Examining Employment and Wages Paid to Oyster Shuckers, Oyster Packers, Shellfish Laborers, and Oyster Boat Deck Hands in the Texas Oyster Industry: 2012 – 2013

Prepared by Extension Specialists in the Department of Agricultural Economics

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service
Texas Sea Grant College Program
Texas A&M University

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service • Douglas L. Steele – Director • The Texas A&M University System • College Station, Texas
Texas Sea Grant College Program • Pamela T. Plotkin – Director • Texas A&M University • College Station, Texas

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Prepared by

Michael G. Haby[2]

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2. Senior Research Associate / Professor Emeritus & Extension Economist – Seafood, Department of Agricultural Economics, Texas Sea Grant College Program, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Texas A&M University. Contact information: Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center, 10345 Hwy. 44, Corpus Christi, Tx 78406-1412. Tel: 361/265-9203, Fax: 361/265-9434, Email: m-haby@tamu.edu.

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Background and Introduction

Labor is a significant input in the U.S. meat processing complex, and processing seafood is no exception. In calendar 2011 (the most recent information available), 36,469 people worked in 844 seafood processing establishments nationwide [1]. Using these reported data, on average each seafood processing operation in the U.S. employed about 44 people. However, this computed average is misleading because there is wide variability in the size of seafood processing establishments. Some seafood processing facilities rival the square footage and employment levels found in beef or poultry processing operations. However, other seafood processing firms are orders of magnitude smaller than beef, pork, and poultry facilities, both in terms of their physical footprints and the number of workers required to staff these facilities. In addition, some seafood processing operations are seasonal in nature, either changing the species handled over the course of a year, or opening and closing based on the tempo of local harvests.

Transforming raw material into convenient,"user-friendly" market forms is at the heart of meat, poultry, and seafood processing. Historically, such transformation required skilled hand labor. Today the transformation employees in the meat and poultry processing industries make is assisted with various types of specialized technology. Technological innovation has enabled meat and poultry plants to make substantial gains in efficiency [2]. In part, some of the efficiency gains have occurred because technological innovation facilitates the hiring of less-skilled (and lower paid) workers. In contrast, the transformation of oysters, mussels, and hard clams still relies on the technique, skill, and speed of employees.[1]

Historically, seafood processors recruited labor from local sources. Over the last several decades though, recruiting and retaining local wage-earners willing to transform live mollusks into value-added products has become more difficult.[2] The Texas oyster industry–a major, nationwide supplier of shell-stock and various value-added oyster products–has experienced a continuous reduction in the availability of local labor for more than twenty years. As a result, virtually all Texas oyster-processing establishments have recruited foreign workers for necessary duties in their facilities through the H-2B program. In a growing number of firms, were it not for the H-2B program, these facilities simply could not operate.

In the Texas oyster industry, the reliance on foreign "guest workers" goes beyond just transforming live oysters into various value-added products. In addition, oyster production leaseholders within the Galveston Bay system and those entities farther south along the Texas coast that specialize in shell-stock production have also resorted to using foreign workers aboard dredge boats during the six-month, public, oyster season that begins November 1st and ends April 30th.

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[1] Some "transformation technology" has been developed for mollusks. In 1979 an interdisciplinary team of Sea Grant researchers at Virginia Tech pioneered a heat-shock technology that facilitated the hand shucking of oysters with the attendant material handling system necessary to transport live, heat-shocked oysters (i.e., with "relaxed" adductor muscles) to the shucking room. A few oyster processors around the Chesapeake Bay area invested in heat-shocking technology but the vast majority of Eastern oyster *(Crassostrea virginica)* processors did not opt for this specialized technology. Regarding the processing of molluscan shellfish, Hackney points out, *"... industry depends on natural stocks which fluctuate from year to year. The varying supply often causes processors to be reluctant to expand their operations, to adopt new technology, or to make major investments in product development."*[3]. The one example of capital-intensive, mechanized, molluscan processing is the Atlantic surf clam *(Spisula solidissima)*. Surf clams, found in nearshore mid-Atlantic waters, are mechanically shucked. Originally, only parts of the clam were targeted for use as clam strips, but ultimately other parts of the animal, originally considered "salvage"were captured and used in a variety of applications from liquid flavoring bases and stocks to bait.

[2] Regarding the seasonal transformation of live oysters into a variety of value-added products, the shortage of local labor exists across the entire geographic range of the eastern oyster.

