

# EAST COAST SHELLFISH GROWERS ASSOCIATION



The East Coast Shellfish Growers Association represents over 1,500 shellfish farmers from Maine to Florida and the Gulf states. These proud stewards of the marine environment produce sustainable, farmed shellfish while providing thousands of jobs in rural coastal towns.

The ECSGA informs policy makers and regulators to protect a way of life.

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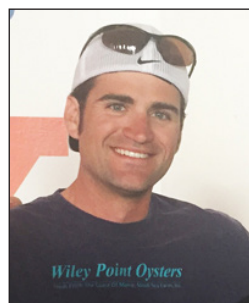
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## From the President A Year in Review



President  
Jeff Auger

Ice on the ponds and turkeys in the oven signal another year coming to a close. Since racing to remove gear and shellfish from our beds leaves little time for reflection, I figured I would take this opportunity to talk about the year we had while also highlighting some of the immense challenges that lie ahead.

After two years of meetings, drafts and community input we finished updating the Best Practices manual. We feel confident that the immense effort undertaken to publish these comprehensive guidelines has produced a useful tool to help growers avoid mistakes and continue to grow their businesses. But business expansion remains a perennial struggle: new farms still face immense challenges as opponents have become ever more willing to rush to the courts.

Nevertheless, production is steadily increasing as prices continue to climb—the perfect time to remember that we have a good story to tell! It seems as if every month we hear about new studies highlighting the ecosystem benefits provided by

our farms (check out the “[Sustainability](#)” tab on [ECSGA.org](http://ECSGA.org)), while innovations in gear and tools continue to make our jobs easier.

Climate change is resulting in warmer winters and rainier summers. While the winters may be a bit more tolerable, the negative effects paint a bleak picture: more intense storms, proliferating *Vibrios*, reduced recruitment and an abundance of parasites and predators. Fortunately, we were able to successfully advocate for a large investment in research genetics for the development of regionally adapted lines of disease-resistant broodstock. This first step in combatting negative climate effects also could help us to better understand the causes of summer mortality seen in much of the mid-Atlantic (See article below). In addition, the ECSGA has led efforts to rationalize the regulations for shellfish and seed movements between states, contributing to an excellent resource in the Regional Shellfish Seed Biosecurity Program ([RSSBP.org](http://RSSBP.org)). We hope that this tool, along with our continued advocacy, will help alleviate periodic seed shortages and mitigate the harmful changes to growing waters.

It is great to see a continued influx of new, young, enthusiastic farmers as we lose the guidance and wise council of those old-timers who are retiring and moving on. The Nature Conservancy and The Pew Charitable Trusts continue to support our

—Continued on page 15

## Lessons Learned From a Rough Season for Oyster Health

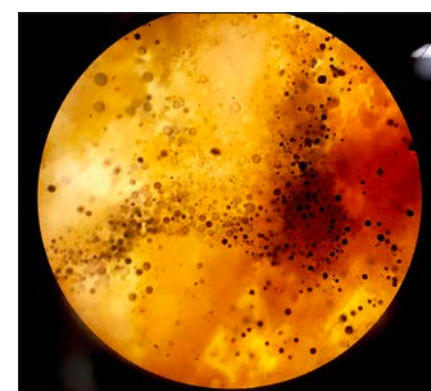
by Ryan B. Carnegie,  
Professor, Virginia Institute of  
Marine Science,  
Gloucester Point, Virginia

Especially in the Mid-Atlantic region, 2023 has proven to be the most difficult year in a decade for oyster health. The emerging problem of “unusual oyster mortality” (also referred to as “triploid mortality” or “summer mortality”) continues to produce widely reported losses of near-market-ready oysters in intensive aquaculture—primarily in the late spring to early summer—from at least the Mid-Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico.

