Alabama-MIssissippi Oyster Community of Practice

May 13th, 2023 Meeting Notes

Entities in Attendance:

Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant
Auburn University
University of Southern Mississippi
Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Mobile Baykeeper
The Nature Conservancy
ADCNR Marine Resources Division
Dauphin Island Sea Lab
Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
Various oyster farming companies
Bon Secour Fisheries

Topics of Concern Discussed During Breakout Groups:

Oyster Mortality

- Many groups discussed that low dissolved oxygen concentrations and hypoxic events are the key issues causing oyster mortality. Gulf waters have continuously low levels of dissolved oxygen, rather than periodic events.
- Another key issue of concern is oyster drill predation. These snails can wipe out young oysters, and limit growth by getting caught in aquaculture pumps and cages.
- Fluctuations in temperature and salinity, especially sudden fluctuations, are another major cause for oyster mortality. Periods of low salinity are becoming more frequent due to flooding and subsequent freshwater influx in both Alabama and Mississippi.
- Dredging, especially that in the Mobile Bay shipping channel, increases turbidity and causes siltation. Siltation
- Algal blooms and red tides are another cause for mortality. They are increasing in frequency due to excess nutrient runoff into the Gulf of Mexico.
- A parasitic oyster disease, dermo (*Perkinsus marinus*), causes low growth and reproductive output as well as mortality in wild oyster populations.
- Poaching oysters is a problem on farms. Farmers are worried that there aren't enough people in the Marine Resources Division to help with enforcement to counteract this issue.

Regulations

- Current Bay closure due to sewage spill that occurred on April 17, leaking 4 million+ gallons of sewage water into a Dog River tributary. Oyster farmers received little or no communication about the closure from the Alabama Department of Public Health. The closure is still in effect 3+ weeks later, leading to loss of revenue for farmers both currently and in the future as oysters can grow over market size when they are unable to be harvested.
- Obtaining permits for oyster aquaculture takes too long. Originally, farmers only needed to obtain permits from the Army Corps of Engineers and the Marine Resources Division. Now, many more agencies are involved and the process to obtain all the necessary permits can take months to years.

- Oyster harvesters want more guidelines on constructing wet storage facilities to hold their oysters after harvest from the Alabama Department of Public Health. They also want more access to wet storage facilities, as they can require many resources to build.
- Open water aquaculture is difficult due to boating traffic, and people who own waterfront properties don't want to see it. These issues cause farms have to operate farther out from shore.
- Some regulations are written vaguely on purpose for flexibility, but these same regulations can cause confusion among harvesters (e.g., 1 hr on ice regulation in AL).
- Inspections may come from people who know little about oysters - farmers need to understand forms and inspection processes.
- Education for legislatures key as they may be making regulations about oyster cultivation and harvest without understanding the process.
- Requesting changes in the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference is very hard, which is an issue as some of their tests/regulations are outdated.
- Caged oysters should be treated like crab traps legally - this would limit the involvement of Army Corps of Engineers in oyster aquaculture and reduce permitting time.

Water Quality/Food Safety

- Leakage from septic tanks pollutes oyster-growing waters with wastewater. Switching to a sewer system would help mitigate this issue.
- There isn't an FDA-approved testing lab in Alabama. Sending samples to be tested out of state to an approved lab takes too much time and resources.
- Disease prevalence that could impact people, such as vibrio, is higher in warmer waters.
- Seafood distributors should provide information on how they handle and process the shellfish product. It should be clear which companies distributed the product, as currently only the farmer's names are on the oysters. If people get sick, it looks bad for the farmers, not the distributors.
- Oyster farmers need more communication in general from the Alabama Department of Public Health, especially on closures and pollution hazards.
- Water closures for health concerns reduces AL oyster credibility. Farmers want to prevent other states from further taking over the oyster market. Imported oysters are already more prevalent in AL - 85% of farmed oysters are exported out of state/Baldwin County.

<u>Ideas for Future Meetings:</u>

Stakeholders in attendance expressed an urgent need for the following changes:

1) Need an FDA-certified lab locally
2) Increase distribution of information about oysters
3) Create a co-op for oyster farmers - "Oyster Association of Alabama"
    a) Farmers could share gear & freight costs, address common issues
4) Create an oyster task force in Alabama/Mississippi
5) Create an aquaculture park in the Mobile Bay similar to that of Deer Island to reduce permitting time

6) Create a market for oyster drill
7) Classify or zone waters in Perdido Bay to allow more farms/harvest
8) Create a safe harbor between AL and MS - move oysters between Mobile Bay and MS Sound to avoid closures & protect assets
9) Annual meetings with the Alabama Department of Public Health similar to annual harvest meeting
10) More monitoring necessary - develop models for early warning systems
11) Registry of harm: method for farms to report mortality causes and work with science to identify how oysters died
12) Bring back aquaculture board in Alabama
13) Turbidity controls
14) Shoreline protection and restoration
15) Increase local interest in Alabama-grown oysters