

Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel Meeting Summary
June 12, 2026
9:30 – 11:30 AM
VMRC Main Office, 380 Fenwick Road, Hampton, VA

The meeting was called to order by the Chair at 9:31 a.m.

I. Introductions

Panel Members Attending:

Chair Joseph Grist, VMRC
Tommy Kellum
Ben Johnson
Kim Husky
Beverly Ludford
Rachael Peabody, MPB
Jackie Shannon, CBF

Roger Mann, VIMS
Jamie Brunkow, JRA
Kevin Schabow, NOAA
AJ Erskine, Associate Commissioner
Keith Lockwood, USACE
Colonel Matthew Rogers, VMRC

Panel Members Unable to Attend:

Andy Lacatell

II. Long-Term Planning Topics

The committee focused on identifying long-term priorities, challenges, and opportunities for Virginia's oyster resource. Panel members were encouraged to identify issues of concern that may impact future sustainability, management, and industry growth. Topics included:

Oyster Resource Sustainability and Restoration

The committee emphasized the importance of continued investment in oyster production, restoration, and habitat enhancement efforts. Maintaining progress toward Chesapeake Bay restoration goals and ensuring long-term sustainability of oyster resources were identified as priorities.

Discussion included opportunities to:

- Expand restoration efforts to other areas.
- Protect and enhance productive oyster-growing areas and previously restored areas.
- Improve coordination between restoration activities and fishery management objectives such as retrieval of shell during dredging.

- Explore the use of alternative substrates and restoration materials to supplement traditional shell resources.

The committee also discussed evaluating the use of condemned waters for restoration projects and identifying additional opportunities to leverage environmental and nutrient reduction programs that may provide future revenues streams or industry support.

Shell Replenishment and Dredging Capacity

A significant portion of the discussion focused on shell replenishment and the long-term impacts associated with the loss of the state's shell dredging capability.

Key topics included:

- Developing a comprehensive shell inventory and management strategy.
- Identifying existing shell reserves and storage opportunities.
- Exploring alternative methods of obtaining shell resources.
- Evaluating Virginia-based shell dredging opportunities and upland shell sources.
- Considering mechanical dredging alternatives and other methods to maintain replenishment efforts.

The committee stressed the importance of ensuring sufficient shell resources are available to sustain future production and restoration activities.

Fishery Management and Future Production

The committee discussed the need for long-term fishery management strategies that balance conservation, restoration, and harvest objectives.

Discussion included:

- Ongoing development of fishery management plan that would also support the Tangier/Pocomoke Sound USACE project.
- Identifying strategies to maintain production levels in the event resource expansion is limited.

Industry Development and Market Expansion

The committee discussed opportunities to strengthen and expand Virginia's oyster industry through improved coordination, marketing, and workforce development.

Topics included:

- Increasing promotion and marketing of Virginia oysters, particularly during lower-demand periods.
- Strengthening communication and collaboration among industry organizations and stakeholders.
- Expanding domestic and international market opportunities.
- Recruiting and retaining younger generations within the oyster industry and aquaculture sector.
- Supporting hatchery development and aquaculture infrastructure in rural communities.

Export Challenges and Regulatory Issues

The committee discussed barriers affecting access to international markets, particularly European export opportunities.

Topics included:

- Disease-free certification requirements.
- Regulatory approval processes.
- Challenges associated with *Vibrio* management requirements.
- Opportunities to improve coordination with state and federal partners regarding export certifications and market access.

Environmental Conditions and Industry Outlook

The committee discussed observed changes in environmental conditions and their potential impacts on oyster growth, survival, and product quality.

Topics included:

- Declining meat quality observed in recent years.
- Changes in salinity and water clarity.
- Potential reductions in food availability for oysters.
- Mortality concerns in certain growing areas.
- The need for expanded monitoring of water quality and seawater chemistry.

The committee also discussed the importance of understanding how environmental conditions may influence the industry over the next decade and beyond.

Representation and Stakeholder Engagement

The committee discussed opportunities to broaden stakeholder participation in future discussions, including additional representation from commercial watermen and Tribal communities.

Chesapeake Bay Goals and Recognition

Discussion included ongoing Chesapeake Bay restoration efforts and the importance of ensuring Virginia receives appropriate recognition and credit for oyster management and restoration accomplishments.

III. Law Enforcement Update

Staffing and Recruitment

The committee discussed staffing challenges facing marine law enforcement, including:

- Recruitment and retention of officers.
- Competitive salaries and benefits.
- Workforce attrition.
- Anticipated retirements and vacancies.

An update was provided on current staffing levels and ongoing efforts to maintain enforcement capabilities.

Enforcement Operations and Technology

The committee discussed the continued importance of targeted enforcement activities and the potential role of technology in improving efficiency.

Topics included:

- The use of cameras and monitoring technologies.
 - Opportunities to reduce administrative burdens through automation and artificial intelligence.
 - Improving operational efficiency while maintaining effective enforcement and resource protection.
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IV. Shellfish Division Topic: Vessel Monitoring System (VMS)

The committee discussed the potential implementation of a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) and its possible benefits for resource management, enforcement, and public health protection.

Discussion focused on:

- Improved safety for watermen.
- Enhanced compliance monitoring.
- Reduced reporting and administrative burdens.
- Protection of private investments and public resources.

- Improved documentation of vessel activity.
- Potential deterrence of illegal harvesting activities.

The committee also discussed:

- Pilot program opportunities before broader implementation.
- Potential funding and cost-sharing approaches.
- The importance of stakeholder outreach and incentives to encourage participation.
- The use of VMS data in determining vessel activity near harvest boundaries.

Additional discussion addressed emerging management considerations, including offshore wind development and other future uses of coastal waters that may influence fisheries management.

V. Next Meeting Date and Future Planning

The committee discussed future meeting topics, including legislative issues and long-term management priorities.

The next meeting was set for Friday, July 24, 2026, with interest expressed in establishing a consistent meeting schedule moving forward.

Summary of Key Themes

Throughout the meeting, several recurring themes emerged:

- Ensuring long-term shell availability and replenishment capacity.
- Maintaining sustainable oyster production and restoration efforts.
- Expanding market opportunities while addressing export barriers.
- Understanding and adapting to changing environmental conditions.
- Utilizing technology to improve management, compliance, and safety.
- Strengthening stakeholder engagement and industry collaboration.
- Identifying innovative funding opportunities to support future oyster management and restoration initiatives.

The meeting was adjourned by the Chair at 11:32 am.