And in the Chesapeake Bay region, dermo disease caused by *Perkinsus marinus* reached elevated prevalence and intensity at the same time that MSX disease (caused by *Haplosporidium nelsoni*) was also reaching the apex of one of its periodic

intensifying phases. This double whammy resulted in sharply increased disease pressure from both pathogens on cultured oysters as well as on wild oyster populations. But in spite of these myriad impacts, there are reassuring signs regarding the tools we have to mitigate the effects of major diseases in aquaculture. At the same time, we have gained sharper insight into areas where oyster-health management needs improvement. New questions are also emerging. So, what have we learned from this challenging year?

**Our primary tools for farm-level oyster-health management, lines selectively bred for MSX and dermo resistance, continue to demonstrate their effectiveness.** Recently completed research in our lab sponsored by the NOAA Saltonstall-Kennedy program has shown that oysters intensively cultured in the high-disease area of Chesapeake Bay display only modest levels of



RYAN CARNEGIE/VIMS

The numerous gray and black spheres in this microscopic image of heavily infected oyster gill and mantle tissue are individual cells of the parasite *Perkinsus marinus*, which causes dermo disease.

dermo disease, well below natural background levels on nearby wild reefs. MSX was generally absent during the period of that project, but our analyses of industry samples both for routine health certifications and in the context of mortality events over recent years have generally shown minimal MSX, and not enough dermo (when it is detect-

—Continued on page 4



## A Critical Review of Microplastics in Shellfish

by Robert Rheault,  
ECSGA Executive Director

As someone who has been questioning the hype about microplastics (MP) in shellfish for years, I found that "[A Critical Assessment of Microplastics in Molluscan Shellfish with Recommendations for Experimental Protocols, Animal Husbandry, Publication, and Future Research](#)," by Sandra E. Shumway et al. made for a very enjoyable read. For those of you who don't have the patience to wade through 133 pages, following are some highlights.

Shumway and her team were highly critical of the deluge of slapdash research published in the field, resulting in "a chaotic and cluttered literature rife with inappropriate meth-

odologies, poor experimental protocols, misinterpreted results, overstated significance, and subsequent damaging media stories."

Shumway's team reviewed more than 750 publications and criticized the tendency of many authors to reach conclusions about impacts that are purely speculative and not justified by the research. The authors make sound recommendations on improving methodology and using appropriate sampling techniques and instrumentation, and present guidelines for quality control. The team also cites many shoddy studies using husbandry techniques seemingly designed to kill the experimental animals.

Shumway et al. do an admirable job dispelling the many myths about the impacts of MP in shellfish, noting that the numbers of particles detected in samples are generally low, and that drawing conclusions about insignificant variations or trends is

—Continued on page 4

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# Best Practices Manual Gets an Update

by Robert Rheault,  
ECSCGA Executive Director

After two years of effort involving dozens of interviews and workshops, along with hundreds of hours of editing and fact-checking, we are excited to unveil a revamped ECSCGA Best Practices Manual. Building on the 2010 version, this update contains: a whole new section on the management and handling of floating gear, multiple embedded links, tons of info on new gear types, new photos, a revised bibliography and more. We sincerely hope that growers will embrace these grower-suggested practices as a way to head off government-mandated regulations.

Inside you will find plenty of helpful information to guide you through the various ways you can protect the environment while maintaining good relations with the other users of the commons and with your shoreside neighbors. The manual includes sections on site selection, being a good neighbor, options for anchoring floating gear, tips on storm preparation, fouling control, bird issues, record keeping and a robust discussion of regulations.

We also completely rebuilt the tool that creates your personalized, farm-specific Best Practices document as an easy-to-use, web-based form. The Best Practices Form lists all the BP options from the manual as a series of check boxes, allowing you to select those pertinent to your farm and to skip sections that are not relevant to your operation. It walks you through the steps to create a final MS Word document that you can then tweak, trim, format, add images to, embellish or personalize however you want. You can turn this customized farm plan into a detailed presentation for permitting, use it for employee training or turn it into a streamlined marketing document.

