

PARTNERSHIP FOR A RESILIENT APALACHICOLA BAY

MEETING #21

Thursday, April 22, 2026 - 12 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, Roger Mathis, Cameron Baxley, Grayson Shephard, Ken Jones, Anita Grove, Chad Hanson

Advisory Members & Visitors: Betsy Mansfield, Alejandra Rios, Kim Miller, Carrie Jones, Portia Sapp, Joel Trexler, Sandra Brooke, Doug Brown, Faith Causey, Shaun Donahoe, Capt. Mitchell Mims, Hannah Bleth

Online: Erika Burgess, Andy Kane, Claire McIntyre

1:03 *Call Meeting to Order and Welcome – Ottice Amison*
Review Agenda - Betty Webb, Facilitator

1:06 *Organizational Business*

- Meeting Minute Approval – Motion: Ken, Second: Shannon, Approved
- May 12, 9-1:30 → TNC is working on a Scaling Up Nature-Based Solutions, Franklin County focus is on the dredge island, want local input and help with design concepts, Betty to send out reminder
- Franklin’s Promise Coalition did an application to NFWF for four projects – wrote in the Partnership pre-application – Betty will talk about more if the process moves forward
- Short 2 members as of today – Jim Estes and Chris Rose unable to participate any longer → need to add two people to fill the vacancies

1:10 *FSUCML Update – Sandra Brooke*

Presentation: Changes in Apalachicola Bay oyster populations in response to a five-year fishery closure

- Restoration has occurred across the bay using a variety of different methods and materials – to varying success
- Before fishing closure, no sites reached 400 bags/acre (even the FLDEP RESTORE Act and NRDA Projects)
- ABSI was funded in 2019 to do various research on the oysters
- Conducted annual monitoring 2020-2025
 - o Use tongs to monitor
 - o Measure and count all oysters – record predators and water quality as well
 - o Round 1 tonging was 103 sites – reflected what the previous monitoring showed on not meeting the threshold
 - o Round 2 (Dec 2021 – Mar 2022) about a year after closure, only one site almost reached the threshold
 - o Round 3: 227 sites, targeted both restored and natural unrestored reefs – more sites moving above the threshold

- Round 4: 2024, 66 sites, realized a lot of the natural sites had nothing there, due to limited time and effort, focused on the limestone sites where there was actually material and oysters – 12 sites had reached harvestable level
 - Sites mean location of the boat – so in reality 4 locations had harvestable levels which had multiple boat sampling sites above the threshold
 - All these sites were limestone planted, 2 of the areas were in summer areas
 - Not all areas are going to have this level when you extrapolate out from small sampling areas to the larger site areas
- Round 5: 2025, went back to the bay wide monitoring, 185 sites, 2 sites reached the harvestable threshold
 - Doesn't mean that the oysters crashed – because FWC showed that there were 5 sites that reached that threshold
 - What happened at the ABSI sites? – lesson in experimental design and making sure you know what you're looking for and what your goals are before starting
 - FWC really focused on areas that had oysters
 - ABSI focused on oyster areas, but there was areas that were freshly restored so the oysters hadn't grown to full size and the different groups weren't taken in to account as well as it could have been
- 2021-2022: three limestone sites reached 400 bags/ acre – equal to about 56 acres of oyster reef
- FWC setting only a percentage of harvest of total number of estimated bags really helps protect from spatial heterogeneity and thus population number uncertainty
- Challenges of oyster population monitoring:
 - Habitat heterogeneity – areas with material right near areas with mud
 - Spatial and temporal mortality – timing of monitoring in the year
 - Spatial and temporal variability in population drivers – what the environment is like will effect the population
 - Timing of monitoring and analysis prior to harvest
 - Methods matter!
- Oyster populations are increasing but status is fragile
- Limerock is the only material that consistently supports oyster growth
- Continue to need money for restoration and monitoring of restoration
- Joel: Points out that a zero data point is still very informative – this shows that the idea that there are large areas of oysters that aren't being monitored may not be the case, and if there are pockets of oysters throughout the bay they are small and isolated
- Claire: When was the last time the mapping/ sidescan was done
 - Images in the slideshow are from 2022, but have done quite a bit of mapping most recently as 2025
- Anita: DWH oil spill didn't actually result in a major harvest pressure – DWH spill caused more social upheaval than anything else – the harvest pressure actually came after (2012) when there was a major shutdown in Texas
 - Ottice: Bay closed and folks paid not to oyster for a while, and then opened completely in December 2010

- Shannon: more people were catching oysters that had never oystered before, things started declining earlier (2007) but the increased harvesting sped things up in the 2010s
- Joel: We all agree that drought definitely played a role in this and is FWC looking/researching any of the impacts of the current major drought we are facing?
 - Sandra: FWC will start their monitoring soon at the start of this summer, ABSI limited on their collection ability, but have a caged experiment on growth, mortality and condition index to look at some of the salinity impacts, but it is not a fishery designed study so would have to be more of an FWC project
 - Joel: Need to also step up the assessment of predators during times of drought as previous data collection seems to not be popular in the amount of information, is anyone doing this?
 - Sandra: Know FWC does shell pests monitoring, boring sponges, etc. but also have been done regular pest monitoring
 - Claire: This is something that FWC continues to collect data on, yes.
- Ken: Is there any way to look at the primary productivity levels entering the bay from the drought levels and how this might play a role in reproductive success?
 - Had a condition index experiment out last year, saw areas that are closer to the inlet had better condition index
- Roger: All the way back in the day, folks were talking about the importance of freshwater, without quality and quantity water – there are no oysters
- FWC monitoring has started and will go through the beginning of June

