

Alabama Oysters Report: Shoreline Protection, Monitoring, and Capacity Building



ON MARCH 22, 2022, AT THE COASTAL RESPONSE CENTER IN CODEN,

60 watermen, oyster catchers and farmers alike, gathered to learn about ongoing shoreline projects and to share their thoughts, concerns, and ideas about the state of the oyster fishery in south Mobile County. Hosted by the Organized Seafood Association of Alabama and the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, the

program included presentations on the status of Bay Front Park, Dauphin Island Causeway, Mon Louis Island Tip, Old Fowl River, and Deer River shoreline protection projects; an overview of environmental monitoring and challenges related to it; and an introduction to the Coastal Alabama Fisheries Fund.

The Bay Front Park/Dauphin Island Causeway/Cedar Point Project: Mobile County, working with the US Army Corps of Engineers, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, aims to provide roadway and marsh protection by stabilizing and fortifying 3.2 miles of shoreline along Dauphin Island Causeway while restoring marsh area to enhance fisheries habitats. The use of breakwaters will reduce wave energy and will create an environment suitable for oyster recruitment and growth. Cedar Point Pier will undergo renovations necessary to open it up in April, with plans to do more extensive renovation in the future.

In addition, Mobile County is improving Bayfront Park along Dauphin Island Parkway to include a small sand beach and fishing pier. This project includes 10 acres of wetland protection.



The Dauphin Island Causeway Restoration design will increase resilience and ensure long-term sustainability of coastal habitats in the face of winds, tides, ship wakes, and storm surge. It will also enhance resilience of fisheries resources by restoring marsh habitat lost over previous decades. Breakwaters may also provide suitable substrate for oyster production.

Input from attendees included:

- Concern about any future impacts to the reefs around Cedar Point
- Concern about containment of sand on beach
- Creation of an Oyster Harbor at Cedar Point, Heron Bay, or Old Gates Landing to provide a central location for smaller boats to offload
- Need for boat ramp near Cedar Point
- Request to know more about how the sand will be contained
- Requests for lighting on all structures in the water
- Requests to consider how to get the watermen involved in the project
- Requests to fully understand how the sand moves in the area with concerns about sand movement into the oyster reef
- Requests to learn more about these plans
- Suggestion to hire watermen to maintain and monitor boom used during construction
- Suggestion to include language in construction contracts for hiring local watermen
- Suggestion to restore natural reefs in Portersville Bay- (Need to put something there to catch the spat)
- Supportive of anything to promote the re-establishment of oyster bottoms



Mon Louis Island Tip/Salt Aire Project: The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, working with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, completed the protection and restoration of the tip of Mon Louis Island, while dredging the mouth of the river to improve its depth for boater access.

Salt Aire Project: Mobile County is expanding habitat and protecting shoreline by restoring 30 acres of coastal marsh with 5,600 feet of low-profile breakwater structures and 150,000 cubic yards of dredge material.

Input from attendees included:

- Need for additional lighting
- Concern the project would wash away in a major storm
- Appreciation to Mobile County for protecting the property into the future
- Requests for additional markings and lighting on the reefs at Old Fowl River Cut
- Request for marking and lighting on the inside edge of structures to improve safety
- Appreciation for both projects “They’re doing good—Doing their jobs”



Deer River/Western Shore Project: The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, working with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, is creating an offshore landform to slow the wave energy from the bay, with a goal of creating 30 acres of salt marsh.

Input from attendees included:

- Request to maintain adequate distance to allow for fishing behind the landform
- Questions about the dredging of Deer River and where the material would be placed
- Approval of efforts to stem the shoreline erosion occurring along the shoreline at present
- Requests for adequate lighting
- Several in the audience suggested consideration of creating a summer reef to allow watermen to extend their season and to engage off-season watermen in the restoration projects somehow.