Nationwide concern about continued access to H-2B workers was mentioned in an on-line, daily news magazine called *"Seafood.com News"* that focuses on seafood industry-related issues. On April 9, 2012, *Seafood.com News* editors noted that:

> *"The changes to the H-2B visa program could have a significant negative impact on domestic seafood processing, leading to a loss of thousands of U.S. jobs. Specifically, the new rules make it harder for seafood companies to use the flexibility they have had in the past in terms of the amount of work and the number of hires, and the new rules raise the calculation of prevailing wages by 30% or more. The seafood industry is pressing for a specific foreign worker program geared to the needs of the industry, and this may be a necessity for processing to continue in the continental U.S."*

Report Objective

This report summarizes a survey of Texas oyster industry operators. These facilities occupy five coastal counties that range from Chambers County on the northern end of the coast to operations in Aransas County north of Corpus Christi. This survey was initiated in mid-April 2013 at the request of leaders in the Texas oyster industry. In a departure from the work conducted for the 2009-2010 oyster season, this survey addresses the number of workers and the manner in which they are compensated (e.g., by the hour, by the piece, or through a sharing arrangement with the vessel owner for deck hands) with **no** distinction between the source of those workers (i.e., local or foreign).[3] In computing statewide wages across the four job titles/descriptions, we follow the procedures outlined in *"Prevailing Wage Determination Policy Guidance for Non-agricultural Immigration Programs"* that was revised in November 2009. This document can be found at http://www.flcdatacenter.com/skill.aspx. Reporting on employment and wages paid across the four types of jobs found in oyster processing and production firms is the primary emphasis of this work that addresses an immediate industry concern: continued access to H-2B workers who are essential for continued operations.[4]

Collecting Industry Information

Identifying Oyster Facilities along the Texas Coast

Work began by obtaining contact data from several sources which included: (a) the Interstate Certified Shellfish Shippers List, a directory maintained by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, (b) a similar listing from the Seafood and Aquatic Life Group within the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), and (c) other entities suggested by leadership within the Texas oyster industry. (A listing of Texas oyster firms who received the survey is presented in Appendix I.)

Designing and Distributing the Survey

The design of this survey–and virtually all other surveys distributed to the seafood production, processing and marketing industries for the past 35 years–follows the approach suggested by Don A. Dillman in his 1978 reference called *"Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method"* [4]. This *"total design method"* highlights a stepwise procedure for developing and structuring questions, enumerates pertinent

[3] That publication prepared in 2011 was referenced as Haby, Michael G. 2011.*"The Source of Workers and the Wages Paid in Texas Oyster Facilities for the Twelve-month Interval November 2009 – October 2010."* A Texas AgriLife Extension Service / Texas Sea Grant Extension Program / Department of Agricultural Economics Staff Paper. The Texas A&M University System, College Station, Tx. TAMU-SG-11-200. 13 p.

[4] Industry leadership suggested four "job types" that are customarily used in either oyster processing facilities or on the dredge boats. These are: (a) oyster shucker, (b) oyster packer, (c) shellfish laborer, and (d) oyster boat deck-hand.

information to be included in the cover letter to potential respondents, specifies the contents included in a mail out, and outlines the sequence of steps necessary in subsequent communications with the sample.

A survey instrument was prepared, then proofed/reviewed by both industry leadership and several volunteers including (a) a firm that helps various industries navigate the H-2B guest worker program and (b) an attorney that specializes in H-2B guest worker issues. A cover letter was then prepared outlining (a) why the survey was being conducted, (b) more specificity about why questions sought particular information, and the (c) new requirement that respondents needed to be listed alongside their responses.[5] (A copy of the initial cover letter and survey instrument is located in Appendix II.) Survey packets were assembled for distribution using two delivery methods. About half of the participants were mailed a survey packet. This packet included a personally-addressed cover letter, a survey that carried a randomly-generated identification number, and an addressed, stamped, return envelope. The other half of industry members were faxed the personally-addressed cover letter and their own uniquely-coded questionnaire. The first distribution of the surveys occurred on April 17, 2013. Exactly one week later on April 25th, a follow-up reminder letter was prepared, and all who had not yet responded were either mailed or faxed a subsequent survey.

A Summary of Responses

Surveys were sent to all nineteen Texas entities found on the Interstate Certified Shellfish Shippers List and the State of Texas shellfish license database. Of the 19 firms surveyed, 10 responded indicating a 53 percent response rate. However, one survey was returned with all numeric responses as zeroes because the nature of this operation had changed and now only retailed oysters. Ultimately, this survey, which contained no information, was excluded. The nine operational firms who returned their surveys answered all questions. Having deleted the survey returned by the facility no longer engaged in either oyster processing or oyster harvesting changed the response rate to 50 percent, with 9 of 18 firms responding.

With a relatively small number of operators, several methods were used to boost participation. Calls by industry peers to each respondent were extremely valuable. Haby also placed calls to respondents but these were primarily to answer questions about the purpose of the survey, and clarify responses.

Sometimes, serendipity influences the number of responses. In this particular case, international travel by one operator probably reduced our response number by three and the survey response rate by 17 percent. Three facility operators are related, but the most senior facility owner has been out of the country during April and early May. This directly impacted receiving completed surveys from the other two facilities too since both potential respondents preferred to talk with their traveling, senior family member prior to returning their surveys. With industry anxious about having the survey results compiled into a final document, and with only one response arriving since the follow-up was distributed on April 25th, the decision was made to use available information and attempt to complete the project by May 10th.

[5] This requirement for "full disclosure" is not something usually done when reporting survey results, particularly when prepared by those employed in publicly-supported universities. Rather, the general *"stock-in-trade"* among those who routinely conduct surveys is to keep individual responses private through various means. Because of the Department of Labor requirement for linking responses to individual companies, in this instance each respondent was given the choice of having their firm listed along with the data they contributed or, not being associated directly with their contributed data by being identified solely with a randomly-generated number. This report does include data from those willing to allow their contact data connected to their information as well as information from those preferring to remain anonymous.