2:00 Break

2:25 Committee Updates

- Finance: Only expenditures have been for incorporation renewal and Partnership meeting lunches. Will look at developing another incorporation for membership committee in the future.
- Education & Outreach Committee: Will be at FSUCML Open House. Want to discuss the idea of rebranding the logo – if folks have ideas about what needs to be included or not included, let Betty know. Working with Chad to develop a notice for the ACF meeting to inform them about the impacts of the drought down here FSUCML Open House is April 25 from 10-3.
- Communications: Have not met recently, want to meet this month with Morgan about location and how material will be placed.

2:31 FWC Updates – Erika Burgess

- FWC still working with harvesters to resolve harvest errors – final numbers will be coming sometime in the next month or so

- Most of the issues are in a difference of reporting between the harvesters and how the dealers are reporting the trip tickets
- Want to fix everything and get it all reporting errors fixed before starting on renewal denials due to regulation breaks
- Deadline to fix reporting errors is April 30
- AB Oyster Commercial endorsement Renewals open up in April and run through June 30
 - Currently have a hold on anyone trying to renew their AB endorsement while they finalize any of the reporting errors/ issues
 - People can put their application in, it just won't be processed until the hold is lifted
 - People who got letters about reporting problems need to address the issue before April 30, this is a hard deadline, if not addressed by then – they will be given a violation and will not be eligible for next season
 - No penalties tied to the letter, just a courtesy to let people know that they have a discrepancy that FWC wants to resolve
- Restoration status: Award the bid April 28, start project in July
- For 2026-2027 season: Have started monitoring, will end in June
 - Set harvest levels in July
 - Recreational lottery run from July 15 to the end of the month
 - Will post harvest levels for each reef on the website
- 2026 budget request: Legislature has not provided a budget yet, not expected to til June, and likely late June
- Doug: Have talked to a lot of the recreational harvesters about how they were unable to harvest and are concerned about not being able to reapply in the future because of not using their tag
 - Erika: Folks can reapply every year, even if they don't use their tag as
- Roger: What does the sampling look like, will there be more bottom area to harvest than this year?
 - Erika: They just started the harvesting, so there is no estimates yet, likely won't know until after
- Otlice: Asks clarification about the SPL versus Bivalve renewal and timing
 - Current SPL will be valid until June 30, and all issues will be cleared before June 30 so folks will have a renewal in time of
- David: Harvesters and FWC are more than welcome to call the oyster houses if there are information
- Hannah: Sent out 60 letters about issues, only 25 responses to the letters
 - A lot of the issues is that FWC have the tags but folks did not report on the app or on the phone that they had harvested that bag
 - Capt Mims: Letters were sent by certified mail, if not home, sent back to FWC at least once if not twice because folks did not go pick up their letter after notification of missed certified mail
- Carrie: For folks that were denied at the start and appealed what is the timing on this? Should folks renew their SPL if they are in the appeal process?

- If folks sent in an appeal from the decision, they should have gotten a response from the legal team – deadline for responding to the initial denial letter was 21 days after receipt of letter

**** Folks who received a letter about reporting discrepancies need to contact Hannah Bleth and her FWC team and resolve the issue by April 30 or they will be in violation and thus not eligible next season for oyster harvesting. This is a hard deadline.**

2:55 Additional Committee Updates

- Communication: Had a small meeting, having another meeting next month to discuss about the restoration bid for FWC and some things that have come up today
- Technical: Had a workshop at the Marine Lab last Friday, had 15 attendees – similar presentation from Sandra, and presentations from other FSUCML folks doing oyster research, gave folks a chance to ask questions about the presented information. Chad wants to invite Adam Alfasso who is doing research on larval movement to the Partnership to present. All this information can provide information and priorities for restoration planning recommendations/ program for the state. Chad has had internal conversations with folks internally, will have another committee meeting to start more solidly developing a restoration plan prior to

3:00 Additional Business

- Reminder need positions filled for Jim Estes and Chris Rose (Seafood Dealer)
- Betty going to invite folks to update on Highway 98 project next meeting
- Ken: Update on dredging advisory group, presently ACE position is that they have authorized channel and use – gonna get a permit for this and not looking at any other options. ACE is looking at opportunity to pump sand 10,000 feet away, but bank disposal is still an option.
 - Ken will provide regular updates on dredging and what is going on with this issue
 - Discussion about dredging and the ACE
 - Will add this discussion as an agenda item in the future

3:25 Meeting Adjourned

Next Meeting: May 27th, 2026