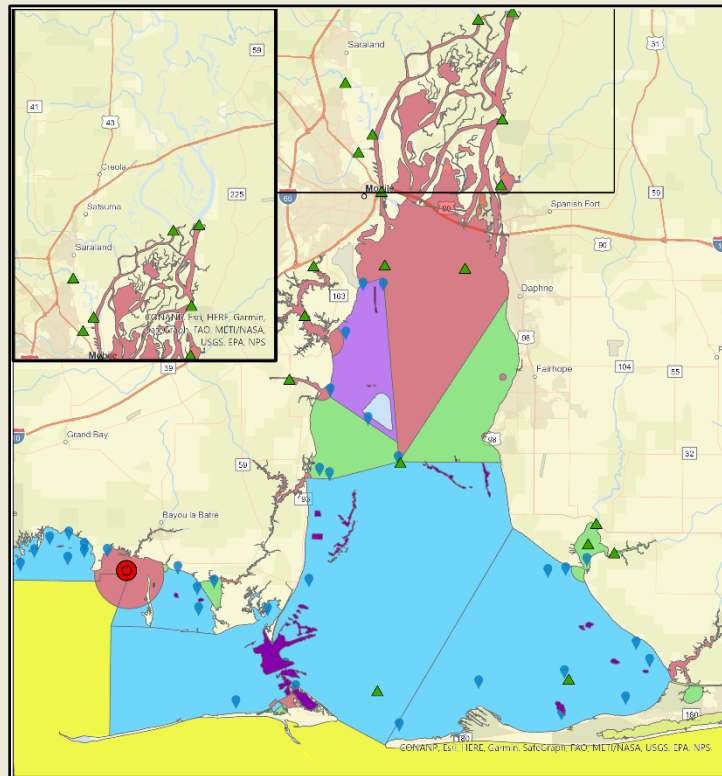
Overview of Monitoring: Monitoring is done to comply with different regulations, understand changes in the environment, find problem areas that require attention, and make predictions about the future.

Much of the current monitoring in oyster growing and harvesting areas focuses on fecal coliforms—bacteria associated with animal and human waste— and making sure levels in the water are safe for human health. The monitoring done by the Alabama Department of Public Health—as prescribed within the Model Ordinance of the National Shellfish Sanitation Program—affects where and when you can harvest or farm oysters.

Monitoring by ADPH is limited by personnel, laboratory capacity, and funding. At this time there is only one lab in the Mobile Bay Area that is certified to test for bacteria in oyster growing areas. Additional monitoring for sediment, turbidity, and salinity are limited and non-continuous. Possible solutions include community-based monitoring, better access to lease areas for researchers, and upward political pressure.

Input from attendees included:

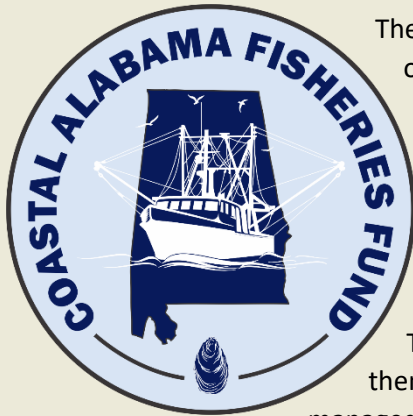
- Need for a local certified lab that can analyze bacteria samples
- Modeling to help provide advanced notice of closures
- Oystermen could get involved in monitoring, possibly for pay



The icons in blue are ADPH shellfish monitoring locations which govern the boundaries of growing areas. Regular monitoring is conducted here during the season, with periodic sampling after closures. Green icons represent sampling by ADEM for other water quality parameters (e.g., salinity and turbidity) from years past.

It appears to be a lot of monitoring, but not enough. This is where community-based monitoring, increased access, and political pressure can make a difference.

Capacity Building Overview: Mobile Bay National Estuary program has launched the Coastal Alabama Fisheries Fund, a revolving loan fund designed to support Alabama's oyster industries. This fund was created to respond to a need for capital in the fishing community to replace and obtain gear and to modernize the fleet in general.



The fund provides loans between \$2,000 and \$10,000 at 5% interest to oyster catchers and farmers in need of equipment or seed. Borrowers must provide a business plan and 10% of the loan value in project equity.

The fund also seeks to provide auxiliary services to oyster catchers and farmers that will be developed based on need. Currently a marketing service is provided through oystersalabama.com.

The long-term vision of this fund is to hand it over to the borrowers themselves, and for the Coastal Alabama Fisheries Fund to become peer managed.

More information on the fund is available at www.mobilebaynep.com/CAFF.

Seven loan documents were requested by attending oyster catchers and farmers, and Henry Perkins will conduct workshops in Bayou La Batre as needed to help complete the applications and get the funds to the borrowers.

Input from attendees included:

- Requests for advisement on completing the application documents
- Clarification on what equipment is eligible for loans
- Clarification for what credit score may disqualify applicants (none)
- Requests for loan applications

Other general input throughout the meeting included:

- Communicating should happen through US Post, using a mailing list of licensed commercial fishermen with registered landings
- Look for work opportunities for 6-month period /or off-season

This was the first of what will hopefully be many meetings between south Mobile County watermen and stakeholder groups. It was well attended and strengthening these relationships will lead to more empowered watermen and waterwomen and more responsive management groups, creating a better environment that works for everyone.