Survey Results

Each of the sub-headings in this section summarizes responses to questions that were specific to each job title used in the survey. (These job titles are underlined in each sub-heading). From the survey found in Appendix II, the first question asks about the number of employees hired, while the second question examines how these employees are compensated and the entry-level rate of pay. Finally, the entry-level piece-rates, hourly wages, or crew-shares (for deck-hands) are presented in tabular form following the approach specified in *"Prevailing Wage Determination Policy Guidance for Non-agricultural Immigration Programs"* which seeks a weighted average value (weighted by number of employees for each job title revealed in the survey).

Employment, Compensation Method, and Initial Hourly Rate
for an Entry-level, Unskilled Oyster Shucker

Synopsis of expected duties. Oyster shuckers transform live oysters (typically called shell-stock) into either shucked meats which are containerized and sold by liquid volume or "shucked half-shell" oysters which are typically arrayed on a tray, frozen, packaged, master-cartoned, and ultimately sold by the dozen. Regardless of the ending market form, shuckers must first pry open the bivalve, then cut the adductor muscle connected to the top shell, and finally cut the adductor muscle connected to the bottom shell. Some on-the-job experience (practice) is required in the transformation process since the market demands whole oyster meats which have not been accidentally nicked or sliced during the opening process.

Employment and Compensation Methods. Of the firms that responded to the survey, there were 329 oyster shuckers who worked in Texas oyster facilities in 2012–2013. With just a 50 percent response rate (which did not include one large, vertically-integrated facility), the actual number of workers employed in this occupation across the Texas oyster industry is obviously higher.

Seventy percent (230 shuckers of 329) of oyster shuckers employed by the firms who responded to this survey are paid a piece rate which is a stated price per quantity transformed. The quantity can be pounds of meats shucked (which will be packed in various-sized containers), or the number of oysters or sacks/bushels opened (many of which are destined for use in frozen, "shucked half-shell" presentations). In one firm, oyster shuckers are strictly paid by the hours they work. When tallying shuckers' daily pay, two firms offer the greater of (a) the stated piece rate multiplied by the quantity transformed or (b) the stated hourly rate multiplied by the number of hours worked that day. One of these firms also offers oyster shuckers a range in the per-pound, piece rate depending upon changes in meat yield throughout the six-month oyster season.[6]

Estimating the weighted average wage for oyster shuckers was complicated because several different compensation methods were used. Regardless of the compensation method an operator uses, each understands that someone who wants to learn the shucking job will have to practice, both to increase their speed while also ensuring the level of visual quality expected by the market. Therefore, this information-gathering process also asked those operators paying shuckers only a piece rate about what they would pay per hour during an initial start-up period of several days to a week while new hires developed their shucking skills on the job. The five firms responded that they would pay an inexperienced person a range of $7.25 to $8.50 per hour while this person improved his skill (i.e., being able to open more oysters per time interval while minimizing accidental cuts to oyster tissue).

Table 1 shows both the responses to questions 1 and 2 as well as the arithmetic which figured the weighted average wage across this industry survey. The computed, weighted average wage for entry-level shuckers of $8.23 per hour is downwardly skewed because it is an amalgam of three different approaches. These include (a) a stated, hourly rate, (b) the hourly rate offered as an option to the piece rate in two

[6] When meat yields are at their highest, slightly less is paid per pound, and when meat yields begin to decline, slightly more per pound is paid to shuckers.

firms, or (c) an estimate of what an operator would pay hourly for just a few days while novices honed their shucking skills or moved to other work in the facility. In fact, oyster shuckers generally earn much more from their learned skill and productivity that what an hourly wage can provide. However, it is important to note that some firms do offer threshold guarantees if, for some reason, the shucking process is disrupted or stalled in a day through no fault of the employee.

Table 1. Responses by Facility Operators (Survey Questions 1 and 2), and the Computation of a Weighted Average Wage for Inexperienced, Entry-level Oyster Shuckers

Firm	Shuckers Hired	Compensation Method and Entry Level Rate of Pay: lb. shucked or no. opened	sack or bu. opened	Hours Worked	Guaranteed Minimum per Hr.	Number of Workers x Guar. Min. per Hr.
Alby's Seafood	13			$8.15	$8.15	$105.95
Arnold's Seafood Sales	23	$1.25			$7.50	$172.50
Bay Fresh Oyster Co.	82	$1.25			$7.25	$594.50
Chunky Monkey's	5	$1.75			$7.25	$36.25
Firm ID: 52102022[a]	11	$1.50 - $1.75			$15.00	$165.00
Hillman Shrimp & Oyster Co.	90	$1.25	$6.50		$8.32	$748.80
Jeri's Seafood, Inc.	75	$1.05			$8.41	$630.75
Miller Seafood Co., Inc.[b]	0					
Prestige Oyster, Inc.	30	$0.65			$8.50	$255.00
Totals	329					$2,708.75
Weighted average wage across survey respondents = (sum of (shuckers hired in each facility x the guaranteed minimum per hour rate in that facility)) ÷ (sum of all shuckers hired)						$2,708.75 ÷ 329 = $8.23

a. This firm opted for anonymity.
b. This firm does not undertake any transformation of live oysters to value-added products.

