

A Community Supported Fishery (CSF) for Williamsburg?

Results of the 2012-2013 CSF Feasibility Study at W&M and VIMS.



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What is a Community Supported Fishery?

A Community Supported Fishery (CSF) is an innovative seafood distribution method based on direct exchange between fishermen and community members. Modeled after Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, CSFs allow members to pay upfront for a predetermined amount of seafood delivered at regular intervals throughout the season.

Community members who participate in a CSF receive access to fresh, local seafood products, and community connection to local food. Fishermen benefit from the upfront payment structure of CSFs that isn't subject to typical market fluctuations. By shortening the distance between producers and consumers, CSFs provide seafood with a smaller carbon footprint.

What Research was Conducted?

With its proximity of the Chesapeake Bay, Williamsburg is an obvious location for a CSF to exist and thrive. To further investigate the potential for a CSF in Williamsburg, an interdisciplinary student and faculty team conducted a feasibility study. This study can be separated into three major sections: market research, organizational design, and supplier research.

What's Next?

The results of the feasibility study indicate that a successful CSF could exist in Williamsburg. Next steps for the research team include formalizing a launch strategy and identifying the right CSF supplier and coordinator. A potential CSF coordinator may be someone from the seafood industry, such as a waterman or seafood processor, or a qualified community member with a passion for local food. Potential coordinators and suppliers will be invited to a rollout event in fall 2013 to share more about the challenges and opportunities of a Williamsburg CSF and eventually submit qualifications and proposals to start a CSF with the research team's support.

The CSF Research Team

Virginia Sea Grant

Virginia Institute of Marine Science Green Team

The College of William & Mary School of Law

The College of William & Mary Mason School of Business

The College of William & Mary Student Environmental Action Coalition

Market Research

Market research was conducted through in-depth interviews with students, faculty, and staff from the College of William & Mary (W&M) and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS). A survey constructed from interview responses was distributed to the greater Williamsburg community. Eighty-three percent of the 628 survey respondents were affiliated with W&M or VIMS while the other 17% were non-affiliated members of the Williamsburg community. Both the survey and interviews included questions about how often and what types of seafood respondents eat, and what factors might motivate or prevent them from joining a CSF.

Based on the initial survey results, a prototype CSF brochure was presented to 147 people in the Williamsburg area to elicit reactions and determine an overall market size in the Williamsburg community. While some people were either uninterested or had concerns about the logistics of participating in a CSF, many were interested in the idea. The results show that there is a market for a CSF to operate in Williamsburg.

Survey Comments

“This is an absolutely fantastic idea. I would love to see come to fruition!!”

“I’ve often lamented the fact that we live on the Chesapeake Bay and yet we have a horrible lack of fresh local seafood as evidenced by a visit to any local grocery store.”

“I really hope this fish thing takes off!”

“I’m eager to hear when the program will start!”

Key Findings:

- 554 households are expected to make up the initial membership of a Williamsburg CSF.
- Williamsburg-area residents eat twice as much seafood as the average American, every other week compared to once monthly.
- Williamsburg-area residents prefer finfish to shellfish, and almost everyone prefers cooking with a fillet as opposed to a whole or pan-dressed fish.
- Williamsburg-area residents say they’d pay grocery store prices for fresh, local fish supplied through a CSF.

Organizational Design

The research team conducted case studies of six existing CSFs around the country through background research and interviews with CSF staff. Separate studies analyzed the legal structures, business practices, and sustainability aspects of CSFs. The purpose of the organizational design study was to identify challenges that CSFs have encountered, as well as best practices for success. These best practices and challenges can be used to make informed decisions about the organizational design of a Williamsburg CSF. The biggest takeaway from the organizational design study is the importance of customizing the CSF to meet the needs of the community.

Essential Elements for Success:

- A passionate coordinator. Whether a fisherman or a community member, a successful CSF coordinator is motivated by more than just profit.
- Use of existing resources and partnerships. Collaborating with and learning from other local food programs (CSA, farmer's market, etc.) and seafood distributors in the area is a good strategy.
- Online marketing and business management tools. An online platform where members can interact with CSF staff, fishermen, and each other is an efficient way to organize orders, answer questions, collect feedback, and recruit potential members.

Supplier Research

The supply-side research used focus groups and interviews with local members of the seafood industry. The purpose of these discussions was to identify characteristics of seafood producers who might be interested in supplying a CSF, predict concerns or barriers to participation, and suggest solutions for those concerns.

Key Findings:

- Full-time fishermen who already sell to multiple buyers are most likely to want to participate.
- Fishermen are motivated by the potential for higher pricing in a CSF, and are looking for a consistent market for their products.
- Fishermen acknowledge that processing and logistical challenges need to be overcome for a CSF to work.

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Copies of this report are available from Virginia Sea Grant Communication Center

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