

PARTNERSHIP FOR A RESILIENT APALACHICOLA BAY

MEETING #16

Wednesday, October 29, 2025 - 12 to 3:30 PM EST
Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve
108 Island Drive, Eastpoint, Florida

Facilitator: Betty Webb

Members Present: Roger Matthis, Anita Grove, Ken Jones, Shannon Hartsfield, Bruce Millender, Steve Rash, Grayson Shepard, Ottice Amison, Gayle Johnson

Advisory Members & Visitors: Betsy Mansfield, Chad Hanson, Alejandra Rios, Carrie Jones, Jim Estes, Joel Trexler, Morgan Eason

Online: Andy Kane, Kim Branciforte, Erika Burgess

12:55 *Call Meeting to Order and Welcome – Ottice Amison*
Introductions of new faces
Review Agenda - Betty Webb, Facilitator

12:51 *Organizational Business*

- Motion to approve minutes of the previous meeting - Gryson, Seconded Shannon, approved.
- Duke Energy Contribution – New Bank Account Open
 - o Securing \$5,000 from Duke Energy for the Partnership, signatories on account are Betty and the Chair
 - o Money is for Program Development – use the funding to keep the group going, program support.
- Propose to combine Nov & Dec Meeting – Thursday December 18, 2025
 - o Approved
- Other business
 - o Discussion of potential funding opportunities for other projects – maybe CCA as a possibility
 - o Discussion of potential zones for restoration that would act as sanctuaries in areas that DACS would never allow fishing at
 - Chad suggests creating a plan for restoration of different areas based on the different goals – build a restoration plan for both habitat and the fishery (in conjunction with FWC)
 - Utilize local knowledge on where to put different reefs with different goals
 - Recreational fishing group support could help with leverage for legislation
 - Suggestion to bring in rep from CCA or other groups to be a part of the Partnership
 - Sanctuary reefs would be on historical reefs, but in areas that are not safe for consumption as determined by FDACS

- December meeting with focus on 2026 objectives for planning
- Ken asks for a large-scale map that has the historical bars, restored bars, oyster leases and maybe bathymetry, for geographic reference – then work together to draw out recommendations of where restoration should occur and which type of bars
- Betty will look for the large-scale map that was created a few years ago with 12 fishermen about where the bars are and what bars historically produced good. Joel and Sandra will work on Bay map creation.

12:57 Morgan Eason, FWC Presentation on Commission Final Rules

- Review and understand all of the proposed rules for the re-opening of the bay
- Written for both state rules in general and then includes Apalachicola specific rules
- **Undersized oyster limitation numbers are explicitly for Apalachicola
 - Size tolerance is going to be region specific, this was based on feedback from fishers of other regions
- Question: Is there going to be a set measurement for the size of the bags?
 - Rule will be – 60 pound bag is equal to two 5 gal buckets or one 10 gal bucket
 - 2 5 gallon buckets, 1 10 gallon bucket or 60 pounds – whichever is less
 - FWC will talk with LE to discuss enforcement and consistency
 - Clarification from Shannon – a 10 gal bucket weighs more like 80-85 pounds, if the enforcement is going to be by weight, then people will need scales, basing on the weight was from being paid by weight, but this is not consistent with what actually happens out in the wild
 - 10 gal can never comes close to 60 lbs. (always gonna be more)
 - Morgan – understood, conversation will likely be towards enforcement and education
 - Commission seems to be leaning towards continuing the 60 pound bag rather than a 100 count
 - Shannon – LA and MS have a set container that everyone has to use and fill to the brim, etc.
 - The biggest way LA stopped undersized oyster harvest – made a tag system – both harvester and dealer have to both put tags, when oysters are checked at the dealers both harvester and dealer have to be present, and when the harvester gets paid, they sign acknowledgement that those bags are theirs, then if found that the oysters are undersized – harvester gets a ticket
 - Otlice – It’s gonna come down to the enforcement side of things
 - Also, if the dealers are buying oysters from folks where the bags weigh over 60 pounds but fit in the bag – then it looks like the dealers have been buying illegal oysters – without the standardization there is a potential for incidental overharvest
 - May want to have a discussion on having a container that is specific