Employment, Compensation Method, and Initial Hourly Rate for an Entry-level, Unskilled Oyster Packer

Synopsis of Expected Duties. Once the cadre of shuckers either removes oyster meats from their shells or prepares a "shucked half-shell" market form (complete with the unattached bottom shell), these products become the responsibility of the oyster packer. For shucked meats, the packer pours the meats on a skimming tool and inspects the meats for inadvertent nicks and cuts which ultimately will cause the oyster meat to weep and lose its liquor. An oyster packer then containerizes the meats in gallons, quarts, pints, or smaller volumes. Likewise, a packer also inspects the "shucked half-shell" market form, and prepares this market form for the next step which is placing the "shucked half-shell" on a tray holding a dozen items. Oyster packers also record the quantities of oyster meats or "shucked half-shells" generated by each oyster shucker.

Employment and Compensation Method. From this survey, there were 83 oyster packers employed in Texas oyster facilities in 2012– 2013. From the survey, on average one oyster packer is needed for every four shuckers. Unlike oyster shuckers who are mostly paid on a piece rate, oyster packers earn an hourly wage. Table 2 presents the responses by facility operators, and computed a weighted average wage for employees operating under this job title. The weighted average entry-level wage among oyster packers is $8.46 per hour.

Table 2. Responses by Facility Operators (Survey Questions 3 and 4), and the Computation of a Weighted Average Wage for Entry-level Oyster Packers

Firm	Packers hired	Hourly Rate	Workers x Hourly Rate
Alby's Seafood[a]	0		
Arnold's Seafood Sales	2	$8.00	$16.00
Bay Fresh Oyster Co.	3	$10.11	$30.33
Chunky Monkey's	1	$12.50	$12.50
Firm ID: 52102022[a,b]	0		
Hillman Shrimp & Oyster Co.	60	$8.32	$499.20
Jeri's Seafood Inc.	10	$8.43	$84.30
Miller Seafood Co Inc.	1	$8.93	$8.93
Prestige Oyster Inc.[c]	6	$8.50	$51.00
Totals	83		$702.26
Weighted average wage across survey respondents = (sum of (packers hired in each facility x hourly rate in that facility)) ÷ (sum of all packers hired)			$702.26 ÷ 83 = $8.46

a. Owners are responsible for the packing function, and do not receive an hourly wage.
b. This firm opted for anonymity.
c. This firm specified a range in the hourly rate for oyster packers so an average was used.

Employment, Compensation Method, and Initial Hourly Rate for an Entry-level, Unskilled Shellfish Laborer

Synopsis of Expected Duties. Shellfish laborers implement the materials-handling system in oyster facilities, and are also responsible for periodic/daily clean-up of the facility. Specifically, shellfish laborers periodically distribute shell-stock to the cadre of oyster shuckers who operate in dedicated space within the facility, and periodically remove the shells and place them in outside storage areas for later use.[7] Shellfish laborers also keep the processing areas clean; an ongoing requirement to meet good manufacturing practices and other food safety requirements.

Employment and Compensation Method. Of the firms responding, there were 101 shellfish laborers employed in Texas oyster facilities in 2012–2013 (Table 3). On average one shellfish laborer supports the material-handling requirements of three oyster shuckers. Of course facility preparation and clean-up as well as warehousing are also conducted by these employees. Shellfish laborers earn an hourly wage. The weighted average hourly wage for these employees is $8.45 per hour.

Table 3. Responses by Facility Operators (Survey Questions 5 and 6), and the Computation of a Weighted Average Wage for Entry-level Shellfish Laborers

Firm	Shellfish Laborers hired	Hourly Rate	Workers x Hourly Rate
Alby's Seafood	2	$8.00	$16.00
Arnold's Seafood Sales	2	$8.00	$16.00
Bay Fresh Oyster Co.	2	$8.50	$17.00
Chunky Monkey's	0		
Firm ID: 52102022	2	$12.00	$24.00
Hillman Shrimp & Oyster Co.	80	$8.32	$665.60
Jeri's Seafood Inc.	10	$8.43	$84.30
Miller Seafood Co Inc.	0		
Prestige Oyster Inc.	3	$10.00	$30.00
Totals	101		$852.90
Weighted average wage across survey respondents = (sum of (shellfish laborers hired x the hourly rate)) ÷ (sum of all shellfish laborers hired)			$852.90 ÷ 101 = $8.45

7. The *"highest and best"* use of oyster shell is to "replant" them in the bay. Unlike clams that burrow in the bottom, oysters must attach to some structure in the water column, and oyster shell provides that structure.