It does not take long to complete the form, and we expect that most growers will not have to make significant operational changes to follow the relevant best practices. New growers should find the manual and form very helpful, and we expect that some old hands may also learn a few things by going through the exercise.

Since we released the manual just a few weeks ago we have clocked over 100 downloads, and many growers have already completed their customized, farm-specific BP documents.

You can download ECSCGA's revised Best Practices Manual at [ecsga.org/best-practices](https://ecsga.org/best-practices).

*This project was made possible through support provided by The Nature Conservancy's SOAR Shellfish Growers Resiliency Fund.*



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—Continued from page 1  
**Summer Mortalities**

ed at all) to be causing extraordinary mortality. In short, and contrary to recent suggestions in the press, these pathogens have been substantially subdued by selective breeding. But we have known this for a while.

**At the same time, these major pathogens remain capable of causing significant mortality.**

While lines selected for disease resistance can substantially reduce MSX and dermo impacts, we are finding very high prevalences and intensities of infection in oysters lacking the same level of disease resistance: wild seed relayed to disease-intense,

higher salinities from lower salinities, and hatchery lines selected for low-salinity tolerance but grown in disease-intense areas. It is very important that growers consider the relative disease risks in their growing areas, and that they consult their regional shellfish pathologists for perspective. Disease-intense waters really require the use of disease-resistant seed.

**But which seed to grow in which location or aquaculture context is not always obvious.**

The relative field performance of different hatchery lines in commercial aquaculture contexts is not well established. Beyond the challenges of MSX and dermo, and in addition to Seaside Organism (also referred to as



RYAN CARNEGIE/VIMS

A pathology sample from a case of the enigmatic “summer mortality” showing the excellent condition typical of affected oysters.

SSO, a disease caused by *Haplosporidium costale* in the highest salinities), “summer mortality” is a major contemporary issue that may well relate more to general oyster resilience than to any interaction with a specific pathogen. It may be viewed (hypothetically) as reflecting the complex interaction between a challenging and changing marine environment, the unique nuances of husbandry on a specific farm, and the genetics and physiology of the oysters being cultured on that farm.

Differences in oyster genetics are fundamental to summer mortality in Pacific oyster systems. We should consider whether genetics (such as inbreeding) plays a similar role in summer mortality in the Eastern oyster. Alternatively, oysters



selected specifically for MSX and dermo resistance may not be adequately selected for resilience in the more complex stress regimes presented by commercial aquaculture farms. We need a better understanding of the field performance of different genetic lines in different commercial culture contexts. We also need a better understanding of how mortality is influenced by environmental variation across the vast geography in which summer mortality is affecting farmers. This knowledge will be essential to ultimately managing summer mortality, not least by allowing farms to make more informed, data-driven choices on which seed to grow.

We should be highly optimistic about the future of oyster and clam aquaculture, in large part because of the success we continue to have in managing major pathogens. Thanks to selective breeding, we are already effectively managing MSX and dermo. As we pivot to establishing greater resilience for animals cultured in more stressful marine systems, we will need to find new ways for science to work closely with industry to understand and model environmental change and oyster performance. This work must be carried out on commercial aquaculture farms as well as in lab settings.

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## Microplastics

irresponsible. They point out that there are “no convincing data to support any negative claims being made with regard to the contributions that the aquaculture industry may be making to the levels of MP in the environment. Further, there are no data to support claims that there are negative impacts on the shellfish crops or the environment, or that the extremely low levels of MP accumulated in the shellfish pose any threat to human health.”

It is not too surprising that filter-feeding bivalves capture microplastic particles from the water, since they are well adapted to living in waters laden with inert and organic particles of all sizes. Notably, many are also adept at rejecting inedible particles and don’t even put them into their digestive tracts. Inert, non-food particles that do get ingested are

rapidly expelled. What I found surprising was how few particles were actually noted in most of these studies. Looking at my social media feed I can say with some confidence that these overhyped claims of adverse MP impacts are hurting our markets.

