

PARTNERSHIP FOR A RESILIENT APALACHICOLA BAY

MEETING #11

Wednesday, April 16, 2025 - 12 Noon to 3:30 PM EST

Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve

108 Island Drive, Eastpoint, Florida

Facilitator: Betty Webb

Members Present: Ottice Amison, David Barber, Shannon Hartsfield, Bruce Millender, Roger Matthis, Joel Trexler, Cameron Baxley, Jenna Harper, Gayle Johnson, Grayson Sheperd, Portia Sapp, Chad Hanson, Sandra Brooke

Online: Betsy Mansfield, Erik Lovestrand, Kim Branciforte, Andy Kane

Visitors: Doug Brown

12:47 *Call Meeting to Order and Welcome - Ottice Amison, President*
Review Agenda - Betty Webb, Facilitator

12:51 *Organizational Business*

- Motion to approve minutes of the previous meeting (Shannon), Seconded (R. Matthis)
- Starting in May, all FCC meetings will be on the first and third Wednesdays, so Partnership meetings will move to 4th Wednesday of the month
- Bruce made motion, Roger second, all approve

12:53 *FWC Update – Not present today*

- FWC in Pensacola today for a workshop but there will be discussion of the Workshop that happened April 15, 2025

12:55 *Follow Up Discussion from FWC Workshop 4/15/2025*

- Once poll is done today, results from the questions asked will be public record and available
- Sharing the presentation from the workshop last night
 - o Ways to send comments
 - o Importance of oysters
 - o Threats
 - o General Resource Status
 - o FWC Restoration
 - o Wild Capture Fishery
 - o State of the Oysters
 - o Setting the Harvest Level
 - Set annual harvest level based on percent of legal oysters on open reefs
 - Harvestable bags at 5% and 10% take for three areas in a table
 - Shannon: Numbers based off the amount planted in the areas listed
 - Devin: On the acreage, its not the entire Cat Point reef, just an area that has been restored. FWRI looked at hard bottom acreage and estimates of what they were pulling from monitoring data from

2023 and 2024. With the data being so variable, the lower end is being used for the data presentation.

- Sandra: Numbers are close in acreage, but the bags per acre weren't that high.
- Potential Bars for Oyster Harvest
 - General discussion on when certain areas were planted, and what is included or not for the data presented by potential harvest
 - Shannon: Barber said there was 1800 bushels in one day in May/June 2015, there were also 500 oyster fishers at that time.
- Discussion on general thoughts:
 - Grayson: Background offshore, part of the Apalachicola Artificial Reef Group, worked extensively with FWC, when he see rocks going down – thinking about fish, not oysters. Oysters attaching to the rocks are just an added benefit of it. Trout and sheepshead use the reefs a ton, everyone knows that. May need to redirect a bit to focus greater than the oysters, but for the bay as a whole. Shift the messaging to artificial reefs for funding sources, expand opportunities for funding. It's a structure issue, need structure, the reduction of structure has pushed fish into smaller areas. 40 fishing guides in the Bay, quick math there are 16,000 fishers on the Bay per year (this is a conservative estimate just based on the number of charter fishers). 20,000 people a year are (on the lower end) fishing on the Bay. Need to use these numbers when talking with policy makers, and government officials. Quantify that economic benefit and present it to funders and government officials, increasing stakeholder value. This is an estuary for Gag Grouper, with the oyster bars gone there is no hiding habitat for juveniles so the gag grouper has decreased, and the fishing season is now one week, and one fish per person. Taking this from oysters to gag grouper and the commercial industry, increasing the fold of stakeholders impacted. Think there needs to be some expansion and redirection of messaging to engage more folks and funders. (e.g. Bonefish Tarpon Trust, CCA). Start selling it to folks that we need help with getting funding from the gov't to 'rebuild redfish or fish habitat', these groups would sign on right away. Get word out to help get funds for more habitat, selling it differently would help generate more money and interest. Present it to the state as not just investing in a few oystermen, but also from recreational fishers, etc.
 - Office: Recreational fishing has very strong lobbying power, if we can get them on board to make calls will likely have support. Really only have 3 weeks to get on the FWC budget line about this. Definitely need to be more inclusive of these groups.
 - Grayson: Groups may not give money, but writing letters in support for clutching programs and funding for it can be very powerful.
 - Chad: Got a data request in for the numbers related to economic value of recreational fishing species related to oysters from Ed Camp. This habitat supports everybody, trying to show the economics behind that. CCA has worked with other state artificial reef programs to help place reefs in Bays

for oysters. Could be a supplemental to the other rock habitat, may not be harvestable, but provide source of larvae for other areas. Broadening the scope is good.