Employment, Compensation Method, and Initial Hourly Rate
for an Entry-level, Unskilled Oyster Boat Deck-hand

Synopsis of Expected Duties. Aboard large, offshore vessels like those who fish for oceanic crabs in the Bering Sea, there are Captains, "titled" positions like "engineer", and those crew members (deck-hands) who work on deck and retrieve and empty the large steel "pots" used to harvest crabs. In contrast, vessels used in the Texas oyster industry are generally staffed by a Captain and several deck hands. Despite the size difference between ocean-going crab vessels and inshore oyster boats, the production activities aboard an oyster "lugger" are very intense, with oyster dredges being hauled aboard about every 5 to 6 minutes during every eight-hour day the public season is open. Once the dredge is aboard, emptied, and re-deployed, deck hands cull the catch, sack the shell-stock into burlap bags, tag each bag as they are filled, and move the filled bags to storage locations on the vessel. Once at the dock, deck hands unload the vessel by placing the filled sacks on a conveyor that moves the shell-stock to shellfish laborers responsible for loading trucks or stacking pallets. After the unloading process, deck hands get the vessel ready for the next day's work.

Employment and Compensation methods. Of the nine firms responding to the survey, four also dredged for oysters, and reported that 95 deck hands were hired in 2012–2103. Across virtually all commercial fisheries, Captains and crew members are compensated based on the value of the catch they land. Among those firms who responded to the survey about their use of oyster boat deck-hands, two firms pay deck hands by the hour. One firm offers entry-level deck hands $3.00 for every sack the vessel harvests. Another entity allocates half the value of every sack to the Captain and deck-hand compliment, with fractions of that 50 percent allocated between the Captain and the number of deck-hands who served on the vessel carried that day. Three of four firms quoted either a straight hourly rate or paid the greater of half of the value of the harvest or an hourly rate. In checking with the fourth facility about alternative, minimum compensation methods, owners felt the $3.00 per sack share worked well for entry-level deck hands in their area. As shown in Table 4, the computed, weighted average hourly wage was $9.60. Note that those 13 deck-hands who strictly receive a $3.00 share were excluded from this weighted-average hourly wage estimate.

Table 4. Responses by Facility Operators (Survey Questions 7 and 8), and the Computation of a Weighted Average Wage for Entry-level Oyster Boat Deck-hands

		Compensation Method and Entry Level Rate of Pay				
Business	Deck-hands hired	Pounds harvested	Sacks harvested	Hours Worked	Daily pay = the greater of piece rate or hourly rate	Computing a Wtd. Avg. Wage
Alby's Seafood	0					
Arnold's Seafood Sales	13		$3.00			
Bay Fresh Oyster Co.	0					
Chunky Monkey's	0					
Firm ID: 52102022	0					
Hillman Shrimp & Oyster Co.	0					
Jeri's Seafood Inc.	15		½ sack price	$10.50	$10.50	$157.50
Miller Seafood Co Inc.	47			$8.93	$8.93	$419.71
Prestige Oyster Inc.	20			$10.50	$10.50	$210.00
Totals (from the last 3 entries)	82					$787.21
Weighted average wage across survey respondents = (sum of (deck-hands hired who are paid either an hourly rate or offered the greater of a share or an hourly rate)) ÷ (sum of deck hands hired)						$787.21 ÷ 82 = $9.60

Creating a Common Language Between Industry Job Descriptions and the Standard Occupational Classification Used by the U.S. Department of Labor

A final step in this report is to use the four industry-provided job titles as key words to create a link between a job title like "oyster shucker" with the larger database of occupations used by the Department of Labor in its Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system.

Background Comments and Data Sources

Commonly-used industry job titles such as *oyster shucker*, *oyster packer*, *shellfish laborer*, or *oyster boat deck-hand* have specific meanings to industry members about: (a) the work and duties involved, (b) requisite skills, and (c) necessary training. Attempting to align these industry-used job titles with the most relevant SOC occupations for each of the four job types puts industry descriptions of job titles into the larger federal occupational classification context. Undertaking this step provides industry members with a way to compare stated tasks, abilities, and knowledge found for each SOC occupation with the tasks, skills, and knowledge required in oyster facilities. Creating this common, descriptive language begins by entering each job title into the on-line resource found at http://www.onetonline.org/ (Figure 1).