The authors conclude that, **“There are currently no reliable data to indicate that MP associated with shellfish have any impact on human health,** and it is highly unlikely that the extremely low levels of MP reported in bivalve molluscs globally presents any significant risk to either the shellfish or to human health. **In reality, the number of MP found in shellfish is far outweighed by the MP inhaled and consumed by humans in everyday life.”**

“A Critical Assessment of Microplastics in Molluscan Shellfish” is available for download for a limited time at [doi.org/10.1080/23308249.2023.2216301](https://doi.org/10.1080/23308249.2023.2216301).



# Unintended Consequences of Coastal Barrier Act

by Robert Rheault,  
ECSGA Executive Director

When the ECSGA was Walking the Hill in March 2023 we met with congressional offices that were trying to reauthorize the Coastal Barrier Resources Act of 2005. The law was enacted to encourage conservation of vulnerable coastal barriers by preventing homeowners and developers from using government-subsidized insurance and disaster-relief programs to rebuild after storms destroy buildings in these areas. The current re-authorization effort is being undertaken to add more mapped areas, but we saw this as an opportunity to rectify an unintentional oversight.



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Since mapped areas do not allow federal funding that would support private or commercial activity, an unintended consequence of the act is to disqualify shellfish farmers in these areas from access to programs such as FSA disaster relief or USDA Rural Development loans and incentives. Paul Zajicek of the National Aquaculture Association had alerted me to a situation where a Florida shellfish farmer was denied an FSA loan a few years ago because he had leases near such a zone. While we don't think it has been common for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to deny the use of these programs by shellfish farmers, we were confident that it was not the intent of the act to block shellfish farms, which have been shown to preserve biodiversity, enhance fisheries and stabilize sediments. Since many farms are located in these mapped areas, it seemed worth a try to insert an exemption for aquaculture growers.

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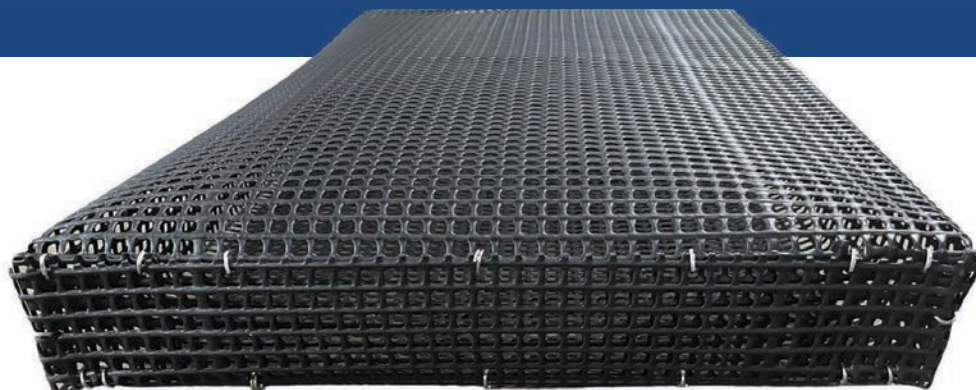
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## SGV Ex. Dir. Mike Oesterling Retires

by Ben Stagg, Executive Director, Shellfish Growers of Virginia

Michael J. Oesterling (affectionately known as Mike O.) brought his 11-year tenure as executive director of the Shellfish Growers of Virginia (SGV) to a close when he retired in June. After earning degrees in biology from the University of Miami and in zoology from the University of Florida, he enjoyed a long career working at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), where he co-authored the marine resource report, "Best Management Practices for the Virginia Shellfish Culture Industry." He also promoted new and exciting concepts for the seafood industry while serving on the Fisheries Resources Grant committee at VIMS.



Shellfish Growers of Virginia Executive Director Ben Stagg presents Mike Oesterling (l) with a framed resolution passed by the Virginia General Assembly noting his numerous contributions to the aquaculture industry at the 2023 Virginia Aquaculture Conference.

