t write the rules for 2000 acres, but can write adaptability into the rules to manage different scenarios and changes in the system as things grow.
  - o Chad: Management is built towards having a sustainable and renewable fishery, rules being made are designed to reach the end goal of 2000 acres. Setting goals and benchmarks (likely internal) will help build the trajectory of management and restoration.
    - Erika: There is no regulation that could be set that could be harvest related that would result in 2000 restored acres. Need also investment in restoration.
- Shannon: Presentation by Lauren Rice about oysters and her research would be useful and super informative.
- Outreach and Education Committee: Anita Grove

- Not a ton of response about involvement, just Anita and Doug
- Don't have a lot of idea about what needs to be communicated
- Need to develop a consensus of messaging from the PRAB for outreach and education to the community
- Need to put out messages about poaching and the amount of oysters that are out there
- Ottice: need to clarify also at what stage of restoration efforts are at
- Cameron: May 17<sup>th</sup> Riverkeepers are going to have an event at the Yacht Club, happy to make that an opportunity to highlight what's true and provide local information. Volunteers to be a part of the subcommittee as well.

### **3:37 Other Business**

- Wayne Williams recommendations – same as what existed in terms of management prior to the closure
  - Grayson: Follow clarity and cleanliness of their recommendations/ asks for the PRAB recommendations
  - Betty will resend the attachment for folks to see
- Ottice: Question for FDACS, the temperature restraints and time controls – vibrio is a consumption hazard, why is it that wild capture oysters time restricted and farmed not?
  - Portia: All oysters are covered by the time constraints, not just wild, farmed do as well. FDACS reviews the time temperature matrix every year, just did it in January. Typically use Apalach temperatures for air and water temps.

### **3:43 Meeting Adjourned**