- Cameron: Next three weeks it is crazy with the budget approval approaching. Folks at the legislator are highly recommending going in person to meet face to face. Staff and folks are not looking at emails right now. They don't read out emails in the committee meetings in Cameron's experience.
- Gayle: Simon and Shoaf are asking for folks to email in about economic impacts of things along with the ecological. In the committees they read the names of people who email and if they are for or against bills, but not the whole email. Presenting in person, folks have to listen.
- Cameron: Is it too far removed to talk about hunting and the softening of the sand and such? → Answer: Hunters don't really tie in to it.
- Shannon: Speckled trout are schooling at some of these new bars, been a long time we've seen that. Black Sea Bass were being caught at legal size in the Bay last year, always have seen juvenile sizes.
- Chad: If people are going up to TLH and interacting with legislators, would be good to also mention the shell recycling bill that was developed by Franklin's Promise and others. Needs bolstering to make sure it is in the budget as well.
- Otlice: Previous experience shows that there isn't a strong voice for just commercial fishing, but mixed use has more strength. Selling this as a mixed use issue may give a lot more power to the asks.
- Grayson: There is a ton of economic components that could be included in these arguments and discussion. Need to bring back the reputation of good oysters *and* good fishing.
- Chad: Data analysis mentioned will hopefully be done by the end of April, may have a presentation for the May meeting. Thinking long term and talking to the commission and lots of folks.
- Grayson: May be better to look one year out, for a long haul. Is it too late to get things done now?
- Otlice: Think we need to do something now, there are line items on the budget for right now, so getting calls and in person conversations would be good. FWC line item 19.5 million, and 10 million to spend it on. Work both currently and long term.
- Betty: If we could get some folks to support FWC's request this year. ABSI work includes a lot about the habitat and the fishery. We have worked on oysters for the last few months, because working with FWC on the oyster rule changes. Then we should bring the environment and those components to the forefront.
- Chad: The reason the rec from the technical committee starts with restoration, it's to address some of these we are talking about. Second thing, Chad offers to call Bonefish Trust and see if they can engage.

- Betty: Budget will cover July 1, 2025, to June 30th 2026, need calls of support for the current asks for this session, and then work for next session.
- Betty: Short-term thing, for recommendations for future funding, include some more of these benefits that Grayson is mentioning. Will get with John and Grayson to discuss these and add them to the recommendations.
- Chad: Hoping to get a proposal pulled together looking at durability of oyster reefs. Pulling together a team to develop this.
- Further Discussion on Workshop:
 - Joel: Noticed that many of the questions focused on what percentage of the harvest could be removed. But haven't seen number presented on these ideas. (this will be presented later at the technical committee review).
- Feedback for Erika and Devin:
 - Shannon: Saw a lot of percentages that were accurate as far as reading the room. One of the big things Shannon's been pushing is catching oysters by the count. You can't do number of bushels, because each place is going to be different. The count will change up to 20 oysters per count. That's an easier number to keep up with – 250 oysters/ bushel
 - Joel: Lot of interest in a few things of the results, but there wasn't enough time spent on them. More time shown for
 - Grayson: A lot of interest and positivity for an RS. It is hard to get. Making an RS a requirement to catch oysters is going to get rid of a huge number of people. Might need to be cut if it will restrict too many folks who used to harvest and don't have one now.
 - Shannon: A lot of oystermen already had RS regardless. Some folks have lost it because they haven't filed the \$5000 in profit. Talked about grandfathering folks in, which might be a good idea. If you don't use them, you lose them, which Shannon supports.
 - Grayson: But then you're taking out the people who just need to harvest for part-time or emergency funds.
 - Ottice: We can figure out what an expansion would look like in the future but should probably just keep focused on the 2026 decisions. Right now, to qualify for an SPO with an RS, there is only one species to sell crabbers for bait. Everything else in the bay is covered under RS.
 - Roger: All he has ever done is oyster, never had an RS
 - Ottice: If you qualify for an RS, you can get it for free. But a lot of folks who only oystered didn't have an RS.
 - Cameron: There were a few things missing in regard to the RS requirement. What would be extra choice to address the RS requirement? What folks are grandfathered in?
 - Ottice: Whoever applies for these licenses will have to meet some qualification. Give folks an endorsement for the first one, and then they have to maintain it.