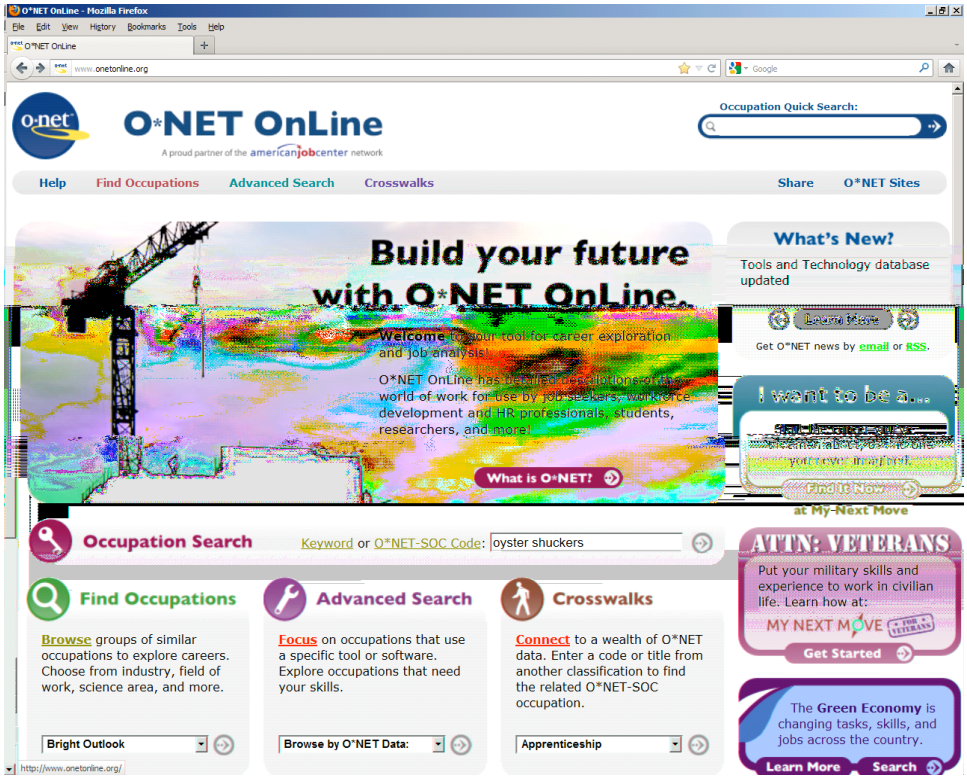

Figure 1. Opening screen used to enter industry job types to find the most relevant Standard Occupational Classifications

After the key word is typed into the opening screen, a variety of SOC occupation results appear which are sorted by relevance to the key word entered in the opening screen. Using the example job title of "oyster shucker" key-entered into the opening screen, Figure 2 shows the listing of SOC occupations which are sorted from most- to least-relevant. The user can then open the most relevant SOC occupation and explore the detailed job description. Information includes the tasks, skills, abilities, etc. required of employees interested in that particular occupation (Figure 3).

Figure 2. The most relevant SOC occupations presented based on the key word entered in the opening screen.

Figure 3. A detailed report for the most relevant occupational code that describes the various tasks, knowledge, skills, abilities, etc. necessary for that particular code

Aligning Industry-specified Job Titles with the Most-relevant SOC Occupations

The results of the on-line process discussed and depicted above in Figures 1 through 3 are presented in Table 5. This "common language" allows industry operators to compare the published list of skills, knowledge, and abilities that go with each SOC with their expectations of skills, knowledge, abilities, etc. required for workers to succeed in an oyster operation. Perhaps with this first step, the eastern oyster industry can consider subsequent work to establish that *"specific foreign worker program geared to the needs of the industry"* by working to create more definitive SOC codes that are better aligned with the worker traits necessary in oyster processing facilities across the coastal U.S.

Table 5. SOC Occupations that Most Closely Align with Industry-specified Job Titles

Industry-specified Job Title	SOC Occupation Code	SOC Occupation	Relevancy to Job Title
Oyster Shucker	51-3022	Meat, Poultry, & Fish Cutters & Trimmers	100%
Oyster Packer	45-2041	Graders & Sorters, Agricultural Products	99%
Shellfish Laborer	53-7062	Laborers & Freight, Stock, & Material Movers, Hand	76%
Oyster Boat Deck-hand	45-3011	Fishers and Related Fishing Workers	100%

Summary and Conclusions

Request from Industry

Leadership within the Texas oyster industry requested an employment and wage survey to assist them in recruiting H-2B workers for their production and processing enterprises. A list of certified shucker/packers was obtained from state and federal sources. This listing comprised the facilities that were contacted. Industry leadership also suggested the overall approach for the survey. Once a draft questionnaire was prepared, industry members reviewed and proofed the document.

Development and Implementation of the Survey

The survey was sent to all nineteen firms on the two lists. Industry members contacted all respondents to ask that they complete and return their surveys. One of the nineteen operators responded that his business had moved away from oysters, and not surprisingly his completed survey contained all zeros. Without any information, this survey was deleted from the list. After the initial mail-out and a one-week follow-up of an updated cover letter and another survey, a total nine responses were received–a 50 percent response rate. The author was contacted by two operators who expressed interest in the work that was underway, but wanted to talk with a senior family member who owned a large, vertically-integrated facility before they returned their answers. Unfortunately, the senior family member was out of the country during the time this survey was being implemented, so unavoidably, three responses were not received. This cut our response rate by 17 percentage points. More importantly, with a small number of respondents, the summary values are, perhaps, less representative of the overall industry than had additional information been available.

Survey Results

Respectively, the employment and weighted average wages paid to entry-level workers across these four type of oyster industry employment were: (a) 329 oyster shuckers who earned a weighted average hourly wage of $8.23; (b) 83 oyster packers who earned a weighted average hourly wage of $8.46; (c) 101 shellfish laborers who earned a weighted average hourly wage of $8.45; and (d) 82 deck hands who earned a weighted average hourly wage of $9.60.

Caveats Associated with the Hourly Wage Estimates for Shuckers and Deck Hands

The primary objective of this work was to estimate the employment and weighted-average wages paid across the four job titles suggested by industry. Two of the four job titles reflect weighted-average hourly wages that are downwardly skewed. For oyster shuckers, operators who paid a straight piece rate for the transformation of shell-stock into more convenient market forms were asked to estimate what they would pay an individual per hour for a short period–likely a week–who first needed to learn how to open oysters. Understandably, in this learning mode, the maximum amount an operator could pay ranged from minimum wage to $8.50 per hour.