As the first SGV executive director, Mike O. was instrumental in starting the organization back in 2012. He also served as chair of the Virginia Marine Products Board, where he presided over the marketing of Virginia's seafood industry. He shared his extensive knowledge and guidance while sitting on the Shellfish Management Advisory Committee at the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and the Aquaculture Advisory Board at the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. At the national level, Mike O. enhanced the Commonwealth's standing in the shellfish industry while serving on the National Aquaculture Association's Marine Aquaculture Committee. He was a frequent attendee of Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference (ISSC) biennial meetings, and served on several ISSC committees. Throughout his career, Mike O. fostered bipartisan consensus with legislators, nonprofit advocacy organizations, government organizations, shellfish farmers and farming interests, and other stakeholders to pass numerous pieces of natural resources legislation. He was part of the team that successfully named November as Virginia Oyster Month in 2022.

Mike O. continues to provide advice and wisdom to new SGV Executive Director Ben Stagg, and lent a hand one last time by serving on the planning committee to help organize the 2023 Virginia Aquaculture Conference (sponsored by VIMS) in Newport News, Virginia. You can drop Mike O. a line thanking him for his lifelong dedication to the aquaculture industry at [mikeoesterling@gmail.com](mailto:mikeoesterling@gmail.com).

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## Coastal Barrier Act

With the help of Delaware Senator Tom Carper's staff we were able to add an exemption that reads: "Aquaculture operations that produce shellfish (including oysters, clams, and mussels), micro-algae and macro-algae cultivation, or other forms of aquaculture that do not require use of aquaculture feeds, and adhere to

best management practices and conservation measures recommended by the Secretary [of the Interior, who oversees the Fish and Wildlife Service] through the consultation process referred to in this subsection."

Some have raised concerns about the best management practices requirement, but we believe that the recently released ECSGA Best Practices Manual will fit the bill, and that it will not be a heavy lift for growers to adopt our best practices. In discussions with FWS it seems as if they are mostly concerned about the use of pressure washers for fouling control (a practice that is not widely used).

The aquaculture exemption language has made it through committee and we hope it will be passed by the full Senate in spring 2024. Currently the House version does not have Republican support for the exemption language, but we are continuing our push to convince critical offices to support it. Stay tuned.

To access both the current and proposed revised maps on the FWS website, visit [www.fws.gov/program/coastal-barrier-resources-act/maps-and-data](http://www.fws.gov/program/coastal-barrier-resources-act/maps-and-data).

### NACE/Milford Aquaculture Seminar

Jan. 10-12. Conference and trade show. Omni Hotel, Providence, RI. Visit [www.northeastaquaculture.org](http://www.northeastaquaculture.org).

### Foundations of Shellfish Farming

Jan. 16–April 2. Tuesday night training course. UConn Avery Point Campus, Groton, CT. Visit <[s.uconn.edu/shellfish](http://s.uconn.edu/shellfish)>.

### Aquaculture America

Feb. 18-21. Conference and trade show. San Antonio, TX. Visit [www.was.org/meeting/code/AA2024](http://www.was.org/meeting/code/AA2024).