- If the ticketing for overharvest due to difference in 5 gal bucket goes to court – likely be dismissed because there is so much uncertainty and variation amongst the types of buckets used
 - Bruce: Dealers are going to be selling at different sizes, broken down for different needs – so long as the catch passes check, shouldn't be on the dealer to keep track of the amounts and the numbers from purchase
 - Jim: LE needs to have figured out exactly what they are going to do, how they are going to enforce, and how they are going to check things – need to talk to dealers on this
 - Otlice: Once oysters have started to be processed there is a potential for the oysters to lose a bit of size due to tumbling and knocking material off – once the dealers start processing, the size limit enforcement should end
- Morgan – Workshop will be held on the enforcement of the new rules and make sure it is standardized
 - Betty request that FWC come to give a summary of what is covered in this workshop/conversation
- Planning on handing out harvest tags and permits in person → if FWC could, would it be beneficial for FWC to hand out standardized containers for harvest? Would they be used?
 - Shannon – yes, folks have been given things in the past and that would clarify things and reduce any uncertainty
- What is posted is what FWC is proposing to the Commission, the commission could make a motion to change things, but after next week – whatever they make a motion and pass is what will be what is enforced in the bay
- Tags will assign the reefs the harvester can fish from (each tag is assigned to one reef) – will try and evenly distribute the tags by location, and then any remaining ones will be distributed evenly (not all tags will be for one location, there might be slight variation on the ratio of each location, but they will try and make it as even as possible)
 - Recreational tags will also be assigned to specific location – but only get one tag per person
- After end of the first year of seasons (2026-2027) oyster season will run October through February every year
- Have to have your SPL with BV endorsement prior to applying for the AB endorsement
 - Can watch the video for SPL at any time
 - December 16th is the last day for apply for a commercial or recreational permit
 - Start registering Nov 12, be there for 2 straight weeks, and then oyster biologist will have 'office hours' to help folks out until Dec 16
- Endorsement holder has to be on the boat - if you have a Crew SPL, you can have crew assisting you, but if you only have an individual SPL, can't have crew/ someone assisting culling (FWC will check on this)
- Tags are only good for a year, do not carry over from year to year

- If you apply for the first season and get tags, so long as you sell at least one bag – you can renew
- For the second season – don't have to have a history of selling oysters – can enter the lottery for and endorsements that were not renewed by existing permit holders
- Otlice: Why is FWC setting the future number of harvesters based on the number of people that sign up for the first season?
 - This is so that FWC can plan for fishery management and restoration based on knowing the number of people who will be participating in the fishery
 - Feedback: lots of folks are not going to leave their job the first year to oyster as they know you won't make money in the first year – could shrink down the fishery even as the number of harvestable bars opens up inadvertently
 - Morgan – this prioritizes historical fishers to keep their licenses while also keeping it open to new entrants
 - Jim – FWC had to create a baseline, if things go well and the bay starts to recover more and there is an ability to fish more – FWC would go back to consider opening the fishery to more people
 - Why not set the number of permits at 300 and then people can join or not as there are available? – it can grow and adapt as the resource changes
 - Erika: Nothing in the rule that would shrink the fishery – the number that we establish at this point is what would be year after year, FWC is open to the idea to recommending to the Commissioners to open the fishery to more participants
 - Commissioners decision was to choose a pathway that any historical fisher could enter the fishery
 - Suggestion: put a statement in the rule to require reassessment of the numbers of fishers within the fishery – maybe too late for this
 - Steve: To qualify for the license is that all you had to do is catch just one bag of oysters in the past. Historically there have been full-time oyster fishermen and then part-timers that fished rarely – not really doing anything for the historical fishermen as they are thrown in the same pot as the part time person – as they get the same number of permits – no preferential treatment for the historical oysterman
 - Erika: Tried to address as many concerns as they could, but cannot please everyone. If there are any changes to this rule at the meeting next week – then there will not be a January season – wouldn't be time to get rule approval with changes
 - Erika: Legislation has made funding for restoration a legislative priority, so FWC is following those funding orders
 - Otlice's main concern is that the number of permits that are determined in the first season is what it is going to be for the foreseeable future – can limit people entering as things improve
 - Never seen a fishery that was returned after being taken away from folks

- Otlice will be going down to the FCC meeting to talk about this issue and concerns during public comment – this is the last window to make voices heard before the vote
- **Next FWC Commission Meeting is Nov 5-6 in Belle Glade, FL**
 - **Oysters Agenda Item #8 on Day 1 – Nov 5**
 - **Summary Memo of Proposal: <https://myfwc.com/media/bafiusow/8a-summary-memo.pdf>**