A more representative approach for converting piece-rate work into an equivalent hourly wage would require much more information from respondents. Industry members would first have to support such an approach, and then follow-through with creating the information to document piece-rate earnings as an equivalent hourly rate. Operators have this information, but the time required to summarize it, and do so in a standardized manner, may require the intervention of a third party. In particular, facility operators who pay a piece rate would have to (a) summarize the earnings generated by each shucker (or deck-hand) over the course of a six-month season and (b) estimate of how many hours each shucker (or deck-hand) worked each day of the season. This accumulation of information from one entity would then be added to that of others so a more representative hourly rate could be estimated for oyster shuckers and deck-hands. Importantly though, there is quite a bit of variability in annual oyster harvests. Periodic closing of harvest areas by regulatory authorities and episodic events like hurricanes impact annual harvests. Thus, the suggested collection and summarizing of data may have to be done over multiple years for a better long-term estimate of shucker (or deck-hand) earnings expressed as an equivalent hourly rate.

Possible Next Steps for Industry ...

The April 9, 2012 *"Seafood.com News"* article noted that *"The seafood industry is pressing for a specific foreign worker program geared to the needs of the industry, and this may be a necessity for processing to continue in the continental U.S."* One first step in seeking a foreign worker program geared to the unique operating characteristics of the seafood industry would be to compare the tasks, requisite skills, abilities, etc. that are part of the U.S. Department of Labor Standard Occupational Classification system of occupations with the tasks, requisite skills, abilities, etc. necessary for the different occupations in seafood processing facilities. In a review of the expected tasks, skills, abilities, and knowledge base of the four SOC occupations which were most relevant to oyster-industry occupations such as "oyster shucker," "oyster packer," "shellfish laborer," and "oyster boat deck-hand," the expectations in each federal occupation were much more expansive than the essential, expected tasks, skills, and knowledge base required in oyster facilities.

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Appendix I – Oyster Firms Who Received the 2012-2013 Wage and Employment Survey

Texas Oyster Industry Members Who Received the 2012--2013 Survey

Sal.	First Name	Last Name	Business	Address	City	State	Zip
Mr.	Henry	Anderson	Clark's Seafood	P.O. Box 43	Port O'Connor	TX	77982
Mr.	Mark	Bates	Gold Coast Seafood, Inc.	P.O. Box 931	Palacios	TX	77465
Ms.	Janie	Blevins	Chunky Monkey's	621 South Main	Seadrift	TX	77983
Mr.	Leslie	Casterline	Casterline Fish Co., Inc.	110 Casterline Dr	Fulton	TX	78358
Mr.	Billy	Duff	Billy Duff Oyster House	106 Duff St.	Liberty	TX	77575
Mr.	Jerry	Duff	South Liberty Seafood	115 Duff St.	Liberty	TX	77575
Mr.	Anthony	Godninich	Alby's Seafood	3402 Hwy 35 N	Fulton	TX	78358
Mrs.	Lisa	Halili	Prestige Oyster, Inc.	P.O. Box 8448	San Leon	TX	77539
Mr.	Clifford	Hillman	Hillman Shrimp & Oyster Co.	10700 Hillman Dr.	Dickinson	TX	77539
Mr.	Michael	Ivic	Misho's Oyster Co.	P.O. Box 269	Seabrook	TX	77586
Mr.	Tony	Jurisich	U.S. Sea Products, Inc.	4020 22nd St N	Texas City	TX	77590
Mr.	Curtis	Miller	Miller Seafood Co., Inc.	200 Montier	Port Lavaca	TX	77979
Mrs.	Doris	Nelson	Fisherman's Harvest	513 Fisherman Rd.	Anahuac	TX	77514
Mr.	Manuel	Reyes	Reyes Seafood Products	76 Hwy 100	Laguna Heights	TX	78578
Mr.	Jure	Slabic	Gulf Coast Oysters, Inc.	10345 Lazy Lane	Dickinson	TX	77539
Ms.	Mary	Smith	Hillmans Seafood Café, Inc.	5516 Hillman Dr.	Dickinson	TX	77539
Mr.	Buddy	Treybig	Arnold's Seafood Sales	P.O. Box 543	Matagorda	TX	77475
Mr.	Mark	Valentino	Bay Fresh Oyster Co.	Ave. L	San Leon	TX	77539
Mr.	Tracy	Woody	Jeri's Seafood, Inc.	136 County Dock Rd	Anahuac	TX	77514

Appendix II – Employment and Wage Cover Letter and the Accompanying Survey

Texas Sea Grant College Program • Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service • The Texas A&M University System

Texas A&M AgriLife Research & Extension Center
10345 Hwy. 44
Corpus Christi, Tx 78406-1412
Tel: 361/265-9203
Fax: 361/265-9434
E-mail: m-haby@tamu.edu

April 15, 2013

, Letter & Attachment sent to:

Dear ,

Recently, leaders in the Texas oyster industry asked me to collect some targeted information from their fellow shucker/packers which will be used to support continued access to H2-B guest workers. The information I was asked to collect includes:

(a) the sources of workers in the oyster industry,

(b) overall employment for shuckers and other hourly employees across Texas shucker/packer operations,

(c) entry-level wage rates paid for both shuckers and other hourly employees and

(d) the Texas oyster industry's dependence upon H2-B "guest" workers.