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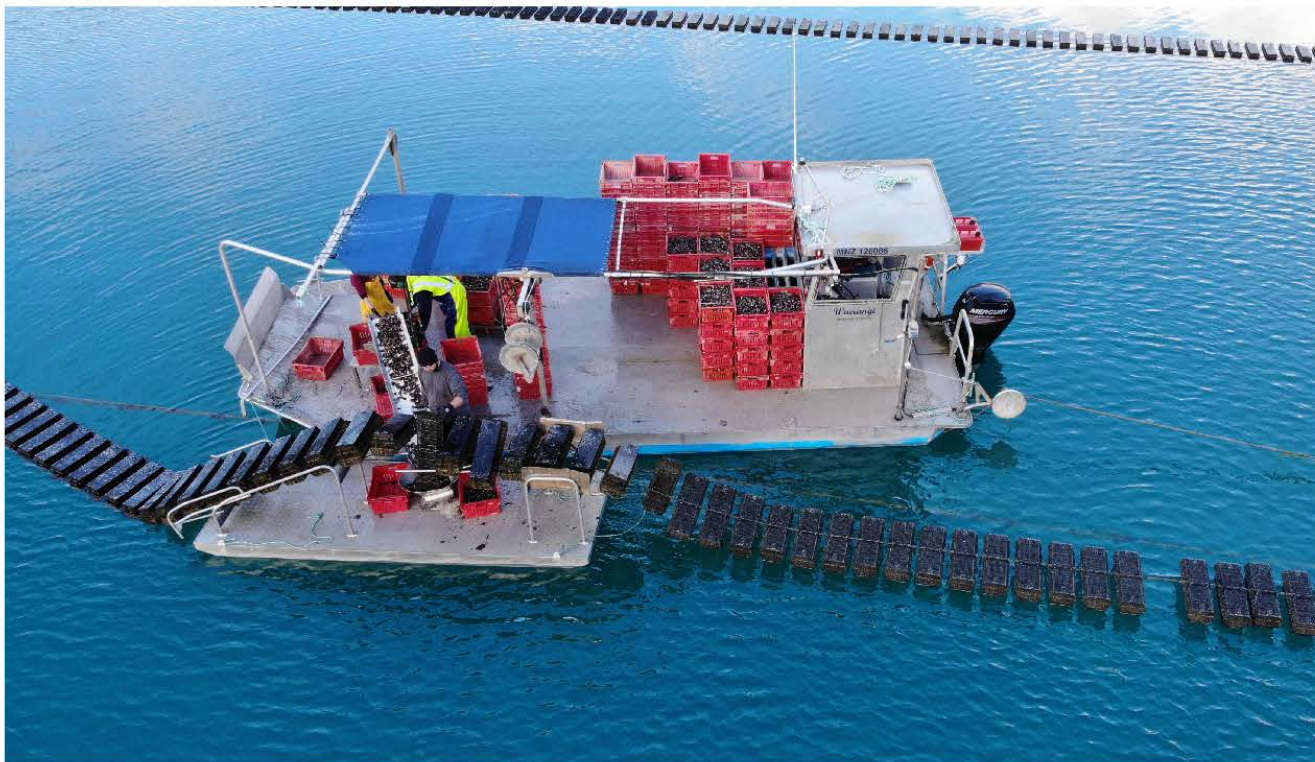


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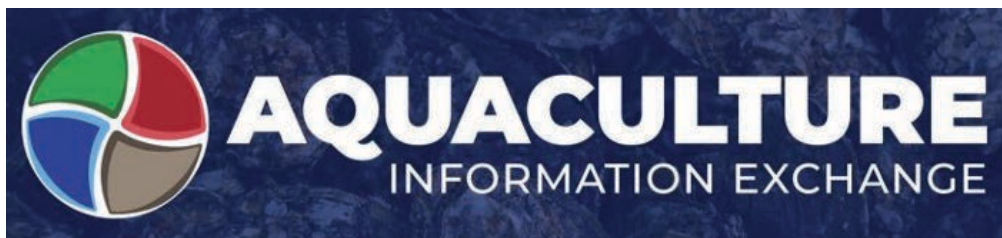
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The Aquaculture Information Exchange (AIE), an online, moderated community platform website for people from both the public and private sectors with interests in U.S. aquaculture and related topics, is now live. Users can register for free at [aquainfoexchange.org/signup](http://aquainfoexchange.org/signup).

Designed to facilitate discussions about current issues and the latest research and developments in aquaculture, AIE will be a space where users from across the nation can connect and work with like-minded collaborators on projects and deliverables such as grant-funded research projects, specific contracts, science advice products and more.