- Chad: Workshop was well organized, well-staffed, gave lots of opportunity for people to talk. Not everyone there was a commercial fisherman, it highlights the importance of oysters for everyone.
- Shannon: Glad that they were listening to the Partnership, recommendations were seen as favorable by the participants, reassuring Shannon that the Partnership is on the right track with recs and ideas.

1:55 Break

- Betty: Ottice and Betty got together to write a letter to senators and reps about supporting the funding request for FWC. It has been sent out. Will be posted to the website.

2:15 Committee Updates

- *Technical Committee: Chad Hanson (2:15)*
 - Technical Committee recommendations for oyster habitat restoration and fishery management for discussion with the Partnership
 - The committee seeks to meet with FWRI and DMFM to discuss specific management strategies, restoration methods and monitoring protocols
 - Some changes have been made, but not significant ones
 - Met with Ed Camp to look at the modelling for harvest numbers, not strong, but did receive good information about restoration needs, etc.
 - Met with Jason (last name) from Alabama about how they determine their numbers and what monitoring is done. A bit more sophisticated there than here, with check in cell phones, etc. Use on boat monitoring with the fishers to monitor reef condition.
 - Want to see lessons and ideas can be taken and used to present to FWC
 - Still working to meet with FWC to talk about percentages and how data is being used to set thresholds and things.
 - Recommendations
 - Restoration – mostly similar to previously presented
 - Focuses on durability and restoring for ecosystem
 - Management of the fishery
 - When the monitoring data shows – struck out ‘every two years’
 - Struck out specific reference to 400 bags, in hopes to be more general
 - Also cut verbiage about spatial management – didn’t want to prescribe something that wasn’t possible, in terms of specifics of opening and closing specific areas
 - Do talk about harvest areas in general
 - Annual total harvest quotas or targets are an alternative to spatial management
 - Now focusing on what percentage the harvest rate should be.
 - Varying recommendations from other locations and the literature
 - See 20-30% as a range (this number is just an example of what could be, based on other locations) and not a set

number, should be adaptive based on conditions such as environmental stress, predation, etc. – Part of the adaptable management strategy, come in conservatively and then adapt as able

- Most changes were in word smithing
- FWC recommended to work with the Partnership in decision-making, monitoring, etc. (Betty will word smith further to fit with the current recommendations, and focusing broader than just on oysters)
- *Did not read every recommendation out loud*
- *Discussion of TC Report*
 - Jenna: With the numbers presented by FWC, do we want to change our numbers to what FWC is doing?
 - Shannon: Think we should keep the numbers as is and let FWC be the deciding factor of the numbers.
 - Sandra: Maybe avoid all numbers together, let FWC be the decision makers on the exact number. Make it clear that these numbers are just examples based on what other states use.
 - Chad: The 20-30% in the recommendations is just examples of what is done in other places, not an explicit recommendation.
 - Shannon: How does AL monitor where people harvest from?
 - Chad: They have an app that monitors people's locations, and they have people on the water monitoring two days per week. And the fishers have to report based on the grid system where most of their oysters come from.
 - Shannon: Without monitoring of where and how fishing is occurring, the bay will be depleted.
 - Sandra: This is why there is a recommendation to move away from spatial management. Set a quota for the fishery and when the quota is met you close the fishery, and a result would be some bars are depleted and others are left alone. Also, the AL monitoring app is for the fishers to see where they go, but they don't track exactly where they are like VMS. There are also check stations that people need to stop at.
 - Chad: They do diving monitoring, sampling monitoring, and monitoring of tonging. To get folks up to speed, they have a pre-season meeting with everyone to introduce any new rules, regulations or management approaches. Any given time 75-275 fishers, and as high as 430 on the water.
 - Shannon: Would be good to have a conversation with them about where they started, where they are now, and what is working for them. Are they controlling harvest like they want or is more harvest occurring than they hope?
 - Jenna: Have to stop at a check station and report catch before you can get a ticket and move on to sale. All information is then uploaded on a publicly available dashboard.