I am contacting you to collect this information. This survey uses the six-month time frame beginning November 1, 2012 and ending April 30, 2013. Turnaround for this has to be QUICK! Your info. is needed AS SOON AS POSSIBLE because a few days will be required for me to summarize individual responses into an industry-wide profile. When that report is completed, you will receive a copy. **If possible, please fax your completed survey to me at 361/265-9434.**

In addition to a summary of the Texas oyster processing industry, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) now requires that individual responses be included in any report prepared. I've done numerous surveys across the seafood industries over the last 35 years, and have always made privacy a top priority. This new requirement by DOL to provide individual company responses will be addressed in the following way:

(a) You will notice that your questionnaire contains no mention of your company, only a randomly-generated identification number. Individual responses will be presented but the only identification will be the number on your survey.

(b) DOL requires a listing of respondents, so your company name will be listed in a separate section of the report, but there will not be any connection between you, your company, and the randomly-generated identification number. **Only you and I will know which identification number corresponds with your company.**

All the best to you and yours,

Michael G. Haby
Senior Research Associate / Professor Emeritus & Extension Economist – Seafood

attachment: 2012-2013 Texas oyster industry wage survey

Examining Employment and Wages Paid to Oyster Shuckers, Oyster Packers, Shellfish Laborers, and Oyster Boat Deck-hands in The Texas Oyster Industry: 2012 – 2013

Identification Number: 521020??

Conducted by

Michael G. Haby – Senior Research Associate /
Professor Emeritus & Extension Economist – Seafood
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service
Sea Grant College Program
Texas A&M University System
Tel: 361/265-9203
Fax: 361/265-9434
Email: m-haby@tamu.edu

The information you contribute will be combined with that of others to develop an **industry-wide estimate** of employment and wages paid to those who work in Texas Oyster facilities.

The information you contribute here can remain permanently separated from your contact information to preserve your privacy **if you prefer**. However, your specific request for H-2B guest workers **may be jeopardized** if you choose not to include your contact information.

As soon as you are done, Please return your completed survey to me at the Fax number or email address above!! We only have a few days to compile the results!!!

In this survey of employment and wages, we are interested in **ALL** employees you hired for each job-type, not just H-2B guest workers.

If you did **not** employ any workers for a particular job-type, please enter "0", "none", or "N/A".

Q1. How many **oyster shuckers** did you employ during the 2012 – 2013 oyster season?
(Please enter all the oyster shuckers you hired. This should include "local" employees and H-2B guest workers too.)

_____ **Total number of Oyster Shuckers**

Q2. How did you pay the **oyster shuckers** you hired, and what was their entry-level rate of pay?

Oyster shuckers were paid based on ...	✓ here	and their entry-level rate of pay was ...
pounds of meats shucked or number of oysters opened		$
number of sacks or bushels of oysters opened		$
number of hours worked		$

Q3. How many **oyster packers** did you employ during the 2012 – 2013 oyster season?
(Please enter all the oyster packers you hired. This should include "local" employees and H-2B guest workers too.)

_____ **Total number of Oyster Packers**

Q4. How did you pay the **oyster packers** you hired, and what was their entry-level rate of pay?

Oyster packers were paid based on ...	✓ here	and their entry-level rate of pay was ...
pounds of shucked meats or number of oysters packed		$
number of sacks or bushels of oysters packed		$
number of hours worked		$

Q5. How many **shellfish laborers** did you employ during the 2012 – 2013 oyster season?
(Please enter all the shellfish laborers you hired. This should include "local" employees and H-2B guest workers too.)

_____ Total number of **Shellfish Laborers**

Q6. How did you pay the **shellfish laborers** you hired, and what was their entry-level rate of pay?

Shellfish Laborers were paid based on ...	✓ here	and their entry-level rate of pay was ...
pounds of shellstock and shucked meats handled		$
number of sacks or bushels of oysters handled		$
number of hours worked		$

Q7. How many **oyster boat deck-hands** did you employ during the 2012 – 2013 oyster season?
(Please enter all the oyster boat deck-hands you hired. This should include "local" employees and H-2B guest workers too.)

_____ Total number of **Oyster Boat Deck-hands**

Q8. How did you pay the **oyster boat deck-hands** you hired, and what was their entry-level rate of pay?

Oyster Boat Deck-hands were paid based on ...	✓ here	and their entry-level rate of pay was ...
pounds of live oysters harvested		$
sacks of live oysters harvested		$
number of hours worked		$

Q9. Contact information is optional, but strongly recommended if you intend to apply for H-2B workers for the next season.

Company name:	
Contact person:	
Mailing Address:	
City:	
State:	
Zipcode:	
Telephone:	
Fax number:	

Thanks very much for the information you contributed! mgh

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Douglas L. Steele, Director, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service,The Texas A&M University System. 05-13

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