The site features subject matter work groups that can have access restricted to a small team or be open to any member of the AIE. Teams can store document files, image files and video files, but can also use built-in collaboration tools like video conferencing and group-editable documents. Groups will be led by a Working Group Chair who will manage the team's progress toward achieving project goals or creating specific deliverables.

The AIE uses an interface similar to popular social media sites. In addition to working groups, it also includes features like keyword-searchable member profiles, job postings, community discussion forums and an events calendar.

"The goal was to create a site that would feel intuitive and engaging to users," said Jay Clark, assistant director for communications at Virginia Sea Grant, host of the AIS website.

The AIE is a joint effort between NOAA's National Sea Grant Office, NOAA's Fisheries Office of Aquaculture, USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS), USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), and Virginia Sea Grant.

Register for free at [aquainfoexchange.org/signup](http://aquainfoexchange.org/signup).

## Training and Education for Growers

Check out [ecsga.org/grower-training](http://ecsga.org/grower-training) for instructional videos, links to training classes, presentations and webinars, and info about hands-on courses all along the coast. We have resources for newbies and old hands alike, and it's free.

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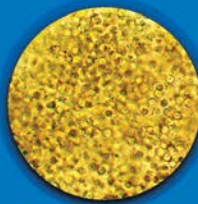
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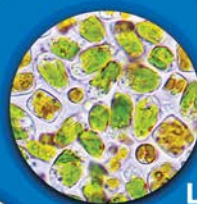
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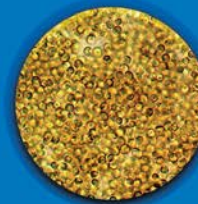
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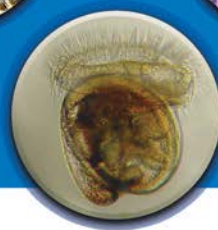
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**Shellfish Growers Climate Coalition**



**"My generation wants to do something good for the environment, and oyster farming is a clear route to achieve that."**

*Tyler Niven, Mere Point Oyster Co.  
Brunswick, Maine*

Help us protect the shellfish we love and the waters that sustain them at [nature.org/shellfish4climate](https://www.nature.org/shellfish4climate)

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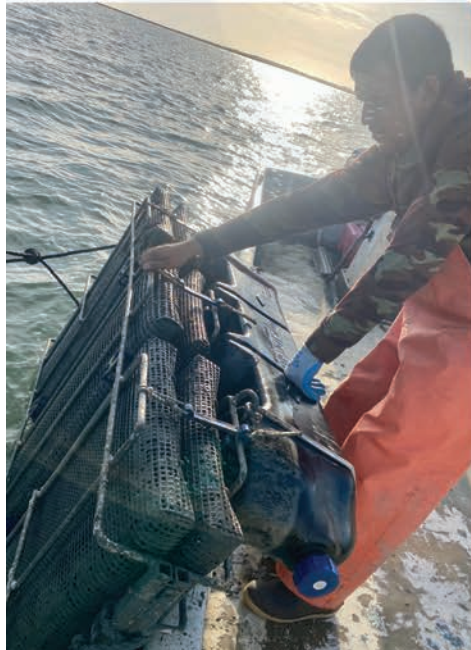
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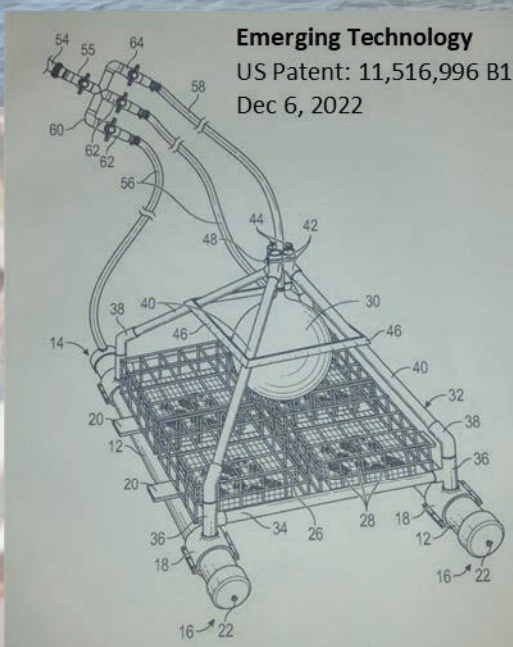
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—Continued from page 1

