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2024 Legislative Priorities

More than 2,000 shellfish farms on the East and Gulf Coasts provide thousands of jobs in rural coastal communities, producing over \$175 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: diseases, climate change and restricted waterfront access.

Farm Bill Marker Bills

Please co-sponsor: [S.2704 Fair Access to Agriculture Disaster Programs Act](#) & [H.4127](#). These bills would raise the AGI cap and allow larger farms to access Farm Service Agency Disaster Relief programs if they could demonstrate that more than 75% of their income was farm related. We are also seeking an expanded definition of farming activities to include farm tours, farm-linked restaurants and shellfish marketing.

Please co-sponsor: [S.2169 Promoting American Competition in Aquaculture Research Act](#) & [H.3542](#). These bills increase the funding authorization for the five USDA Regional Aquaculture Centers that fund farmer-directed applied research. Current authorization is \$5M, increase to \$15M.

Please co-sponsor: [S.2211 Sustaining Healthy Ecosystems, Livelihoods, and Local Seafood Act \(SHELLS Act\)](#) & [H.R.3951](#). These bills elevate aquaculture as a priority within the USDA by establishing an Office of Aquaculture within the Department of Agriculture to coordinate USDA aquaculture-related programs (e.g., research, disaster relief, etc.) and create an Aquaculture Advisory Committee composed of industry and academic experts to guide USDA aquaculture programs.

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 Working Waterfronts Preservation Act. [S.3180](#) (Sens Collins, Reed and Murkowski 19 sponsors). Authorizes \$20M per year for four years to upgrade and improve eligible working waterfront access.**
- **Support Keep America's Waterfronts Working Act [H.R.6641](#) (Reps. Pingree and Wittman 14 co-sponsors). Establishes a grant program and a loan fund to help preserve and expand access for water-dependent businesses. Authorizes \$50 million each for the loan and grant programs. Organizes a Working Waterfronts Task Force at the DoC.**
- **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.**

(Over)

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 investments in research.

- **Support funding for Sea Grant (\$80M, FY25 Senate mark).**
- **Support the Sea Grant Marine Aquaculture Competition (\$18M FY24 request).**
- **Increase NMFS Aquaculture funding to \$24M (\$19M in FY23).**

Direct the CDC to Correct Misleading Language on Its Website

The Centers for Disease Control is the leading authority on foodborne illnesses and the go-to website for reporters who are looking for information when writing about illnesses. Its website does a poor job of differentiating between illnesses caused by wound infections and those related to seafood consumption, leading journalists to publish articles that grossly exaggerate the risks of eating shellfish, and resulting in devastating impacts to our markets. Our efforts to get the CDC to correct its online messaging have been stonewalled.

Congress needs to demand that the CDC update its online representation of foodborne health risks to clarify the actual numbers of seafood-related illnesses so that journalists avoid publishing deceptive and misleading data.

Coastal Barrier Resources Act Aquaculture Exemption

The CBRA is being reauthorized and we are seeking a narrow exemption for shellfish and seaweed aquaculture projects that allows them to remain eligible for disaster relief and other federal assistance programs. The exemption has made it through committee in the Senate and **we are seeking Republican sponsors for the language in the House version.**

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.