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2023 Legislative Priorities

More than 1,500 shellfish farms on the East Coast provide thousands of jobs in rural coastal communities, farming over \$170 million worth of sustainable, nutritious shellfish. East Coast oyster production doubled in the five years pre-Covid and is poised to double again. Expanding production will create more jobs, improve public health and provide tangible environmental benefits. But shellfish farmers still face a variety of challenges, including diseases, climate change and restricted access.

Expand Access to USDA-FSA Disaster Assistance Programs

The USDA Farm Service Agency provides critical assistance programs such as disaster relief, loans and grant programs to support small farms in rural communities. Unfortunately, these programs are unavailable to firms with an adjusted gross income over \$900,000. We are seeking a waiver of that limit for farms that make over 75% of their income from farming, and an expanded definition of farming activities to include farm tours, farm-linked restaurants and shellfish marketing.

- **Include language in the Farm Bill directing the Farm Service Agency to increase access to disaster assistance programs for larger farms by waiving the \$900K AGI cap for firms that make over 75% of their income from farming, and expand the definition of farm-related activities.**

Shellfish Genetics Research – USDA ARS & NOAA

Selective breeding is a proven effective means of enhancing disease resistance, increasing survival and developing lines of shellfish that are resilient in the face of climate change. Hard clam farmers produce over \$62M worth of sustainably farmed clams in almost every East Coast state, providing hundreds of jobs in rural coastal communities. A collaboration between NOAA and USDA ARS is developing regionally-adapted, disease-resistant oyster lines. We are seeking an additional \$1.3M to build a similar selective breeding program for hard clams, which are cultivated in every state from Maine to Florida. These funds will enhance our capacity for genetics research and improve the lines available for industry. Such stocks will mitigate the damage to farms caused by climate change, while improving the profitability of hundreds of shellfish farms along the entire East Coast.

Appropriate \$1.3M to USDA ARS to support the selective breeding of shellfish for disease-resistant lines and enhanced food security.

Suggested report language: *East Coast Shellfish Breeding and Genetics -*

The Committee recognizes the economic importance of shellfish aquaculture for rural coastal communities on the East Coast and the value of disease-resistant genetic stocks that can tolerate changing conditions and emerging disease threats. The Committee provides \$1.3 million to the ARS National Cold-Water Marine Aquaculture Center to advance genetic and physiological research for the development of hard clam stocks that are regionally adapted to the wide variety of conditions throughout the range of the entire East Coast, and to transfer technology and improved stocks to industry.

Working Waterfront Access – Critical Infrastructure Need

Waterfront access for shellfish farmers has been shrinking for decades and is approaching a critical tipping point. Commercial waterfront is being repurposed for condominiums, while marinas are pushing out commercial fishermen and shellfish farmers in favor of yachts. Public boat ramps are overwhelmed with recreational boaters, especially after a massive increase in recreational boating sparked by Covid.

If shellfish farmers cannot access the water and land their crops, they cannot have a farm.

- **Support Keep America's Waterfronts Working Act. (was [H.R.3160](#) in the 117th Congress)**
- **Direct the Department of Commerce to support the Blue Economy by making critical investments in coastal working-waterfront access.**
- **Develop tools for states to mandate that marinas using public resources devote a percentage of slips to commercial fishing and farming.**

Aquaculture Research Funding – NOAA

Federal shellfish aquaculture research is funded through a patchwork of USDA and NOAA programs that have suffered deep cuts in recent years. Shellfish farmers (mostly small-scale) are unable to self-fund critical research in shellfish disease and food safety. NOAA Fisheries spends less than 2% of its annual budget on aquaculture research, even though 90% of the seafood consumed in the U.S. is imported, and half of that is farmed overseas. Pressing challenges from the impacts of climate change, coastal acidification and harmful algal blooms demand creative solutions and investment in research.

- **Support funding for Sea Grant (\$80M, \$4M bump)**
- **Support the Sea Grant Marine Aquaculture Competition (\$14M, \$0.5M bump)**
- **Increase NMFS Aquaculture funding to at least \$20M (\$2.5M bump) to support critical research and rehabilitate the Northeast Fisheries Science Center Lab in Milford, CT.**

Help Expand Access to Export Markets

In 2020 the FDA was finally able to negotiate an equivalency agreement with the EU that allowed the resumption of trade in molluscan shellfish. The pilot program allows Massachusetts and Washington State to sell to EU countries, while Spain and the Netherlands are allowed to export to the U.S. We were assured that additional states would be added to those allowed to participate in a timely fashion. The FDA asserts that the EU is dragging their feet.

Exporting shellfish internationally requires expensive product-inspection certificates from NOAA's Seafood Inspection Service for each shipment. Exporting live animals (shellfish seed, eggs or fingerlings) internationally requires batch certification by APHIS-accredited veterinarians.

- **Inspection processes need to be streamlined so that costs can be reduced and the speed of inspections improved. (NOAA's Seafood Inspection Service)**
- **Negotiations with trading partners should focus on reducing non-tariff trade barriers to level the playing field. (FDA, NOAA, APHIS)**

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We thank our congressional allies for supporting our efforts to obtain an exemption to the Merchant Marine Act for Aquaculture Workers. The Shellfish Aquaculture Improvement Act HR4677 passed in 2022, allowing shellfish-farm owners to insure workers under state workers compensation and avoid expensive Jones Act premiums and unlimited liability lawsuits.

Thanks also for congressional support for USDA-ARS Eastern Oyster Breeding funds to support the selective breeding of lines of oysters that are resistant to diseases and adapted to local conditions across the East Coast. Breeding trials are underway!