- Joel: How will we get to an understanding of how many oysters can be removed, and then the population can recover by the next season for a sustainable harvest.
 - Sandra: We tried to get that out of this, but he couldn't give us that.
 - Chad: MS and LA use a shell budget model, that's sort of what AL is doing, but its more trial and error. That's why TC is having a hard time coming up with a scientifically backed number.
 - Joel: TX may also have some lessons learned from their experience with restoration and opening the fishery
- Joel: Is the TC in its recommendations trying to make recommendations so that there is not large investment for only one year of successful harvest? Are there recommendations moving to sustainable harvest recommendations?
 - Sandra: That's what these are trying to do
 - Chad: Removed the 2 year requirement of closure of freshly restored reefs – now says 'harvest should start when the data allows'.
 - Shannon: Doing bags by count would help with the seafood dealers. It's a lot easier to market oysters when you get consistent oysters. Everything is sold by the pound currently, but if they go to counts, they'll be sold by the count like Aquaculture.
 - Roger: You get the multiple generations by throwing the little oysters back. Having a count would reduce the inclusion of baby oysters and other material in the bags.
 - David: When you had the burlap sacks, you couldn't see what was inside the bag, and you'd pay for rocks, empty shells, undersize oysters, and get 50lbs of oysters for sale from a 60lb bag.
- Chad: AL is six bags/ person/ vessel/ day, and the season is around 55-60 days. Monitoring during the season is 15k, dashboard is in-house GIS folks, from State of Alabama money. No mention of monitoring of the recreational harvest.
- Grayson: One of the questions to vote on at the FWC workshop was about preference of using an app in the fishery, but there wasn't a lot of explanation in the question. So the responses might not be accurate because folks didn't understand what an app would entail.
- Chad: Could add a recommendation for a shelling program if people are amenable to it.
 - Sandra: Definitely think we should
 - Ottice: Agreed, should be with the focus on sustainability.
- AL Dashboard: www.outdooralabama.com/oysterharvest
- Betty: Next FWC Workshop is online on May 1, need to get the recs to FWC before that meeting. Already approved the communication
 - Motion (Shannon), Seconded (Gayle), approved – with the addition of a recommendation for the shelling program
- *Education and Outreach Committee – Doug Brown (3:04)*
 - Committee met to talk about reaching more people

- Mostly those far the FB has been for announcements
- Will add an FAQ section, and a weekly feature of these questions, if Partnership members get questions – send them along so we can address them
- Would also like to feature folks from the committee to showcase who is on the committee with pictures, etc.
- Need help with groups to share the FB page on, everyone please share on your FB page
- How do we address the issue of poaching? Any suggestions on how to approach this?
 - Shannon: Touch on that it is cutting in to their percentages in the future
- Office: Need to get information out about legislators with their emails so folks can reach out in support of Partnership initiatives
- Shannon: Put out the questions that FWC asked, and ask for opinions on it, and any questions folks have, have them ask them and get the answers from FWC
- Betty: Put a note on the FB page that there are presentations on the website for more information
- Betty: Need to come up with an outreach plan for the next year, have campaigns to push through throughout the year

- *Finance Committee – Ken Jones – Not present*

3:10 Other Business

- Cameron: Talked about legislation that Shoaf and Simon are sponsoring to stop oil drilling in the region – received unanimous support in the House today, and got support in the Senate committee, is being sent off to the Senate for voting
 - House bill (Shoaf) – kills the drill, has a 10 mile buffer from the NERR boundary
 - HB 1143 – protects all three of Florida’s estuaries (Reps. Shoaf and Tant)
 - Senate bill (Simon) – doesn’t have the 10 mile buffer language to actually kill the drill (1 mile buffer in statute, but that is not enough protection)
 - Will be mobilizing in a couple of days for folks to show support for getting that buffer included in the Senate bill language – need to adopt the wording from the House Bill
 - Want to hear from employers and how it will economically affect the area and livelihoods
 - Currently there are oil lobbies pushing against it, need to show some support to Simon and show that there is push back against it.
 - Phone calls have higher success rates, but also sending emails would be useful. Betty has sample email that folks can use that she will send out.

- Will probably happen within the next week or two – before the legislation session ends → need to capitalize on the support currently present in the legislature

3:20 Meeting Adjourned

Next Meeting: 4th Wednesday of the Month – 28th of May 2025