2:50 Break

3:05 USACOE Dredging Project Update/Discussion – Ken Jones

- Presentation and discussion between Ken’s group and the agencies about the importance of responsible disposable dredging and sand distribution in the Bay
- RCSC couldn’t get others to lead this initiative so working with the COE to try and discuss a plan for changing approaches
- Not saying they are against dredging, just against how they have approached it in the past
- Have a mandate to represent all 6 counties of the RCSC – want the counties to sign a resolution to support this initiative
 - 4/6 counties have approved the resolution
- Want the opportunity to have a seat at the table with COE when discussing approaches to dredging
- Basically the resolution takes the approach of ‘what’s in it for Florida?’
 - Corps position is right now – either/or – either they do it how they have been or it won’t happen at all
 - RCSC thinks there is something that could be in the middle to have a discussion about this
- Anita: when you say before, the COE didn’t do it how they were supposed to in fixing any environmental disruptions – Florida got stuck with the consequences. So when they say doing it like before – are they doing it like they were or how they were supposed to?
 - Ken: First thing would be to have a conversation about this, and how they will handle all of the needs and possibility for dredging
- Opportunity to have a conversation with the Corps, right now counties will have to take it on themselves to advocate for this conversation
- This topic is on the agenda for the Franklin County Commission on November 4
- Jim: Still don’t understand how this project benefits the state and citizens of Florida
 - DEP, when they do their permitting, has to be in the public interest
 - If going to go forward as a compromise, decision needs to be made on how it will benefit Franklin Co. and the citizens of Florida
 - Ken: Problem is, the Corps will give DEP 2 options, to do it as they used to, or not do it
 - Alternatives are just for locations of placing sand and debris
 - Don’t consider the bay at all in relation to impacts, floodplain is only considered as an incidental benefit

- Corps will not provide the cost-benefit analysis of any of the dredging they will be doing
- Goal of the resolution is to not allow COE and Tri-rivers to divide and concur – can't promise just certain things to certain counties – work together as all the counties, and benefit all the counties
- Benefit to Franklin Co. – clean up the sand that has come into the Bay, figure out the piling issue
- Key is to figure out how to best leverage what we would like to get out of it, against what is going on in Georgia and Alabama
 - Navigation at the cost of what it does environmentally to the Bay and the river isn't tenable
- Shannon: If there isn't more flows and get the sand out of there, it's a losing battle
- Anita: The problem is, they are managing for everyone above Florida. Need to be able to articulate what we want from the COE.
- Bruce: IS anybody figured out exactly millions of cubic yards of Georgia sand we have in our basin? East bay and other locations are full of sand
 - Ken: That's not Georgia sand as its held upstream by the dams, but its sand from the dredging of the river because of the dams
 - Have money to look at exactly the amount of sand coming from the river
 - Key to fix things is to dredge the waters and get rid of the sand out of the system entirely
- Chad: Pew is funding a research project on modelling some of these impacts and solutions – provide information and recommendations to the Corps to address some of these issues
 - Steve Lightman presenting at Sci Café on this
- Dredging stopped in 2004 – permit denied in 2005
- Chad: Positive spin is – this is an opportunity to go and fix the problems of the past, leverage point that could be pulled on
- Office: Things have gotten worse since the dredging has stopped
 - Anita: The problem is less the stopping dredging and more about the decline in the water flows
- Anita: Does RCSC need a resolution from the city on Dredging?
- Deeper conversation about this will be had next meeting

3:38 *Recreational Fishing Ties to Oyster Restoration – Grayson Shepard*

- Presenting to the FWC Commission next week on the importance of oyster restoration for recreational fishing within the Bay and offshore
- Focusing on the importance of estuaries in the growth of grouper – particularly gag grouper
- Gag grouper fishing in Florida has been in steady decline in both timing and catch limit – as the population is in decline
- Showing proof that gag grouper grow on and use oyster reefs
- Artificial reefs invested in throughout Florida to build habitat for important recreational species including gag grouper

- Presenting this data to showcase the importance of funding oyster restoration for other important species within the recreational fisheries – increase coastal legislator buy-in from not just oyster fishing but recreational fishing

3:45 *Committee Updates*

- Technical Committee: No Updates
- Education and Outreach Committee:
 - o Got a press release out about the proposed fishery rules
 - o Have a banner for the Partnership – will be present at the Seafood Festival, have handouts and maps of the historic bars and the current bars
 - o Sustainable Rivers project – deadline in early July
 - Project that we can partner with the Corps on to help increase the sustainability of the Corps
 - Need to bring this idea up again in the new year – could be a discussion within the Technical Committee
- Communication Committee: No Updates
- Finance Committee: Bank account updates provided previously

4:00 *Meeting Adjourned*

Next Meeting: Joint meeting for November and December – Thursday December 18th, 2025