## From the President

restorative efforts, and are helping to spread the word about the environmental benefits of shellfish aquaculture, such as improved water quality and enhanced fisheries production. No matter what our NIMBY friends may say, our industry is critical to improving the health of our bays and rivers!

It's a great time to be thankful for the association we've created: the board represents some of the best in our community, our dedicated executive director has tirelessly advocated for all farmers on the water over the years, the work ECSGA undertakes at the ISSC and in Washington helps to overcome many of the challenges we face that don't come from Mother Nature. We look forward to continuing our efforts next year, and to bringing along many more for the ride.

### Tax Tips

\* The IRS allows you to offset income with expenses considered "ordinary and necessary" to run a business, such as gear, supplies, boat electronics, percentage of cell phones, licenses, legal fees, association memberships, business meals and travel (excluding commuting to work).

\* Bank or credit-card statements do not suffice in the event of an audit. Instead, note the business purpose on the back of deductible expense receipts and keep them in a manila envelope. Keep all receipts and tax returns for seven years. For assets you own for longer, like vehicles or homes, keep the purchasing docs throughout their life.

\* To make end-of-the-year accounting easier, keep business records separate from personal finances and use separate bank accounts and credit cards.

\* Vehicles are a business expense, but if you also use them for personal travel, log your miles. Use the percentage of miles used for business to calculate the deductible amount of insurance, repairs and fuel (similar to a home office space used for business purposes some of the time).

From the October 2023 issue of [National Fisherman](#).

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## ECSGA Dues Categories

Growers, dealers and equipment suppliers enjoy full voting rights. (If you are both a grower and a dealer simply ask yourself where most of your revenue comes from.) If you don't fall into one of these industry categories please consider joining as a non-voting associate member.

Member Type	Gross Annual Sales	Dues
Grower	\$0 to 50,000	\$100
Grower	\$50,000 to \$100,000	\$200
Grower	\$100,000 to 300,000	\$500
Grower	\$300,000 to 1 million	\$1,000
Grower	\$1 million to \$3 million	\$2,000
Grower	over \$3 million	\$3,000
Shellfish Dealers and Equipment Suppliers		\$250
Restaurant Ally		\$100
Non-voting Associate		\$50

Because ECSGA is a 501(c)(6) non-profit trade organization, a portion of your membership dues may be tax deductible as a business expense; please contact us for details.

You can pay online using PayPal or your credit card on our website [ECSGA.org](http://ECSGA.org) or mail this form with your check to:

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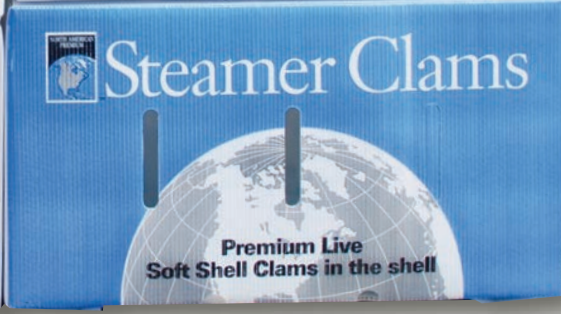
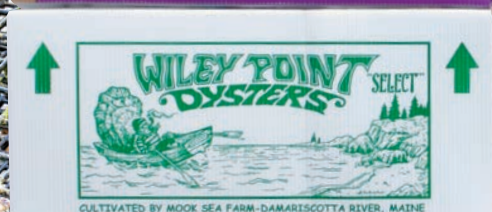
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